



St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center

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NEWS RELEASE

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El Paso Teen to Graduate High School Next Month after Nearly Dying from a Rare Brain Disorder

An 18-year-old El Paso boy will graduate from high school in June after making an amazing recovery from a potentially lethal illness that cost him the normalcy of his teenage years and almost killed him.

Just one year ago, Daniel Juarez nearly died from a rare and complex brain and spine abnormality that was causing compression of his brainstem and spinal cord. He suffered from paralysis on his left side, respiratory distress, he was unable to talk, relied on a feeding tube and was dying.

“When I first saw Daniel, he was literally on death’s doorstep,” says Nicholas Theodore, MD, neurosurgeon and Chief of the Spine Section at Barrow Neurological Institute at St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix. “He was nearly a quadriplegic and losing his ability to breathe. I did not expect him to survive.”

Juarez received a grim diagnosis in 2008 while being treated for a broken leg. He asked physicians to do an MRI on his brain due to headaches. The result was a chiari malformation, a rare and complex brain disorder that he had likely since birth. The malformation was compressing his brainstem with his spinal cord and putting pressure on the nerves that control functions such as breathing and swallowing. Without surgery to correct his condition, Juarez would die.

“That was devastating news for me and my family,” says Juarez. “All my friends were driving and being normal kids while I was spending my teenage days in the hospital not knowing what my outcome would be.”

Once diagnosed, Juarez underwent multiple procedures and surgeries in El Paso. Each procedure, while initially providing some relief, in the end caused Juarez to further deteriorate. By May 2010, Juarez was dying rapidly. Doctors in El Paso told the teenager and his family that Barrow Neurological Institute at St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix was his only hope. The hospital is one of the world’s leaders in treating the most complicated brain and spine disorders and treats patients from all over the world.

Juarez was urgently flown to St. Joseph’s in an air ambulance in the middle of the night and was immediately intubated and placed on a ventilator until surgery could be safely performed.

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Dr. Theodore and Robert Spetzler, MD, neurosurgeon and director of Barrow; performed a complicated procedure on Juarez where they removed all the old spinal hardware from his previous surgeries, decompressed his brainstem, and stabilized his spine with a series of plates and screws and a piece of his own rib.

“I’ve done approximately 100 of these procedures but Daniel’s case was by far the most difficult one,” says Dr. Theodore.

Since Juarez’s surgery at Barrow, he has shown tremendous improvement. He’s regained his balance, and his ability to walk and eat normally again. He returned to school and will graduate from El Dorado High School on June 4 with a 3.5 GPA, an amazing feat for an 18-year-old who spent many months in the hospital and nearly died.

“I feel awesome now,” says Juarez. “Last year I couldn’t walk or eat and now I’m having the time of my life.”

Juarez, who has dreamed of becoming a doctor since age 5, studied his entire medical case and memorized all of the medical terms associated with his condition. He says his experience has increased his desire to become a neurosurgeon, just like the one who saved his life.

“I hope I can be like Dr. Theodore one day,” says Juarez. “I want to be able to help people who are really sick, like I was, to get back to a normal and healthy life.”

“The future is very bright for Daniel,” says Dr. Theodore. He has made an amazing recovery and is now almost completely normal. Additionally, he is a very impressive young man and has taken a life threatening situation and made it into a learning experience. He is truly an inspiration to us all.”

— Barrow —

Daniel Juarez and Dr. Theodore are available for interviews with the media by calling 602-406-3319 before Friday, May 27 and 602-406-3312 after May 27. They both are very well spoken and will be excellent interviews.

Barrow Neurological Institute at St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center is an internationally renowned medical center that offers care for people from throughout the world with brain and spine diseases, disorders and injuries. U.S. News & World Report routinely lists St. Joseph's as one of the top 10 best hospitals in the nation for neurological and neurosurgical care.