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Healing A Heart From Halfway Around The World

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HeartGift provides life-saving surgery for children up to 14 years who live outside the U. S.

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Recently, the doctor who founded HeartGift, decided to make an exception for a 22-year-old man from Afghanistan.

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KXAN's Jim Bergamo joins us live with the details of how this long, life-saving journey came to be.

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Twenty-two-year-old Muhammad Naeem arrived at the Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston just four days before Christmas.

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A Christmas Miracle may be an apt way to explain how virtual strangers -- half a world apart -- were able to bring him to this country for heart surgery.

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As American soldiers helped rid Afghanistan of the Taliban regime, some troops, like U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer Layne Pace of



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Utah, began organizing humanitarian efforts in that country. One of the people pace was asked to help, was Muhammad Naeem, who had a hole in his heart that required surgery.

Naeem says the operation was too complicated for surgeons in nearby Pakistan.

"A lot of people will die in this case in Pakistan, so therefore I do not want to lose my life," Naeem said.

Pace got involved and through the AnySoldier Web site, he started reaching out to a network of supporters back in the U.S. who were interested in helping with the humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan. Pace's Internet plea for help was answered in Austin.

Dr. Stephen Dewan, the founder of the HeartGift Foundation, offered to perform the surgery, and the Heart Hospital of Austin volunteered is facilities. So in July, Naeem applied for his visa. But what was supposed to take 45 days, turned into 100 and then despair.

"After two months, I didn't got any information and e-mails from them, so I thought it's not going to be possible to go to America for surgery," Naeem said.

Liaisons from the offices of Senators John Cornyn of Texas and Bill Bennet of Utah helped get the ball rolling again. Nearly four months after Naeem was due to arrive, he did.

He finally got to meet the man who would literally hold his heart in his hands.

During their meeting, Dr. Dewan explained how he planned to close the hole in Naeem's heart. Naeem showed his appreciation by giving the doctor a ring that he had made for him back in Afghanistan.

The two then posed for pictures and prepared for surgery the following week.

The three-hour procedure at the Heart Hospital of Austin went flawlessly, and it left all involved not only thankful, but marveling at how it call came together.

"It's interesting the way the connections all come about, how the whole cycle of life comes around, and even from across the other part of the world," Dewan said.

"I would like to do something for USA people or America and for USA. I will never forget this act of kindness," Naeem said.

Naeem will remain hospitalized for several days, and it'll be some time before he can return to Afghanistan, but the Muslim and Christian friends he's made here promise to take care of him as long as he's in Austin.

In a month, Officer Pace, who's now back home in Utah, will travel to Austin to pay Naeem a special visit.



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