

Rashale Arana was supposed to return to Belize after cancer treatment in Charlotte. It didn't work out that way. But plans for a new clinic in her homeland could help other children.

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Rashale Arana got love and attention from lots of new friends when she came to Charlotte from Belize last year for free cancer care. One of her favorites was "Miss Kim" Melton director of Hospitality House where Rashale and her mother stayed when she was not in the hospital getting chemotherapy.

When I met 8-year-old Rashale Arana, she was lying in a hospital bed beneath yards of princess-pink netting, draped from the ceiling.

Her brown eyes were so big and inquisitive, her smile so bright, I barely noticed she had no hair. Chemotherapy had stolen the jet-black braids she once wore proudly. That wasn't all the cancer had taken.

Rashale's left leg was only about half as long as her right. And her left foot was turned around, as if it wanted to walk backward.

This was not some random anomaly. Her leg had been amputated, the diseased upper part removed, and the healthy lower half turned around and re-attached to her hip.

That was the reason I had come to see her. I wanted to find out more about the unusual surgery, called "rotationplasty," that had produced her odd-looking leg and was going to allow this young girl from Belize to walk again.



"Miss Kim" Melton kisses Rashale during one of their visits

Photographer Jeff Siner and I visited Rashale (pronounced ra-SHELL) at Presbyterian Hospital in October and prepared to follow her for months. We went to Savannah Ga., in December to watch her getting fitted with an artificial leg.

Like almost everyone who met her, we fell in love with the sweet, smart, courageous girl plucked from poverty in Central America and flown here for free cancer care.

Then, just when we began to imagine that she would not just walk, but run and jump again, the unexpected happened.

Rashale died.

It was six weeks after her 9th birthday and three days before Christmas. I was stunned.

This is not the story I hoped to write. I still find it hard to believe. A lot of people tried to do the right thing by a little girl who surely would have died from cancer in Belize. She died here instead. But she made hundreds of friends who still mourn her passing. Rashale's story doesn't have the happy ending we expected, but she did leave her mark.

Cancer went untreated

Rashale's journey began last summer in the small, dusty town of Silk Grass, Belize, about 1,400 miles southwest of Charlotte. A pain in her left leg turned out to be cancer.

A doctor was available at Silk Grass Health Post, little more than a shack. He was there from 9 a.m. to noon on Thursdays.

Rashale got no treatment for the tumor growing in her left thigh bone. The doctor gave her over-the-counter pain relievers and sent her home to die.

Coincidentally, the Kiwanis Club of Mecklenburg was starting a project to provide free medical care for children with cancer in Belize. Rashale's name came to the attention of Dr. Mark Mogul, a Kiwanis member and children's cancer specialist at Presbyterian Hospital.

Rashale flew to Charlotte, her first airplane ride. When she arrived at the airport last July, Mogul was among 100 or so people who greeted her with "Get Well Soon" balloons.



Mogul

Mogul, a short, friendly man with a 12-year-old's sense of humor, ran to her and introduced himself as "Dr. Mark."

He and these other strangers would become like family to Rashale. But on that day, she was scared and hurting. She barely spoke or smiled. Rashale was exceptionally thin, but her left leg was swollen to twice its normal size because of the bone cancer.

Within hours, Rashale felt better. In the hospital, Mogul gave her enough medicine to relieve the pain. She started 10 weeks of chemotherapy to shrink her tumor before having surgery to remove it.

Rotationplasty surgery

Mogul, who treats cancer with medicine but doesn't perform surgery, contacted an orthopedic surgeon at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem about amputating Rashale's leg.

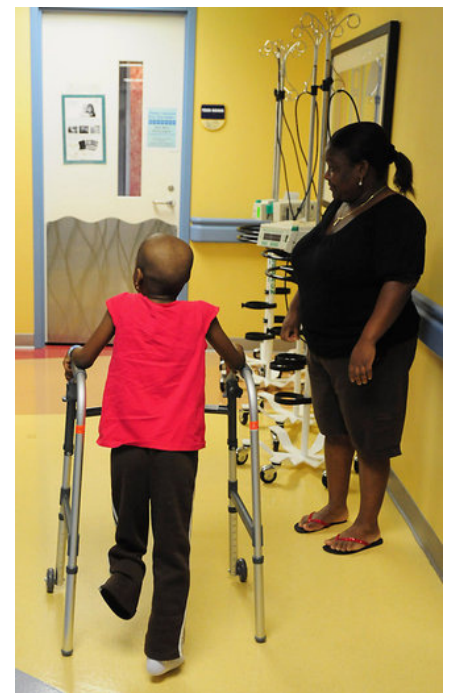
Dr. William Ward offered to operate for free. But as the day approached, he began having serious doubts.

He knew that Rashale's home in Silk Grass sat along a dirt road. Getting around in a wheelchair or on crutches would be tough. Ward also knew that if Rashale lived in the United States and had insurance, she would have been having a rotationplasty, a more complicated operation that would save the healthy part of her leg and enable her to wear a prosthesis.

So, Ward called Dr. Brian Brigman, a fellow surgeon at Duke University in Durham, who performs rotationplasty about once a year. He offered to do it for free.



At Silk Grass Health Post in Rashale Arana's hometown in Belize, a sign on the door says the doctor is available on Thursdays from 9 a.m. to noon.



Rashale Arana uses a walker in the hallways at Presbyterian Hospital after her Rotationplasty surgery. Her mother, Reba Arana, (right) thought her prayers for a miracle were answered.

By the time I met Rashale, she had already had the surgery. To explain how it worked, Rashale showed me a doll named Rachel with dark hair and fluttery eyelashes.

Before Rashale had gone to Duke, one of the Presbyterian doctors suggested that Rashale perform a rotationplasty on the doll so she would understand what was going to happen and be less afraid.

“Dr. Rashale” helped amputate the doll's left leg. They saved the lower half from below the knee, rotated it so the foot faced backward, and sewed it back on at the hip.

After she showed me the doll, Rashale pulled up the left leg of her own sweatpants.

Just like the doll's, Rashale's left leg was half as long as it used to be. And her foot pointed backward.

It looked strange.

But it was a good thing.

Rashale's heel and ankle would take the place of her knee. And with that partial leg and her foot at the end, Rashale could be fitted with an artificial leg and walk again.



Rashale loved the smiley faces that Kimberly Melton drew in purple on her left foot and each of her toes.

Fitted for the prosthesis

In early December, seven weeks after her surgery, Rashale traveled to Savannah to meet the man who would make her new leg.

Steve Miller became a prosthetist – making and fitting artificial limbs – because he wears a prosthesis himself.

As a child, he was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, the same bone cancer as Rashale. He had the same surgery and has worn an artificial leg since he was 11.



Steve Miller, the Savannah GA., prosthetist who made Rashale Arana's leg for free, coaches her on how to walk with her new prosthesis. She struggled at first, but then took steps without any help from parallel bars or a walker. Miller also wears a prostheses.

Miller played football in high school. And now at 34, he was living proof that Rashale would be able to walk and run again. He offered to make her \$20,000 prosthesis for free.

Because Rashale was tiny, only 45 pounds, her artificial leg seemed small enough to fit a doll. She was pleased that it looked and felt like her own milk chocolate skin.

At first, she struggled to pull the prosthesis over the heel and ankle that had become her new knee. Her first steps were tentative, as she held on to parallel bars. It was hard, and at one point she was sobbing.

But with Miller's coaching, she began training her brain to make her heel and ankle act like a knee. When she took her first steps without help, I watched in amazement and burst into applause.

“You're going to walk just like me one day,” Miller said.

Moved to intensive care

Before Rashale got much practice, she went back to Presbyterian for more chemotherapy.

I checked on her one Friday in mid-December. She was curled on her side, asleep. Her tiny body seemed so peaceful, her hairless head exposed. Rashale's ever-present Hannah Montana cap, with glued-on hair that looked like her own, lay at her side. It looked deflated without her smiling face under its bill.

I would come back in a few days, I whispered.

But that weekend, something went wrong. Rashale developed a terrible headache that made her scream in pain. She was moved to intensive care.

Rashale's mother, Reba Arana, who had returned to work for a few weeks in California, flew back to Charlotte. Others from the hospital and the Kiwanis community joined her as the news spread. They held hands and prayed.

On Dec. 22, three days before Christmas, she died.

An electrolyte imbalance

Rashale's mother has declined to talk with me about her daughter's death, requesting time to grieve. Without her permission, Presbyterian officials are not allowed to discuss Rashale's care. So I don't know what happened.

Her death certificate says she died from "brain herniation" as the result of "hyponatremia," an electrolyte imbalance. Doctors unconnected to Rashale's case say electrolytes are closely monitored during chemotherapy so that hyponatremia is not a common side effect.

Rashale's death has been hard on Kiwanis Club members, too. "I've tried to put it out of my mind," said Sam McMahon Jr., a past president who visited Rashale's relatives in Belize and attended her hometown funeral in February.

The Kiwanis spent more than \$100,000 on Rashale, McMahon said. But the total contribution came to more than \$750,000, including donated medical care as well as housing at Hospitality House.

Memorial service

On Dec. 23, the day after Rashale died, more than 200 people came to a memorial service in Charlotte.

"Miss Kim" Melton, the Hospitality House director who became a second mother to Rashale, decorated a table with photographs of the little girl with big brown eyes and the riveting smile. Melton draped the table with the pink netting that had hung over Rashale's hospital bed, and displayed some of her favorite things, including In a eulogy, Melton said Rashale had smiled in the face of obstacles. "She gave us all a beautiful gift. No matter what we're going through, we can make the choice to smile."

Mogul, who had been on vacation when Rashale died, embraced her mother, Reba, who was crying and barely able to stand. They held each other for a long time.

Mogul was heartbroken. He had helped bring Rashale to Charlotte. He reminded himself that if she hadn't come, she would have died sooner, a painful death, in Belize.

In his minivan afterward, with his wife and son, Mogul sobbed. But then he went back to work, because that's what he does.

Other young patients were waiting.

They are the reason he'll return to Belize to help create a clinic focused on early detection of cancer in children.

Kids like Rashale will no longer have to rely only on Silk Grass Health Post, where the doctor is in every Thursday from 9 a.m. to noon.

Photography: JEFF SINER - jsiner@charlotteobserver.com



The Rev. Mike Koch, formerly of Sharon Presbyterian Church, escorts Rashale's mother, Reba Arana, from the memorial service at Hickory Grove Baptist Church. "Rashale has touched each and every one of us," Koch said.