

Love Relay

*Break the vicious cycle of poverty and illness,
glimpses of hope show
with Tzu Chi Charity and Medicine Mission joint efforts.*

Straighten the Back **Pursing a Dream with Courage**

**Philippines Rejean
- Kyphosis Correction**

By: Liao Wei-Ching & Tzu Chi Philippines



Bohol Island, located on the south east of Cebu, is the 10th biggest island among the seven thousand plus islands of Philippines. This island preserves the original feature of a tropical island, thus becomes a famous tourist visiting place. After the earthquake, Tzu Chi volunteers and the Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) began earthquake relief effort and offered free clinics. Tzu Chi then discovered that there were so many poor and sick people. Moreover, many people couldn't afford the cost of medicine, so

they didn't want to seek help from doctors and got worse. Rejean Ligue is one of them. Rejean was then 21 years old with kyphosis (severely convex spine over 149 degrees) that made her very short, weak and skinny. She couldn't lie flat on the bed or turn her back easily. She couldn't lift heavy objects or climb stairs. At the same time, she felt tired easily. Thus she could only sell some handmade products for a living. When volunteers visited her, she said for 15 years she only wished to have a "good night sleep".



August 21, 2017, Dr. Tseng Hsiao-Tsu was examining Rejean's physical condition

Bohol Island to Taipei, Experience Many Firsts in Her Life

On August 20 2017, Rejean left her home town and arrived at Taipei Tzu Chi Hospital with hope. She was accompanied by her sister Russel Jean Ligue and Philippine Tzu Chi volunteer Co Yee Lock.

In the morning of August 21, Superintendent Chao You-Chen, orthopedist Tseng Hsiao-Tsu led a team of medical staff visited Rejean in the ward. Supt. Chao told the sisters that Dr. Tseng had plenty of experience on spinal surgeries so they should relax. The sisters expressed their gratitude with the highest respect to the medical team.

The 23-year-old Russel Jean said with tears, "This is the third time I see my sister, when our parents divorced, we were separated. I feel so guilty not taking care of her. I hope I can provide her with some support. She is in a very pitiful situation."

"This is my first airplane ride. I have never seen these sceneries and I am very excited. I never knew many people here are so concerned on my condition. I heard Dr. Tseng has cured many. I have confidence and believe there is hope," said Rejean who also acknowledged that there would be a long hard recovery road ahead. She told the medical team, "I will

do my best to endure all the hardships and hope for the best."

As Rejean's attending doctor, Dr. Tseng did examinations to evaluate her current condition. He had already seen all her x-ray pictures and reports. He said, "Looking at the real person is more stereoscopic and serious than the photo. From the X-ray images, we should be able to conquer the problem. But we need to wait until the completion of a physical examination. Then we will outline a treatment plan. If everything goes according to plan, we will do our first surgery on August 25th."



Pre-operation: Provided Rejean a series of necessary examination



August 23, Taipei Tzu Chi Hospital held a meeting to discuss the details regarding Rejean’s surgery. Picture from left: Thoracic physician Dr. Yang Mei-Chen, Anesthesiologist Dr. Chen Cay-Huyen, Rejean, Philippines volunteer Conchita Tan, orthopedist Dr. Tseng Hsiao-Tsu.

The Multi-disciplined Medical Team Operations

On August 22, Rejean started a series of pre-operation examinations. Dr. Tseng arranged a CT scan to examine 3-D images and a MRI to see the nerve system; and heart ultrasound to make sure that both heart and lung could endure the risk of surgery. In the afternoon of August 22, after all the tests were done, Tseng invited nearly 20 specialists: like the Chest Medicine Dr. Yang Mei-Chen, anesthetist Chen Cay-Huyen, a dietitian, and a social worker to attend a pre-operation meeting.

Tseng explained, “Rejean’s height is

less than 140 centimeters and weigh less than 40 kilograms. Although she is very skinny, but her blood test results indicate that she is able to withstand the surgical operation. But her lung capacity may affect the removal of ventilator after the operations and that is the key to success. We must rely on Thoracic physician’s evaluations.”

Dr. Yang explained, “As matter of fact, this type of patient has no problem with their lungs. The problem is the pressure from her chest bones limiting the lungs to expand and function appropriately. Therefore, my suggestion would be more time for healing before the removal of the ventilator. Otherwise, the wounds will



August 29, Dr. Tseng performed the first spinal correction surgery.

affect the breathing.”

“If the two doctors gave an okay after an assessment, then the team shall accept this challenge,” Anesthetist Chen continued, “During the operation, we must monitor bleeding, change in potassium level, etc. The patient is very skinny so we must have enough blood supply for transfusion, and we need to prepare for all possible situations.”

The meeting from different disciplines reached a consensus so Dr. Tseng followed with detail procedures of the operation. He pointed out that Taipei Tzu Chi hospital had done more than 150 cases of spinal operation but only 30 were serious. When kyphosis is more

than 100 degrees, the team will decide on the method of operation depending on the kyphosis curvature. If it is smooth, then typically 2 surgeries are required. During the first surgery, titanium screws are applied near the pedicle areas on either side of the vertebra to reduce the curvature; the second stage is to straighten the spine. If the curvature is pointed, an incision is made at the pointed area for correction. Tseng said, “Today’s medical technology is more advanced; the old traditional way would require the surgeon to open the chest, followed by the backside. That would create tremendous burden on the patient.”

After the meeting, doctors explained

the treatment plan to Rejean in great details; everyone wished the operation on August 25 to be successful.

It's Almost Around the Clock Surgery for Spinal Correction

The day before the operation, Rejean was sick with A-type flu because of her long duration in the hospital air-conditioned room. Although the medical team gave her flu medicine, the team decided to postpone the operation for a week. Dr. Chen Cay-Huyen said, "When the patient has flu, the electrolytes inside will change, and the lung cells become

more susceptible to collapse. Once they collapse, its oxygen content will become worse, especially during the process of anesthesia. Moreover, the flu will alter one's body temperature. Therefore, all the Intravenous fluids will have to be warmed to compensate for a drop of body temperature."

In the early morning of August 29, Superintendent Dr. Chao and Chief Secretary Chiao Li-Hua came to the operating room to give their blessing. The first stage operation began at 8 o'clock in the morning. After 19 hours, the operation was successfully ended at 3:30 am the following morning. The curvature



Dietitian Cai Wan-Ruei encouraged Rejean to eat more nutritional food so she could endure the second surgery.

was corrected to 85 degrees from 140 degrees. Rejean then was transferred to the surgical ICU. The team then assessed Rejean's condition and discussed the next steps.

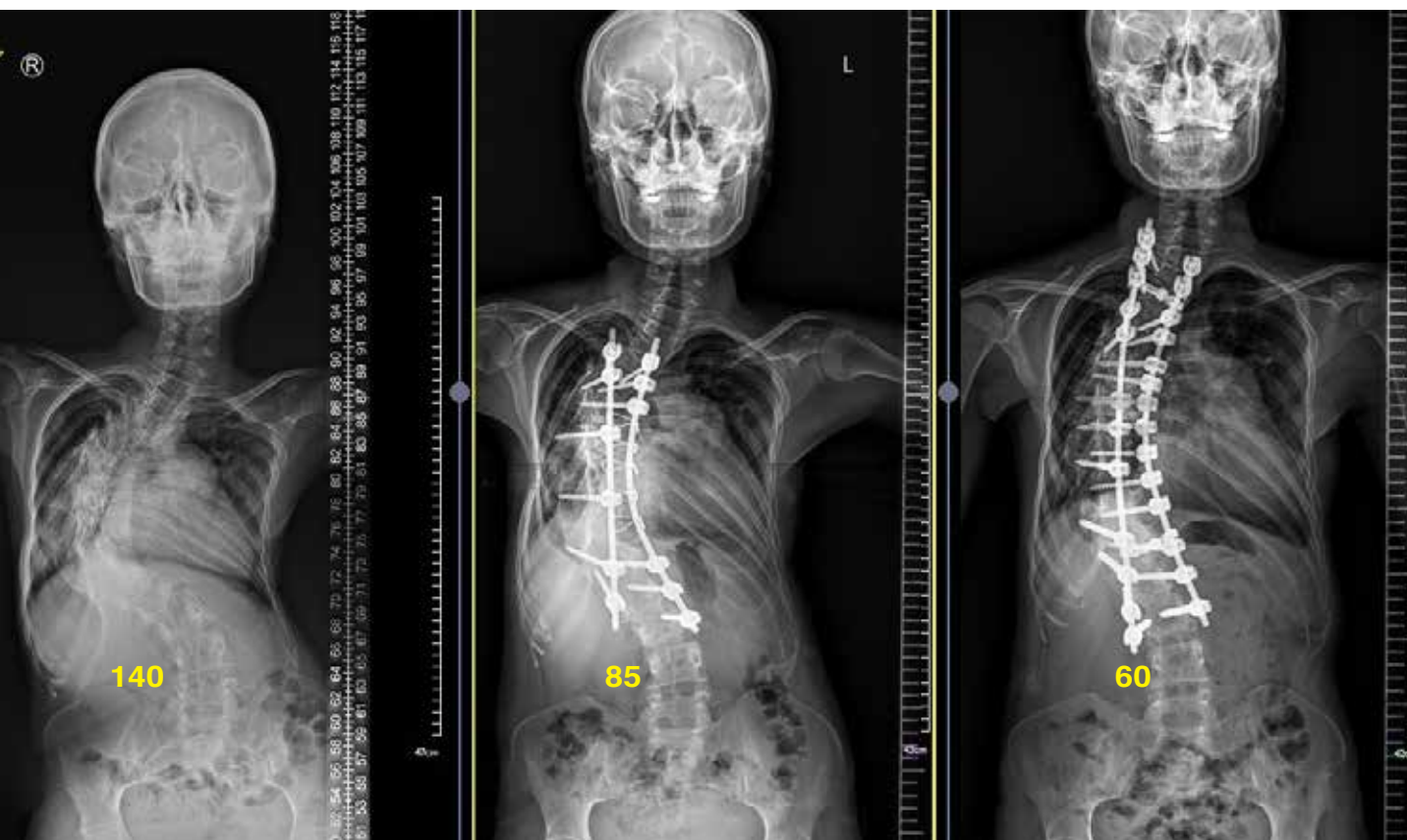
"The result of the operation is on target. The most critical factor now is if we can smoothly remove the ventilator. I hope we can safely remove the ventilator. We'll wait for Thoracic physician Dr. Yang to evaluate," Dr. Tseng said.

Fortify Her Physical Strength Is Essential prior to Second Operation

"Is it very painful? You must be strong to get well and healthy," Russel said to her sister Rejean. Seeing so many tubes connected to her sister's body, Russel felt very sad and kept on encouraging Rejean to get strong. Rejean used writing to



Rejean appreciated the deliveryman Mr. Chiang who treated her like a daughter. Picture shows prior to the second surgery, Mr. Chiang was cheering her up.



The curved spine was corrected from 140 degrees to 60 degrees.

communicate with the medical team. She hoped the ventilator to be removed soon. However, because of the lung function and physical condition, they couldn't remove them until September 4th. After the removal of all tubes, she was then transferred to a regular room.

"Doctor, with my current condition, is it suitable to do the second surgery? Am I going to be so uncomfortable like the first one?" asked Rejean.

"Look at this picture. This picture is before the surgery and the other one

is after surgery," Dr. Tseng showed and explained to Rejean with the X-ray pictures. "The angle is much smaller than the first one. Your lungs have some fluids as a result of the operation and possibly related to malnutrition. Thus we need to observe a bit longer before the next surgery. You must eat more to gain strength to endure the second operation." Dr. Tseng explained to her. Post-operation nutrition is the most concerned problem for the medical team after the surgery.

"After all, this is not her home country.

We can imagine the impact to a person at her young age enduring such a big surgery and without parents around. It is a big shock mentally, physically as well as culture-wise,” said Dr. Tseng who felt Rejean’s worry and unease. Thus he told Rejean his evaluation and future treatment plan.

Dietitian Cai Wan-Ruei also came to the room to evaluate Rejean’s condition. “We will accommodate the food to your

hometown style. Thus you should eat as much as possible and every day you will need to drink two to three bottles of balanced nutritious drink as supplement. The ideal situation is to gain 45 kilograms. Nutrition is very important to spinal, heart or related stomach or intestinal surgeries. Without enough nutrition, the recovery road will be very slow and even affect the immune system and increase the chance of infection. Therefore, one can’t



October 3, 2017, Taipei Tzu Chi medical team cut the cake with Rejean to symbolize the rebirth.

neglect the replenishment of the nutrition, especially during the surgery process,” said Tsai.

Seeing everyone was so concerned of her health, Rejean promised that she would do her best to strengthen herself and prepare for the second operation.

Straighten the Spine Increased 15 cm in Height

“Because of Tzu Chi, you came from Philippines to Taiwan; because of Tzu Chi, you bravely endured two surgeries; and because of Tzu Chi, we met the lovely you. Today is your second surgery, we have straightened your spine. Do you remember when you woke up, I asked if it was painful or not, you nodded your head, but you didn’t move. We were so worried. Then when I said, ‘Would you please move your legs?’ You moved your legs lightly. We cheered for you, happy for you; you are a lucky girl...” The young ICU RN Chu Chi-Ting wrote down his feelings in taking care of Rejean, and he was also grateful having the opportunity to be part of this girl’s life story.

Rejean’s second surgery was completed on September 12th and the spine was corrected to 60 degrees. She again went back to surgical intensive care unit. Whenever she was homesick, she would ask nurses to give her a hug. But she never wanted to trouble the nursing

staff. “Rejean is very strong and brave, and wants to do many things herself. Fearful of her coughing might infect the nursing staff, she reminded us to wear mask,” RN Chu Chi-Ting said. Supt. Chao and Chief Secretary Chiao also visited and encouraged her every day.

September 18, RN Chu wrote a note in English and posted it on her headboard. The note says: “I am so happy to say goodbye to you because you have recovered. Today you will be transferred to a regular room.” Rejean read the note with a smile.

Rejean recovered really well. Upon her return to the regular room, she worked very hard with the medical team. Two days later, she was able to get out of the bed and walk. Her height increased from 139 cm to 154 cm. Recalling her hardship, Rejean said, “When I was in the ICU, I heard other patients’ painful moaning, I was praying for their speedy recovery. I am confident with my medical team; I didn’t feel much pain myself.”

She said with a smile, “There was a person in grey clothing hugged me. It must be Dharma Master Cheng Yen! I am very grateful for Dharma Master Cheng Yen and everyone’s blessing.” She said she would never forget the delivery person Mr. Chiang. “He is so kind to me, every day he would bring fruits to me, and he is like a father to me,” Rejean said.

The Appreciation of Re-born, Gained Courage and Face Difficulty

On September 27, Dr. Tseng assessed the wounds and then took out Rejean's suture. She left the hospital on September 29. Rejean, accompanied by her sister Russel and the medical team, went to Hualien on October 3 to pay tribute to Dharma Master Cheng Yen. She then returned to Taipei Tzu Chi Hospital to attend an "Appreciation press conference" to express her gratitude to the medical team.

Superintendent Chao remembered when he first met Rejean: "I remember clearly that when I first met her, this tiny Rejean placed my hand on her forehead as a respect to us. Now she grew to 154 centimeters in height after surgeries, she looked so different from before. Now she is full of confidence."

After the treatment at Taipei Tzu Chi Hospital for more than a month, Rejean not only looked different, her innermost being also changed. Dr. Chao shared the following, "I first shared the vegetarian concept with Rejean, and it surprised me that she is a vegetarian now."

Rejean said, "I used to live with my grandfather and grandmother with a simply life style. When my body was

deforming, I felt like I was in a deep valley. I couldn't imagine how I would live with a deformed body. I used to envy those with normal body and asked god why I couldn't be like them. Why can't I like others? This time I have gotten everyone's help, I think god answered me."

Rejean then thanked everyone and said, "Now, I have the courage to face difficulties, I believe the person standing in front of you changed a lot. Without you, I don't have this moment. You have given me a new life. I also want to apologize for being so childish sometimes because of my ignorance. I don't even know how to express my gratitude. I appreciate each and every one of you, especially Dr. Tseng, I really appreciate your kindness and compassion."

The medical team then cut the cake with Rejean to symbolize her re-birth and wished her a great and bright future.

Cherish the Happiness, Renew the Dream

In early February 2018, after Tzu Chi Volunteers from Philippines's Bohol Island visited Rejean's home, they brought back good news. When Rejean returned to Bohol Island, many friends and neighbors came to visit her and were all surprised and happy for her recovery. After a few months, Rejean was pretty much back to



Upon her return to Philippines's Bohol Island, Rejean (right 3rd) no longer has a hunchback, is full with self-confidence and wants to pursue her goal. Picture is provided by Tzu Chi Branch in the Philippines.

a normal life. She helped her grandmother house chores and prepared her niece's school snack and lunch. She also helped grandmother preparing food to sell at the school cafeteria, and making handbags from recycled plastic paper. She also returned to her church's chorus group.

Rejean says she is so happy that she can wear pants and is no longer a hunchback, and she won't be short of breath as before. Now, she hopes to enter college to study accounting, she wants to be a normal student, like all the young people and pursuing her dreams.