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Dr. Lee Errett bids goodbye to Hojhani Taffee at Toronto Pearson International Airport

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HOJHANI'S STORY:

How One Surgery Changed a Jamaican Boy's Life

BY THE TIME HOJHANI TAFFE was ten, the lump on his neck had grown to the size of a grapefruit. It was a form of cystic hygroma, a rare cyst caused by blockages in the lymphatic system. For some kids, cystic hygroma can make it hard to breathe or swallow. Hojhani, fortunately, wasn't one of them.

But while not physically damaging, the large lump took a terrible toll on the young boy's life. He was mocked and scorned. When he sat down on a bench, other kids would shuffle over, afraid to be even near him. When he went out, he hid underneath hooded sweatshirts, even in the blazing Jamaican heat.

To his mother Caron, Hojhani asked why. Why did he have this? Why did he have to suffer?

But Caron, a waitress with two young boys, had no easy answers—or solutions. Hojhani had been diagnosed with cystic hygroma shortly after birth, then referred to the local children's hospital. There, Caron had questioned one of the surgeons.

"Would you allow your child to do the surgery here?"

She said no.

It may seem like a simple procedure, but removing such a large cyst from the neck is tricky. One

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Hojhani, before his surgery

wrong cut could have damaged a facial nerve, leaving Hojhani permanently disfigured.

Caron considered getting the surgery outside Jamaica. Miami, which is less than a two-hour flight from Kingston, certainly had the expertise. But the cost—\$60,000 (USD)—was impossible to afford. Which meant that, for the longest time, there was nothing Caron could do to help her son. That is, until the day she got wind of a visiting surgeon from Canada: Dr. Lee Errett.

While plenty credentialed and respected, Dr. Errett was not exactly the doctor Hojhani needed. He is neither an ear, nose, and throat doctor, nor a paediatrician. He is a cardiac surgeon and the University of Toronto's first-ever Professor of Global Surgery, and he has operated on every continent on earth, including Antarctica. But much of his international work is in China and Jamaica.

"Jamaica is one place where we've dug in a little bit," Dr. Errett says.

When one of his team travels to Jamaica, it's usually for a specific disease or need, like hernias or prostate problems. Word circulates in the churches, and when he shows up for clinic, there are dozens, sometimes hundreds, waiting.

On a recent trip, Dr. Errett got a call about a young boy needing surgery. So, he made the trek to see him in Ewarton, a small rural town about 45 minutes from the capital. It was there he first met Hojhani: a shy, ten-year-old boy dressed in a school uniform, with a grapefruit-sized cyst on his neck.

As much as Dr. Errett wanted to help, the surgery was outside the realm of his expertise. To get the care he'd need, Hojhani would have to leave Jamaica. Being a Toronto-based, globally-minded surgeon, Dr. Errett immediately thought of the Herbie Fund.

Neither Caron nor Hojhani had passports, and the application process took some time, but with Dr. Errett's help, Hojhani was accepted. He and Caron would soon be leaving for Toronto, their first flight ever and their first time leaving the island. But at least one thing would be familiar.

They would be staying with the Errett family.

For Caron, life in Toronto wasn't simply good, it was "amazing." Dr. Errett, his wife, and two children were "like family," taking them everywhere from the CN Tower to the skating rink at City Hall.

"They were wonderful," Caron says. "They made us feel at home."

She was equally charmed by the staff at SickKids, especially Hojhani's surgeon, Dr. Paolo Campisi, whom she described as "super nice."

But when the day of the actual surgery arrived, Caron's joy soon yielded to anxiety—and fear.

"I was crying, crying, crying," she says.



Dr. Paolo Campisi

Hojhani was calm, more occupied with the many games than the prospect of going in for surgery. When he asked his mom why she was crying, she did her best to be brave. But as soon as he left for surgery, she was crying again.

"I was a total mess," she says.

Once the operation finished, Dr. Campisi found Caron. Hojhani was okay. The surgery was a success. The lump was gone.

While thinking back to her time in Toronto, Caron is flooded with gratitude.

"I am so thankful," she says. "Everybody there showed us so much love."

Hojhani is grateful, too. His grades are improving. He no longer hides under hooded sweatshirts. He makes friends more easily. And when he sees himself in the mirror, he thinks, "I'm handsome."

On behalf of Hojhani, Caron, and all our Herbie Fund patients—thank you.

Your support makes this incredible work possible.

SickKids has treated 846 patients from 107 countries through the Herbie Fund.

THANK YOU.

Every day, SickKids works towards improving the lives of children, and our success depends on the generosity of donors like you. Your commitment to the SickKids

Herbie Fund ensures that we can continue to offer the best possible health outcomes for children around the world, so they can live longer and healthier lives.

Thank you for your remarkable generosity.



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