

BY BART JONES

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The family from Peru is calling it a Christmas miracle.

Sebastián Jiménez Piña, 5, had a cancerous brain tumor removed from his head in August in Lima, only to see another growth emerge in November - and continue to grow rapidly.

Doctors warned he could die if not treated, but medical help was limited in Peru.

Friday, Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington) swung into action after he learned about the boy's plight at 4 p.m. Racing against the clock, he got the U.S. Embassy in Lima to stay open an extra three hours past its regular 5 p.m. closing time - a highly unusual move - to process a visa for the boy and his parents and get them to Schneider Children's Hospital in New Hyde Park immediately.

They arrived Sunday, Sebastian underwent pre-op exams Monday, and surgery is scheduled for tomorrow.

His parents, industrial engineers Enrique Jiménez, 30, and his wife, Wendy Piña, 28, expressed disbelief at the generosity and speed with which the Americans acted. Schneider has offered to treat Sebastián for free. "We never imagined it could be so fast," Piña said in Spanish at Schneider on Monday while her son and Israel played games. "For us, this is a Christmas miracle."

Doctors at Schneider say the boy's prognosis is uncertain. They are still gathering information, because the family had few documents to bring from Peru. Doctors will be able to make a more extensive evaluation after they remove the peach-sized tumor protruding from Sebastián's right temple, said Dr. Mark Atlas, chief of Schneider's Childhood Brain and Spinal Cord Tumor Center.

Atlas said the boy's condition is grave - he could die within weeks if not treated - and surgery is needed immediately.

For his part, Israel said he was as stunned and grateful as anyone that the embassy kept its doors open late for the family and processed the visa.

"It's a classic Christmas story," Israel said. "Everything was working against this young man until at the last minute, his hope was restored."

Monday, the rambunctious Sebastián challenged Israel to a series of games in a playroom at the hospital, declaring "Gané!" - "I won!" when he beat the congressman. Israel called the boy "cute and courageous."

Sebastián's parents said that on Saturday they frenetically began gathering clothes for the winter weather in New York to take on an overnight flight to Kennedy Airport. They are staying with a relative, Luis Piña, in Hicksville.

Luis Piña, a nurse, recently told a doctor with whom he works at North Shore-LIJ, John D'Angelo, about Sebastián. D'Angelo contacted Babylon Supervisor Steven Bellone, who called Israel.

Sebastián's parents said he was a healthy and active boy until July, when he started to get severe headaches and nausea and had trouble walking. Doctors passed it off as a viral infection, but then the tumor appeared.

They thought he'd been cured before but then the second tumor emerged.

The family had little hope of reaching the United States to get help. "Getting a visa for the United States is very difficult," Wendy Piña said. "It's impossible."

Monday, they were still absorbing the rapid turn of events, but were grateful their son may have a chance. "God is great," Jiménez said, "that he put in place the elements necessary to open the path."

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