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UT SOUTHWESTERN SURGEON PERFORMS PANAMA'S FIRST COCHLEAR IMPLANT SURGERY

DALLAS--A deaf 20-year-old Panamanian college student has the chance to hear again, thanks to the combined efforts of a small Panamanian community, a faculty member at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas and a staff member from The University of Texas at Dallas Callier Center for Communication Disorders.

Four years ago, Farina Robles had normal hearing. But after a bout with meningitis, she lost her hearing completely. The people of her home community of Chitré raised the money to buy her a cochlear implant. Dr. Peter Roland, associate professor of otorhinolaryngology at UT Southwestern, traveled to Panama in December to perform the surgery, the first of its kind in that country.

The cochlear implant is a device that converts sound to electrical impulses, stimulating the auditory nerve and enabling some totally deaf people to hear some sound.

Roland performed the surgery without charge and instructed Panamanian physicians about the cochlear implant. "A lot of doctors came in and watched the surgery," Roland said. "It was a teaching case. That was the main reason the surgery was done there rather than in Dallas."

Robles' journey back to the hearing world began when Leyda de Rodriguez, an audiologist who had worked with Robles, saw a television story about cochlear implants. She contacted Brisy Northrup, a University of Texas at Dallas Callier Center for Communications Disorders audiologist who maintains close ties to her native Panama.

Northrup agreed to test Robles, and found she was a good candidate for the implant. But there was one problem: The \$18,000 cost of the implant itself, plus other fees for the surgery, training and

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programming, was beyond the Robles family's means.

A committee of six people began to raise the money for the implant. "They did everything, including standing on street corners with cans," Northrup said.

Meanwhile, she was at work in Dallas. "I approached the director of the Callier Center, who said I could assist in the case without charging a fee. Then I talked to Dr. Roland, who agreed to do the surgery free," she said.

Robles came to UT Southwestern in March to have the implant programmed and to begin rigorous training in using the implant to decipher sounds.

Roland said his patient is motivated enough to learn to master using the cochlear implant. "Despite losing her hearing suddenly, she still progressed through college," he said. "Not many people, given that sort of blow, would pop back up like that."

De Rodriguez, the audiologist, said Robles had handled her deafness well. "She reads lips very well," she said. "Some of her friends had a hard time believing she had gone deaf."

But being able to communicate wasn't enough for Robles. "I felt trapped in my own body," she said. "With the implant, even though I am hearing only noises, hearing something is better than hearing nothing." Now she can hear the telephone's ring, busy signal and dial tone, and she can understand some speech. She also can recognize her family members' names. "It's not perfect, but it is enough," she said. She will return to UT Southwestern in October for follow-ups.

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, affiliated teaching hospitals and outpatient clinics.

- Photos available on request