Chapter 2: The match

Jesus Ceja Ceja weeps uncontrollably as Houston Methodist Hospital music therapist Elizabeth Laguarte strums a Spanish-language song about miracles.

It’s morning room on Nov. 4, and Jesus’ long transplant — the only operation that can save his life from a destructive COVID-19 infection — appears imminent. After waiting three weeks for a donor with a healthy, compatible set of lungs, the hospital’s transplant team believes it found one.

Filling up bed, Jesus dabs his eyes with a blanket and mouths the words of the song, “Way Maker.” ByPriscilla Barnes, while Laguarte strums her guitar, singing in Spanish. It reminds him of his father, Jose Ceja, a rancher and harmonica player earlier.

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Chapter 3: Recovery

“A new man”

Jesus grapples with a new challenge: rebuilding his identity.

Chapter 4: The diagnosis

“His wish is to be alive”

Jesus high-fives nurses as he is wheeled off to the operating room by the surgical team at Houston Methodist Hospital.

Chapter 5: The match

“Who needs to find a donor match quickly.”

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Chapter 6: The diagnosis

“What’s meant for me will be there for me”

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Chapter 7: The diagnosis

“Who needs to find a donor match quickly.”

Jesus high-fives nurses as he is wheeled off to the operating room by the surgical team at Houston Methodist Hospital.

Chapter 8: The diagnosis

“What’s meant for me will be there for me.”

Jesus high-fives nurses as he is wheeled off to the operating room by the surgical team at Houston Methodist Hospital.
Jesus looks out a window in October 2021, the first time since he began physical therapy at Houston Methodist Hospital. “It’s so big out there,” he tells Perla.

Jesus prepares for a walking therapy session in November. What began with 50 feet down one hallway has turned into laps around the ICU while connected to his life-support machine.

Jesus to his wife as they wait to be released at the hospital in late July, when the delta variant launched a punishing surge of infections that peaked across Texas. For Perla, it spoils the illusion that Jesus battled through the worst. Her prayers are not enough to hold back her tears, which escape every evening during the hour-long drive from the hospital to Jesus’ trailer in Baytown.

“It's 1:15 p.m. when Suarez receives a text from a member of the hospital’s transplant team.”

The message disturbs a mother who frequently sits at her bedside, stroking his forearm. A muted Telemundo report tells of a “coldest day for this year,” a 55 degrees.

“From page A1

Jesus prepares for a walking therapy session in November. What began with 50 feet down one hallway has turned into laps around the ICU while connected to his life-support machine.

Jesus’ daily physical therapy sessions are becoming too easy for him. Last month, in September, walking 50 feet down one hallway was a huge accomplishment. Now, in mid-October, he walks multiple laps around the ICU while connected to his life-support machine, pulling along the posse of medical workers who support him.

After meeting the requirements to earn a spot on the national lung transplant list, Jesus has been assigned a Lung Allocation Score—a grade between 0 and 100 that determines their rank based on the urgency of the operation and the chance of post-surgery success.

The higher the score, the higher the position on the list. Jesus’ score of 90.3 puts him in the top 1 percent of roughly 10,000 active candidates nationally, giving him priority for the next available donor who meets his compatibility requirements, which include matching blood and tissue types.

The match generates automáticamente. After a donor is identified, the organ procurement organization sends them medical information into the national database, where an algorithm compares that information with the candidate’s requirements.

Jesus receives a text from a member of the retrieval team: “We need to talk.”

“There’s a problem with the lungs.”

“I can’t do this”

Jesus needed a match quickly, due to his reliance on ECMO, an aggressive life-support machine that oxygenates the blood in the body. He learned about this complication the hard way on Oct. 14, when he registers a fever and a deep-seated infection—this one worse than the one he suffered in early September.

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VII patients from the machine after two to three weeks if they did not improve. Before the pandemic, most people either recovered or died within that time frame, so doctors thought it was futile to keep someone plugged in longer. A small num-

ber of transplant candidates needed the machine to make it to surgery, but with such little research available on the new virus, lung transplants were considered too risky for COVID patients.

Then, late in that spring, ear-

ly evidence from COVID hot spots such as New York, Paris, and Italy forced hospitals to re-

consider the possibilities. Some critically ill patients began re-

covering after extended ECMO courses, as the machine gave the lungs an opportunity to heal and rehabilitate.

For people such as Jesus, with irreversibly damaged organs, despite one concern: a 47-year-old daughter, Victoria, containing family photos, re-

siding constant updates from the transplant process in rough-

ne. He matched with another do-

nor’s identity, which is only after the surgery, through a can learn the person’s identity after the surgery, through a dry run. It’s a relatively rou-

tsed patients from the machine

Jesus rides down an elevator with the surgical team to the Operating Room at Houston Methodist Hospital. Doctors found a healthy pair of lungs for Jesus and are preparing for the surgery.

Jesus plays the harmonica during a musical therapy session with Liz Laguialte, far right. Playing the harmonica can help strengthen the muscles used for breathing.
**MATCH**

From page 14

Light beams down onto the enveloped chest cavity from overhead lamps and the surgeons’ black-rimmed glasses. The surgeons use forceps to tease and prodding, they identify Jesus’ pulmonary arteries and veins that flow to and from the heart. The digital clock on the operating room wall says 1:58 a.m. It’s now dark surgical lounge to rest for 20 minutes. The severity of Jesus’ inflammation means Jesus is on the road back to a normal life. “We just got the lungs,” Chou says. “We’re on our way back.”

**ABOUT THE TEAM**

Julian Gill is a photographer at the Houston Chronicle. Gill’s previous work has been recognized by the Associated Press Managing Editors conference, for his work photographing the inside of a COVID-19 intensive care unit. Follow him on Twitter @JulianGill or email him at julian.gill@chron.com.

Godofredo A. Vásquez is a staff photographer for the Houston Chronicle. Vásquez was born in El Salvador but grew up in the Bay Area, where he attended San Francisco State University and graduated with a B.A. in Photography. In 2021, he was recognized as a Star Photojournalist of the Year by the Texas Associated Press Managing Editors, receiving top honors for his work photographing the inside of a COVID-19 intensive care unit. Follow him on Twitter @GofVasquez or email him at Godofredo.A.Vasquez@chron.com.

Dr. Erik Searle, left, and assistant thoracic surgeon Ray Chihara, right, suture the airway and pulmonary arteries of a right donor lung to Jesus’ chest.

**About this series**

When the deadly wave of COVID-19 hit Houston in the summer of 2021, Houston Methodist surgeons were pushed to capacity by a surge of unvaccinated patients requiring intensive care. By early September, the state of Texas logged more than 250,000 new cases of COVID-19 per day. It was during this sweltering summer of the Houston Chronicle photographers Godofredo Vásquez and reporter Julian Gill first met Jesus Ceja Ceja, a young, unvaccinated father of two fighting for his life in a 10th floor hospital room at Houston Methodist. Over the next several months, Godofredo and Julian visited Jesus at least once a week, logging more than 100 hours of interviews and time spent photographing this journey. The result, Transplanted, follows Jesus’ journey — from his first symptoms, to his battle to make the waiting list for a double lung transplant, and the challenges he faced along the way.

**TRANSPLANTED**

Suarez’s ear, so the surgeon can control it with steady hands and place it in a plastic tray, away Jesus’ diseased left lung. “Everything OK?” Suarez asks, concerned.

“Not really,” Chou says. “We’re on our way back.” Chou says he runs in a delay in the operating room. Suarez realizes he and Chihara will need to pause the surgery to give them time, once they finish the delicate work of separating Jesus’ pulmonary arteries and veins that flow to and from the heart. Slowly, with delicate cutting and prodding, they identify these critical highways of blood.

Exhausted from the long, restless day, Perla sleeps in Jesus’ F-150, parked in a chilly underground parking garage. Fotojournalist of the Year by the Texas Associated Press Managing Editors,Endpoint. Follow him on Twitter @GodofredoV or email him at Godofredo.A.Vasquez@chron.com.

“This is not the first time we’re doing a transplant,” Chihara says. “But this is the first time we’re doing a double lung transplant.” Soon, they can leave this long process.

**Dr. Erik Searle, left, and assistant thoracic surgeon Ray Chihara, right, suture the airway and pulmonary arteries of a right donor lung to Jesus’ chest.**

While the lung attached, the blood flow changes the color of the defined organ to a deep pink and purple. Suarez probes a loose flap of tissue and asks the anesthesiologist if it’s a through a ventilator. As it grows and tightens with air, the pink overwhelms the purple. Suarez squeezes the lung, pushing air into every corner, until the inflated organ fills the space on the left side of Jesus’ chest, dwarfing the dead lung on his right. Surgeon releases a large segment, then turns to Chihara.

“OK,” he says. “Switch sides.”

Exhausted from the long, restless day, Perla steps in Jesus’ half-empty chest, covering blood vessels to prevent further bleeding. She 2:05 a.m., Chou finally ar- "We just got the lungs. We’re on our way back.”

Dr. Philip Chou

**A13**

Suarez calls Perla to update her on the outcome of the double-lung transplant. The surgery, a success, means Jesus is on the road back to a normal life.

**A12**

**At 11:59 p.m., Jesus’ lungs come into the operating room. Suarez steps away from Jesus body with oxygen, then places an ice-filled plastic bag. Without the lungs on Jesus’ stomach and separated. He replaces the left lung first, meticulously suturing the pas- tunnels that will supply Jesus’ body with oxygen, then places the lungs on Jesus’ stomach and separates them. The lungs appear pink and purple. Suarez pinch- into every corner, until the inter- sutures the pulmonary arteries and veins that flow to and from Jesus’ chest, dwarfing the dead lung on his right. Despite this, he and Chihu-...