Washington

Donor heart gives Navy child a second chance

By Patricia Kime pkime@militarytimes.com

A Navy family is praying for the family of an Arizona 3-year-old they’ve never met, grateful for the parents’ decision to donate their dying son’s organs and give their child, 17-month-old Jeuz Balares, a chance at life.

Jeuz, the youngest child of Lt. Jorge Balares and his wife Jennifer, of Chula Vista, Calif., was born with tricuspid atresia, a heart defect that required him to undergo several heart surgeries before his first birthday. He sailed through those operations and looked forward to several years of normalcy before facing a final surgery in a few years. But in late April, plans changed: Jeuz’s heart was not functioning at all, he said.

“In your family’s worst moment, you try to tell yourself, ‘Out of this unfortunate event, life will be given to another person.’ It may be the only positive thing to come out of a terrible tragedy,” said Samuel Weinstein, who decided to donate his son’s heart after he ran the youngster over backing out of their driveway.

The family hassigned their organs, the surgeons, the nurses, the medical staff at the hospital, and the tragic: a father who decided to donate his child’s heart after he ran the youngster over backing out of their driveway.

“I stopped asking about how the children died. You try to tell yourself, ‘Out of this unfortunate event, life will be given to another person.’ It may be the only positive thing to come out of a terrible tragedy,” said Weinstein.

Pediatric cardiac do not know the back story of their son’s new heart, which was placed in his tiny body July 4. They only know it came from a 42-month-old boy of similar blood type, size and age.

The Balareses don’t know the family members. They also hope Jeuz’s story will encourage families to consider the option.

“In your family’s worst moment, you can help another human, another child. They can make a difference,” said Alejos.

DoD council hears concerns from families

Budget cuts causing worries across force

By Karen Jowers kjowers@militarytimes.com

For the first time in the five-year history of the Defense Department’s Military Family Readiness Council, members at an Aug. 5 meeting were asked to provide input about what they’re hearing from the field.

Housing, schools, pay, medical care, child care and budget cuts are on the minds of military families, according to spouses and advocates who spoke at the meeting.

For example, budget cuts have caused some installations to eliminate free child care for some family program functions, so some younger spouses can no longer afford to attend these programs, said Jeanne Chandler, wife of the sergeant major of the Army.

She said she is also hearing concerns about family program positions being left vacant because of the DoD civilian hiring freeze.

Gathering families’ perspectives is part of a new direction for the council, said Jessica Wright, acting undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness.

“We brought them there for their knowledge base, so we need to pay attention to that, and we need to capitalize on that,” Wright said in an Aug. 6 interview.

Spouses and advocacy groups had expressed concern in meetings about the lack of opportunity to offer input from the field and about whether the council is taking meaningful action to improve programs for families.

“The council is headed in the right direction,” said Karen Golden, deputy director for government relations on military family issues for the Military Officers Association of America. “It’s so important to hear from the grassroots perspective.... Each person at that table is bringing a certain perspective.”

Golden said she also was pleased that a stack of emails from family members was given to council members. “Families are being heard,” she said. “What remains to be seen is what action the council will take.”

Also important, she noted, was that three senior military leader council members were at the table — the three-star generals from the Army, Air Force and Air National Guard who have family programs under their watch.

“That sends a powerful message to military families,” she said.

In past years, senior leaders’ attendance has been sporadic at council meetings.

By law, the council is required to report annually to the Secretary of Defense and the congressional defense committees on military family readiness, including an assessment of the adequacy and effectiveness of related programs, and recommendations on ways to improve them. The deadline for the annual report is Feb. 1.

Among other issues brought up at the latest meeting:

■ Sherri Brown, American Red Cross senior vice president of Service to the Armed Forces, reported concerns about single service members’ access to child care and the need for more military youth programs.

■ Kathy Moakler, director of government relations for the National Military Family Association, reported worries about long-term reintegration issues and budget cuts to family programs.

The council agreed to delay making recommendations at the Aug. 5 meeting for improvements in family programs after Chandler asked for more time to review information and for another meeting for the council to deliberate.

“It would have been easier, maybe not as productive, if we had been able to knock out those recommendations,” Wright said. “But easy is not where we want to go. Where we want to go is solid, actionable items. So, ... we need to take more time.”