

Voice of a teen-age Christmas angel helps open eyes of girl days after surgery

It had been three days since Karly Cordano-Ringo's brain surgery, and still she hadn't opened her eyes or spoken. The 7-year-old girl lay in a bed in Doernbecher Children's Hospital intensive care unit in mid-December, her dark hair spread out on a pillow, turning her pale face. Not awake. Not asleep.



MARGIE BOULÉ

Karly was in such serious condition," says her mother, Nancy Ringo. "She'd had such a dangerous surgery. With brain surgery like that, you never know if the person is going to end up in a coma or brain dead. When you don't wake them up, you just have to wait and hope."

Karly has had 11 brain surgeries in her ten years. She has a long list of medical problems; at the top of the list are hydrocephalus, epilepsy, mild cerebral palsy and a syndrome similar to autism. Long ago doctors put a shunt in Karly's head to drain fluid that collects in her brain. But the shunt sometimes breaks or becomes infected, necessitating more brain surgery. In

November and December, Karly had endured three brain surgeries. She hadn't awakened from the last.

Nancy Ringo was at Karly's bedside that December day when a singing group from Sam Barlow High School came to the ICU to sing holiday songs for the patients. Nancy heard the music from down the hall. Karly loves music, she thought.

"After we finished one song a lady came and tapped me on the shoulder," says Crystal Meneses, a 17-year-old senior at Barlow High. "I was standing in the back. She said, 'Would you come with me and sing for a little girl?' So I followed her."

Crystal saw a thin child hooked up to a lot of machines. It looked like she was just sleeping. "From the moment I walked in the room I had a feeling like I was supposed to be there," Crystal says.

Ordinarily, Crystal would have refused to sing by herself. She's been taking voice lessons for only a few months. "She has a beautiful,

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rich mezzo-soprano voice," says Susan St. John, who is Crystal's voice teacher and is married to the choir director at Barlow High. "But Crystal doesn't like to sing solos. She's very shy."

On this day Crystal didn't hesitate. She stood close to the little girl's bed and began to sing "Silent Night." Nurses crowded into the room to watch. Down the hall the other students had finished their last song and headed for the school bus. Crystal didn't care if she was being left behind.

She began to sing "Some Children See Him."

"It's a song about children, and she was so little," Crystal says. "I just sang my best and tried to make her feel better. I tried to spin the phrases just for her. I felt like she was trying to hear me."

And then Karly opened her eyes. "She opened them and then she squinted them," says Karly's mother, Nancy. "And then she got a big grin on her face. Everyone started crying."

Everyone but Crystal. Crystal was still singing.

When she finished her song, Nancy took a picture of Crystal standing beside Karly's bed. Crystal looked over and saw her choir teacher, Gary St. John, standing in the doorway, smiling at her. It was time to go.

In the hours after Crystal left, Karly awakened more completely. It felt like a Christmas miracle to the people who'd seen what happened.

In fact, one of the nurses wrote about it in a Christmas newsletter she tucked into her Christmas cards and mailed to friends a few days later. One of her friends, coincidentally, is a teacher at Barlow High. She read the story and called music teacher Gary St. John.

"We hadn't realized until then that Crystal's song had had that effect," Gary says. His wife, Susan, called Crystal immediately and told her what she'd done for Karly several days before. "I couldn't believe it, I was so excited," Crystal says. "I was jumping up and down. I wanted to go sing for her again."

So calls were made, and on Christmas Eve Crystal went back up to Doernbecher, to Karly's bedside. It was another hard day. "Karly was in a major amount of pain,"

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CRYSTAL MENESES

WHO IS STILL AMAZED AT THE EFFECT HER SINGING HAD ON KARLY CARDANO-RINGO

Nancy says. She'd been having seizures and was having trouble sleeping. Crystal sat down and sang to Karly for more than an hour. "I sang her to sleep," Crystal says. "I sang her into a peaceful sleep."

Crystal still is amazed at what her singing did that day in December. "It made me realize how powerful music is, and how it changes and affects people. It made me realize that music is meant to be in my life."

In fact, Crystal has decided that when she goes to college next year she will study music therapy.

Karly's mother has asked that Karly be given music therapy as part of her medical treatments. Her doctor agreed. Some violinists came and played for Karly just the other day. "This should be a choice," Nancy says. "It helps Karly a lot."

Crystal plans to stay in touch with Karly and her family. She recently brought Karly a stuffed animal. She's in the process of recording an entire tape of songs for Karly. "And when she gets better," says Crystal, "I'm going to teach her to sing."

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