

Free medical services help repair man's face

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Christian Salguero recalls little of the night he was shot eight times in Guatemala, but he vowed never to forget the kindness he found during his recovery in Sacramento.

"I'd like to thank everyone who helped me while I was here," Salguero, 31, said last week before flying back to his homeland in Central America, four months after he was almost slain in an attempted carjacking.

The Guatemala City car salesman received more than \$100,000 in free medical services in Roseville and Sacramento.

Dr. B. Barry Chehrazi, a Roseville neurosurgeon, reconstructed Salguero's head, which had been hit by six bullets, one of which destroyed the vision in his right eye and left a gaping 2-inch hole in his skull.

Chehrazi performed a cranioplasty on Feb. 7 at Sutter Roseville Medical Center, which donated hospital services for the procedure, including anesthesia and post-operative care.

Besides saying gracias to those and other benefactors, Salguero expressed gratitude to his aunt, Laura Salguero of Sacramento, the driving force behind the humanitarian effort.

"I didn't know if people in the community would rise to the occasion and help someone they hadn't met," said Laura Salguero, Chehrazi's administrative assistant at Spine & Neurosurgery Associates.

"But," she continued, "every single person I spoke to said, without hesitation, 'What do you need?'"

Salguero's tragic story began Oct. 7, on his 31st birthday.

"That night, some friends threw a surprise party for me in a restaurant in Zona 10, a beautiful section of Guatemala City," the nation's capital, he said.

Afterward, Salguero was approaching his 1996 Chevrolet S-10 pickup when he heard a blast behind him, followed by a sharp pain in his the back of his neck.

"That's when the first bullet hit me ... and I can't tell you anything else, because I don't remember what went on next," he said.

Salguero was shot seven more times, some 10 to 15 feet from the pickup.

The most devastating blast, fired inches from his right forehead, appeared intended as a coup de grâce. It left a dark muzzle stamp over his head.

Despite suffering five cardiac arrests during transportation to a hospital, Salguero survived.

"Only by God's grace did I not die," said Salguero, who was in a coma for 15 days. "The doctors had told my mother to prepare for a funeral.

"When I came to in the hospital, I told her, 'Why don't you give me a birthday hug?' " he said. "I thought it was still the same day. And people couldn't understand me, because my tongue had been split in two by one of the bullets."

No arrests have been made in the case.

The pickup wasn't stolen, said Salguero's uncle, Americo Salguero, who lives in Oak Park with his wife, Laura.

"It seems the thieves were interrupted ... because they didn't take the pickup," he said.

The uncle obtained some details of the shooting from Salguero's mother, Alma Salguero, who phoned him after it occurred.

Americo Salguero and his nephew had a newly launched business partnership.

With a visitor's visa, Christian Salguero would fly to Sacramento to pick up used cars that his uncle had bought.

Last summer, Salguero had driven from Sacramento to Guatemala to pick up the S-10 pickup that almost cost him his life.

He was still looking for a buyer when he was assaulted.

"That kind of pickup is unusual in Guatemala," said Salguero, who underwent surgery in that nation to repair his tongue. Guatemalan doctors also extracted portions of a 9 mm bullet from his right arm, as well as bullet fragments from his brain.

Those doctors couldn't close the hole in Salguero's frontal skull, near his right eye. The cavity, created by the close-up bullet, was covered by skin.

"For me, it was very sad to see a hole in my head each time I looked in the mirror," Salguero said.

Released from the hospital after 23 days, Salguero went home.

A month later, he accepted his aunt and uncle's invitation to continue his recovery here.

By the time Salguero arrived, his aunt Laura had sought help from entities she had dealt with as part of her job.

"The people I phoned didn't know me directly," Laura Salguero said, adding she was amazed by their responses.

In preparation for the Feb. 7 surgery, Salguero underwent a CT scan, or X-ray of the skull, courtesy of Radiological Associates of Sacramento.

With the resulting readouts, Synthes of Pennsylvania developed a life-size model of Salguero's skull along with a synthetic piece of bone to fill the void.

Dr. Chehrazi said he was pleased to have done his part.

"It was only natural to want to help," he said.

Barbara Nelson, chief nursing executive at Sutter Roseville Medical Center, said: "What Dr. Chehrazi and the entire medical team were able to accomplish for this young man is incredible.

"I'm so glad that ... through our charity care program, we were able to be part of such a happy outcome for him."

Salguero, meanwhile, remains optimistic about the future.

"I'm not the same person I was before," he said, "but, as I return home, I know I shall survive. I must find a way to stay ahead."