

How far would a doctor go.

To save a baby's life? When Natasha Hendricks' baby girl desperately needed a transplant, even Hurricane Charley couldn't stop one doctor from making sure she got it

It was 3 a.m. on August 13, 2004. The air outside Miami University Hospital hung damp and gloomy. Hurricane Charley was fast approaching Florida's coastline.

Inside the hospital, Andreas Tzakis, M.D., director of the transplant program, sat at his desk, filled with worry.

He'd just gotten word that all Life Flights had been grounded—only moments after notifying Natasha and Rogelio Hendricks that they'd found the organs that could save their nine-month-old baby girl.

I've got to find someone to fly to Atlanta to get them, Dr. Tzakis thought desperately. This could be Natalia's only chance...

Natasha and Rogelio had been thrilled when, after two miscarriages, Natalia was born. And though premature, she was so strong, the nurses called her "Superstar."

But at six weeks old, she'd developed necrotizing enterocolitis, a serious intestinal infection common to preemies.

In the coming months, Natasha and Rogelio watched in anguish as Natalia underwent five surgeries to remove portions of her diseased bowel. But finally, her only hope was a transplant.

Weeks passed waiting for a donor. Natalia could no longer eat and had to be on an IV. But Natasha continued pumping her breast milk and freezing it. Stopping would be like giving up on her, she thought. I'll never do that, she vowed.

But Natalia's body couldn't fight the raging infection and by six months old, her liver was failing.

And when Na-



"He went way beyond the call of duty," Natasha says of Dr. Tzakis, holding Natalia.

tasha and Rogelio met with Tomoaki Kato, M.D., Natalia's transplant surgeon, he had even more frightening news.

When they found a donor, they would not only replace both intestines and her liver, but also Natalia's pancreas, stomach and spleen.

"If we replace the organs as a unit, it increases the odds of survival," Dr. Kato explained.

"It's too dangerous to fly!"

But with each day that passed, those odds fell as Natalia grew sicker.

Then the call came that August morning...

"We have a donor!"

Natasha and Rogelio raced to the hospital while Dr. Tzakis contacted the Life Flight crew to fly to Atlanta to retrieve the organs.

But... "We can't fly," the pilot said.

Hurricane

Charley was approaching Florida with 150-mile-per-hour winds.

"It's too dangerous," the pilot said.

Frantically, Dr. Tzakis called another team. And another. Until he'd called every crew on the hospital's list and even pilots in Atlanta. But no one was willing to fly.

We can't lose these organs! Dr. Tzakis thought.

In his mind, he pictured the tiny baby who, after all she'd been through, was always smiling.

But Natalia couldn't fight much longer.

I'll go! Dr. Tzakis decided. But as he began calling charter airlines...

"Can't chance it," one pilot after another said.

Finally, one pilot agreed. By now, Natasha and Rogelio had arrived.

"Don't tell them what I'm doing," Dr. Tzakis told

his team. "They have enough on their minds."

The flight to Atlanta, headed away from the storm, was smooth. Dr. Tzakis packed the organs in ice and headed back.

But toward what? Dr. Tzakis worried.

Radio reports said the hurricane had hit Florida's coast at 140 miles per hour. As they neared Miami, storm clouds swirled violently below the plane.

Glancing at his watch, Dr. Tzakis knew Dr. Kato would almost be done removing Natalia's organs.

"We made it!"

Slowly the ground grew closer and finally...

We made it! Dr. Tzakis breathed.

"Thank you!" he told the pilot, who told him, "Just help get that baby well!"

Dr. Tzakis zoomed to the hospital—and arrived just as Dr. Kato had prepped Natalia to receive the new organs.

Eleven hours after she

Don't tell them what I'm doing. They have enough on their minds

was wheeled into the operating room, "The surgery went great!" Dr. Kato told Natasha and Rogelio.

"Oh, thank you!" Natalia wept, still unaware of Dr. Tzakis' heroic flight.

With the nourishment of her mother's milk, Natalia quickly gained strength—and today, at 20 months, she's a healthy, bubbly toddler.

"We have so much to be thankful for," Rogelio says. "The donor family, Dr. Kato, Dr. Tzakis..."

Natasha starts to cry.

She and Rogelio hadn't known what he'd done until they read an article on Natalia's surgery.

"That he would risk his life to save our daughter... and when we tried to thank him, it needed to be done," he said modestly, Natalia says. "We thank God for him every day."

—Shari Cohen

Did you know?

A recent Gallup poll revealed that the majority of us—67%—trust our doctors.