



Miracle surgery has Nicasio ready to take big leap

Facing new future

Rosanne Michie

NICASIO Cardenas is heading home to a new life in the Philippines after having miracle surgery in Melbourne.

Mr Cardenas, 26, will pursue his dream of marriage and family after his life-saving surgery.

He arrived in Australia five weeks ago with his brain literally growing out of his nose, a condition known as a neural tube defect.

Thanks to the work of Brighton plastic surgeon Alan Breidahl and a team of volunteers, he has a new face and new hopes for his future.

"It's like I am dreaming," Mr Cardenas said.

"It is much better than I was ever thinking.

"I am looking forward to

going home and showing my family and friends."

At the Epworth Hospital, Mr Cardenas underwent a complicated five-hour operation to remove the large growth, after being brought to Australia by the Altona Rotary Club.

His smile lights up the Brighton surgery where Dr Breidahl normally conducts his "other life" — breast enhancement, nose jobs and face lifts.

The operation was necessary to ward off potential blindness and even death.

"I prayed for this to happen since I was born but I was afraid to get my hopes up in case it wasn't true," Mr Cardenas said.

He describes the surgery as the start of the rest of his life.

The youngest of eight children from a very poor family, Mr Cardenas comes from the

Cagyan Valley, 600km north of Manila.

He loves playing sport, especially basketball.

He has a girlfriend — Loret, a maid — who he said "accepted me with this condition".

Now Mr Cardenas can't wait to see her reaction when she sees his new face.

He arrived in February, thanks to Rotary Oceania Medical Aid For Children, for the exhaustive preparation of CT scans, blood tests and X-rays, but hasn't had much chance to explore Melbourne.

Mr Cardenas helped Altona Rotary members at a sausage sizzle at Bunnings.

He said before the surgery that he didn't dwell on his disfigurement but confessed to sometimes crying in private at the way he looked.

"It stopped me from getting a job because when people see me they looked down

on me," Mr Cardenas said.

Neural tube defects are extremely rare in Australia.

Dr Breidahl — who is also vice-president of the Australian and New Zealand Society of Cranio-Maxillo Facial Surgeons — has seen about 15 similar cases in his international humanitarian work.

He heads to Vietnam next week for another five cases.

"Intellectually it (the growth) hasn't affected Nicasio at all," Dr Breidahl said.

"It affected the social aspects, of course."

Dr Breidahl, who often donates his time to ROMAC, gathered a specialist team including anaesthetist John Cormack and neurosurgeon Gavin Fabyini, who also donated their services.



Before: Dr Breidahl and Nicasio Cardenas



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Can't believe it's me: Filipino Nicasio Cardenas admires Alan Breidahl's work. Pictures: MARK SMITH