

The Salinas Californian

July 29, 2010

www.thecalifornian.com

Onyx Fund, Natividad Medical Foundation offer women needed surgery

By Mike Hornick

SALINAS, CALIF. - After putting off surgery for months or years due to money worries, four low-income Monterey County women got the gynecologic operations they needed in the past six weeks at Natividad Medical Center.

Others like them will benefit, too, if a new fundraising effort has its way.

The Onyx Fund for Women, named in honor of Seaside patient Onix Herrera, has collected \$33,000 and is committed to raising \$100,000 in the next year, Natividad Medical Foundation President Linda Ford said Wednesday. A big chunk is expected to come from a two-to-one, \$50,000 challenge grant offered

by the Community Foundation for Monterey County.

The Onyx Fund covers only down payments; for the balance, the women must still work out agreements with the hospital. It doesn't solve all problems, but Natividad doctors said it solves the most urgent one.

"It allows us to get the patient taken care of, to get in and out and get healthy," said Dr. Peter Chandler, obstetrics and gynecology service director at Natividad Medical Center.

Like the other surgery recipients, Herrera, 32, is uninsured. For nine years she's worked full-time as a housekeeper in Carmel. When her daughter Sofia, now 4 years old, was born at Natividad, doctors found fibroid tumors and delivered the baby by Caesarean section.

The tumors required surgery, but faced with a \$10,000 down payment, Herrera — like others in her situation — put it off. For



Onix Herrera of Seaside, center, speaks Wednesday during a press conference at Natividad Medical Center in Salinas, where the Onyx Fund for Women — named in honor of Herrera — was announced. At left is Herrera's sister, Yessenio Mendoza, and at right is Maria Giannini, a member of the board of directors of the Community Foundation for Monterey County. (Scott MacDonald)

four years, Ford said, Dr. Ricardo Cuadros kept Herrera's name high on a "worry list" in his wallet. There was occasional phone contact. When she came back seeking care, Ford said, the tumors had grown enough to make her appear nine months pregnant.

Herrera took another six months to raise \$3,000 toward the down payment on her \$100,000 surgery. The hospital cut the total bill to about \$25,000, said foundation board member Maria Giannini,

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The Onyx Fund Necklace, being sold to benefit the Onyx Fund for Women. (Scott MacDonald)

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and accepted the reduced down payment.

By the time Herrera went into surgery, her condition was dire.

“Had she waited a bit more, the tumors were going to push into her lungs and stop her breathing,” said Giannini. “She knew that if she didn’t have the surgery, someone else would have to take care of her daughter. The emotional stress was just as great as the physical.”

The Onyx Fund is for gynecologic and obstetric surgeries covering conditions like Herrera’s, and others like prolapsed uteruses, marked by sporadic bleeding and other symptoms.

The four years were not the first experience of lasting misery for Herrera, who grew up in El Salvador and speaks only Spanish.

“She’s been through a lot of stuff in her life,” said Yessenio Mendoza, her sister. “But she’s thankful that everybody helped and that this is over.”

Born with a cleft palate that went untreated until age 12, as a child Herrera could eat and talk only with extreme difficulty, Ford said.

“She couldn’t go to school and her mother had to hand feed her every day,” Ford said. “She suffered all that and then came and went through this. Her story touched us and we

TO HELP

To learn more about The Onyx Fund for Women, visit www.theonyxfund.com or call 831-755-4187. Donation options include purchase of a necklace bearing an O-shaped sterling silver piece studded with three onyx stones. It costs \$125; \$100 is tax deductible.

started the Onyx Fund for Women.

“It’s a hidden suffering by women who are uninsured. That’s what touched me — even to imagine that this is going on, right in our backyard.”