

A 'DAY OF SMILES' FOR CHILDREN



JOHN VANBEEKUM/HERALD STAFF

During a 'Day of Smiles' at Baptist Children's Hospital in Kendall on Saturday, Dr. Jhonny Salomon describes to Claudia March, 7, how he is going to rebuild her bellybutton, shown here as a circle he drew, that was lost to burn scarring when she was only 1. Salomon and other surgeons donated their services free of charge to repair almost a dozen South Florida children's cleft palates, facial scars, birthmarks and other deformities. **Story, 3B.**

KENDALL

For 11 youths, it's a chance to fit in

■ Almost a dozen South Florida children got free plastic surgery to correct cleft palates and the like as part of Baptist Children's Hospital's 'Day of Smiles.'

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Plastic surgery, virtually a recreational sport among South Floridians, is all about standing out.

But for 11 children a little nip and tuck on Saturday morning brought a sense of relief at the prospect of being able to fit in.

"At a certain age, they want to be different," plastic surgeon Brad Herman said about his image-conscious adult patients. "Kids like this, they just want to blend in."

Nine plastic surgeons, one ophthalmologist and about 40 nurses, orderlies and surgical assistants gathered at the Kendall-based Baptist Children's Hospital to help alleviate the sting of that childhood and teenage pastime: ridicule.

The corrective cosmetic surgery treated cleft palates, or cleft lips, facial scars and birthmarks and a drooping eyelid. The operations averaged about an hour.

"Kids with cleft palates get picked on," one of the plastic surgeons, Joel Levin, said. "As



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READY FOR SURGERY: Jamar Stanbury, 13, grimaces as Giso Johnson starts an IV. Victoria Ndobu, 11, watches.

a parent myself, we want our kids to have as pleasant a childhood as possible."

Such corrective surgeries as these fetch between \$4,000 and \$6,000, Herman said. To be eligible for the free treatment, parents or guardians "in need" were required to submit their income tax returns for the past 12 months; the service was advertised in schools, churches, newspapers and on the radio, hospital spokeswoman Barbara Moore said.

It was the fourth year the doctors did the pricey alterations during a "Day of Smiles." Some of the doctors present, such as Herman and

Levin, make up Operation Smile, a nonprofit, volunteer medical group that provides reconstructive facial surgery to needy children around the world.

Claudia March, 7, was among those to go under the knife.

Five years ago, the Japan native was left alone with her mother's boyfriend, who fell asleep, and scalding water burned her stomach and legs and disfigured her bellybutton.

On Saturday, Jhonny Salomon was to turn Claudia's pin-size navel into something more "normal" so she could wear high-cut shirts with her

cousin.

"[I'm] a little bit nervous," Claudia whispered, her father Larry at the side of her stretcher.

A cellphone game helped keep her mind off the IV needles about to prick her arms.

"When she was younger, she asked me why she didn't have a bellybutton," March, 27, said.

"When she goes out, she's embarrassed she doesn't have a bellybutton."

For Loudjje Garçon, 16, surgery on her cleft lip and a collapsed nostril will aid her in her stateside assimilation after she moved to South Florida from Haiti with her mother, Mimoseo, 38, four months ago.

The operation serves another purpose, her doctor said.

"It can cause sinus problems," Herman said about an uncorrected nose.

And for Jamar Stanbury, the operation meant an end to routine name calling because of a prominent bump that was left on his forehead when he fell on a coffee table at age 1.

His classmates at Cutler Ridge Middle School called him "bubble boy" and "bubble head."

"People aren't going to tease me," the 13-year-old boy said.