

Russian girl's surgery today thanks to local donations

By **JIM COLLAR**
OF THE NORTHWESTERN

A once-impossible dream is set to become reality in an Oshkosh operating room this morning.

It's there where Angel Volkova, 3, of Orel, Russia will undergo her first surgery to repair facial injuries from an accident of more than a year ago.

And what a year it has been.

Volkova, who lost much of her bottom lip and cheek when falling onto a broken mirror only days after Christmas 1998, was expected to live with the inability to close her mouth because of the injuries sustained in the fall. With the Russian economy crumbling at the time of the accident and the family surviving on a salary of \$20 per month, the necessary procedures were impossible to afford.



That's before the far-away community of Oshkosh stepped in.

The Northwestern published a story on early fund-raising efforts in spring 1999. It prompted readers, businesses and others to raise enough money to bring the youngster across the Atlantic for surgery. About \$2,000 was raised.

Helen Volkova, Angel's grandmoth-

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Dr. David Janssen
plastic surgeon

er who joined the youngster on her adventure to America, said the generosity still is difficult to believe.

"It's beyond any description," Volkova said. "I cried and cried and cried when I saw that people wanted to help. I didn't only want to kiss them – I wanted to give them my heart."

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ANGEL VOLKOVA, a Russian girl who fell into a broken mirror, in the home of her host family Katya and Mert Fulwiler.

Surgery: Plastic surgeon not surprised by community's outpouring

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The charity will continue bright and early this morning.

Oshkosh plastic surgeon Dr. David Janssen will handle two surgeries, the first beginning at 7:30 a.m.

Janssen offered his aid without pay earlier in the year on the condition that Angel could be brought to Oshkosh.

Pediatricians and a host of other doctors and support staff also are volunteering time. The Mercy Medical Foundation is covering the costs of her hospital stays. Those costs are estimated at \$10,000.

The fact the community responded to Angel's need is wonderful, but not surprising, Janssen said.

"I'm truly impressed with the generosity of everyone — the charity of the hospital and other doctors that donated time," Janssen said. "I never had a difficult time believing that the people of Oshkosh had a big heart."

Today's procedure, which is expected to take about two hours, will reconnect the lower lip and appropriate muscles to their proper location.

During the surgery, Janssen also will insert a small balloon into Angel's neck. The balloon will progressively be inflated to stretch the surrounding skin. The excess skin flaps later will be used to replace scar tissue during a second surgery.

Both surgeries combined should result in about a 90 percent recovery, Janssen said.

Angel and her grandmother are staying with Katya and Mest Fulwiler while in



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ANGEL VOLKOVA and her grandmother Helen Volkova.

Both will return to Russia in six months once both of Angel's surgeries and recovery

Katya Fulwiler, also from Russia, became friends with Helen Volkova in college. The Fulwilers said they never thought fund-raising efforts would amount to such a great and prompt resolution.

The fact they were able to come to America for the surgeries also was a great victory, they said.

Doctors in Russia also were preparing to handle Angel's case through money raised in Oshkosh.

Due to different and less-developed techniques, however, a second surgery would have had to wait for 12 years, meaning Angel would have had to grow up with the difficulties and self-esteem issues related to her facial injuries.

What has been a year of pain already is turning to smiles for the youngster.

Angel spent much of the day Monday playing with her dolls, stuffed animals and other Christmas gifts. Helen Volkova said her granddaughter is excited and not a slight bit nervous, because "her friends at the hospital are just going to make her face like the other children's."

The fact she has this opportunity is a great testament to the people in this community, Katya Fulwiler said.

"Things like this only happen in America," she said. "This is such a great country to live in."