

# All the Right Moves

Advancing to martial arts perfection

—after transplant

BY KAREN SOKOHL

**“W**ILL THE REAL ORGAN RECIPIENT PLEASE STAND UP.” Picking either of them from the lineup wouldn’t be easy. You might peg 7-year-old Gabe Kagan or 10-year-old Travis Martin as future ball players. You definitely wouldn’t see them as children who’ve undergone multiple surgeries, including transplantation. But you’d be wrong.

## Gabe Kagan



By the time he was 18 months, Gabe Kagan had sustained three major surgeries. Diagnosed with biliary atresia at only 3 months, he underwent a Kasai procedure to drain

the bile from his liver. The procedure went so well that his doctors thought Gabe would be free from any transplant worries until possibly his teen years. Yet three months later when they checked his blood work, the numbers were so bad the doctors were concerned he might not make it to his second birthday.

“We were scared to death,” said Gabe’s mother, Karen. “We contemplated putting him on the transplant list, but his condition had deteriorated so rapidly that we didn’t want to risk the wait. My husband and I made the decision to give him part of our liver.”

Both were tested as suitable living donors and, thankfully, Karen was a good match. They immediately began making plans. Karen quit her job, and she and her husband downsized from a house to an apartment in preparation for their increased financial responsibilities.

“I had intended to quit in a year or two anyway,” Karen explained. “The

transplant just sped our plans up a bit. It’s really hard to work if you have a child with a transplant because you have constant appointments for lab work and follow-up visits and frequent trips to the hospital.”

Just one week after the Kagan family moved into a new apartment, surgeons removed 30 percent of Karen’s liver and transplanted it into Gabe.

“Everything went beautifully,” Karen said. “The very next morning they wheeled me into the ICU, and I held Gabe in my arms. I think it was harder on my husband,” she said.

Gabe’s father, Neil, an eighth-degree black belt in kung fu, fulfilled a dream back in 2001 when he opened his own part-time studio. Karen is also a student of the discipline, and they teach both children and adults.

Following in the family footsteps, Gabe began studying kung fu at age 4 and has already advanced to a purple belt (just five steps short of black). When Gabe’s little brother, Evan, turns four, he’ll study martial arts as well.

When he’s not working on his kung fu moves, going to school or winning medals at the U.S. Transplant Games, Gabe volunteers for LifeLink, one of Florida’s organ procurement agencies. He’s proud to be the youngest volunteer on record. Gabe and his mother take

regular tours of area hospitals to thank the ICU nurses for their efforts toward organ procurement. Greeted by the nurses with “Here comes the kung fu kid,” Gabe performs martial arts demos each time he visits.

As normal as his life may seem, Gabe understands how critical it is that he take his medicine.

“We talk about it all the time,” Karen said. “And he knows what can happen if he doesn’t take it. We know people who died because they didn’t take their meds.”

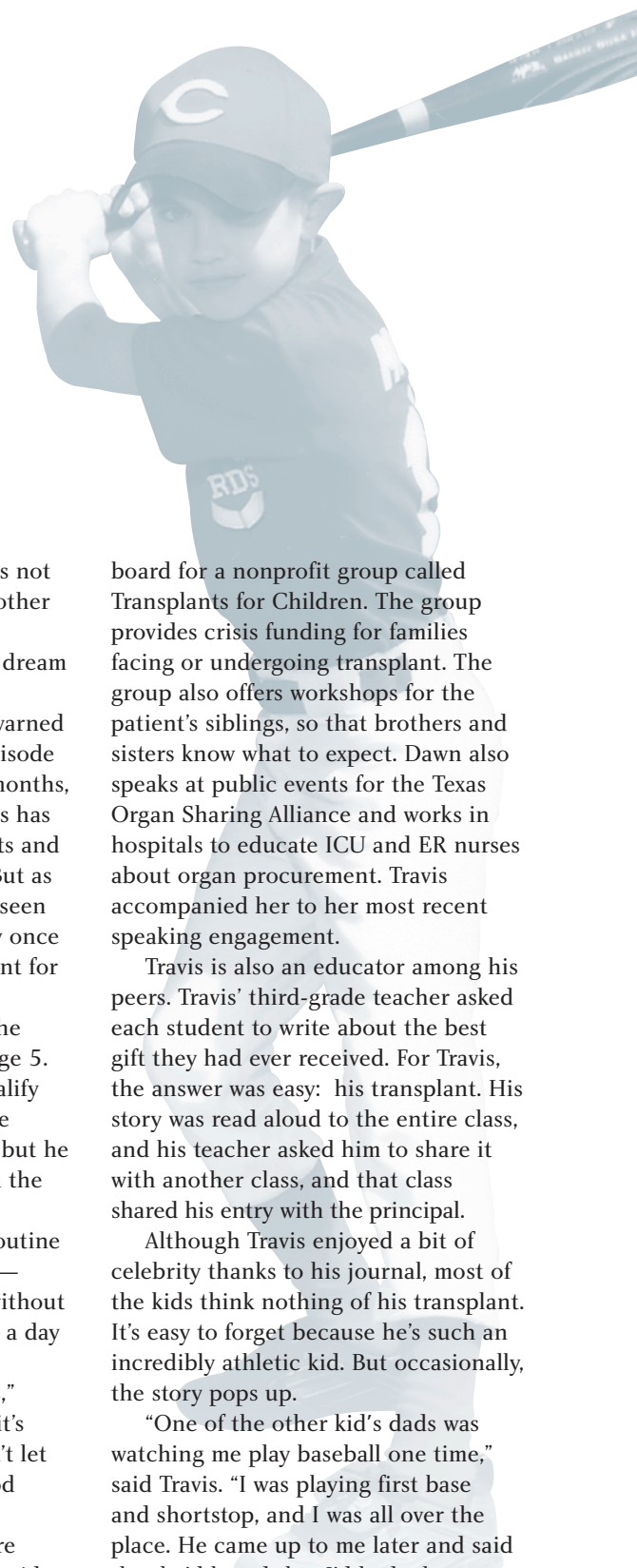
But Karen doesn’t worry about Gabe, who says, “I’m the best pill taker around!” In fact, at age 3 Gabe started asking his mom for cups of water so he could take his medicine the same way his dad did.

“I can even swallow the medium-sized pills without water if I have to,” Gabe bragged.

“I’m just so thrilled with the outcome of his surgeries and with his current health,” said Karen. “Even something like watching him play in the backyard pool is amazing. I didn’t quite let myself believe that he was going to be OK until he turned 5, and then I came to the realization that he was going to grow up.

“He can have a normal life. He can travel the world, be independent. He’s a very lucky little boy.”





### Travis Martin



Twenty-three medals from tae kwon do tournaments, along with trophies from soccer, baseball and basketball, line the shelves of Travis' bedroom. This from a kid who was too

weak to roll from his tummy to his back at 5 months old.

Doctors diagnosed him with a congenital heart defect at 2 months and told his parents his best hope was a transplant. At the time Travis' father was between jobs, which cost the family more than \$500 a month for COBRA insurance premiums. Though she wasn't working when he was diagnosed, Dawn, his mother, found that she had to return to work to meet the family's financial needs. Dawn would leave the hospital to go to job interviews, eventually finding one in a daycare nursery.

"I'd work with healthy infants all day long and then cry all the way to the hospital that evening," Dawn said. "It was so difficult because I'd be there at work listening to mothers complaining about their sons' ear infections. Those kids could take antibiotics, but a simple dose of antibiotics wouldn't help my son."

Travis remained in the hospital almost exclusively from the time he was diagnosed until he received his heart transplant at 5 months. Two weeks later he was on his way home with his family. According to his mother, the kid started rolling around like crazy and hasn't stopped moving ever since.

"We look at him and think, he's not even supposed to be alive," his mother said. "Yet here he is jumping and running and kicking. You'd never dream he'd had a heart transplant."

Dawn and her husband were warned by the doctors that a rejection episode was likely to occur in the first 6 months, so they watched and waited. Travis has no doubt suffered his share of cuts and bruises like all active little boys. But as far as his heart's concerned, he's seen the inside of a hospital room only once—that was two years posttransplant for a routine catheterization.

An exceptionally active child, he started studying tae kwon do at age 5. A natural athlete, he will soon qualify for a second-degree black belt. He should have qualified last March, but he was too busy with baseball to find the time to take the test.

Along with his daily athletic routine comes a ritual of a different kind—medicine twice a day, every day, without fail. This means cyclosporin twice a day and Imuran at night.

"He knows how important it is," Dawn said. "He's fully aware that it's what keeps him alive. And he won't let me forget it," she added, with good humor.


"Once my mom went out before giving me my evening medicine," said Travis. "I waited in my room until I heard the car pull up then I raced downstairs and said, 'Mom! You need to give me my medicine!'"

In her "spare" time (she has two other children, Grant, 7, and Amber, 3), Dawn is a member of the executive

board for a nonprofit group called Transplants for Children. The group provides crisis funding for families facing or undergoing transplant. The group also offers workshops for the patient's siblings, so that brothers and sisters know what to expect. Dawn also speaks at public events for the Texas Organ Sharing Alliance and works in hospitals to educate ICU and ER nurses about organ procurement. Travis accompanied her to her most recent speaking engagement.

Travis is also an educator among his peers. Travis' third-grade teacher asked each student to write about the best gift they had ever received. For Travis, the answer was easy: his transplant. His story was read aloud to the entire class, and his teacher asked him to share it with another class, and that class shared his entry with the principal.

Although Travis enjoyed a bit of celebrity thanks to his journal, most of the kids think nothing of his transplant. It's easy to forget because he's such an incredibly athletic kid. But occasionally, the story pops up.

"One of the other kid's dads was watching me play baseball one time," said Travis. "I was playing first base and shortstop, and I was all over the place. He came up to me later and said that he'd heard that I'd had a heart transplant and he wanted my autograph! That was pretty cool." 

#### DO YOU HAVE QUESTIONS?

Do you have questions because your child is on the transplant waiting list? Feel free to contact Karen Kagan at [kaganfam@aol.com](mailto:kaganfam@aol.com) or Dawn Martin at [wmartin339@aol.com](mailto:wmartin339@aol.com).