

SPORTS

Injuries, trade transitions leave NBA title chase wide open.

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NATION

Former officer testifies about critical moments in Floyd death.

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HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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TRANSPLANTED

THE LONG ROAD TO RECOVERY

Finally back home, Jesus Ceja Ceja begins to restart his life



By **Julian Gill** STAFF WRITER
and **Godofredo A. Vásquez** STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Chapter 3: Recovery

Jesus Ceja Ceja pulls up his T-shirt and gazes at the black scar that curves across his chest like a “W.” Stitches seal four holes on his stomach, where drainage tubes penetrated his body, and a fifth hole on his neck from his life-support machine.

“I feel like Frankenstein,” he tells his wife, Perla Munguia Ceja, and his mother, Evangelina Ceja Aguilar, in a fourth-floor room in Houston Methodist Hospital’s Dunn Tower. “I don’t even want to know how they opened me up.”

It’s 7 p.m. on Dec. 7, four months to the day since he entered the

SUNDAY

Chapter 1: The diagnosis

‘We had so many plans’

With his wife’s support, Jesus Ceja Ceja works to become listed for a lung transplant and piece together his life.

MONDAY

Chapter 2: The match

‘What’s meant for me will be there for me’ Jesus needs to find a donor match quickly. But how long can he wait?

TODAY

Chapter 3: Recovery

‘A new man’

Jesus grapples with a new challenge: rebuilding his identity.

Jesus smiles as he changes into his own clothes right before being discharged from Houston Methodist Hospital on Dec 7.

Houston hospital with a COVID infection that destroyed his lungs and three weeks since his double-lung transplant.

The 29-year-old has already changed out of his hospital gown into a comfortable shirt and black-and-gray checkered sweats. A nurse removed the final IV from his arm – his last remaining link to a machine. And the staff that became his family in the ICU filed into the *Recovery continues on A10*

Read all three chapters of this series at houstonchronicle.com/transplanted

Russian troops head into Ukraine

Putin contends he’s keeping peace in two separatist territories

By **Anton Troianovski** and **Valerie Hopkins**
NEW YORK TIMES

The Kremlin has ordered Russia’s defense ministry to deploy troops in two Russian-backed separatist territories that have loomed large in the conflict over Ukraine.

Moscow announced that it would carry out “peacekeeping functions” in decrees published late Monday, shortly after President Vladimir Putin told his nation that he had decided to recognize Russian-backed separatists in the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics.

It was not immediately certain whether the troops would remain only on the territory controlled by the separatist republics or whether they would seek to capture the rest of the two Ukrainian regions whose territory they claim.

It was unclear if a long-feared Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine had begun. The separatists might have invited Russian forces in, but neither Ukraine nor the rest of the world views the so-called republics as anything but Ukrainian territory.

While Putin’s ultimate plans remain a mystery, a full invasion would constitute the largest military action in Europe since World War II.

By seeking to redraw the post-Cold War boundaries of Europe and force Ukraine back into Moscow’s orbit, Putin is attempting nothing less than to upend the security structure that has helped maintain an uneasy peace on the continent for the past three decades.

Now edging toward the twilight of his political career, Putin, 69, is determined to burnish his legacy and to correct what he has long viewed as one of the greatest catastrophes of the 20th century: the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Asserting Moscow’s power over Ukraine, a country of 44 million people that was previously part of the bloc and shares a 1,200-mile border with Russia, is part of his aim of restoring what he views as Russia’s rightful place among the world’s great powers, the United States and China.

Putin has increasingly portrayed NATO’s eastward expansion *Russia continues on A14*

Welcoming Afghan newcomers is around-the-clock operation

By **Elizabeth Trovall** and **Sam González Kelly**
STAFF WRITERS

A day in the life of a resettlement agency working with the influx of evacuated Afghans is non-stop.

More than 4,730 evacuated Afghans have been moved to Houston since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan – up to 6,000 total are expected. Hundreds of Afghans have been languishing in temporary housing for weeks.

The Alliance is one of five local agencies responding to the historic influx – they’ve hired 84 full-time, part-time and contract staff to work with the 1,278 Afghans *Afghans continues on A8*



Mark Mulligan / Staff photographer

From left, Fahim Ghori and Mohammad Naser Khafi visit with Alliance logistics case manager Shuja Shayan.

Solar panels gaining prominence in state

By **Shelby Webb**
STAFF WRITER

For nearly eight hours one day in late January, the power to Sam Bryan’s house blinked off after a transformer near his greater Third Ward lot blew a fuse.

The same transformer has long had issues, he said, leading to blackouts at Bryan’s house and those of his neighbors several times a year. But in January, Bryan’s lights stayed on, thanks to 43 photovoltaic solar panels bolted onto his roof and a battery system stored in his garage. Instead of comforting his 4-year-old, who had grown anxious during power outages since the freeze of February 2021, they played a game.

“It was a pretty neat experience,” he said. “Part of the fun was that I don’t have to explain why we can’t turn the lamp on.”

Bryan is among thousands of Texans who have turned to solar power and battery storage, creating so-called microgrids, as a solution to blackouts. With a venture creating the same little power plants for apartment buildings, Texas has become a national leader in residential solar power installations.

From 2019 to 2020, small-scale solar capacity in Texas grew by 63 percent, to 1,093 megawatts from 670 megawatts, according to the Energy Information Administration. In the first three quarters of *Solar continues on A14*

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Jesus rests on a chair inside his room at Houston Methodist five days before being discharged. “I feel like Frankenstein,” he said later.

RECOVERY

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room to say their emotional goodbyes.

It’s time to go home.

Jesus can finally breathe on his own with enough strength to continue outpatient physical rehabilitation. Perla packs the 22 medications that Jesus must take every day for the next year before weaning down to 10.

Immunosuppressants will become a permanent fixture in his life to stave off rejection, a common threat for transplant recipients whose immune systems attack the new lungs as if they were a virus. The same drugs also will make Jesus more susceptible to severe illness, so the transplant team urges him to be careful, especially as the pandemic persists.

The state is reporting about 3,500 new cases per day, a far cry from the 25,000 recorded during the peak of the delta surge in early September. But another wave is possible: Just the day before, Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo announced the first local confirmed case of the omicron variant, a COVID mutation with unprecedented contagiousness.

Jesus now must avoid simple pleasures such as smoke from a barbecue grill, alcohol, unpasteurized cheese and carbonated beverages, like soda and Topo Chico, all of which can cause lung infection or irritation. Underpinning his new lifestyle is a looming reality: Only about 60 percent of lung transplant recipients survive after five years, and just 33 percent survive after 10 years.

As he prepares to leave, the



Pharmacist Brett Pierce places medication into a pill organizer for Jesus before he’s discharged. Jesus was prescribed 22 different medications to take after leaving the hospital.

staff presents him with a departing gift: a framed poem, “Another Chance” by Helen Steiner Rice, about creating a new beginning. He reads the Spanish translation and buries his face in Perla’s arms, crying.

After questioning for months whether he’d make it this far, he confronts a new challenge: As someone who built his life around the type of physical labor he is now restricted from, how will he forge his new identity?

A seasonal worker who frequently traveled from his home

“I don’t even want to know how they opened me up.”

Jesus Ceja Ceja, after his transplant

in Cotija de la Paz, Michoacán, to the United States, Jesus took pride in his specialty as a pipe insulator at petrochemical plants. He easily found work with industrial contractors and often served as a team leader, direct-

ing groups of older and more experienced men. The job gave him a purpose, but it also forced him to be around gasses and chemicals that would damage his new lungs. He has experience working construction and fixing cars, but that requires strength that might take him years to rebuild.

Perla, who also grew up on a ranch in Cotija, does not have time to work. She will be consumed with caring for Jesus, their 7-year-old daughter, Victoria, and 3-year-old son, Erick. For now, they rely on federal food benefits, money from family, modest donations and the hospital’s financial assistance program.

Jesus rolls out of the hospital in a wheelchair into the brisk 65-degree air that makes him retreat back inside for warmth. Evangelina rubs his shoulders as he stares out the window at the bustling sidewalk and long line of cars, waiting for Perla to drive up in his F-150.

Baytown awaits.

Mirrors

It was always hard for Jesus to leave the comfort of his family’s ranch in Cotija for Baytown, but living in the industrialized hub allowed him to commute to his temporary worksites in the Gulf Coast region. He rented a small trailer, nearly as wide as his wingspan, to serve as a home base when he found temporary lodging closer to his jobs.

Even when he lived with roommates, he felt lonely without Perla and the kids. But he had to press on. The work carved their only reliable path to the United States.

The couple wanted to build something of their own, separate

from their ranches that brought their families so much serenity and so little income. Many people in Cotija work seasonally in the United States to support their lives in Mexico. But Perla, a U.S. citizen, and Jesus, a lawful permanent resident, wanted a place to raise their growing family with steady work, security and a good education for the kids.

They thought the COVID infection wiped out that future. Now, settling down in their desired destination, they begin to weave a different version.

Jesus stands in the sparsely furnished living room of their new three-bedroom home that Perla found on the north side of Baytown, across from a mobile home park. A “bienvenido a casa” banner hangs on the wall beside a small TV on a dresser. All of his belongings are piled in boxes in the back room.

“Well done,” says Jesus, impressed with the space.

It’s more than enough for him, Perla and the kids, who are visiting family in Mexico but will return soon. Perla is picking them up next week.

Jesus’ slow footsteps echo on the wood floors as he walks, quietly, into the bedroom and runs his hand over the blue plush blanket on their bed. A real bed.

When he sits on the mattress, he faces the mirrors on the sliding closet doors, inspecting his beaten body.

His 5-foot-7-inch frame weighs 137 pounds, down from his pre-COVID weight of 200 pounds. His black hair is thinner, his face marked by the straps of various breathing devices. What he sees matches how he feels. His newfound breath is weak and irregular, which is to be expected from a transplant patient off life support.

He also struggles to comprehend that someone else’s organs live inside his body. Someone who had to die to give him life. It’s a strange feeling – one that’s difficult for him to describe. He doesn’t want to know anything about the donor or even the surgery. To him, those are unsettling facts that will only distract him from the recovery process.

He wonders if he will ever feel like his old self, the man who never stopped moving.

When Jesus was a boy, no older than 13, he and his seven siblings woke at dawn to chop the stalks of sugarcane covering their family’s ranch. Nestled in the mountains, the land was passed down from his father’s father, and the kids accepted the difficult work as a part of life.

Jesus enjoyed carrying on his ancestors’ legacy, but as he grew up, he gravitated toward other interests. He learned how to fix cars, using Google as a guide, tinkering in his teenage years with his father’s Volkswagen Beetle. He had a knack for taking things apart and putting them back together.

That ingenuity lent itself to architecture, which he briefly stud-



Jesus plays with Perla’s hair as they participate in an at-home-care class in preparation for his discharge. Perla will be consumed with caring for Jesus and their two children when he returns.

TRANSPLANTED



Jesus hugs his mom as he and Perla arrive at their new home in Baytown. The family adorned the wall with a “bienvenido a casa” banner and balloons.

RECOVERY

From page A10

ied in Mexico until he met Perla and started a family.

For the last four years, he bounced from 12-hour shifts on one side of the U.S.-Mexico border to parties and cherished family time on the other. In Cotija, he danced with Perla at festivals, carried the kids around their ranches and sang with his father and cousins outside a small market owned by his grandfather.

As his changed face reflects back at him from the mirrors, his mournful thoughts of the past compete with the joy of being home.

He walks to the kitchen to give himself an insulin shot and pricks his finger for his nightly blood sugar reading. Perla records the results in a book from the hospital. Later, Jesus takes a plastic cup filled with his daily pills, swallowing the first three one at a time, then knocking the rest back like a tequila shot.

Reunion

One week later

Victoria beats her mother to the front door and runs straight to the bedroom, where her father lies in bed.

“Papi!” she bursts as she jumps on the mattress and embraces Jesus for the first time since he left Cotija in early July. “I missed you.”

Jesus kisses her cheek. A tear runs down his face. Victoria pulls back, and they study each other with nearly identical eyes.

“I missed you, too,” he says.

Erick, always shy, waits in the living room for a few minutes before wandering into the bedroom for his hug.



Erick, 3, inspects the wound left on his father’s neck by the ECMO tubes. “What happened?” the boy asks. Jesus replies, “I got an injection.”

Their arrival rejuvenates Jesus, who has been waking up at 3 a.m. with the sudden sensation of falling. He doesn’t remember his nightmares, but he thinks stress is triggering them. He worries about the amount of responsibility placed on Perla, who has shouldered the burden of paying the bills and finding a home. Now, she manages his strict daily recovery regimen, including clinic visits, physical therapy and breathing exercises.

He feels like her third child. But those concerns melt as he

“Papi! I missed you.”

Jesus and Perla’s daughter, Victoria, upon seeing him for the first time since he left Cotija in July

sinks into a comfortable chair in the living room with the kids orbiting around him.

Victoria shows him her new toys – a princess doll and a plastic horse, like the one she loves riding at Perla’s ranch. She fetch-

es Jesus a cookie from the kitchen, then plops down on the arm of the chair, cradles his head and smacks a kiss on his forehead. She hands him a book, then a pillow. And by the way, she says, they have to watch “Sing 2” together.

Erick, brimming with unchecked energy that reminds Jesus of himself as a child, crashes Hot Wheels on the floor and flails around with a flashlight, eventually holding the light up to the scar on his father’s neck.

“What happened?” he asks, closely analyzing.

“I got an injection,” Jesus replies, innocently.

Erick grabs a nearby napkin and places it on the scar. “Leave it there,” the 3-year-old says. “So you’ll be better by tomorrow.”

Jesus smiles and obeys. Perla giggles nearby.

Jesus’ body does not let him enjoy the moment for long. After a few minutes, he yawns and drifts to the bedroom for a nap.

Lingering fatigue is normal for people with newly transplanted lungs. Jesus will need about three months to regain enough energy to do normal tasks, such as driving and household chores. But later that night, he struggles more than usual for air. He checks his oxygen level, and the number worries him: 87 percent.

He should be in the 90s.

Something is wrong.

“Why me?”

The next morning, Perla drives Jesus to his weekly appointment at Houston Methodist’s outpatient clinic in the Texas Medical Center, where he undergoes a series of tests that gauge his lung function. A COVID nasal swab is part of the process.

The result comes back within a few hours: Positive.

He and Perla don’t believe it. Dr. Howard Huang, medical director of the hospital’s lung transplant program, is notified immediately. He looks at Jesus’ X-rays and sees a haze covering his lungs, indicating inflammation consistent with his shortness of breath and cough.

It’s unclear whether Jesus is battling COVID, another type of infection or lung rejection. Either way, Jesus must be readmitted with an aggressive treatment plan that includes monoclonal antibody therapy and remdesivir, an antiviral drug commonly used to treat the virus. In his weakened state, even a mild COVID infection could send him back to where he started, battling for his life in the ICU.

“Why me?” is all Jesus can think as he dons another hospital gown in a smaller room than his old one, with less nursing attention and no visitors allowed.

He is now fully vaccinated – a necessity for someone living with a suppressed immune system. He received two Pfizer doses while waiting for his transplant. Still, studies show immunocompromised people with one or two doses of the vaccine face a greater risk of breakthrough infections than people without immune dysfunction. And the ultra-contagious omicron variant is proving to sidestep immunity.

That worries doctors, who note that Jesus’ symptoms are consistent with the virus, even though a string of negative COVID test results following the first positive test cloud his diagnosis.

“How could this have happened?” Perla wonders. It couldn’t be the kids, she thinks, because Jesus told her about shortness of breath hours before they arrived. She and Evangelina, the only other people around him, are fully vaccinated and test negative.

Jesus’ family braces for more bad news when, amid the confusion and worry, he responds to the COVID treatment.

He bounces back within a few days and calls Perla from the hospital, bored and missing Victoria and Erick after their sole, too-short visit.

The sight of a healthier Jesus makes Perla feel confident and in control for the first time in months after having gone through her own metamorphosis in the hospital. Her English is sharper from daily conversations with social workers, nurses and doctors. She stays organized, keeping track of Jesus’ progress with detailed notes in a daily planner. And the home she rented for the family fills her with pride.

Their financial burden also has become less intimidating. Perla enrolled in an insurance plan with Community Health Choice, a local nonprofit insurer, and Houston Methodist has



Jesus checks out his bedroom in the family’s new three-bedroom home in Baytown that Perla found for them while he was hospitalized. “Well done,” he says, impressed by the space.

TRANSPLANTED



Jesus smiles as his brother, Gabriel, finishes his haircut on Christmas Eve. "It's like a dream to see him with us right now," Gabriel says.

RECOVERY

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agreed to pay for the first year of premiums. She and Jesus can re-apply for another year when that money runs out.

Now, she focuses on bringing Jesus home in time for Christmas – their first in the United States. They had planned to host their largest gathering yet in the new house, with Jesus' oldest brother, Gabriel, and his older sister, Yadira, joining them.

It's all Jesus wants. "I'm going to get better for you guys; I promise," he declares during a video call with Gabriel.

Christmas Eve

Jesus' side effects dissipate just in time for a Dec. 22 discharge.

Christmas Eve in Baytown feels like their old life in Mexico. The smell of birria, which his late father always stewed to perfection, wafts from the kitchen throughout the busy house. A stump of Cotija cheese sits on the counter, waiting to be crumbled onto full plates. Norteño music plays on a Bluetooth speaker.

Wrapped gifts rest under the Christmas tree in the living room, concealing more toy cars for Erick and Barbies for Victoria. A photo of Jose sits on a mantle in the corner, high above everything.

Perla is already dressed up, wearing a pink polka-dotted blouse and black jeans, helping the kids get ready while Evangelina and Yadira prepare the food.

Gabriel is in the back room with Yadira's husband and Jesus, giving his brother a haircut, talking trash like they've done for



A reason to be merry: Jesus embraces Perla and Victoria in their living room on Christmas Eve.

years. "Man, you look terrible," Gabriel says. "After I'm done you'll look handsome."

"Don't be an a-hole," Jesus says, smiling.

Gabriel gives Jesus his usual fade with the clippers. Jesus checks himself in a handheld mirror.

"I look like a new man," he says.

The comment makes Gabriel sneak away to another room to cry. It's like a dream for him to be cutting Jesus' hair again. In the

"I'm going to get better for you guys; I promise."

Jesus to his brother, Gabriel

hospital, his little brother repeatedly asked him for a trim, and Gabriel thought he might not have the chance.

Jesus also retreats into his room to change from his sweatpants into jeans and a blue button-up.

He slides into a pair of boots, wobbly around his slim legs. Perla helps squeeze the straps into his pants and stands with him in front of the closet mirrors. She tugs at the front of his shirt, pulling the loose fabric.

Each time Jesus looks in the mirror, at his scars and gaunt features, he reminds himself that he's still breathing. The weakness lingers, but he feels more energetic than when he returned home, with a clearer path to recovery.

Thoughts about the future simmer in his head. Maybe he can be a mechanic? Or possibly he and Perla can sell birria?

He longs to provide for his family again. But he stops himself from thinking too far ahead, about the dormant question locked in the back of his mind: How much longer do I have?

Instead, he tells himself to focus on the present, on the bits of progress in physical therapy, the satisfaction of a full breath, the intimate moments with his family, and the plate of green chicken enchiladas Evangelina brings him in the kitchen.

Seated at the head of the dining room table, he is finally surrounded by the people who gave him a reason to live – the faces he thought he lost forever.

In the kitchen 10 feet away, Evangelina and Yadira load more plates with enchiladas and birria. Gabriel slices up the Cotija cheese before taking a seat with his brother. Perla puts away the insulin shot Jesus just gave himself, then hovers around the table. Victoria darts past everyone, toward the Christmas presents.

Jesus looks up from his food. "To enjoy all of this is a beautiful thing," he says.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

When the delta wave of COVID-19 hit Houston in the summer of 2021, hospitals were pushed to capacity as a surge of unvaccinated patients required intensive care. By early September, the state of Texas logged more than 25,000 new cases of COVID-19 per day. It was during this swell that Houston Chronicle photographer Godofredo Vásquez and reporter Julian Gill first met Jesus Ceja Ceja, a young, unvaccinated father of two fighting for his life in a 10th-floor hospital room at Houston Methodist.

Over the next several months, Godofredo and Julian visited Jesus at least once a week, logging more than 100 hours' worth of interviews and time spent photographing his journey. This project, *Transplanted*, follows Jesus' journey – from his first symptoms to his battle to make the waiting list for a double lung transplant and all the challenges he faced along the way.

ABOUT THE TEAM



Julian Gill is a medical writer at the Houston Chronicle, where he has worked since 2018. He previously

worked at the Denton Record-Chronicle, where, after graduating from the University of North Texas, he covered police and county government. His work at the Record-Chronicle earned him a first-place award in the Freedom of Information category at the 2019 Texas Associated Press Managing Editors conference for his article on the overtime practices used by Denton Police Department to monitor the city's red-light cameras. Follow him on Twitter @JulianGill or email him at julian.gill@chron.com



Godofredo A. Vásquez is a staff photographer for the Houston Chronicle. Vásquez was born in El

Salvador but grew up in the Bay Area, where he attended San Francisco State University and graduated with a B.A. in photojournalism. In 2021, he was recognized as Star Photojournalist of the Year by the Texas Associated Press Managing Editors, receiving top honors for his work photographing the inside of a COVID-19 intensive care unit. Follow him on Twitter @godovasquez or email him at godofredo.vasquez@chron.com.



Jesus sits on the porch watching motorists drive past the family's home. Now restricted from working, he thinks about what the future holds for them.