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Titanium rib is a lifesaver for twins in military family

San Antonio (Sept. 13, 2004) – Kim and Dan Katka of San Antonio know what it's like to have a child who can't breathe. In fact, they're doubly aware.

The Katkas' twin boys, Andrew and Jordan, 11, are alive today because of the titanium rib surgeries developed by Drs. Robert Campbell and Melvin Smith at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio and the Thoracic Institute at CHRISTUS Santa Rosa Children's Hospital. Both boys have a form of muscular dystrophy called spinal muscular atrophy, along with severe scoliosis.

"Andrew would not be with us today were it not for the doctors and the titanium rib," Kim Katka said. "We planned his funeral twice. We're very grateful for what has been done."

Dan, who commands the Logistics Readiness Squadron at Lackland Air Force Base, and Kim knew something was wrong with the boys from birth. The diagnosis of muscular dystrophy and scoliosis meant a long road was ahead.

Andrew, who was severely hunched forward, had titanium rib surgery in 1999 at the age of 6. "He was in very bad shape," Kim recalled. "We had tried several things, including spinal rods in his back that helped for a while. We were told to take him home and keep him comfortable. Then, through a chance conversation, the titanium rib project came up. Andrew got the titanium rib and, while he had some problems with infection for three months, he has had no problems since then. We go in every six months for the titanium rib expansions."

His twin, Jordan, developed severe scoliosis within the past year. Jordan's ribcage was narrowing on the left side, restricting breathing. "We went right to the titanium rib program," Kim said. "We took Andrew's lead. In both boys, the titanium rib has done its job."

The boys race around in their motorized wheelchairs. Both fifth-graders at Medina Valley Elementary School, they like computer games, toy cars and reading. "We've watched these kids grow up," Dr. Campbell said. "Since we see them twice a year for rib expansions, Dr. Smith and I feel as if we have 210 extra children of our own (210 titanium rib operations have been performed at CHRISTUS Santa Rosa). We know what the families go through."