

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

PRICE: \$1 • WEDNESDAY, MAY 11, 2016 • OCREGISTER.COM

**LAGUNA NIGUEL BOY** WITH A RARE HEART DEFECT BEFRIENDS A PARROT WITH A SIMILAR MEDICAL CONDITION



PHOTOS: ED CRISOSTOMO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Heart patient David Harkins, 13, of Laguna Niguel visits with Paco, a parrot with a malfunctioning heart valve, and zookeeper Kristen Marshall.

## BIRDS **OF A** FEATHER

David Harkins was excited to hold sunflower seeds to lure Paco, an Amazon parrot, closer to him. Paco lightly scooted her curved, smooth beak across his palm, nibbling up the treat. David's face lit up as he felt the light tickle.



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"She's just a regular parrot," said David, 13, of Laguna Niguel. "It's cool; she's kind of like me."

Similarities were the point of the get-together.

David and his mother, Cynthia Harkins, 44, were among four families associated with Children's Hospital Los Angeles who recently got a tour of several animal exhibits at the Los Angeles Zoo. The

event focused on animals that, like the children, have medical challenges.

David and Paco both have faulty hearts: David has



David, left, laughs as a mother hippopotamus opens wide while David's nurse since birth, Tina Beckham, takes a photo last month at the Los Angeles Zoo.

# HEART: Successful recovery

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only half a heart, and Paco has a malfunctioning heart valve.

Cynthia Harkins and her husband, James, found out 20 weeks into her pregnancy that their child's heart wasn't forming correctly. "Our whole world changed," Cynthia said. "We went from being excited to 'How can he live with half a heart?'"

David was born at Saddleback Hospital with hypoplastic left heart syndrome. Within hours, he was airlifted to Children's Hospital Los Angeles, and he had his first open-heart surgery at 6 days old.

The couple chose CHLA because of Dr. Vaughn Starnes, a cardiothoracic surgeon with a record of success. Starnes would do

two more surgeries. After the third operation, the nail beds on David's hands and feet became pink, indicating that he was getting the oxygen he needed.

A stroke shortly after the third surgery caused some developmental delays. But since then, David has made steady progress.

"As a mom, it was huge," Cynthia Harkins said while visiting the zoo. "He was finally getting the oxygen his body needed. I felt like I wasn't holding my breath anymore and it was like, 'OK, now we can watch him grow.'"

David is now a sixth-grader at St. Mary's and All Angels in Aliso Viejo. He swims, bowls and plays Xbox. At school, he monitors his exertion and knows when he's had enough. Although elevation change is

a challenge, it didn't stop him from riding the Xcelerator at Knott's Berry Farm.

Tina Beckham, a registered nurse at Los Robles Medical Center in Thousand Oaks, met up with David and Cynthia at the zoo.

Beckham worked at CHLA's cardiothoracic intensive care unit for 14 years and has known David since he was a day old. She beamed, watching him interact with Paco.

"He's got that energy about him - he's a risk taker," Beckham said. "He's never allowed his condition to hold him back. His mother's attitude, I think, is what's made his recovery successful. She trusted us completely when she wasn't able to care for him. I think he picks up on that. He trusts others and the world to help him heal."