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Seriously ill teen has one wish: To see her parents from Pakistan

By **Sebastian Herrera**, Reporter, Houston Chronicle
Updated Jan 9, 2017 12:12 p.m.





Qirat Chapra, an 18-year-old Houstonian diagnosed with a terminally ill condition, wishes to see her parents one last time before dying. Her parents are in Pakistan and have not been approved a travel visa, so Chapra's family and friends began a governmental petition to bring them to Houston.

Courtesy photo

The clear tube that Qirat Chapra relies on to breathe wraps around the front of her face, filling the 18-year-old's lungs with air.

It connects to an oxygen tank that runs 24/7, next to a bed



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inside Children's Memorial Hermann Hospital in Houston. There Chapra must lie patiently, nestled in white sheets, her right wrist immovable from nerve damage.

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Chapra suffers from a severe case of combined B and T cell immunodeficiency that has robbed her of a normal life and left her with a short time to live.

The teenager, who was born in San Marcos, has been wishing a lot lately – to walk outside without fear of infection, to spend time with friends at school like a normal teenager, to breathe fully on her own. But most of all, and more realistically, she wishes to see her parents – who live more than 8,000 miles away in their native Pakistan – in person once more.

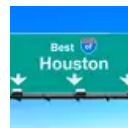
"That's the only thing that I could ask for," Chapra said in a recent FaceTime interview with a Chronicle reporter. "Really, that's my only wish. I need to see them."

It's unclear, though, if her wish will be granted.

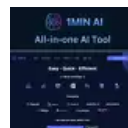
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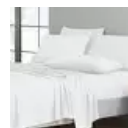


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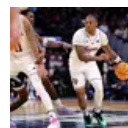
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Despite her declining health, Chapra's parents, who have lived in Pakistan most of her life, have been denied travel visas multiple times in recent years. Visa applications can be turned down for various reasons, such as if immigration officers suspect someone plans to stay in the U.S., but the government can approve short-term visits for medical emergencies. So Chapra, her friends and family have launched a campaign to draw attention to her story and get permission for the parents to travel to Houston.

Chapra's friends started an online petition drive that seeks to persuade the Obama administration to expedite a B-2 travel visa for Chapra's parents. To require the government to respond, 100,000 people must [sign the petition](#) in 30 days. The website exists for citizens to call for the federal government to take action on a range of issues. A B-2 visa is granted to travelers seeking to enter the U.S. for tourism or for reasons such as visiting family.

U.S. Rep. John Culberson is among those working with Chapra's family to devise a way to reunite Chapra with her parents.

"This is a time sensitive humanitarian emergency and I will do everything I can to help this young lady and her family," the Houston Republican said in a statement.

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Chapra's disease, which has made her immune system as brittle as paper, has burdened her with a host of complications that include interstitial lung disease, T-cell lymphoma and chronic pain. Her primary doctor says the next lung or blood infection – she has already suffered two this year – may not be survivable.

Hospital spokeswoman Kathryn Williams said Wednesday that Chapra was in critical condition.

Chapra's family and friends have been posting feverishly on social media, even reaching out to celebrities.

The teenager herself [posted a video on Facebook](#) pleading for petition signatures. As of Wednesday evening, nearly 24,000 people had signed it.

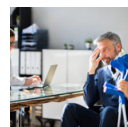
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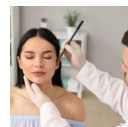
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Reaction to Chapra's story has filled comment boxes of online articles and social media posts.

Chapra's life has been as complicated as the disease that cripples her.

In 1997, Chapra's mother, Naila, traveled from Pakistan with her parents to visit family in Texas, according to Chapra and her aunt, Neelam Ghanchi, a Houston-area resident and her legal guardian. Naila fell ill during the trip, and doctors advised her to stay because her baby appeared smaller than normal in ultrasounds, though Chapra looked well when born on Aug. 31 of that year.

A month later, Chapra's mother returned to Pakistan with her new baby.

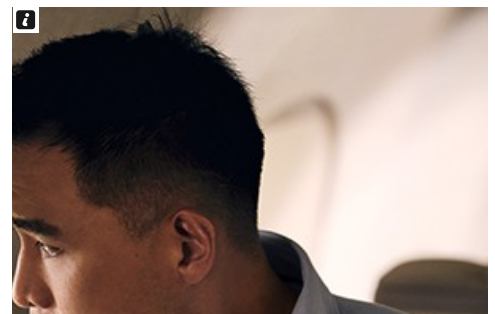
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When Chapra turned 3, though, her health began deteriorating, so doctors there advised her family to return to the U.S. for more advanced treatment because Chapra is a U.S. citizen.

She spent her childhood living with her maternal grandparents as her mother traveled back and forth between Houston and Pakistan, according to both Chapra and Ghanchi. Both say that Chapra's father, Idrees Chapra, has never been granted a travel visa. Chapra and her mother briefly returned to Pakistan when she was 6 but came back to the U.S. after a few months because of her disease.

Naila Chapra's travel visa expired after 2005, and she has not been granted another one, Ghanchi said.

Chapra lived with a different aunt for years and stayed most recently with her paternal grandmother, who lives in



Webster. This year, though, Chapra has only spent 11 weeks out of the hospital, Ghanchi and one of her doctors said.



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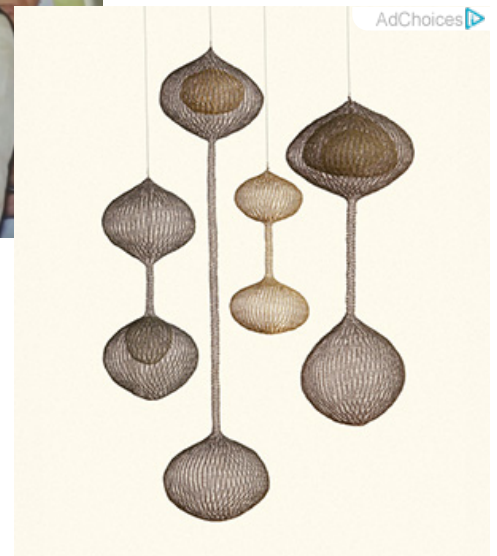
"She has always had other family here," Ghanchi said. "Just not her parents."



Chapra is held by her father, Idrees, next to her mother, Naila, in Pakistan. Photo credit: Qirat Chapra



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Chapra speaks to her parents daily, updating them on her health but also chatting about normal teenage subjects such as her love of the boy band One Direction, movies and

makeup. She loves card games, especially UNO, and making bracelets. When she feels well enough, she eats spicy foods.

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"Talking to my parents about my life through a screen or telephone is never the same as if I could see them in person," she said.

Ruby Powers, a Houston-based immigration lawyer, said problems can crop up in background checks for travel visa applications or because of previous breaches of visa restrictions, such as if someone once overstayed a visa. An Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer can also deny a visa request if it's suspected that the visitors are planning to permanently immigrate.

Chapra has two younger brothers: One born in the U.S. while her mother was in Houston taking care of Chapra, and the other a native of Pakistan.

"(A) visitor's Visa is issued only if the officer is convinced that the applicant has more ties in their country of origin than the U.S. and that the applicant does not intend to

remain in the United States," Powers wrote in an email. "(The officer has discretion in his or her decision and there is no appeal of the same decision."



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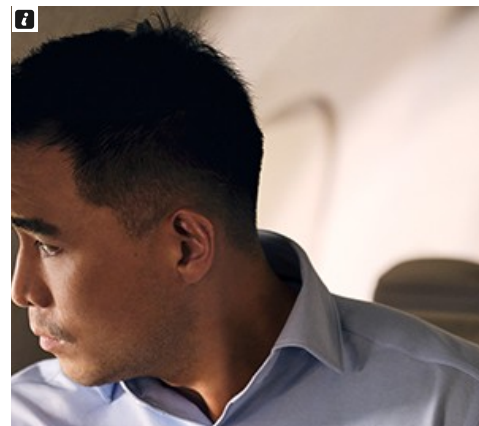


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It can also be more difficult to obtain a travel visa depending on the country of origin, Powers said. A country such as Pakistan, a front line in the U.S. war on terrorism, could make visiting more difficult.

Chapra's immediate family has never applied to immigrate to the U.S. because it typically requires a sponsor who is a citizen or resident, among other requirements, relatives said.

Powers said the family's best option is to apply for humanitarian parole, which allows foreigners who are otherwise inadmissible to make a temporary visit in the U.S.



for an emergency reason.

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services receives an estimated 1,200 humanitarian parole applications a year, but only about 25 percent are approved, records show.



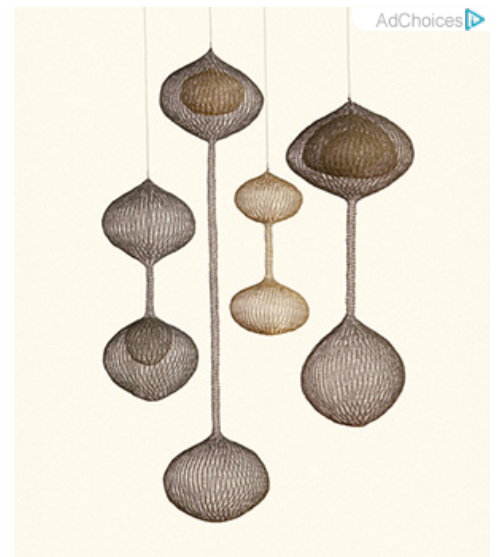
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Ghanchi said the family sent letters from her doctors to the U.S. Department of State, which handles foreign travel-related issues, to plead her case. On Wednesday, a State Department official said visa records are confidential and individual cases could not be discussed.

Chapra's case has been covered by the media in the U.S. and internationally.

"What can we do? She's there and we are over here," Chapra's father told Samaa TV, a national news channel in Pakistan. "We have applied for a visa many times but they have not granted us one. This is our appeal to have a visa issued to us."

Chapra's mother also spoke briefly, saying, "It's been so many years."



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The parents spoke in Urdu but a translation was provided by Fatima Puri, Chapra's friend and a student at the University of Texas at Austin.

Dr. Ricardo Mosquera of the University of Texas Health Science Center, one of her primary physicians for the past decade, confirmed last week that Chapra has been a patient at the hospital most of her life. He said "her lung functions are working at 20 percent right now and keep going down. They can't go under 10 (percent) or she will have to completely rely on the machine to breathe for her."

Chapra's condition prevents her from visiting with most people not in her hospital's bubble, but in her FaceTime interview on Nov. 12, she gleamed with hope that people would come to know and understand her mission.

Visibly frail at less than 5 feet tall, Chapra swung her arms up and down passionately when addressing her need to see her parents. Her illness has devastated her body, leaving her with features that resemble a child's.

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She said that when she goes to sleep each night, she listens to the soft clatter of the machines around her that keep her alive – and wishes. She can feel herself weakening each day, and though she assures a reporter that she's no longer frightened of death, she can't imagine it coming without seeing her mother and father again.

"I'm not the type of teenager to ever want to be away from my parents," Chapra said. "I've been able to survive without them, but I feel like I need my parents more than ever now."

Nov 18, 2015 | Updated Jan 9, 2017 12:12 p.m.

Sebastian Herrera

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Sebastian Herrera mostly covers west Houston and Katy suburban news for the Houston Chronicle. He is a journalism graduate from the University of Texas at Austin, and his previous work includes the Austin American–Statesman, NPR's Austin affiliate KUT Public Media and ESPN The Magazine.

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