"He was such a good person and a good son," Curtinez says of her youngest. "I'll always remember him. He is always in my heart."

**Her Son's Final Gift**

Through his tragic death, Ivan Curtinez provided his mother the chance to see again.

On the way to his sister's house in Nutley, N.J., Ivan Curtinez tried to comfort his mother, who that afternoon faced yet another appointment with an eye doctor. For nearly a year, Secundina Curtinez, 67, had been virtually blinded by glaucoma. Yet as frustrated as she was by her condition, she was also fearful of the delicate cornea transplant operation that doctors said was her only hope of seeing again. "Everything will be fine," said Ivan, 28, whose sister later drove Secundina to the doctor's office. A doting son, the youngest of Secundina's nine children, Ivan pressed his lips to his mother's forehead, saying, "You will have your eyes, maybe this week."

Ivan Curtinez had no idea how sadly prophetic his words would be. That evening the athletic young man with no known health problems collapsed and died of an apparent brain aneurysm in the Bloomfield, N.J., rental property he had bought recently and was remodeling. Nine days later, on March 4, doctors at

Photographs by Robin Bowman
Curtinez (center) plays matriarch with (from left) daughters Ely, Jenny, Ruth, granddaughter Christine (with the family pooch Snoopy, daughter-in-law Adriana and son Flavio).

Santa Cruz, Bolivia, he was just a child in 1982 when his father, the owner of a grocery store, died of kidney cancer. That same year, his sister Ruth met her future husband while on vacation in New York. She married six months later and eventually settled in Nutley. In 1987, she brought her mother to the U.S. to live with her family. Ivan’s brother Eduardo had already arrived in 1985, and Ivan joined them after graduating from high school in 1988.

Living first with Ruth, then with Eduardo and his family in Bloomfield, Ivan worked, saved money and studied hard. An honor-roll student who earned a business degree in 1995 from New Jersey’s Montclair State University, Ivan received his real estate license last year and began a job as a Century 21 agent. He worked part-time on an M.B.A. degree and had little time for relationships. “If it wasn’t serious, he was not going to waste time,” Ruth says. It was at the house that was being remodeled that Eduardo discovered his brother’s body at about 4 a.m. He had awakened and noticed the dinner his wife had left for Ivan was untouched and he drove to the rental property a few blocks away. “We used to do everything together,” says Eduardo, 34. “He was the youngest, smartest guy in my family. We used to play soccer together. Nobody could beat us.” Devoted to his family, Ivan built swing sets for his nieces and nephew, lifted weights with his brother and visited his mother every day, always staying for a cup of coffee. “They were so close,” says Ruth. “He used to drive her, pick her up. She used to breathe through him.”

Though Ruth and Eduardo desperately miss their brother, they rejoice in their mother’s delight as she watches her grandchildren play and in her refusal to let the adults fuss over her. “I can see,” she tells her daughter proudly. “I don’t need anybody’s help.” But they also understand how much Secundina aches for her dead son. “Ivancito,” she tells them, with tears in her eyes, “I carry with me.”

Hackensack University Medical Center transplanted one of Ivan’s corneas into his mother’s left eye (her right eye had been irreparably harmed by the glaucoma, a chronic disease in which increasing pressure in the eye damages the optic nerve). “Ivan gave sight to my mother,” says his sister Ruth Nebiar, 38. “I tell her, ‘I wish I could be you. You have something from him.’ This way, he will never die.”

When her children told Secundina that Ivan had died and wanted his organs donated, she cried out in anger over the suggestion that she take one of his corneas. “I would rather be blind than lose a son,” she said. But the family convinced her that Ivan could rest in peace only if he knew that she had accepted his last gift.

Knowing Secundina had no health insurance and that her children planned to put the $15,000 cost on their credit cards, her surgeon Peter Hersh and the medical center offered to donate their services. “It’s a remarkable story,” says Hersh, unaware of any other case in which a parent received a cornea from a child (Ivan’s right cornea was donated to someone else). On March 5, when Hersh removed the bandages from Secundina’s eye, she grabbed his hand and kissed it. “I saw the doctor’s face and I cried so hard,” says Secundina, in Spanish. “I used to pray to God to give me back my sight. It was a miracle.”

Ivan always was considered the most determined of Secundina and Elias Curtinez’s children. Born in

• Christina Cheakalos
• Elizabeth McNeil in Nutley