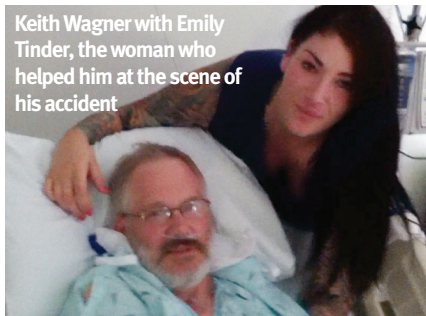


Carriers hurt in accidents work on recovery, warn of future injuries

If you need a reminder of the drive and dedication of a typical letter carrier, consider **Joel Cabrera** of Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100. Learning to walk again in a rehabilitation center after a car struck him as he stood behind his postal vehicle on his route last May, Cabrera has become the center's unofficial mailman. In his postal uniform shirt, he takes the mail from the regular carrier at the front door and delivers it from room to room by wheelchair.

"It's what I call mailman therapy," Cabrera said. Delivering mail in the rehab center is helping him feel normal again, but it's more than that. Much like his role on his route, Cabrera is handing out daily smiles and greetings to the elderly and disabled people in the rehab center who seem forgotten by the outside world, and repaying the rehab center and its residents for the care he's receiving.



Keith Wagner with Emily Tinder, the woman who helped him at the scene of his accident



Wagner's leg got pinned between his postal vehicle and the car behind it.

"I wanted to give back to them, to make them feel like regular people, because they are regular people."

Cabrera is one of several carriers recovering from severe injuries after they were struck while standing behind postal vehicles. At least 10 other carriers have suffered similar accidents since 1996, with a terrible toll in health and lives. Some eventually went back to work, but others lost limbs or were permanently disabled. Atlantic City, NJ Branch 370 member **Maureen De Prince** lost her legs, eyesight and unborn child in an accident in 2006. Four of the victims died, including Los Angeles Branch 24 member **Anthony Dunn**, who was struck in February of last year.

"The recent accidents have been real tests of the courage and tenacity of our brothers who are recovering their ability to walk," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "Their never-look-back attitude is inspiring to us all."

Dunn was killed just weeks after a similar accident severely injured Columbus, OH Branch 78 member **Doug Poole** while he stood behind his vehicle. "It ended up tearing up my right leg really bad," Poole said, and required a rod inserted into his left femur and a long, hard recovery. Poole has no memory of the accident, or the first two months of his hospital stay. But based on what others have told him, he counts his blessings.

"I feel very fortunate to be doing as well as I'm doing," Poole said. "I don't feel unfortunate for what happened to me." His wife, a nurse, told him that most people don't survive the blood loss he experienced. The firefighters who rescued him thought his severely damaged right leg would have to be amputated, but doctors saved it. He made it through several surgeries, pneumonia, blood clots, vertigo and medication-induced hallucinations. An infection caused kidney failure, but the uncomfortable

dialysis doctors said could last six months was needed only for three weeks.

And many people doubted he would walk again.

"Here I am walking," he said. "I've been pretty lucky."

Poole is home continuing to recover and looking after his children. "When I got home," he said, "I could maybe walk with a walker 10 to 20 feet, with help." Today he walks by himself, often with the help of a cane, but sometimes without any assistance. However, Poole said it isn't likely that he'll return to work at the Postal Service. Donations from letter carriers and others in his community have funded modifications to Poole's house to allow him to get around more easily, including a bedroom and bathroom on the first floor.

Following Poole's accident and Dunn's death, NALC stepped up pressure on the Postal Service to hold a safety talk in every station telling carriers how to avoid these especially dangerous kinds of accidents.

"Postal management did finally agree to jointly develop a safety presentation with the NALC on parking point safety for stations soon after Anthony Dunn's tragic death," NALC Director of Safety and Health Manuel L. Peralta Jr. said. "But the follow-through has been abysmal. Most stations still haven't heard the talk or covered this issue."

Managers in Seattle Branch 79 member **Keith Wagner's** station didn't hold the parking points talk in time to prevent his accident. In July 2012, just five months after Dunn's death, a driver impaired by drugs and alcohol smashed into a car parked behind Wagner as he stood behind his vehicle on his route in the Belltown neighborhood of Seattle. The parked car hit Wagner, crushing his left leg in between the car and his vehicle. The driver fled the scene. Broken in eight places, Wagner's leg nearly had to be amputated, but after several surgeries



Anthony Dunn



Doug Poole (c) with Region 11 National Business Agent Dan Toth (r) and Br. 78 President Todd Hornyak

and five months of hard work, Wagner is walking mostly without assistance.

"I just want to thank God that I'm still alive," Wagner said. "I know that, despite my injuries, it could have been a lot worse."

Wagner is at home now recovering and getting daily physical therapy. But Wagner's recovery is more than physical, it's spiritual.

He pointed to a Bible verse as the source of his inspiration: "Like it says in Philippians 4:13, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,'" he said. "I hang my hat right there.

"When you go through something like this, it really lets you see who you really are," Wagner said. By focusing on his recovery and not on anger at the driver who caused the accident, Wagner believes he is on a faster pace to getting back to full health.

"I'm not mad at him," he said. "To me, that's useless energy that could be used for my recovery. I choose to be better, not bitter."

The driver, who expressed remorse for his actions, was sentenced to seven months in prison. The day of the sentencing, Wagner walked without help for the first time since the accident. Wagner plans to go back to work, though he will need to switch to a mounted route.

Wagner has befriended Emily Tinder, a woman who came to his aid when the accident happened. She held his hand and talked to him while he was pinned between the car and his vehicle. "She's like one of my kids now," he said.

While he was still pinned between the two vehicles, Wagner, a 33-year letter carrier, asked bystanders to call the Postal Service to report the accident and protect the mail, even before contacting his wife. He said he is disappointed that the Postal Service didn't have the same dedication to protecting the safety of carriers from accidents that he had to protecting the mail.

He also said he wishes the Postal Service would show similar loyalty to employee safety by holding safety talks on this issue in every station.

"When Anthony was killed, things should have changed," Wagner said. "It's a crying shame. I hope and pray every day that nobody else joins this club."

Peralta urged letter carriers whose stations haven't alerted their carriers to the parking point danger and held the safety talk to ask their managers to give the talk, and to alert their national business agent if managers don't. In the meantime, carriers should educate themselves about this risk by going to nalc.org/depart/safety.

"Think about your own route and your park points. Are they safe? Could you find safer ones nearby?" asked Peralta. "Ask your managers for a review of your park points to find a safer place if you have concerns, and fill out a Form 1767 if needed. Don't hesitate to take this issue to your union steward, branch officers or national business agent."

Cabrera said his accident is a lesson about the limits of caution. He had parked his vehicle on a quiet, low-traffic street, near a church. "That's where I was expecting the least amount of danger," he said, "but that's where I met danger."

A young woman lost control of her car and hit Cabrera as he stood behind his postal truck. He doesn't remember much from the accident, just waking up lying on the street, wet from a fire hydrant damaged in the crash. He saw a package floating away and, on instinct, reached to retrieve it.

Like Wagner, Cabrera has left anger behind. "I really feel bad for the girl," he said. "That's got to be traumatic, not just for me but for her and her family."

Before moving to rehab, Cabrera spent 92 days in Los Angeles County General Hospital, where he had four surgeries to repair severe injuries to both legs. "Like



Joel Cabrera in his USPS uniform as he delivers mail at the rehabilitation center

Humpty-Dumpty," he said, "they put me back together again." The pace of the surgeries was a challenge, he added. "Just as you're recovering from a surgery and feeling normal, another comes and knocks you down again."

Cabrera, who has delivered the mail for 30 years, also is planning to return to work. "I am determined to return to serving the people of San Gabriel," he said.

Last month, Cabrera took his first steps since the accident. To the cheers of the staff at the rehabilitation center, he raised his fist and declared, "The mailman is back!"

Wagner, Poole and Cabrera have reached out to each other to share inspiration and advice as they recover. They also praised their union brothers and sisters for their support.

"The local and national unions have been amazing," Wagner said. "It shocked me how much support I got. I was overwhelmed."

The president of Poole's branch, Todd Hornyak, had taken office just days before the accident. Poole said, "He's been there all along, keeping in touch with my wife and visiting me." He thanked his fellow carriers for the support and donations that came from across the country, including a pass-the-hat collection for him and other injured carriers at the national convention in Minneapolis last year. "The union has been fantastic," he said. **PR**