

Carrier recovers from lower-body paralysis

It's a miracle for someone with paralysis due to a spinal injury to walk again. It's a bigger miracle when he's a letter carrier who makes it back to his route.

On a Saturday in March of 2015, Brick Town, NJ Branch 5420 member **Gary Nodes** came home from carrying the mail just as he has done since 1993. "I came home from work, ate pizza with the kids, watched a movie and went to bed just like any other day," he said. The next morning, he awoke with a bad backache.

The pain got worse, and Nodes thought it could be a kidney stone. But when his legs began to go numb, Nodes knew something was seriously wrong. He headed for the car to go to the emergency room, but had trouble walking out the door. His wife and a neighbor helped him into the car and drove him to the local hospital.

Nodes learned that, while he was sleeping the night before, he had suffered a spontaneous spinal hematoma. A blood vessel had ruptured, and a pocket of leaked blood had put pressure on his spinal cord.

The local hospital couldn't give him the treatment he needed, so he was sent by ambulance to Saint Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston, NJ, an hour's drive farther, for emergency surgery.

"By the time I got there, I was fully paralyzed from the waist down," he said.

The surgery fixed the hematoma, but surgeons couldn't correct the damage to Nodes' spinal cord—and didn't know whether he would recover. Only healing, and lots of physical therapy, offered any hope that he might walk again.

Paralysis affects 1.7 percent of the U.S. population, with the leading

cause being stroke (33.7 percent of cases). Spinal injury is the second leading cause (27.3 percent of cases), and the possibility of recovery is largely based on the severity of the injury to the spinal cord. Of the more than 1.2 million people living with paralysis from spinal cord injuries, only 5 percent of the injuries—roughly 625 a year—were caused by a medical problem, such as the one Nodes experienced, or from surgical complications.

The doctors knew that recovery was possible, but also that it was against the odds, so they made no promises. "They never want to give you false hope," Nodes said.

After a week at Saint Barnabas, Nodes was transferred to a nearby rehabilitation institute in West Orange, NJ, where he spent two months undergoing intensive rehabilitation. Nodes was lucky—the institute is one of the top therapeutic centers in the nation for spinal cord injury recovery.

Nodes began working to regain as much mobility as he could. "They do intense rehab," he said. "You do five hours of rehab a day with a physical therapist and occupational therapist, not knowing how much you'll get back."

His therapies included a suspended treadmill, which allowed him to practice walking while some of his weight was supported by straps, and movement in front of a mirror to reconnect his brain with his body's movement.

When it was time to go home, Nodes had made progress, but more work remained. He still relied mostly on a wheelchair to get around, and he could not walk up or down stairs.

"When I left, I could barely stand with my walker," he said.

Since his bedroom was on the second floor of his house, Kessler's living



What Gary Nodes thought was a backache turned out to be a spinal hematoma, which caused paralysis in his lower limbs.

room became a temporary bedroom. Several fellow carriers from Branch 5420 helped him prepare his home and also raised money to support him.

"They painted my living room, built a wheelchair ramp, cleaned up my yard for me," Nodes said. "They really came out strong, and I'm very thankful for that."

A beacon of hope arrived when physical therapist Erin Sullivan began helping Nodes with his recovery. Sullivan not only had the skills to help him work to overcome his paralysis, she brought built-in inspiration and experience—a cliff-diving accident had broken one of her vertebrae and left her paralyzed just a few years before. When the accident occurred, Sullivan had already been studying to be a physical and occupational therapist. After she recovered—at the same

Nodes eventually returned to delivering his route.

institute where Nodes was treated—Sullivan took a job as a therapist in Freehold, NJ. Nodes was her first spinal injury patient.

“She worked with me for hours and hours,” he said, “from wheelchair to walker to two canes to one cane.” Nodes and Sullivan kept working together as he progressed, never knowing how much more he might accomplish.

After months of work, Nodes regained the ability to walk without assistance, but he wasn’t yet ready for the rigors of carrying the mail. He prepared for going back to work by simulating letter carrier job tasks in therapy, such as getting in and out of a truck or lifting bags and packages. Nodes carried a weighted bag as a stand-in for a satchel and dragged a heavy crate along the floor. The

therapy helped prepare him for going back to his route, a goal he achieved after more than a year of therapy.

Nodes credits his doctors and therapists for making his amazing recovery possible. “I went to very good places with very high levels of care, and I’m very fortunate,” he said.

Back on his route, which he has walked for 14 years, Nodes received a warm welcome from his customers. “Everybody looked after me and made sure I was doing OK,” he said.

Going back to work also helped him to further regain his physical abilities, he said. “Even being back has been therapy,” he said. “All those demands of a letter carrier force you to work.

“It’s been a challenge,” he added, “but I don’t let it hold me back. I never did.” **PR**



Still time to give through Combined Federal Campaign

Last fall, the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC) made it easier for letter carriers and all federal employees to donate online to the charities of their choice, and it found a way to allow federal retirees to more smoothly deduct donations from their annuities.

As a result, the world’s largest annual workplace-giving program was allowed to set a later donation deadline than in past years, meaning postal and federal employees and retirees have until Jan. 12 to designate organizations they would like to support.

Pledges made by donors during the campaign season support more than 2,000 eligible non-profit organizations. To donate online, register an account at opm.gov/showsommelovecfc. The amount of money that you choose will then be deducted from each paycheck

or annuity check and will be sent automatically to your charity or charities.

“The combined effort of letter carriers and other federal employees makes a huge difference to the charities that support our communities each year,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said.

All active and retired letter carriers can participate in the CFC, and NALC is directly involved in three particular charities:

The **Postal Employees’ Relief Fund** (PERF, CFC No. 10268) provides financial support to postal employees whose homes are damaged or destroyed by natural disasters. Run by the four postal employee unions and three management organizations whose members support PERF through voluntary donations, PERF grants money to homeowners and renters alike to help with deductibles and out-of-pocket expenses

that insurance claims don’t cover, and more. Visit postalrelief.com.

The **Muscular Dystrophy Association** (MDA, CFC No. 10561), NALC’s only official charity, is the world’s leading non-profit health organization sponsoring research into the causes of, and effective treatments for, neuromuscular diseases. MDA research grants support about 150 research projects worldwide, as well as camps and activities for children who have one of these diseases. Visit mdausa.org.

United Way Worldwide (CFC No. 11188) is the leadership and support organization for the network of nearly 1,800 community-based United Ways in 40 countries and territories focused on creating locally based, community-led solutions that strengthen education, financial stability and health. Visit unitedway.org. **PR**