

UNITED SPINAL^{NOW}

Heroic PCAs

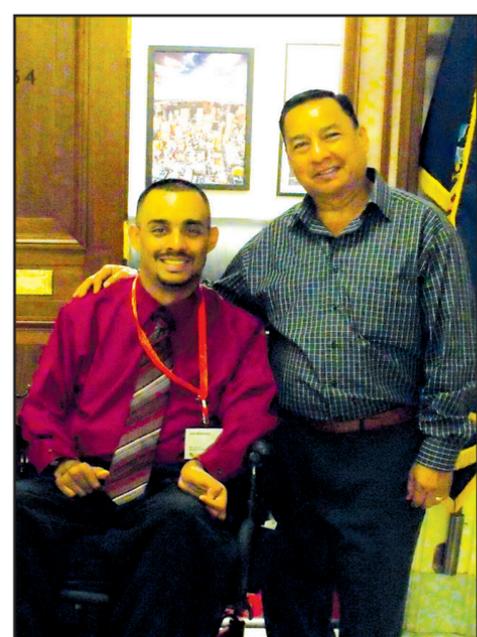
BY JAMES WEISMAN
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



I just experienced the first death from COVID-19 of a person I knew.

When the COVID-19 virus began ravaging our area two months ago, United Spinal knew that personal care attendants, upon whom our members rely, and with some of whom they have long-lasting and meaningful relationships, would be affected drastically.

They would have trouble serving their clients because either one or the other of them were exposed or sick and most don't receive healthcare benefits or paid sick leave. We got the word out as quickly as possible to the United Spinal community, which numbers 58,000 nationally, that if service was interrupted, they should call or email our Resource Center for assistance.



I thought of the interruption in homecare services problem like I think of the pandemic in general - a global problem with acute national implications, and even more acute local problems. I didn't put a face on it. There is a face now.

I was informed late last week that my friend and colleague's personal care attendant had Corona virus, and was admitted to a hospital's intensive care unit, and subsequently, placed on a ventilator. Sanjay Gupta, the CNN medical correspondent, stated that between 40-80 percent of those on ventilators because of the virus, will die.

Even knowing that, I felt the person I knew would make it. He wasn't elderly, he was healthy and kind, gentle and funny. He died last night. His death has devastated my colleague. (They've been together for ten years.) It has affected everyone who works at United Spinal headquarters personally.

To eulogize this man is to describe the best personal care attendant — dedicated, committed to his client, personable, kind, thoughtful and hard-working.

The void created by his absence will be felt by his family, and, of course, his client — my friend. But his loss personifies for us, at United Spinal, the importance of homecare workers to the disabled community - selfless people working under trying circumstances without acknowledgment or significant amounts of compensation. When I see New Yorkers stand at their windows at 7 p.m. every night applaud, hoot, whistle and bang pots and pans in support of healthcare workers, I hope people remember that it is more than doctors and nurses, and even hospital food and maintenance workers that they are saluting. They are saluting legions of homecare workers, who risk their own health and their families' health to serve our population and who even die in the line of duty.

No one would argue that healthcare workers and other first responders aren't truly heroes at this time, but personal care attendants are heroes all the time. They provide the link that would be missing to community living for severely disabled people. Their life's work facilitates the lives of so many others who would be dependent on institutions for care in their absence.

Luckily, my colleague is safe and does not have Corona virus. His heart is broken, and the only lesson learned is the same one learned by so many of our members. Bad things happen to good people all the time: bad luck is random. All we can do is live purposeful lives, like my recently-deceased friend.