



WORKING ON THE MARGINS



Living Hope members and volunteers participating in the May Day Rally for immigrant and worker rights.



Living Hope members outside the Multi-Service Center in Houston where they can play wheelchair sports and enjoy fitness activities.

Photos courtesy of Living Hope Wheelchair Association



# A Voice for the Vulnerable

BY BETH GRIFFIN

In south Texas, **low-income immigrants with spinal cord injuries** face mind-boggling challenges every day.

Since 2005, Living Hope Wheelchair Association has worked tirelessly—through direct services, advocacy, and organizing—to improve the quality of life of people with spinal cord injuries or disease. Most members are Mexican immigrants who were injured as a result of violent crimes or work or car accidents.

Francisco “Pancho” Arguelles, executive director of Living Hope, says that immigrant workers who use wheelchairs formed the organization in Houston after the local health district stopped providing critical medical supplies to people with irregular

immigration status. “People with spinal cord injuries may each use 180 catheters in a month, but some of our people were trying to survive by sterilizing and reusing 30 of them. The risk of infection is very high. Urinary tract infections can turn into kidney infections and then irreversible, chronic kidney failure,” he explains.

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“In the beginning, Living Hope was in a fight for survival,” Pancho says. “We were like a self-help cooperative, providing supplies, services, and moral support to get people out of a spiritual and solitary hole.” The organization maintains its core commitment to help members and their families cope with traumatic injuries by providing wheelchairs, electric beds, personal medical supplies, bus tickets, and advice. It continues to encourage the local health district to reestablish access to medical supplies for those in need.

Living Hope has also now expanded its reach to address the roots of the problems it encounters. “We’re working to change policies and the larger system that excludes people in wheelchairs. We continue to fight for disability rights and health care access, but we’re also focused on immigrant rights issues,” Pancho says.

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LETTER FROM

THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

Do you ever need a reminder to keep your problems in perspective? I got mine from Noe Ramirez, the Mexican immigrant and grassroots-organization president we profile in this issue of Helping People Help Themselves. Without a trace of bitterness, he told us, "I thank God for putting me in a wheelchair." He described how a life-changing hit-and-run accident led him first to refocus on his marriage and then to help form the Living Hope Wheelchair Association. It is only through your support that the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) can provide grant funds to Living Hope and other groups like them.

Noe has been a quadriplegic for more than twenty years, ever since a drunk driver knocked him off his bicycle as he rode to work in Houston. Despite his struggles to get help—perhaps because of them—he and nine other people with spinal cord injuries came together to address their immediate need for medical supplies. The local public health district had stopped providing catheters, adult diapers, and urine collection bags to people with irregular immigration status. At first the members of Living Hope focused on raising funds to buy supplies for fellow wheelchair users. Then the organization began to address the root causes of marginalization and poverty for immigrant workers with disabilities. Today Living Hope is a strong voice for the intersection of disability rights and immigrants' rights.

Living Hope's network helped identify and aid people with disabilities who were stranded after Hurricane Harvey devastated south Texas in August 2017. Its post-hurricane work has reflected Living Hope's consistent call to community. Without Living Hope's assistance and outreach throughout

the year, many people with mobility concerns would be physically and emotionally isolated. The group uses CCHD funds to train quality-of-life promoters to help reintegrate people facing debilitating injuries back into the community and ultimately help them return to full participation in society.

We were honored to present our 2017 Sister Margaret Cafferty Development of Peoples Award to Living Hope Wheelchair Association in November. The group embodies the criteria of the award with its community-based self-help model that helps poor and low-income people improve their situations and change the structures that made and keep them poor.

Living Hope members are strengthened by their faith in God and help from one another to advocate for basic rights and respect for their human dignity. Because of members' persistence in engaging elected and appointed officials and speaking publicly about their plight, Living Hope has won small but significant improvements to health care access, transportation, and public safety.

Living Hope is a tangible example of how the preferential option for the poor translates from concept to action. Thank you for helping CCHD address the needs of the vulnerable and poor.

Sincerely,

**RALPH McCLOUD**

*Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development*

WHAT IS CCHD?



Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the CCHD has contributed over \$300 million to more than 8,000 low-income led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.



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## Paratransit Victory

Among its wins, Living Hope counts its campaign to expand access to Houston's METROLift service: a wheelchair-accessible, shared-ride public bus system. "We're working for an equity approach in the transportation system,



Members of Living Hope enjoying some time together.

not just efficiency," Pancho says. During recent public transit budget hearings, Living Hope helped win a reasonable fare increase.

"The paratransit system is essential to the quality of life for people with disabilities," Pancho says. Living Hope continues to advocate for more bilingual bus dispatchers and customer service agents at a time when METROLift is considering outsourcing the dispatch function altogether. "Public service should remain public and accountable," Pancho says.

## Immigrant Rights Are Human Rights

As part of its effort to promote immigrant rights, Living Hope works on the "Welcoming Houston" initiative as part of the mayor's advisory council. Pancho says the purpose is to identify concrete local policies to make the city more friendly to immigrants and refugees. Living Hope has connected with legislators and community leaders to develop realistic local human rights policies based on dialogue with affected populations.

For example, Living Hope advocates a multilingual strategy for municipal

hiring at all levels. It has also urged local police to make a permanent commitment to stop collaborating with immigration officials. "We've set the tone and had some victories," Pancho says, "but we have a long way to go forward."

"We're engaging service agencies and grassroots organizations in 'Know Your Rights' campaigns," Pancho says. "It's a challenge to push funders to get involved in immigration on a more 'horizontal' level and work with immigrant-led groups to change the system."

He says he believes immigrant rights initiatives have a chance of developing more fully at the local level than the national level. Decision makers in the nation's capital lack the humility and firsthand experience of grassroots participants, he says. But people at the grassroots level must communicate their story effectively and support like-minded people who run for office, he adds.

## Hurricane Harvey

Hurricane Harvey swept through the Houston area in August 2017. Its damage did not discriminate on the basis of immigrant status, disability, or economic sector. And it created a particular kind of havoc for people in wheelchairs.

"Many people were marginalized before the hurricane, but the storm brought a higher level of vulnerability. It was terrifying," Pancho says. "We had to rescue ourselves. For many days after the storm, people were confined to their homes because there was debris on the sidewalks.

"Some housing suffered minor damage or mold, but didn't qualify for FEMA assistance. Some people were in unsafe rental units whose owners did not invest in repairs. And some of our members qualified for FEMA assistance, but their applications were denied, and the appeals process is slow and intimidating," Pancho explains.

"And if the disaster wasn't bad enough," he adds, "the preexisting systemic barriers made it worse, and continue into the future."

Nonetheless, in aid-planning conference calls with national assistance groups after Harvey, Living Hope was able to raise the profile of people with disabilities as well as that of immigrants. "When we speak in the disability rights context, we are one of the few groups raising a voice for immigrants. And when we speak as immigrants, we raise a voice for people with disabilities as well," Pancho says.

## Membership

Living Hope has 60 to 80 active wheelchair members, 200 family and solidarity members, and a growing number of online supporters. Volunteer leadership is one of the unique aspects of the community-based nonprofit organization.

New members hear about the group through word of mouth or media coverage. Established members visit newly paralyzed people in local hospitals to offer assistance and encouragement.

"We've opened our membership to people with diabetes- and kidney- and stroke-related mobility issues, 90% of whom are in wheelchairs," Pancho says. "And we've expanded our vision to [include] policy work that will make Houston a more inclusive city that illustrates the big picture of a more real American democracy."

Living Hope buys some items for its members, gets donations of others, and has cost-saving arrangements with medical supply distributors. The organization serves the Houston community and also shares equipment and supplies with people with disabilities living in Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico.

"Our membership meetings are always bittersweet. Humanity and vulnerability are so visible, yet the faith and the joy of the people is very humbling," Pancho says. Members discuss advancements and achievements and talk about the issues they face. At the end of some meetings, attendees pass a hat to help someone in a tougher situation. "It's a powerful thing," Pancho says. ☀





Noe Ramirez of Living Hope Wheelchair Association receives the Sister Margaret Cafferty Development of Peoples Award in Houston, TX.

## Meet Noe Ramirez, President of Living Hope

Twenty years ago, as Noe Ramirez pedaled his bicycle to work at a Houston construction site, a drunk driver ran over him, crushing his chest and breaking his spine. The driver fled the scene, leaving Noe lying in a pool of blood on the road. In an instant, the young immigrant husband and father became a quadriplegic.

Finding it difficult to get the medical supplies he needed from a public clinic, Noe channeled his frustrations by joining nine other men with spinal cord injuries to start Living Hope Wheelchair Association.

"We started by selling roses on the street and raffling televisions at local churches to raise money to buy supplies. Every couple of months, a new guy showed up in the same condition and we helped him, too. People started to see what we were doing and helped us," Noe says. He has been reelected president of Living Hope every two years since its founding in 2005.

Living Hope became a non-profit organization and now provides approximately \$400 of supplies and transit tickets to more than 60 people each month, Noe says.

Noe studied music and played in traditional trios in Mexico. Today he

supports his family as a guitar teacher, while his wife works as a housecleaner. Their daughter graduated from college in Houston and plans to become a physician's assistant.

The path has not been easy, but Noe's faith and his work with Living Hope have made a tremendous impact on his ability to cope with his disability and near-constant pain. "I thank God for putting me in a wheelchair. Before the accident, I drank too much and it almost broke my marriage. My family suffered a lot" after the accident, he says, "but they kept telling me to move ahead with the association.

"God has a bigger plan for me," Noe says.

He credits the association with saving lives. One despondent friend from Noe's physical rehabilitation program attempted suicide three times. Living Hope intervened to provide him with help, support, and the example of members who were leading full lives. "His life changed 100%, and he's working with us now," Noe says.

Noe describes Living Hope as an organization based in faith that supports whoever needs its help. "We start every meeting and event with a prayer, thanking God for our blessings and asking God to help us," he says. ☩

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