



Good-bye to a Real Hero: Chuck Shin, Brother, Disability Rights Leader and Friend!

Korea town is Chuck Shin's little domain in Los Angeles. He was well covered by the Korean press on anything disability-related. He knew to call them for something very relevant to the disability community and he would have them at his service giving full attention to an issue otherwise ignored. He lived and operated the Korean Disability Association office, a little center he founded and headed as Executive Director until the day he died November 13th, 2007, a day after he last called me.

He was, once again, down with an infection, a very typical illness that come upon people who deal with severe spinal cord injuries like Chuck had. That last Friday, he called to say he needed an attendant at 9 PM and my neighbor went to his rescue. During our last conversation, I sensed a calmness about him, although too, a tacit plea for a visit. I had in mind to discuss with him later, our strategy to fight the Para transit system currently making decisions that hurt our community. But first, Chuck had to get well and I expected him to. So, when at the end of a busy day on Wednesday, I received a call that he had died, I felt stunned, like the gum that erupts in bleeding after a tooth had just been pulled.

The thought that Chuck would not ever ring my cell phone again, to consult me on something or to tell a story for a giggle together, to refer someone for services or update me on a recent romantic interest, to offer a ride in his van plus all the things we used to do together was just a loss my system could not take. I pretended to be ok but ended up in the hospital the next day. But Chuck was a big brother and he sternly warned me this year to take it easy and to strive to better take care of my health.

"I do not want you to work too hard, Lilibeth," he said, "try to do something fun—life is too short."

Chuck was intensely passionate. He worked very hard to scrape every little bit of joy for his life of struggle. Every day, he was determined to keep busy, whether it was to work at his office or an outing or to engage someone in an animated conversation. In the early days after I met him, we frequented his brother's karaoke bar. In order to belch out a song, Chuck would lower his wheelchair to the lying position and ask someone to push down their hands on his diaphragm; he'd have someone else hold the mike for him. Then he'd turn his head toward the TV monitor to read the lyrics and then from that painful position would come out from his voice box, the most beautiful and heartfelt ballads I've ever heard. This was Chuck's miracle—that he could produce the most melodious music from the most difficult circumstance! He was at the peak of his life, after he traveled the world during his training in the army, had just begotten a wife, a beautiful son and was about to embark on his American dream when he was hit by a car the 4th of July, some 25 years ago. The road up from that crush was painful and arduous—Chuck experienced the utmost darkness—intense anger, cruelty and injustice and at times substandard care—he tried three times to kill himself. To his utter amazement, he failed at every attempt, no matter how well thought out.

"Now I know why I was not allowed to die," he said. "there is just too much to do for people!"

Chuck served a largely immigrant community of Korean disabled. He provide them with social services, advocacy, sources of medical care and information and referral. He met every request for help with a resourcefulness of a master. He knew his roster of phone numbers by memory, he knew the people to call and he knew where to get them the things they needed for survival. But often the demands of his job took from the demands of his body because managing a severe disability takes precision and intense concentration which Chuck had a lot of.

When faced with a choice to take care of himself or to take care of people, Chuck always opted to serve his people and pushed his body to the limit. He always seemed impatient with an infection or a fever but never when he was helping someone. Only when an illness was in the way of serving others did he switch his gears to attending to his body, this time demanding care that was often a cry for extended human warmth and love.

With his caregivers, he not only challenged them to provide him with basic care but the greater obligation to see beyond his physical impairment. He wanted them to see him as a thoroughly whole person beyond the paralysis, beyond the amputation, beyond the wheelchair. He wanted them and all his friends and family to look in his eyes and recognize the original Chuck Shin that God had created—beautiful, attractive, competent and with a lot of love to offer. In his death and because he lived an extraordinary life, we know today that our Chuck Shin has gone back to God—beautiful, dashing, attractive and with hands laden with great works of charity and mercy.

My brother Chuck has left so that he could sit on my shoulder with wings, to guide me in our work together!

Lilibeth Navarro

CALIF Executive Director