



A Tribute to Louis A. Preston, Sr., CALIF Board President & Disability Rights Advocate

We come here to give tribute to our dear friend, mentor, father and leader Louis Preston, Sr. I first met Mr. Preston when he came to CALIF in 2003. CALIF was barely a year old then as an organization and a staff member invited him to be part of our Board of Directors. We really had him at “hello”, his handshake warm and firm, his smile immediately friendly and welcoming. He listened to our self introductions and our organizational presentation, carefully clarifying points and asking questions so that as we spoke, he could form in his mind, a picture of who he was talking to. He had us identified by voice, inflection, laughter and personality.

We immediately recognized in Louis the grace of leadership essential to get us through our difficult pioneering years. He was wise and patient, broad in his knowledge and understanding of people and their interactions. We were experiencing the growing pains of organizational and Board development as well as fund raising. He honed us on the concept of the one-minute elevator speech to sell a stranger on the merits of our work to inspire a donation to CALIF. When things on our annual plan were difficult to achieve, he would suggest the concept of the work in progress, positively encouraging efforts to complete the tasks.

At times on the Board, we would have very involved and animated deliberations but he guided people through the difficult dialogue toward constructive resolutions. He thought through things carefully and always saw both sides to an issue, calmed our nerves and brought positive perspective back. He understood the challenges of organizational management in the context of bureaucratic expectations of government contracts as well as the realities of a community struggling with prejudice, poverty and politics. He was consistently supportive and accompanied us to meetings, rallies, outreach events, providing support, guidance and eloquent testimony. From years of counseling, he understood human nature very well and was the master of his own. Even when he was aggravated by frustrating circumstances brought about by disability-related prejudice, other people’s ignorance or thoughtlessness, he would exhibit patience and understanding, a positive spin and a purposeful seeking of the right solutions. He would always come out on top with a problem resolved without anyone getting hurt or insulted.

As a father to us all, after his retirement, he often came to visit and spend time with us, getting to know the staff and consumers and enjoying the camaraderie. I often made sure to describe to him the scenery and the lay out of the land at a meeting place as well as the people present so he could have a better picture of where he was and who the people were. He appreciated my descriptions and then he would share with me how they compared with his mental pictures and impressions.

He told stories of his adventures when he was younger, stories of family, church and his affiliations with other organizations. He was keeping up with world events and expressed enthusiasm for things progressive and just. Even when he came down with the painful flare ups of his Sciatic nerve, he chaired Board meetings via telephone conference.

And when he came down with his lingering illness, he mastered the last of his life's to do list. He suffered with dignity, quietly without complaining. He never whined about life in all the years we knew him—just an occasional expression of sadness that many of his family and friends were dying. He was tired of attending funerals he said but always ended those conversations with expressions of hope for the real life to come.

Good-bye dear Louis—it is your turn now to describe to us how beautiful the scenery is up there. We have been tremendously blessed to have known you and we thank your family—your beautiful wife and children for sharing you with us. You have loved and inspired us and we will miss you terribly but for the sake of a shared dream, we will carry on at CALIF.

Lilibeth Navarro

CALIF Founder and Executive Director