

HE LEFT THE “NO” BUTTON BEHIND

A Tribute to Nelson Manaay

Nelson Manaay was our best ambassador to the world, our welcoming committee, data expert, Personal Care advocate, overall Jack-of-all trades and for 11 years, we seemed assured that Nelson would always be there — he was young and energetic, joyful and beloved. He was one never to say “no” to anyone, even to the detriment of his health so on Monday night, the 17th of December, he died suddenly from diabetic complications. The weekend before that, I bought him a holiday gag gift to make him laugh — a “NO!” button, similar to the Staples’ “That’s Easy” button. You push it 4 different times and it belts out 4 different ways of saying “no!”, something Nelson always struggled with. Sometimes even on his break, when people needed something, he would drop everything just to respond to serve.



There were really a lot of us from CALIF at the viewing and the funeral and repast representing those who could not make it but who Nelson Manaay knew, served and cared about. We met his lovely family — his Dad Rico and Mom Azucena with whom he lived, his only sister Teresa and her husband and two sons and his brother Ed and his wife and two little kids. They were surrounded by a whole village of extended family and friends and their whole church family with their priest filled the church from wall to wall. All spoke about Nelson’s gentleness, his infectious smile, humility, generosity, his incredible command of the office procedures and complications at CALIF. His mother said that even when there were lures of other jobs where he could have made more money, he was insistent on staying at CALIF because he considered us his second family.

When I’d arrive at the office, Nelson would be the first to greet me not because he was posted at the front desk but because he was always among the first to arrive almost an hour before we open. He would open my office, turn on my lights, provide me with fresh drinking water and even water my plants! I only had to concentrate on getting comfortable before plugging away. Nelson knew when I was having a difficult day, and he would be there trying to

make it better. He always anticipated his co-workers' needs knowing their disabilities. He gave our staff water or help with their files or computer, he would manage the front crowd for truly busy days and had everyone seated comfortably and quietly until served. At the front desk he knew our consumers by name. He provided them with hot coffee everyday shelling out from his pocket every month for the coffee supply. Unbeknownst to us, he would give out cash donations to those with difficult situations running out of options for funding.

His father recounted his last days — supposedly he was obsessive about keeping tab of his sugar, he charted it till the 13th of December but ran out of insulin. He did not realize that being without insulin for even a day or two would be fatal. He was more preoccupied with the care of others and putting himself last. By the time his dad found him very sick, he was close to Code Blue! He died ten minutes after receiving the Church's Last Rites for death, 2 days after he was rushed to the ER. He had his friends and family around him.

From the church, Nelson was given an impressive police escort with the long caravan of cars following him. At the burial site, it was even surprisingly accessible for his cemetery plot was at the very edge, almost kissing the road. It was as though Nelson had it arranged that way so that all could participate. His Mom who has long suffered a stroke sat on a chair and did not even have to get up. Gordon and I likewise did not have to tread on the wet ground. The readings from church to the final prayer were very moving, compelling one to hone in on the most essential realities of life — our choices and our walk with God and neighbor. Michael said that as they were lowering Nelson's casket, there were 4 planes flying in formation, an indication that although not a military soldier, the Heavens were giving him honor for how beautifully he lived — never for himself but always for the others. Because Nelson was never boastful, remaining quiet and concentrated on his hidden services, God kept tab of his journey. Nelson's genius was not only that he mastered CALIF's machinations as an agency, he mastered life's essential priorities. In his short life of 41 years, he immediately got the riddle of life—he understood that the password to God, was his neighbor. The "NO" button he left untouched because when God called him, true to form, Nelson said "YES!". Nelson embodied the spirit and service style we strive to live and give at CALIF!

~~ by **Lillibeth Navarro**

CALIF Executive Director

January 7th, 2019