

In Memoriam: RODNEY GARTNER, DRIVING TOWARD THE GOAL

I heard yesterday that Rodney Gartner, a Vietnam veteran who worked with us at CALIF during our first three years, had passed away. Please say a prayer for him. Rodney was a humble, smart man from the Dakotas. He showed me his pre-Vietnam pictures one day-- he was standing tall, a dashing man of great enthusiasm and promise--smiling at the camera in his military uniform. And then he went to combat in the jungles of Vietnam. There he was shot at and became paralyzed. He was brought home for rehabilitation, cried his heart out but persevered and eventually recovered. But life has dramatically changed for him.

He had to use a manual wheelchair and live with a colostomy bag. Undaunted, he faced his new circumstances with even greater obstinate determination. He got involved with the Disability Community and worked with us at CALIF as Housing Advocate for almost three years. He was very knowledgeable about housing and kept himself updated on the issue so that he could give generously to our consumers. He started saving up his paycheck to buy his van with special hand controls which the Department of Rehabilitation paid for to the tune of \$30,000.

The van modification process was that expensive as it entailed retrofitting the floor of the van to make it lower, installing automatic locks on the floor to hold secure the wheelchair and purchasing the hand controls. Rodney had a Social Security PASS Plan approved (Plan for Achieving Self Support) with a goal of starting his own business and going back to school. With the plan, he could work full time and not lose his Supplemental Security Income so that he could put aside his wages for the van modification.

Day in and day out, he came to work. There were struggles with the consumers, his health, life in general. Transit gave him the biggest grief, making him wait for hours, sometimes causing him to reach home at 9 PM. This was what fired him up to pursue his own driving and a retrofitted van. Aside from helping the consumers, he was an

intrepid activist, accompanying us to the protests and rallies. He was there 100%. And he shared with us in confidence--his dreams, his hopes for a brighter future, self-directed and his own boss. He ventured into social sites and making friends overseas. There were plans of meeting up with a potential life mate and soon it was time to leave CALIF.

He resigned from his job and we bade him good bye, happy for him moving on to the next part of his dream. With his salary savings, he finally bought his van and got it fully retrofitted by the Department of Rehabilitation. He drove into CALIF one more time, to show us his prized transportation--a brand new red Dodge van, its floor lowered, with a fully automatic wheelchair strap system and fancy hand controls.

"Maybe now, we can go to the movies!" he told one of us, "I'll pick you up!"

After that one last good-bye, we did not hear from Rodney. We knew he was on his way back to his hometown in South Dakota. We figured that he was busy like he always was. We did not know that he passed away.

So Rodney leaves an example of a man who never gave up. How long after he attained his goal of getting a van and driving did he live to enjoy it does not really matter. What matters is that Rodney kept working on his goals and actually attained them. The partying after that is just the icing on the cake.

--Lillibeth Navarro, October 17th, 2013