

Window washer talking after 47-story fall

'If you are a believer in miracles, this would be one,' says doctor

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NEW YORK - Doctors say they have never seen anything like it: A window washer who fell 47 stories from the roof of a Manhattan skyscraper is now awake, talking to his family and expected to walk again. Alcides Moreno, 37, plummeted almost 500 feet in a Dec. 7 scaffolding collapse that killed his brother.

Somehow, Moreno lived, and doctors at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center announced Thursday that his recovery has been astonishing. He is scheduled to undergo his 10th surgery Friday.

He has movement in all his limbs. He is breathing on his own. And on Christmas Day, he opened his mouth and spoke for the first time since the accident.

His wife, Rosario Moreno, cried as she thanked the doctors and nurses who kept him alive.

"Thank God for the miracle that we had," she said. "He keeps telling me that it just wasn't his time."

Dr. Herbert Pardes, the hospital's president, described Moreno's condition when he arrived for treatment as "a complete disaster."

Both legs and his right arm and wrist were broken in several places. He had severe injuries to his chest, his abdomen and his spinal column. His brain was bleeding. Everything was bleeding, it seemed.

Miraculous recovery

In those first critical hours, doctors pumped 24 units of donated blood into his body — about twice his entire blood volume.

They gave him plasma and platelets and a drug to stimulate clotting and stop the hemorrhaging. They inserted a catheter into his brain to reduce swelling and cut open his abdomen to relieve pressure on his organs.

Moreno was at the edge of consciousness when he was brought in. Doctors sedated him, performed a tracheotomy and put him on a ventilator.

His condition was so unstable, doctors worried that even a mild jostle might kill him, so they performed his first surgery without moving him to an operating room.

Nine orthopedic operations followed to piece together his broken body.

Yet, even when things were at their worst, the hospital's staff marveled at his luck.

Incredibly, Moreno's head injuries were relatively minor, for a fall victim. Neurosurgeon John Boockvar said the window washer also managed to avoid a paralyzing spinal cord injury, even though he suffered a shattered vertebra.

"If you are a believer in miracles, this would be one," said the hospital's chief of surgery, Dr. Philip Barie.

New York-Presbyterian has treated people who have tumbled from great heights before, including a patient who survived a 19-story fall, but most of those tales end sadly.

The death rate from even a three-story fall is about 50 percent, Barie said. People who fall more than 10 stories almost never survive.

"Forty-seven floors is virtually beyond belief," Pardes said.

Science may never be able to explain what protected Moreno when the platform he and his brother were using atop an Upper East Side apartment tower broke free and fell to the ground.

Edgar Moreno, 30, of Linden N.J., died instantly. He was buried in Ecuador, where the brothers were from.

'I didn't know he could speak'

Alcides Moreno, whom his wife described as strong and athletic, may have clung to his scaffolding platform as it dropped. It is possible that the metal platform offered him some protection, although doctors said they were unsure how.

An investigation into the cause of the accident is ongoing.

Rosario Moreno said her husband was conscious during the fall but remembers little. She said he didn't need to be told that his brother had died.

The injured window washer spent about three weeks on a ventilator, unable to speak, and initially his only means of communicating with his family was by touch.

"He wanted to touch my face, touch my hair," Rosario Moreno said.

She would take his hand and hold it to her skin. Then, one day, he reached out and touched one of the nurses.

Rosario Moreno said that when she heard about it, she jokingly lectured her husband to keep his hands to himself. He answered in English, "What did I do?"

"It stunned me," she said, "because I didn't know he could speak."

There is still a rough road ahead for the tough New Jersey man, a father of three children, ages 14, 8 and 6.

He was scheduled to undergo another spinal surgery on Friday, and he will need another operation to reconstruct his abdominal wall. There is a chance he will develop complications, even life-threatening ones, during the months ahead.

Lifelong injuries

Moreno will remain in the hospital for at least a few more weeks, doctors said. After that, he will need extensive physical rehabilitation. It may be another year before doctors know how much he will improve.

The medical staff was guarded Thursday about his prospects for returning to a normal life. Doctors said they believe he will walk, but they also suggested that some of his injuries are likely to be lifelong.

"We're optimistic for a very substantial recovery, eventually," Barie said

Rosario Moreno said she knows this much for sure: His days as a window washer are over.

"I told him," she said, "you're not going back to work there."