

A Second Chance At Life

Surgeons operate for free on man who leaped from burning home.

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Roberti Banegas and his son Edwin were trapped on the roof of a burning house in Roosevelt Tuesday morning, after escaping through a narrow window from their attic apartment. With nowhere to go, they jumped. The impact, from about 20 feet high, compressed their spines, breaking them.

Dragged by neighbors to safety, they were in excruciating pain when taken by ambulance to the emergency room of Nassau University Medical Center in East Meadow. Roberti Banegas, 42, had a lumbar fracture but was deemed neurologically intact. He was given anti-inflammation medication and ordered to rest. Edwin Banegas, 19, fared worse.

Edwin Banegas' nerves were compromised, crushed by fractured spine bones that basically imploded into the spinal canal. He was at risk of never walking again.

Neither he nor his father had medical insurance, but the hospital called on two orthopedic surgeons – who happen to be brothers – and, thanks to their expertise, Edwin Banegas may have been spared from life in a wheelchair. The doctors, who were on duty at another hospital when called for the emergency, did their work for free.

Doctors Marc and Ira Chernoff, originally from Bellmore, performed a seven-hour surgery to remove the mash of vertebral bones and free endangered nerves. They did it all while preventing bleeding, since Edwin Banegas is a Jehovah's Witness who opposes blood transfusions.

"I feel better now. I can move my legs," Edwin Banegas said Friday from his hospital bed. "I'm thankful."

When Edwin Banegas and his father woke up to the crackling fire inside the attic of 78 E. Clinton Ave. sometimes after 5.a.m. Tuesday, they ran to their only exit door. A cloud of heat and smoke stopped them. In desperation, they tore through a small window and emerged onto the roof. Their landlord, Juan de Los Santos, put up a retractable ladder. But they couldn't reach it.

Then, some of the 11 people who already had gotten out of the house started screaming, telling them to jump. Roberti Banegas hesitated. Edwin Banegas went first. He bounced off his legs and landed facedown. His father followed, landing on his buttocks.

They had survived the fire, whose cause remains under investigation, but neither could stand on their own after fall.

At the hospital, X-rays, CT scans and MRIs showed the size of Edwin Banegas' spinal canal had been reduced by 90 percent. "He had a lot of weakness in his legs, so we had to go in to work on the fractured area," said Marc Chernoff, 34.

The Chernoffs cut a 6-inch incision, as Edwin Banegas lay on his stomach, anesthetized. They found the fracture and took away some of the bone pinching the nerves. They then drilled titanium screws into the vertebrae, above and below the fracture, and attached them with rods. Through the same incision, they scraped off bone from his pelvic area and reinserted it along his injury to help it heal.

Another 8-inch incision was made on the left side of his diaphragm. Through it, the surgeons removed the fractured vertebral body and adjoining discs. In their place, they put a reinforcing titanium cylinder, stuffed with bone graft.

Within a couple of hours, Edwin Banegas woke up and could move his legs. Like his father, he will wear a hard plastic brace on his back for four to six months. "His sensation and his strength had a marked improvement... That is a very good sign," Marc Chernoff said.

The procedure costs upward of \$50,000 but is not denied in cases of trauma to uninsured patients. Medicaid refunds the costs for citizens and legal residents without insurance, but for undocumented immigrants the hospitals absorb the cost. Edwin Banegas, who arrived from Honduras four months ago, does not qualify for insurance.

For the Banegases, though, the treatment was a second chance at life. "We lost everything, but your life is the most important thing." Roberti Banegas said.