

NY CULTURE | JANUARY 29, 2011

Cyclists Rally Around a Competitor

By SOPHIA HOLLANDER

The first time Nanci Modica hung out with Damian Lopez Alphonso he was playing pool. But it wasn't his skills that caught her attention: Mr. Alphonso didn't have hands.

When he was 13 years old, Mr. Alphonso, a Cuba native, tried to dislodge a kite tangled in some wires with a metal rod; instead 13,000 volts of electricity shot through his body. The pole slammed into his head and melted against his face. Subsequent infections forced the amputation of his arms just below the elbows and his face and body were left badly disfigured.



NANCI MODICA

Ms. Modica met Mr. Alphonso in Cuba during the 2002 Pan Am Masters Cycling Championships. She was astonished to learn that he not only competed, but challenged able-bodied racers for titles.

"I was a child and I could never take people telling me I couldn't do anything," said Mr. Alphonso, now 34, through a translator. "I started walking and then I found a bike in the house and I started riding it."

Tracy Lea was another American cyclist at the competition in Havana. Though she spoke limited Spanish, she and Mr. Alphonso became friends. "He would come over if I was struggling with carrying my bikes into the velodrome and he would help me," she said. "I was horribly embarrassed."

Ms. Lea returned to her home in Maryland vowing to help Mr. Alphonso receive the medical treatment he needed. She contacted Whitney Burnett, the executive director of the National Foundation for Facial Reconstruction, which funds the Institute of Reconstructive Plastic Surgery at NYU Langone Medical Center. "She kept at me," said Ms. Burnett. Now, "he's just someone that I just can't stop thinking about."

In December, Ms. Lea secured a travel permit for Mr. Alphonso to visit the U.S., Ms. Burnett coordinated his medical treatment and Ms. Modica agreed to host him in her family's small Manhattan apartment. Though she was initially concerned her young son might be scared by Mr. Alphonso's appearance, "I really couldn't say no to him," Ms. Modica said. "He had the courage to do this, he's so willing to take this chance and take the risk."

In New York, a team of doctors at the hospital evaluated Mr. Alphonso's condition. He visited Times Square and tried not to get his hopes up. He refined his dreams: He didn't want regular prosthetics for daily life; he's become accustomed to using his stumps to handle forks, draw pictures and even fix cars back in Cuba. "For me, it's normal," he said through Marco Quezada, a local cyclist and freelance photographer who volunteered as a translator for the trip. But Mr. Alphonso yearned to be a more competitive racer and to heal his face, "to live like a normal person without being gawked at by strangers," he said.

His first surgery could be scheduled within a month. Meanwhile Ms. Lea and others continue to raise funds for his travel, treatment and post-operative care. They have secured commitments for the prosthetics, a grant for Mr. Alphonso to attend racing competitions as he seeks to qualify for the 2012 Paralympic Games, and more than \$2,000 (largely from the city's cycling community) to cover follow-up visits to New York. "The New York group has been so core, so key," Ms. Lea said. "New York has opened doors."

Ms. Lea estimates that his post-operative visits and lodging will cost approximately \$5,000. Ms. Burnett said that the medical services, including at least two surgeries, and hospitalization could cost "a minimum of \$100,000."

The Achilles Foundation has agreed to donate the racing prosthetics, which cost about \$15,000; Fuji provided Mr. Alphonso with a new bike; and the Challenged Athletes Foundation will bestow a \$5,000 grant to help Mr. Alphonso attend competitions to qualify for the 2012 Paralympic Games, according to board member Scott Stackman, who works in New York as a senior vice president at UBS Financial Services Inc.