UHealth Teamwork Brings Injured State Trooper Back from the Brink and Readies Him for Return to Duty

When the Miami-Dade County Fire Rescue helicopter touched down on the roof of Ryder Trauma Center at the University of Miami/Jackson Memorial Hospital on January 9, a trauma team was waiting. As its doors opened, however, the team didn’t rush forward to help speed a patient to the advanced emergency treatment offered on the floors below. Instead, they clapped and cheered.
Trooper Carlos Rosario with members of the trauma team who saved his life.

For out stepped Florida State Trooper Carlos Rosario, in full uniform, 22 months after having been flown there in the same helicopter with life-threatening injuries. It was Rosario’s first day back on duty, and he had come to thank the team that had saved him.

On March 17, 2017, Rosario, then 40 and a 12-year veteran of Florida Highway Patrol Troop E, was participating in a speed-related traffic stop. Standing on the shoulder of the Dolphin Expressway, he was struck by a car whose distracted driver was texting while traveling 75 miles per hour in a 55 zone. Rosario was thrown against the side of one of the cruisers parked at the site. He suffered a traumatic brain injury, severe facial lacerations and fractures from his head to his feet.

“I have no memory of the event,” Rosario said, “but I am told that I landed with my torso sitting upright against the side of the police cruiser and my legs going in another direction. We see a lot of terrible automobile accidents, and my fellow troopers who were at the scene did not expect me to survive.”

In critical condition and bleeding heavily, Rosario was flown to the Ryder heliport, where his trauma team was waiting. Daniel Pust, M.D., assistant professor of surgery, was the trauma surgeon on call that day and immediately took charge. Also in the building was Carl I. Schulman, M.D., Ph.D., professor of surgery and the officially appointed surgeon for Troop E. When he received word from Troop E that one of their own had been brought to Ryder, he rushed downstairs to help
with Rosario’s initial treatment.

“In the early stages, there were many times when Carlos could have died, and we put forth a real team effort to make sure that didn’t happen,” Dr. Schulman said.

Trooper Carlos Rosario with Daniel Pust, M.D., the surgeon who was on duty when he was brought to Ryder Trauma Center.

“He was bleeding so severely that we activated our massive
transfusion protocol, in which the blood bank delivers blood continuously until we tell them to stop," Dr. Pust said. “We even had to keep interrupting his CAT scan to give him more blood. It took a huge effort from everyone involved, but we saved him.”

Rosario was in a coma for 17 days, finally waking up on April 3. Nine days later, on April 12, he was transferred to Ryder’s rehabilitation center, where the beginning of his recovery was supervised by Gemayaret Alvarez, M.D., assistant professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation, and Ryder’s medical director of neurorehabilitation.

“He needed time, because he had so many injuries,” Dr. Alvarez said. “When he came to me, he was at maximum assistance level—he needed help doing almost anything, such as moving from the bed to a chair. He had to learn to walk again. Even simple daily tasks, such as shaving, required assistance. By the time he left five weeks later, he needed minimal assistance.”

Dr. Alvarez credits Rosario’s motivation and his support network with helping him make a relatively quick and impressive recovery.

“He was willing to work very hard,” she said. “At the time, we knew he was going to excel. There was the support of his caregiving team here, but he had much more than that. His wife was by him at all times, and the brotherhood of his fellow troopers was really solid. There was always somebody watching over him.”

On May 19, Rosario was transferred to another comprehensive rehabilitation facility — Encompass Health Rehabilitation...
Hospital of Miami, formerly Health South, which has a relationship with UHealth – where his continued recovery was overseen by David S. Kushner, M.D., clinical professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation.

“Carlos was still very impaired when he arrived here, but as he had at Ryder, he demonstrated the strength and determination to recover,” Dr. Kushner said.

Rosario had multiple surgeries to repair the damage to his face, to insert supporting rods in both legs and, at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, to repair the cause of the double vision that plagued him for more than a year after he was struck. When he was finally released to go home on August 22, he was able to walk on his own and go up and down a staircase using a handrail. After that, it was just a matter of time and letting his body continue to heal.

From left, David Kushner, M.D., trooper Carlos Rosario, and Carl I. Schulman, M.D., Ph.D.
Rosario, a dedicated sports fan, also had his spirits bolstered by souvenirs and keepsakes his friends arranged to have sent to him by teams all over the country. A Massachusetts native, Rosario was especially thrilled to receive a signed jersey from New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady. Florida Governor Rick Scott surprised him with two visits while he was hospitalized, and a GoFundMe account set up by his friends enabled him to supplement the workers’ compensation payments he received during 22 months out of work.

“Recovery from life-threatening multiple injuries is a journey,” Dr. Kushner said. “In my 25 years at UM, I have seen the human body’s amazing healing capacity, but patients also need the inner drive to return to health, combined with the right team of therapists and support from family and friends. Stories like Carlos’s offer hope to other patients, and their families, who are just beginning their journey.”

From the time he first woke up, Rosario’s focus was on returning to work – something his caregivers hoped for him but were reluctant to promise. Still, on January 9, he made that return to full duties. After thanking the trauma team at Ryder, Rosario climbed back into the helicopter and was flown to Troop E’s headquarters, where he was met by Dr. Kushner, Dr. Schulman, and a large complement of his fellow troopers for a celebration and a press conference.

“I have no complaints,” Rosario said. “From the first day, I had the best doctors from UHealth. I was walking in three months – something even they thought was impossible. People often complain about having to go to work, but that was my
dream. I love what I do, and I just wanted to be able to say, ‘I gotta go to work tomorrow.’ Now, thank God, I can.”