
With Life On the Shoulder

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Come hell or high water, nameless and committed crews travel the cities every day distributing door-to-door of patients oxygen bottles that guarantee their lives.

It doesn't matter if it's raining or overcasted, neither if there's no electricity and they have to climb six flight of dark stairs; anyway, they will be there every day with the oxygen bottles on the shoulder.

After getting around those and other obstacles like mad dogs or shattered stair steps, they will call punctual to the house where a Cuban awaits for the oxygen that will allow him to keep living.

Eduardo Mario Blasco, driver of the crew, explains that they work under the Company of Industrial Gases, but it's MINSAP the one that hands down the list of patients.

The fleet of almost 15 or 20 trucks has its base in Guanabacoa and, after the daily meeting, they depart to distribute life. "We go around the entire Havana city and also Mayabeque, Artemisa, and Güines."

Every day we distribute a rate of 40 large bottles, "but there are days of 60 and 70. We have odd hours either early morning or night time. I have had back-to-back days because the truck broke."

Eduardo Mario has worked in this for six years, before that he was a truck driver for 30 years. On board the truck prepared to transport the large bottles also go two young loaders.

"There aren't Saturdays neither Sundays in this job, journalist. This is really a matter of life or death; if you don't change an empty bottle for a full one, simply the sick person can die".

Says Danilo González, 27 years old, loader.

"It's true that sometimes one feels like staying asleep, of not getting wet by rain, or of not climbing those stairways with more than a hundred pounds on shoulders. But it's a humanitarian matter, one understands well when looking at the situation of other people who are waiting for you".

- Have there been cases where a relationship of friendship is created?

- Almost all of them. We call them through our mobiles, paying us, to know if we can stop by, if the door is locked; because the bottle must be set next to the patient 's bed.

- How many stairs do you climb daily?

- Countless because most of our patients live in Plaza, Centro Habana and Habana Vieja municipalities, where there are plenty of tall buildings. If we have five houses at ground level in the deliveries, that is a win. Everything is upstairs , downstairs five or six floors, because there aren't many elevators.

- What do you friends tell you about your work?

- They simply stay silent. They know I am a loader, but they don't imagine the real work I do. Those who see me on the street might think what's so hard about getting carried around on a truck, but it's not like that. It's hard, besides the physical effort, you encounter sad stories, and also the treatment of a few patients.

Although, regularly, tight relationships are created, almost of familiarity. There are always, of course says the loader, those who protest when you deliver the oxygen bottle very early and they wanted to sleep later into the morning.

"Sometimes – says Danilo - we have arrived late at night at a house because the truck broke and when you finally arrive at the place, after such ordeals, they yell at you and complain, they tell you "are these hours to bring the oxygen, you must wait until tomorrow... nobody will wake up at this hour".

"One can get mad at hearing those words, but you must think it over and tell yourself that is part of the job, where you care about other people, but they don't always care about us."

Luckily, situations like this one are numbered with one hand.

The truck driver remembers that " we have cases where hot coffee and cool water are plentiful. One build friendships, and there are times when you are given a t-shirt, a pair of pants... "

Every day of the world

Eduardo Mario, the truck driver, comments of possible hazards in the job: "Grease is a mortal enemy of oxygen. The bottles cannot be manipulated neither with grease neither oil in the hands, nothing that contains lubricants, because they are flammable."

- Have you ever had an accident?

- Well, a bottle once fell on my foot, but those occupational hazards... Because I just not only sit behind the wheel, I also help downloading the bottles.

"The two boys and me have also made some sort of a family. We are neighbors, they live next to the factory and in this job which is every day of the world, I take advantage and I explain things to them.

"I tell them we don't distribute wood, neither iron, nor cement; that this is a job for the person who needs it as matter of life or death, hence responsibility to the job comes first. I will soon turn 60 years old, but I watched them be born and I have seen them grown to become good people."
