

Voices of PVA — E03 — Caregiving, with Veronica Cordova

[0:02] AL KOVACH JR.:

Welcome to voices of PVA. Thanks for joining us. I'm your host, Al Kovach Jr. And along with me is my co host, Chad Stewart.

[0:10] CHAD STEWART:

Thanks, Al. Today's episode's about caregivers, the people who carry so much of the weight behind a paralyzed veteran's recovery, often without recognition.

[0:18] AL KOVACH JR.:

Joining us today is Veronica Cordova. Her husband, Josue is a PVA national vice president and Air Force veteran whose life changed in an instant after a car accident. Veronica and Josue married after that accident, and she's been by his side ever since. Through the setbacks and through the victories, she's here to give us an honest look at what caregiving means day in and day out. Veronica, thank you so much for being here.

[0:45] VERONICA CORDOVA:

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

[0:47] AL KOVACH JR.:

So let's get to know your story. Could you tell us about you and your husband Josue, and how did you all meet?

[0:54] VERONICA CORDOVA:

I'm really glad you asked that. That's one of my favorite stories. We actually grew up together, but us knowing each other goes back further than. There isn't a time in my life when I didn't know him. My mom worked for his grandmother, which is really neat. So we're from the same town that borders Chicago, and he was my brother's best friend growing up. I'm the older sister. Wow. Yeah. That's a lot to unpack there.

[1:20] AL KOVACH JR.:

Yeah. So that being said, so you guys got married. Like, how old were you guys?

[1:26] VERONICA CORDOVA:

We were each married before, so this is our second marriage. We were each in relationships beforehand, had kids and all that. We got married in 2011 after starting dating in 2007.

[1:39] AL KOVACH JR.:

So, Veronica, at some point, you start off as the girlfriend, then you became the wife, the mother to his house son. You also filled the role as caregiver. I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about when did you first step into that role as caregiver? And you obviously knew what you're getting into, Right. So what did that transition look like for going from basically a wife to a caregiver?

[2:03] VERONICA CORDOVA:

Yeah. So as I stepped into that role, obviously it didn't happen overnight. It was kind of a gradual thing. I like to say that it's. It happens kind of like a sunrise. It. I didn't go to sleep one day and wake up the next day as a caregiver. So I stepped into the caregiving role first for our

son Ezekiel. He is now 31 years old, autistic and nonverbal. And that looks like something very different than Being a caregiver for my husband, that happened far more gradually. It started as helping with, you know, some heavy lifting and handing him stuff that's out of reach, little things like that that you don't maybe necessarily think about a caregiver doing. You know, those are all caregiver tasks, if you will, that happen almost without thinking. So I was. When we were first married, I was working full time, going to school, a mom of our now blended family of four, four children. And in time, because Josue's been in a wheelchair so much, his needs changed. As everyone can imagine, being in a wheelchair over time changes what you can do physically and what maybe somebody else can help with.

[3:22] AL KOVACH JR.:

Yeah, you know, I can totally relate because, you know, I'm. I'm in a wheelchair myself, and, you know, I'm married, and somehow she's stuck with me for 25 years of torture. But there's something called the caregiver paradox, and that kind of describes the emotional and psychological trap where trying to be both a loving member of the family, you know, being in that supportive role, and then also as a family caregiver. And that kind of leads to filling neither role as well as you would like. You know, you start becoming less as a wife and more of a caregiver. You know, how do you balance that?

[3:54] VERONICA CORDOVA:

Sure, that can be difficult on a daily basis, but I feel like you have to look at it. You have to look at the big picture. So instead of looking at a moment by moment, instead of thinking, you know, this moment I'm a caregiver, the next moment I'm a wife. You know, big picture. Ultimately, I love him, and I choose him every day. And we may have to take care of either a bowel routine or getting dressed in the morning or undressed in the evening, but you can still do all of those things and have your normal husband, wife conversations and relationship, and you're probably becoming a lot more intimate with one another while maintain. Trying to maintain that typical intimacy between husband and wife.

[4:38] AL KOVACH JR.:

So I met you all when Josue became the national vice president of pva. I can't remember how long ago that was, but it was a long time ago. And I remember meeting your son for the first time. And I know that with all that going on, because now you're traveling a lot because Josue is the national vice president, but you're also working for Southwest Airlines. You had a job to work. That balance must be incredibly difficult. And has maybe your employer offered you an opportunity to spend more time with your Family, as they say.

[5:10] VERONICA CORDOVA:

Yeah. So Southwest Airlines, like I always like to call them, the golden goose of airlines, they have this wonderful work life balance that allows me to work zero hours. As long as I keep my accreditation and all that good stuff up and current, I can post all of my trips. And that's how we work. We work trips. So I can post all my trips online. And as long as anyone picks them up or I trade out of them, trade down, I'm able to stay home and be his caregiver. That didn't happen initially at first, because when I was working full time flying, there was a time where I could still work, be gone a day or two, and he didn't need my care and he didn't need my help as a caregiver. So now as we fast forward to him needing more of my assistance, that flexibility that Southwest Airlines has allowed me has been pivotal. Like, I'm so grateful for that company and for my career specifically.

[6:10] AL KOVACH JR.:

So there's something to be said about, you know, it takes a village.

[6:13] VERONICA CORDOVA:

Absolutely.

[6:14] AL KOVACH JR.:

So would you mind talking a little bit more about the realities of caregiving? Could you walk us through what a typical day looks like for Veronica and Josue?

[6:22] VERONICA CORDOVA:

I can say that there is no constant except change. So you do definitely have to be flexible and keeping an open mind, giving yourself some grace, always with a nod to the end game or the goal in mind. But a typical day, we'll call it, is getting up, starting with, you know, getting dressed. And some things part of a typical person's routine look a little different than ours. You know, Josue is a T10 through T12 paraplegic with a complete injury. So things like putting shoes and socks on, getting pants on, all that good stuff need a little bit more assistance from me than one would actually assume. I think, you know, unless you're part of that community and part of our world, you don't necessarily understand that. So we get dressed together and then after getting dressed, that's when we kind of talk. As we're doing all of that, we're talking about what our day's going to look like and what is on the agenda for the day, and we tackle it together.

[7:23] AL KOVACH JR.:

I'm curious. You know, most of us in chairs are through rehab. They teach us how to maintain our independence and, and give direction to those who are caring for us. How do you know when to maybe just back off when Josue wants to be, you know, maintain some semblance of independence, you know, a little bit of that male ego, you know, what there's.

[7:41] VERONICA CORDOVA:

So there's that piece of it, male ego, of course, but then there's also the. The little. There's another caveat to that in that he's a military veteran. So that a person who enlists in the military, that's also another personality, if you will. You know, he's strong, independent. Most veterans are athletes or have been athletes. So there's all of that that goes along with that. And he is, you know, if anybody's ever met my husband, he's like your guy's guy, manly man. So it was difficult at first to learn how that balance. I didn't. I would initially, because I'm a natural nurturer, caregiver type. I would probably jump in and help before even being asked for sure. And before it necessarily being wanted. So I've learned to wait until he asks me. And that's. Sometimes that can be difficult because I just want to jump in and like, let me grab that for you. Let me hand it to you. Let me do that. Because it can frankly be a little faster for me to do it myself. Right.

[8:41] AL KOVACH JR.:

Like, it's no wonder how we can stay out of. Away from, you know, a marriage counselor's office.

[8:47] VERONICA CORDOVA:

I. Hey, nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong with asking for some help, you bet. Or a referee sometimes.

[8:55] AL KOVACH JR.:

So another question along those lines. What's a. Like, a challenge about caregiving that people maybe, you know, they rarely ask or even think about?

[9:03] VERONICA CORDOVA:

I think everyone assumes that there is some physical component, right. They might think like, oh, your back probably hurts, or I bet you're tired. So those things are assumed. And everyone thinks, yeah, you're tired. But what you don't. What others don't think about necessarily is the emotional tax that it could take on you, but also the mental fatigue, like, almost decision fatigue. I have to think about 10 steps ahead of time. I have to think about how my helping may or may not help how, you know, and I'm also. While doing all of that, I'm paying attention to his cues, his health. What, has he had enough water? It sounds silly, but I'm paying attention to so many things and so many unspoken things that that mental tax can be even more. More so than the physical tax.

[9:59] CHAD STEWART:

Thank you for that. I have a question for you, Veronica. How has caregiving changed the way you see your own identity separate from being a wife or a caregiver?

[10:07] VERONICA CORDOVA:

That's. I love that question. So I. I've learned that I'm far more flexible than I ever thought I was. I would before becoming A caregiver for my son and husband. I would have described myself as task oriented type, a kind of driven and a morning person. I'm no longer a morning person. I'm a good afternoon person. I peak mid afternoon now. But I was a morning person. I was driven, I was, you know, task oriented. And now I've learned that sometimes being task oriented is fine. Nothing wrong with that. But you have to be able to change directions. You have to be able to manage your mood a little differently. You have to know your own cues. I've learned so much about myself that I, I'm far more resilient, flexible, and maybe even intuitive than I ever thought I was.

[11:01] CHAD STEWART:

Thank you.

[11:02] AL KOVACH JR.:

And you know, in that answer you mentioned a little bit about, basically I would call it burnout and caregiver. Burnout is really an issue in this. You hear about it all the time when we're talking about caregivers and I imagine that's something you've experienced. I know my wife, we have two little kids and at some point my wife had had enough and she went to Europe with her sister for two weeks and somehow we survived and she, she promised to return.

[11:28] VERONICA CORDOVA:

I'm so glad.

[11:30] AL KOVACH JR.:

I mean, there is something to be said about just, you know, a little bit of respite. And I know that she feels good to feel needed, but there is a time where you just need to step away. I'm wondering, how do you manage that burnout?

[11:41] VERONICA CORDOVA:

I, you know, there's a little bit of FOMO. I hate to use these, you know, these young kids terminologies, but my husband has found other caregivers that can step in from time to time, at

least for short amount of time. And I have to manage my feelings in that moment, like, okay, somebody else can do it too. Just because I do it every day and I feel like I do it best doesn't mean that someone else can't help. I have to allow that to happen. And that isn't a personal failure. That isn't something, you know, that doesn't speak poorly of me, that, that it's important that I value rest and recharging and all of those things. So for me, I have to be honest with myself and honest, let go of some of the guilt.

[12:32] AL KOVACH JR.:

I know that the VA spinal cord injury centers will allow Josue to come in for about two weeks of respite to give you a break. Have you ever taken advantage of that benefit?

[12:40] VERONICA CORDOVA:

I haven't. But like I said, we do have. There are two other caregivers that Josue has. He's even traveled with them. So that gives me respite, in a sense, because he's traveling, he's actually outside of the home, and I get to stay home and do stuff around the house that I don't have to worry about getting in his way and him in mine. Not that we are in each other's way, but you understand what I mean by that. Like, it gives you the freedom to. Yeah. To be in our home and get stuff done around the house and more importantly, spend time with our grandkids. That is my biggest recharge time. When I get to spend time with our grandkids, which we have five of, that fuels me in a way that time away or rest or a manicure or a massage could never do.

[13:28] AL KOVACH JR.:

Well, with that being said, is there anything else you can think of that you wish that more people understood about the mental and emotional weight that caregivers carry?

[13:36] VERONICA CORDOVA:

I think it's important just to recognize it because sometimes we just want to be seen, heard, and understood. There's so much power in that. Somebody just saying, hey, it's okay to be tired. Like, I. It's okay to want to vent a little bit. It's okay to want a break. I think those things are really important.

[13:57] AL KOVACH JR.:

So. And you mentioned earlier that, you know, as Josue gets older and you get older and Zeke gets older, that, you know, their needs are increasing while your ability to provide care is decreasing. Do you have a plan for at that point where you just can't do as much as you do?

[14:14] VERONICA CORDOVA:

We do. We do. We have some family members that have already expressed a desire to help more. We have a good plan. In the event of Josue and I being unable to care for our son entirely, let's say, God forbid something happens to either one of us or both of us. We do have a plan in place. That's probably another thing that most parents, most people don't have to think about. You know, our son will very likely always depend on others for his safety and for his care. We do have a plan in place, and there's power in that. It's important to have that set up. And the PVA has been helpful with so many things, not just my husband's care, but as you know, Al, they are a wonderful source of help for caregivers, for dependence, for spouses and for children of veterans.

[15:07] AL KOVACH JR.:

Yeah, thank you. About that. Saying that it's despite the hard days, like, what are some of the. Maybe the most proudest or most joyful moments that You've had in this journey with both Josue and Zeke.

[15:20] VERONICA CORDOVA:

Sure. One of the. We actually had a pretty major, I would say, milestone. Josue and I were able to travel to Mexico in February for a wedding. A family friend, their son got married in Mexico. And before this trip to Mexico, Josue hadn't traveled internationally since very early on in his injury when he weighed 100 nothing pounds. And people were able to, you know, honestly just pick him up out of his chair and stick him in a. In a seat on an airplane. So that was a major milestone for us, a major win and a source of joy. I'm so glad we were able to do that. And now we're looking forward to other trips like that in the future. So we're already planning more trips. We're talking about going to Sydney, Australia, in two years, which is really exciting.

[16:06] AL KOVACH JR.:

Ooh, that's a long flight.

[16:07] VERONICA CORDOVA:

Yeah, that's. I know. We have a plan in place. We're going to stop, I think maybe in Hawaii. So we're going to have to break it up. It's going to be an extra long trip for us, which.

[16:16] CHAD STEWART:

Oh, no, a stop in Hawaii.

[16:18] VERONICA CORDOVA:

I know, right? We love Hawaii. But getting to grandparent together has been phenomenal. You know, we. I mentioned we're a blended family, so he had his kids, I had mine, but we have our grandchildren together. Getting to do that together has been an amazing joy. It's fun to watch him grandparent with the freedom of knowing that I have his back and that I can cover some of the things he doesn't have to worry about.

[16:47] CHAD STEWART:

What has caregiving taught you that you didn't expect to learn?

[16:51] VERONICA CORDOVA:

I guess we kind of mentioned it earlier that it does take a village, and that's okay. It has, definitely. I was fiercely independent before. I had a lot of friends, but definitely a person to do things on my own. And for myself, relying on others is not a bad thing because there are people who've done it before you that are frankly smarter than me and know a lot more and have probably, you know, have done things a different way and stumbled upon learning new routines, new techniques, and all kinds of things like that. It's. Relying on others is. It's okay.

[17:27] CHAD STEWART:

Yeah. Thank you.

[17:28] AL KOVACH JR.:

I think our listeners could use a little bit of advice, maybe in looking ahead. What would you say to someone who just found out that they're going to be a caregiver for a loved one, especially a spouse of a veteran?

[17:39] VERONICA CORDOVA:

I think it's important to give ourselves some grace. It's okay to almost grieve the life that you had planned and give yourself permission to feel overwhelmed at times, but to build that community, to find other people who've gone before you, to find other people that can support you in moments of weakness. You know, this life is kind of like a roller coaster. You can be sad about missing opportunities, but grateful for the life that you have together. You know, two things can be true at the same time.

[18:14] AL KOVACH JR.:

Veronica, thank you so much for trusting us with your story today. Caregivers like you are the invisible workforce behind every veteran's recovery. I should know, and we are very grateful that you took the time to share yours.

[18:28] CHAD STEWART:

Thanks for listening. If this episode meant something to you, subscribe so you catch every conversation and share it with somebody who might want to hear it.

[18:36] AL KOVACH JR.:

This has been Voices of PVA. We'll see you next time.