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Health Foundation of South Florida lauds health advocates

By U/Miami News Service

Two leaders in the health community recently emerged as the top winners of the Health Foundation of South Florida's Concern Award, but it is CEO Steven Marcus, the foundation's president, who could not be more excited.

"Both of the winners exemplify overcoming a disability by becoming the CEO or founder of an organization that provides services to people of like disabilities," Marcus said. "It's amazing that they both won."

Marcus' praise is for Virginia Jacko, president and CEO of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and Pedro Rodriguez, who founded Spinal Cord Living-Assistance Development, a group that promotes independent living for people with disabilities and helped develop barrier-free housing based in Hialeah.

Jacko lost her vision to a rare eye disease known as retinitis pigmentosa and Rodriguez suffered a spinal cord injury resulting from a car accident that left him paralyzed from the chest down.

"I know about a lot of awards programs," Marcus said. "I think this is the only one in the United States where the award winners head up organizations that offer services to people who share their disability."

Jacko and Rodriguez each won \$25,000, which can be donated to their own organizations or to an organization of their choice, Marcus said.

Four other finalists also were honored and will receive \$10,000 each. They are: Nick Silverio of Palmetto Bay, founder of A Safe Haven for Newborns; Maria Elena Torres, family nurse practitioner and diabetes specialist, St. John Bosco Clinic/Mercy Hospital; Rosendo Collazo, director of Health Services for Camillus Health Concern and Camillus House in downtown Miami; and Susan M. Widmayer, founder and executive director of the Children's Diagnostic and Treatment Center.

The winners and finalists, selected from a total of 23 nominations, were honored at a luncheon Dec. 2 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in downtown Miami. The Health Foundation has its offices in downtown Miami.

The award, first granted in 1992, has since awarded more than \$79 million in grants and direct program support.