



\$4.5M award for hardhat's horror

By ERIC LENKOWITZ

A construction worker whose life has been agony since a nightmare accident in 1999 has been awarded \$4.5 million.

Manuel Caamano, who was foreman of a Queens construction site, was lowering a bolt-filled bucket from a beam above a concrete-floored sewer-renovation area when the handle broke.

The recoil from the rope knocked Caamano off the beam and he fell 21 feet to the ground.

He landed heels first, shattering his ankles. The impact shifted to his wrists, jarring the bones nearly through the skin.

Three years, seven surgeries and the \$4.5 million lawsuit settlement later, Caamano is just happy he's not a vegetable.

"I can go to the bathroom on my own," he said.

The 47-year-old career construction man was hurt on April 2, 1999, as he and his crew from E.E. Cruz Co. Inc. were laying a water and sewer tunnel along Conduit Avenue in



MANUEL CAAMANO
Pain is still constant.

Springfield Gardens. It was a city-contract job.

Caamano's initial medical bills were covered by worker's compensation — but that didn't make life easier for his wife, Guillermina.

"The first few months were difficult," she said. "It's like he was an infant. I had to clean him, feed him."

It was during that time Caamano realized he'd never work again — or even walk without a cane — and sought legal help.

A first jury trial last June absolved the city of any blame in the accident, placing responsibility on his employer.

The ensuing trial for damages was about half-way over when Caamano's lawyer, Michael Gunzburg, and attorneys for his company's insurer, AIG, settled on a monetary amount.

AIG lawyer John Doody said the injuries were significant, but "a large portion of the damages he was going to seek were overblown."

Caamano said that since he has no more worker's comp, insurance or income, a good chunk of the settlement will be put toward at least two more surgeries, physical therapy and doctors' bills.

Caamano has 3-inch screws in his feet, and they'll be there forever.

His wrists have healed somewhat, but every so often, his left hand bunches up like a claw.

"The pain is all the time, sharp pain, constantly," he said. "I've got to start all over again."