

Six NALC members honored for delivering above and beyond

The courage and fortitude of letter carriers in the service of others, above and beyond the act of delivering the mail, were themes repeatedly expressed at the 2007 NALC Heroes of the Year awards luncheon held in Washington September 20.

NALC President William H. Young served as master of ceremonies for the event, which was attended by the union's national officers as well as special guests representing the AFL-CIO, sister postal unions, the Postal Service and both houses of Congress.

"I know firsthand how the nation's 225,000 active city letter carriers contribute to the best and most affordable postal service in the world," Young told the audience with pride. "But I also get to see how this extraordinary group of men and women go above and beyond every day to serve their communities in the most surprising ways."



2007

Heroes of the Year



The luncheon honored six letter carriers from across the nation whose tales of courage and compassion stood out among the hundreds of stories that appeared in *The Postal Record* over the past year, both as feature articles and in the “Proud to Serve” section. Young pointed out, however, that many acts of selfless service go unreported.

“We are honoring these letter carriers today because they are outstanding examples of how most letter carriers approach their jobs,” Young said. “When we honor them, we honor every letter carrier who

generously delivers that extra service to the American public every day.”

Before presenting the awards, President Young introduced several of the honored guests in attendance, including President John Sweeney and Secretary-Treasurer Rich Trumka of the AFL-CIO; USPS Postmaster General John Potter, Deputy PMG Patrick Donahoe, Vice President of Labor Relations Doug Tulino, and Board of Governors Chair James Miller III; Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME); and Reps. Mike Michaud (D-ME) and Jeff Miller (R-FL).

Opposite page: President Bill Young introduces the Heroes of the Year at a ceremony in Washington, DC.

Above: Thumbs-up from this year’s NALC Heroes. From l are Patti Arismendez, Wayne Viger, Gary Fitch, Nathaniel Roberson, Gene Kahl and Debra Hamilton.



The 2007 Heroes of the Year, as selected by three independent judges, are:

Wayne Viger, Lewiston, Maine Branch 241, National Hero of the Year: Approaching an apartment complex on his route, Viger first smelled and then saw smoke coming from a ground floor apartment. He burst into the burning apartment and rescued a woman whose clothes were ablaze, then went back inside the three-story building, going door to door and yelling for everyone to evacuate.

Gary Fitch, St. Paul, Minnesota Branch 28, National Humanitarian of the Year:

This summer, Fitch rode his bicycle 2,800 miles—from Seattle, Washington, to Washington, DC—and collected nearly 23,000 “Letters of Hope,” personal messages expressing the hopes for the future of the people he met along the way. Many NALC branches timed Muscular Dystrophy Association fund-raisers to coincide with his arrival in their towns.



Patti Arismendez, Bakersfield, California Branch 702, Western Region Hero: As she drove along her route, Arismendez spotted a tyke toddling toward a busy intersection. The letter carrier placed her vehicle in the crossing and picked the baby up before she could wander into the speeding traffic. She went door to door in the neighborhood until she was able to return the child to the safety of her mother’s arms.

Debra Hamilton, Chicago, Illinois Branch 11, Central Region Hero: As Hamilton was driving to work, she came upon an accident scene. Slowly driving by the banged-up cars, she saw a woman lying on the ground. The carrier pulled her car over, hopped out, and immediately began to administer life-saving first aid until official help arrived.

Nathaniel Roberson, Atlanta, Georgia Branch 73, Eastern Region Hero: Roberson got out of his car to aid a police officer who was having trouble subduing a belligerent driver during a traffic stop. As the man struggled and grabbed frantically for the officer’s weapon, the letter carrier seized his arms and together Roberson and the officer wrestled the perp to the ground and into submission.

Gene Kahl, Pensacola, Florida Branch 321, Special Carrier Alert Rescue Award: Piled-up mail prompted Kahl to chalk a customer’s car tires to detect whether the vehicle moved. After a couple days without movement, Kahl knocked on the door; getting no response he called police, who discovered an anguished and weakened elderly man inside, singing and praying



while holding the hand of his wife, who had died a few days before.

In making the presentations, President Young noted, “Six days a week, in every city and town across America, carriers travel along the streets and sidewalks to deliver the mail. But they deliver more than just the mail. They feel the pulse of everyday life as they stop at every home and business along their routes.”

Senator Collins, honoring National Hero Viger, who hails from her home state, picked up on that theme. “Because you are everywhere, you’re on the front lines when emergencies arise, and you always respond,” she said. Collins is the former chair, and now the ranking Republican, on the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, which oversees the Postal Service. She was a chief proponent of the postal reform legislation that was finally signed into law last December.

“Whether it is your acts of heroism, the watchful eye that you keep on those in need, or your generous support of the Muscular Dystrophy Association,” she said, “an essential part of the service you provide is your caring and your compassion.”

In his remarks, AFL-CIO President Sweeney congratulated the honorees and

also related a heartfelt, personal anecdote of how a letter carrier had come to the aid of a cousin who had fallen gravely ill. PMG Potter applauded the winners and said he values letter carriers’ contributions to the Postal Service. “You are the face of the Postal Service,” he said.

Once again serving on the panel of independent judges were Jordan “Bud” Biscardo, AFL-CIO Community Services liaison at the United Way of America; Chief Phil Guercio from Montgomery County, Maryland’s Department of Fire and Rescue Services; and Director Shelby Hallmark of the Office of Workers’ Compensation Programs.

The judges selected this year’s heroes from among the stories included in *The Postal Record* between July 2006 and June 2007. Individual stories of each honoree’s heroic action appear in the following pages.

Branch officers are encouraged to send newspaper clippings and other reports of heroic or humanitarian service by NALC members to *The Postal Record* at NALC Headquarters. Accounts of branch activities that benefit their communities are also sought for consideration for the Branch Service Award, which was not presented this year.

Opposite page: AFL-CIO President John Sweeney (top) and Postmaster General Jack Potter thanked the heroes for their tremendous service.

Above: The heroes join President Young for a photo with their award certificates.

National Hero of the Year



Maine carrier a magnet for heroic challenges



Top: Rep. Mike Michaud (D-ME, r) was on hand to honor Viger.

Above: Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) with Viger before the ceremony.

OPPORTUNITIES for heroism have gravitated toward Wayne Viger throughout his 30-year career as a carrier and he has never shied away from helping.

The member of Lewiston, Maine Branch 241 has aided customers who were suffering from Alzheimer's disease or stroke. When someone required CPR, Viger went to work. Once, he even helped upright a patron whose wheelchair had tipped over.

"To say the least, it has been an exciting career," he said modestly, "but I just thought it was all in a day's work."

The veteran carrier has also had some experience with building fires, having rescued pets from a structure home on one occasion. On April 3, 2006, a fire called him to action yet again. And it was that particular act of bravery that led an independent panel of judges to select Viger as the NALC National Hero of the Year for 2007.

On that day, Viger was carrying mail on his route when the smell of smoke intruded on the fresh scents of springtime. With each step he took, the odor grew stronger, and soon he clearly heard the insistent clanging of alarm bells coming from an apartment building. As he approached the scene, he saw the acrid smoke oozing from a first-floor unit, escaping through tiny gaps around its door and window frames.

The letter carrier sprang into action. He rushed to the apartment door and threw his weight against it to force it open. Making his way through the dense smoke inside, he discovered an elderly and confused woman, her clothes ablaze. Instantly, he grabbed her by the arm, led her outside and extinguished the flames that threatened to sear her entire body.

Satisfied that she was safe for the moment, Viger went back inside the three-story structure, running through the hallways and knocking on doors, shouting above the din of the bells that everyone needed to get outside, that this was a real fire and not simply a false alarm. Once the building's occupants had been safely evacuated, the letter carrier remained with them outside while they waited for the fire department.

As the sound of the approaching fire trucks grew louder, the elderly woman Viger rescued initially started inching her way back toward her front door—and all her worldly possessions endangered by the blaze. The letter carrier managed to hold her back and keep her calm until the emergency response teams arrived.

The panel of judges were understandably impressed by Viger's selflessness. "He did what needed to get done," they said. "What an admirable undertaking—he really went the whole nine yards."

Sen. Susan Collins, a fellow Mainer, agreed. "What he did is the very definition of being a hero," she said during the Heroes' awards ceremony. "The people of Maine are so proud of Wayne, for his commitment to go beyond the call of duty." ☒

WAYNE VIGER

Lewiston, Maine Branch 241

National Humanitarian of the Year

Bicycle marathon stirs spirit of hope

A SERIES OF TRAGEDIES, BOTH man-made and natural, had instilled a creeping sense of hopelessness among Americans, according to St. Paul, Minnesota letter carrier Gary Fitch.

In his mind he heard a litany, nagging at America's spirit: The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The Iraq war. The Asian tsunami in 2004 that killed nearly a quarter of a million people. The destruction and despair wrought by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2006. Fitch felt that many Americans were beginning to give up hope for a brighter future. Ongoing worries about "ethnic cleansing," poverty and endemic disease only added to that sense of hopelessness.

To help restore a measure of hopefulness, the St. Paul Branch 28 member concocted a plan. As an avid bicycle rider, Fitch had undertaken two previous long-distance rides from St. Paul, one to Memphis and one to Washington.

His new plan was an even longer journey: from Seattle, Washington, to Washington, DC, pedaling from town to town and doing what he has done as a letter carrier for more than 20 years—gathering letters. Only this time around, the letters would contain special, personal messages of hope for the future.

"The one thing we all have in common," Gary said, "is the hope in our hearts for a better tomorrow for ourselves and our children."

Inspired by Fitch's vision, St. Paul Branch 28 President Dan Garhofer coordinated the ride with his branch's own fund-raisers for the

Muscular Dystrophy Association, the NALC's official charity. Garhofer's idea quickly spread to many of the branches along Fitch's route across the nation's northern tier.

So, from Memorial Day to mid-August, Fitch cycled for nearly 2,800 miles with his wife, Joan, always nearby in a borrowed RV, providing support and encouragement. En route, the carrier linked up with thousands of people, both carriers and "civilians." By the time he finally rolled into the nation's capital, he had gathered about 23,000 letters of hope, and NALC branches along the way had collected more than \$25,000 for MDA.

For his part in helping to instill a renewed sense of hope in America and for the extra inspiration his ride brought to MDA fund-raising, judges chose Gary Fitch as the NALC's Humanitarian of the Year for 2007.

"Brother Fitch is a very unique and dignified individual," they noted. "The ride took a lot of work and required a lot of attention to detail. It was an admirable display of vision."

Next, Fitch dreams of digitizing the letters he collected and sending them into space on a future NASA mission. "I'm looking to stock the world with new positiveness," the letter carrier said. "We have to do something now for the kids who are growing up in this world." ☒

Gary Fitch of St. Paul, Minnesota Branch 28 receives the Humanitarian of the Year award.



GARY FITCH

St. Paul, Minnesota Branch 28

Western Region Hero of the Year

Quick-reaction pickup scoops toddler to safety

LETTER CARRIERS NOT ONLY deliver important things, they pick up important things, too.

Patti Arismendez of Bakersfield, California Branch 782 had been called in to work on her day off. She was delivering another carrier's route when she spotted a toddler wandering onto the roadway up ahead. Cars were speeding by and the youngster was clearly in harm's way. Quickly positioning her postal vehicle to block traffic at the busy intersection, Arismendez jumped out, ran to the little girl and scooped her up before she could stray any farther.

The small child, obviously lost and plainly frightened, could only repeat one word, "Mama, mama." Although the neighborhood was unfamiliar, after moving her vehicle Arismendez went door to door and soon found the girl's mother—who did not even know that her daughter had wandered off.

Arismendez's quick reaction averted potential tragedy, saving the girl from possible injury or abduction. "What was really scary is that intersection is on the edge of town," she recalled, "and even if the baby had not been hit by a car, somebody could have kidnapped her."

The nine-year letter carrier completed her route and did not mention the incident to anyone when she returned to the post office. "Had her heroics not been witnessed by the

daughter-in-law of a postal manager, the incident would never have been reported," President Young told the award luncheon crowd as he presented her the Western Region Hero of the Year certificate.

Arismendez admits that she is pretty shy and said she was not looking for any special attention. But she noted, "Letter carriers are always alert and aware about what is happening on their routes. There are lots of other carriers who have done much more amazing things for people in Bakersfield and haven't been recognized."

Referring to her fellow 2007 Heroes award recipients, Arismendez said, "What these carriers did was true heroism. I was just doing my job." ✉

Patti Arismendez was named the Western Region Hero of the Year for saving a youngster from wandering into a dangerous intersection.



PATTI ARISMENDEZ

Bakersfield, California Branch 782

Central Region Hero of the Year

Almost forgotten, life-saving skill returns to carrier

YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN SOMETHING you learned will come in handy. Letter carrier Debra Ann Hamilton can testify to that.

One day last year, she was driving to work when her commute got hung up in a big-city traffic snarl. The Chicago, Illinois Branch 11 member was only four blocks from her station but traffic was crawling along. As she inched forward, Hamilton finally saw the reason—two cars had just collided in front of a hospital complex. There were no first responders on the scene, and the traffic was slowly snaking around the wreckage.

As she reached the smoldering cars, Hamilton noticed a woman wearing hospital scrubs sprawled unconscious on the ground. She apparently had been hit while crossing the busy street, either as a consequence of the auto accident or possibly as the cause of it. Hamilton and another driver pulled over to check on the woman. When Hamilton discovered the injured woman had no pulse, she deftly tapped some old skills she almost had forgotten she had.

After retrieving some sweat pants and a bagged lunch from her trunk, the letter carrier tucked the pants under the woman's neck to clear her airway, used a sandwich bag to create a protective

barrier, and proceeded to perform CPR. Within moments, the young hospital worker coughed and regained consciousness.

Hamilton had done just what she was taught in her long-ago CPR training—a graduation requirement she took during her final semester at Southern Illinois University.

The 13-year letter carrier said she had never performed the procedure before and thought having to learn it to get her degree was a “pain in the you-know-what.”

“Lucky for that injured young woman, Debra learned her lessons well and performed when the pressure was on,” President Young said as he presented her the 2007 Eastern Region Hero of the Year award.

Judges called Hamilton a “true highway good Samaritan,” commenting that working at the scene of an accident is very dangerous and that simply by stopping she was taking “a massive risk.”

Hamilton stayed with the victim until an emergency team arrived—all the while waving to her puzzled and surprised coworkers who were themselves driving by on their way to the office. ☒



Debra Ann Hamilton displays her certificate, received for being the Central Region Hero of the Year.

DEBRA ANN HAMILTON

Chicago, Illinois Branch 11

Eastern Region Hero of the Year



After receiving his award, Nathaniel was congratulated by his wife, Jacqueline, a retired police officer.

Carrier follows Golden Rule into roadside fracas

DRIVING TO WORK a little earlier than usual, Nathaniel Roberson of Atlanta, Georgia Branch 73 ran into a stretch of slow traffic resulting from a police traffic stop. Creeping

ahead in a long line of rubber-neckers who were inching past the police cruiser with its flashing lights, Roberson saw a startling sight—the police officer was in a wrestling match with the motorist he pulled over.

Roberson did not follow the crowd that simply drove on by. Taking no time to calculate the risks involved, he immediately pulled over and went to the aid of Henry County Officer Eric Arrington. When he got closer, he noticed blood dripping from bite marks on Arrington's arms—and he could see that the determined driver was desperately trying to get hold of the policeman's holstered pistol.

Fearless, the letter carrier closed in on the struggling duo, grabbed the man's arms from behind and helped force him to the ground. It was all over in a matter of seconds; Roberson and Officer Arrington kept the perp pinned down until police backup arrived to take him to jail.

In choosing Roberson as NALC's 2007 Eastern Region Hero of the Year, the judges noted how dangerous the situation was,

with a policeman as the victim of an assault. "When there's a struggle with a gun like that, you don't know who could wind up getting shot," they commented. Nonetheless, Roberson "saw a situation and knew he had to jump in, running the risk of losing his own life."

"I felt I had a responsibility to act," Roberson explained. "I saw what needed to be done and thought, why not me?"

Officer Arrington credits Roberson with possibly saving his life. The county police chief told Roberson that the driver was under the influence of drugs and extremely dangerous. In recognition of his heroism, Roberson received the Chief's Citizen Award as well as the NALC honor.

The 22-year letter carrier said that he's humbled by these accolades and insisted that what he did was not so extraordinary. He added that he never felt in physical danger himself, but he did think of his wife, Jacqueline—a retired police officer—during the incident.

"Had my wife ever been in the same situation as Officer Arrington," he said, "I hope someone would have stepped in the way I did."

"That, my friends," President Young told the awards luncheon audience, "is the Golden Rule personified." ☒

NATHANIEL ROBERSON

Atlanta, Georgia Branch 73

Special Carrier Alert Award

THE NATIONAL CARRIER ALERT program was four years old by the time Gene Kahl picked up his satchel for the first time. Under that program—a joint effort involving the NALC, the Postal Service, the United Way and local care-giving organizations—elderly and disabled customers can request that their letter carriers keep an extra-watchful eye out for their welfare.

Since becoming a carrier in 1986, the member of Pensacola, Florida Branch 321 has personalized Carrier Alert by learning the names and a little something about everyone in the 700-plus homes on his route—adults, children, even the dogs.

In one home lived an elderly couple. Last summer, Kahl noticed that a couple days' worth of mail had gone uncollected. He was concerned, but a full mailbox wasn't a reason to sound any alarms—at least not right away.

Instead, the carrier took a piece of chalk that he happened to have with him and marked a tire on the couple's car. If the mark had moved by the time he came back again, it would indicate the car had been driven and suggest that his fears were unfounded.

Two days later, Kahl returned and was alarmed to see that the chalk mark had not budged and the mailbox was practically overflowing. It was time to act.

The carrier rapped on the couple's door. There was no answer but Kahl was certain he heard noises inside. He immediately went to a nearby deli to telephone a friend of the family for guidance. The response: Call the police because something is wrong.

Kahl called 911, then went back to the house to await the authorities. Upon entering the home, the police discovered a heartbreaking sight. The wife had died a few days before and her grief-stricken husband had stayed by her side, so overwhelmed by sadness that he was unable to move. When they found him, he was holding her hand, singing hymns and saying prayers for her. Weak and dehydrated, his devotion to his beloved wife had imperiled his own life.

"He was ready to die with her in that house," Kahl said. "He is a nice old man, and his wife was his whole life." The conscientious carrier added, "I was sad for his loss but I was glad I could help him."

"Using the chalk was a very creative way to keep track of his customer," the award judges noted in giving Kahl the Special Carrier Alert Award. "This was a truly touching story."

"Brother Gene's actions provide a perfect example of how letter carriers can make a life-or-death difference for their patrons," said President Young. "In this case, his alert action saved the man's life."

The Special Carrier Alert Award is presented to one carrier selected as symbolic of the many thousands of NALC members who come to the aid of their patrons every year. ☒

Carrier concern, plus chalk, save a patron in deep despair

Left: Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL), thanked Kahl for his service to the residents of Pensacola.

Below: President Young presents the award to Kahl.



GENE KAHL

Pensacola, Florida Branch 321