



2008

HEROES *of the* YEAR

A RECORD 10 LETTER CARRIERS—including five who joined forces to rescue elderly residents from an apartment fire—were honored at the annual NALC Heroes of the Year luncheon held September 18 in Washington for feats of bravery, quick thinking and compassion above and beyond the delivery of the mail in service to their customers.

“America’s letter carriers develop a special sense about the neighborhoods they visit as they go about their duties—a sense of what’s right as well as what’s wrong,” said NALC President William H. Young. “They are uniquely able to step in and offer aid when a patron is in medical distress or danger, not only because of their jobs, but because of their hearts.” ▶

2008 Heroes of the Year



“Letter carriers,” he said, “touch the lives of their patrons in remarkable ways, both on the clock and off.”

Young stressed that the NALC members recognized at the ceremony are not isolated examples of letter carrier heroism and sense of humanity. “We know that there are hundreds more

including USPS Executive Vice President Anthony J. Vegliante and Vice President of Labor Relations Doug Tulino; Postal Regulatory Commission Vice Chairman Mark Acton and Commissioners Ruth Goldway and Nanci Langley; National Rural Letter Carriers’ Association President Don Cantriel; and Reps. Charles A. Gonzalez (D-TX) and David Loebsack (D-IA).

CEREMONY HIGHLIGHTS A BAND OF HEROES

Above: President William H. Young is joined by USPS Vice President, Labor Relations Doug Tulino and two of the independent judges in congratulating the 10 award winners for their bravery and caring.

Right: Young was the master of ceremonies for the luncheon.

out there, every single day,” he said. “Fact is, most carriers brush aside praise. They say ‘it’s just part of the job’ and leave it at that.”

The “Proud to Serve” section of *The Postal Record* documents many of these tales of courage, valor and self-sacrifice—examples of letter carriers intervening when a customer is threatened or delivering aid to a person in distress, such as an accident victim or patron suffering a medical emergency. Each summer, an independent committee of judges reads through these accounts from the preceding year and selects the winners of the annual awards.

Before he introduced this year’s recipients, Young acknowledged some special guests attending the ceremony,



The 2008 NALC Heroes of the Year are:

National Heroes of the Year: Five letter carriers from Greater East Bay, California Branch 1111—**Alan Girard, Rick Quinonez, Gilbert Rangel, Tonya Joseph** and **Karen Hill**—who worked together to evacuate more than 100 senior citizens from a burning assisted living high rise located next to the carriers' post office.

National Humanitarian of the Year: **David Lundy** of High Point, North Carolina Branch 936, who, with help from his wife Carolyn, battled through a year's worth of red tape to secure badly needed help for an elderly patron on his route.

Eastern Region Hero: **Paul Gereffi** of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida Branch 2550, who intervened in one man's vicious knife attack on another, helping to keep the assailant subdued until authorities could arrive.

Central Region Hero: **Dean Dunkel** of Cedar Rapids, Iowa Branch 373, who saw a car skid off the road and flip over during a torrential rainstorm and braved rushing water to reach the partially submerged vehicle and pull the driver to safety.

Western Region Hero: **Raymond Rivera Jr.** of San Antonio, Texas Branch 421, who grabbed and wrestled a ferocious pit bull that was attacking two little girls playing near his home, keeping the dog pinned for some 40 minutes waiting for animal control officials to arrive.

Special Carrier Alert Award: **Rhonda Russell** of New York City, New York Branch 36, who suspected identity theft when she noticed a large amount of credit card and other financial mail going to a home owned by an 85-year-old woman on her route.

President Young used the occasion to reinforce the NALC's position in opposition to any attempt to give letter carrier work to subcontractors.

"People trust their letter carriers. They know that the blue uniform means that our people represent honest, hard work

in service of the public," Young said. "They know we deliver the finest and most affordable postal service in the world. They know you cannot out-source that job to China or anywhere else."

In brief remarks, Rep. Gonzalez lauded all the heroes and observed that Brother Rivera's decision to tackle the pit bull was "counter-intuitive," something usually left to police, fire and rescue officials. "The truth is, many of us would not have done this," Gonzalez said, calling his constituent "an inspiration to all of us."

Rep. Loeb sack thanked letter carriers "for all that you do"—not only the headline heroic acts, but also the dependable, day-to-day delivery of mail—and presented Brother Dunkel with a special flag flown over the U.S. Capitol.

Serving as judges this year were Chief Phil Guercio, Montgomery County, Maryland's Department of Fire and Rescue Services; Director Shelby Hallmark of the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs; and Jordan "Bud" Biscardo, AFL-CIO Community Services liaison at the United Way of America.

Stories and articles printed in *The Postal Record* between July 2007 and June 2008 served as the basis for the judges' selections. More detailed accounts of each hero's actions begin on page 18. ☒



Top: Iowa Rep. David Loeb sack thanks Dean Dunkel for representing the best of Iowa.

Above: Rep. Charles Gonzalez (I) congratulates Raymond Rivera Jr. during the ceremony for putting his own safety at risk to save two little girls.



Karen Hill's family joins the luncheon crowd in honoring the heroes.



National Heroes of the Year



ALAN GIRARD
TONYA JOSEPH
RICK QUINONEZ
KAREN HILL
GILBERT RANGEL
Greater East Bay, CA, Branch 1111

the office and urgently told her colleague Rick Quinonez to call 911. As he dialed the number, Joseph hollered to two other carriers, Karen Hill and Gilbert Rangel, and the three of them dashed over to the apartment building to help, followed closely by Quinonez.

By the time the four letter carriers joined Girard on the scene, the fire had spread from the second to third floor of the building. Girard and Quinonez worked their way from bottom to top on one side, while Joseph, Hill and Rangel took the other. All told, this group of letter carrier heroes working together

rescued 124 elderly residents from the burning building, which is why the judges selected them without hesitation as the 2008 NALC National Heroes of the Year.

"All five of these men and women did some amazing work in a short span of time," the judges said. "They kept their cool and saved dozens of lives."

Each carrier helped numerous individuals down the stairwells to safety, often lifting up those who could not walk down on their own. Fire fighters soon arrived, but their work had been made a bit easier thanks to five letter carriers who had managed to complete the rescue portion of the operation. Sadly, one person died in the fire—the 87-year-old woman who lived in the apartment where the fire started.

"I'm a California letter carrier," President Young said as he presented the award, "and it makes me extra proud to stand with these brothers and sisters today.

"These five people ran into a burning building on a Saturday afternoon. They risked their lives to rescue some elderly residents. If that isn't the very definition of 'hero,' I don't know what is." ☒

FIVE CARRIERS JOIN FORCES IN DRAMATIC FIRE RESCUE

Top: The five National Heroes of the Year, clockwise from top left: Tonya Joseph, Gilbert Rangel, Richard Quinonez, Alan Girard and Karen Hill.

On a beautiful Saturday afternoon last October, letter carrier Alan Girard had just finished his route and was heading back to Piedmont station when he smelled smoke. The Greater East Bay, California Branch 1111 letter carrier looked around for the source and was horrified when he found it—a six-story retirement home right next door to the post office.

Standing across the street, Girard could see flames inside the window of a second-floor apartment and he reflexively cringed and covered his eyes when the pane of glass suddenly shattered and flames shot out.

Girard comes from a family of fire fighters, so perhaps his next action was not surprising. He found his passkey to the building and went inside, where he discovered that, while there was plenty of smoke filling the hallways, there was no fire alarm ringing. He pulled the alarm to notify the fire department, then raced up to the source of the fire on the second floor, banging on doors and ordering residents to head to the stairwells along the way.

Meanwhile, Tonya Joseph had clocked out next door and was leaving when she, too, saw the blaze. She dashed back into

National Humanitarian of the Year

DAVID LUNDY | Branch 936, High Point, NC

Every so often, letter carrier David Lundy would see one of his patrons standing out in her yard. She was usually wearing the same sweatshirt, which he chalked up to a simple quirk in behavior.

Eventually, Lundy, a member of High Point, North Carolina Branch 936, realized he was seeing her less and less often. In fact, he thought, she never seemed to come outside at all anymore.

"Sometimes, I'd knock on her door," Lundy recalled, "and she would just come to the window and say she was OK."

Lundy had delivered mail on the route for 20 of his 25 years as a letter carrier, so he had amassed considerable knowledge of the neighborhood and about the woman in particular.

"I worried because I never saw her put garbage out," he said. Once, when she opened the door to sign for a package, he saw garbage bags and newspapers piled hip-high inside a darkened house.

Outside, the yard was overgrown and the porches were falling down from disrepair.

He mentioned the patron to his wife, Carolyn, who worked for the High Point assistant chief of police. She arranged for patrol officers to check on the woman, "but she just shooed them off," Carolyn said.

The couple contacted several area social service agencies for help, but quickly found themselves butting up against bureaucratic inertia. One office said that since the 76-year-old woman was not starving, they could not step in. Another told the Lundys that since the woman owned the house, she was entitled to do whatever she wanted with it.

No one would have faulted the Lundys for throwing up their hands in surrender, satisfied they had tried their best. But giving up was not an option for this NALC member and his wife, which is why the judges honored them with the union's 2008 Humanitarian of the Year Award.

"David saw this sad situation every day and was so moved that he was able to involve his wife to help make a difference," the judges said. "What an amazing story of teamwork."

Carolyn persuaded her boss to assign an officer to the case, and also gathered evidence on her own from utility companies that clearly showed something had gone awry in the woman's life. For example, the house had used no water and almost no electricity in more than a year.

The only relative the Lundys could locate was a distant cousin. "I was afraid she would die alone in the house," Dave said. For Carolyn, it became personal. "What if this were my own mother or grandmother?" she asked herself.

Following an effort that ran from the end of 2006 through 2007, a local magistrate at last ordered the troubled woman moved to a new, clean assisted living



Above: David Lundy displays the certificate declaring him the Humanitarian of the Year.

Below: Lundy with his wife, Carolyn, who played a major role in helping an elderly woman in need. Also pictured is their son, Kevin.

NEGLECTED BY MANY, PATRON FINDS BETTER LIFE THANKS TO CARRIER

facility. But by no means did the Lundys consider their work done. The couple has visited the woman several times, and on a recent visit, she gratefully gave the pair a big hug.

"Dave and Carolyn's remarkable generosity of spirit helped somebody they hardly knew," President Young noted. "A perfect stranger's quality of life has been significantly improved, all thanks to the hard work of a letter carrier and his wife." ✉



Eastern Region Hero of the Year

PAUL GEREFFI | Ft. Lauderdale, FL Branch 2550

STEPPING INTO A KNIFE FIGHT

Driving along his route last April, Paul Gereffi saw something unquestionably out of the ordinary: two men struggling behind an office building, both with blood on them. One of the men motioned to him frantically, signaling that he should call for help. The Ft. Lauderdale, Florida Branch 2550 member called 911 immediately.

The letter carrier would later learn that an unhappy employee had gone after his boss with a steak knife, stabbing him several times before attempting to flee. The victim pursued his attacker and when Gereffi first saw the pair, the victim had tackled the attacker and was wrestling him to the ground.

Gereffi kept the dispatcher on the line while the struggle continued. When he saw that the attacker was on the verge of slipping away, he abandoned the safety of his vehicle and, joined by another bystander, approached the wriggling attacker. In their most intimidating manner, they stood over the man and

ordered him to stay on the ground until the police came.

The police arrived a few minutes later and arrested the man. The victim was hospitalized in critical condition because of the five stab wounds inflicted by the attacker, but recovered from his injuries.

The judges were impressed when they came upon Gereffi's story among the hundreds they reviewed. "This was a classic case of putting your life at risk," they noted. "He didn't know what he was getting into. He took a chance and it paid off." They tapped him as the NALC's Eastern Region Hero of the Year.

Gereffi didn't brag about his role in this incident, saying he was only doing what anybody would have done.

President Young had his own view. "As I see it, Paul Gereffi is the kind of guy who cares enough about his community to help stop a violent crime. He acted with quick intelligence and with courage," he said. ✉



Above right: Paul Gereffi of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida Branch 2550 receives the Eastern Region Hero of the Year award.

Below: Gereffi's wife, Terry, joined him at the luncheon.



Central Region Hero of the Year

DEAN DUNKEL | Cedar Rapids, IA Branch 373

As Dean Dunkel was driving home from work in a torrential rain storm, a vehicle ahead of him suddenly hydroplaned on the wet pavement and went into a spin. The car struck a concrete drain on the roadway and flipped over, sliding toward a deep ditch flooded with rainwater.

The car came to rest upside-down, wedged nose-first against the storm drain, with rushing water slowly filling the passenger compartment.

The Cedar Rapids, Iowa Branch 373 member, having managed to avoid the out-of-control car, pull over to the shoulder and stopped. Without a thought, he left his car and ran toward the wreck. When he saw that the driver's side was completely submerged in water, he jumped up on the car's underside, crawled over to the passenger side, and let himself down into the rushing water.

The windows were shut. Dunkel looked inside and his heart sank when he saw two child seats. A woman was trapped in the driver's seat, dazed and trying to move. Dunkel shouted through the closed window, "Are the children with you?" Fortunately, she shook her head, "No."

Dunkel could not get into the car, but he kept a cool head and shouted commands to the driver. With his guidance, the woman regained her wits and responded. Once she hit the door-lock switch, Dunkel was able to open the rear passenger-side door. Following the carrier's instructions, she unbuckled her seat belt and climbed to the rear seat. Once she was there, Dunkel grabbed her arms and pulled her out of the car to safety.

Remarkably, the woman was able to stand and had not been injured. As she escaped from the car, more people



KEEPING A COOL HEAD IN A FLOODED DITCH

arrived. They helped both Dunkel and the driver to climb back over the car and away from the flooded ditch.

"He acted on instinct," the judges remarked in honoring Dunkel as NALC's Central Region Hero of the Year.

"It took physical courage and a cool determination to rescue the woman from her flooded automobile. Obviously, Dean Dunkel had plenty of both," said President Young. ☒

Above: President Young recounts Dean Dunkel's amazing rescue story to the award banquet's audience.

ATTENTION BRANCH OFFICERS:

Send us stories about your branch's heroes and other exceptional members. We're looking for newspaper clippings or other reports of heroic or humanitarian service by NALC members. Send materials to The Postal Record at NALC Headquarters, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144. We also welcome digital photos, which can be sent by e-mail to postalrecord@nalc.org. Reports on continuing branch activities that help the community at large are also sought for consideration for the Branch Service Award, which was not presented this year.

Western Region Hero of the Year

RAYMOND RIVERA JR. | San Antonio, TX, Branch 421



After receiving his award (above), Raymond Rivera Jr. was congratulated by his family, including mother Josephine Tamez (l), wife Diane, and son Jordan.

Rivera's story sounds like something straight out of a nightmare.

The day had been going along smoothly, business as usual. The San Antonio, Texas Branch 421 member had finished

his route and returned to his suburban home. He and his wife, Diane, were talking in their front yard when they heard a terrible shrieking. They ran toward the commotion.

A block away, two 9-year-old girls had been playing on the sidewalk. On the opposite side of the street a man was walking his dogs—two pit bulls. Suddenly, one of the dogs escaped, running at the girls and savagely attacking them. The dog owner ran to grab the dog, but that only enabled the second pit bull to join in the attack.

Rivera reached the scene just as the bigger pit bull latched its jaws onto one girl's face. The carrier was horrified, but he did not hesitate. He got behind the dog and grabbed it bodily, pulling the pit bull away until it unclenched its jaws and let go of

the girl. Rivera held on tight, applying a choke-hold to restrain the struggling animal.

Other neighbors witnessed the pandemonium and jumped in to restrain the second pit bull. The police arrived, but did not take the dog off

Rivera's hands. So he held onto the ferocious beast for more than 40 minutes to prevent another attack. Finally, a neighbor arrived with a rope to hog-tie the animal.

The injured girl needed more than 100 stitches, plus hours of reconstructive surgery, but Rivera's act of courage may well have saved her life. It certainly impressed the judges, who declared him the Western Region Hero of the Year for 2008.

A six-year carrier, Rivera refuses to take full credit for the rescue. "My neighborhood really stepped up," he said. "Other people were with me, working to restrain the second dog and caring for the injured girls. Everybody helped."

"Ray, you have shown astounding courage and a deep commitment to help others," said President Young as he presented the award. "You saved a child, and made us all proud to know you." ✉

SUBURBAN SERENITY BECOMES NIGHTMARE



Special Carrier Alert Award

RHONDA RUSSELL | New York, NY, Branch 36

CARRIER CONFOUNDS CON MAN

Rhonda Russell has carried the mail for nearly 20 years, 15 of them on the same route in the Bronx, New York. During that time, she has gotten to know her customers well, and they, her.

One patron was an 85-year-old woman who lived alone following the deaths of first her husband, then her daughter. Not long ago, the woman broke her hip and found herself confined to single room in her house.

A short time afterward, a man moved into the neighborhood, just a few doors down. He showed special interest in his elderly neighbor, helping around the house, running errands and gaining her confidence. In fact, this con man convinced the woman to let him move in, “under the guise of taking care of her,” Russell said.

The member of New York City, New York Branch 36 was already suspicious of this arrangement, and that feeling grew when she noticed a number of credit cards were coming to the woman’s house, addressed both to her and to her deceased daughter.

Russell also learned the man was isolating the woman, shooing away home care attendants trying to check on her well-being. “He even moved the phone out of her reach,” the carrier said. “She was a prisoner in her own home.”

This was more than enough to spur Russell to action—action that earned her the 2008 Special Carrier Alert Award.

On her own time, Russell began checking in on the woman, sometimes

preparing meals for her, and contacting social workers, who eventually were able to place the woman in a nursing home, away from her live-in con man.

But Russell knew there was more to do. When she contacted the woman’s bank, she discovered the man had already pilfered nearly \$10,000 from her savings, and even persuaded her to take out a second mortgage.

Thanks to Russell’s tenacity, police eventually were able to make a case against the man, who was sent to prison for identity theft and grand larceny.

“Just think if that man had continued, unchecked,” the judges said. “Sister Russell not only saved her patron’s life, she saved her from certain financial ruin as well.”

Since 1982, the NALC and the Postal Service have sponsored the Carrier Alert Program, allowing elderly or disabled customers to arrange for their letter carriers to keep an eye out for their safety and alert authorities if something is amiss.

“Rhonda Russell did a lot more than just alert the authorities,” President Young noted. “This letter carrier became an advocate for a customer who couldn’t help or defend herself. And as a result, an elderly woman is safe and a crook is behind bars.”

The Special Carrier Alert Award is given annually to one individual whose actions typify the thousands upon thousands of NALC members who may not risk their lives, but nonetheless deliver that extra service to their patrons that makes every letter carrier proud. ☒



Above: President William H. Young presents the Special Carrier Alert Award to Rhonda Russell.

Below left: Russell’s mother, Julie, was on hand to capture the moment.

