

What's happening on social media

Various news stories and interesting anecdotes that celebrate letter carriers and the mail have been flying around social media. The following are some that have come to the union's attention. If you come across a story you'd like us to consider featuring, send it to social@nalc.org.

Idaho carrier joins last punch bunch

After being on the job for more than 23 years, **Brett Hochhalter** of Pocatello, ID Branch 927—known for going out of his way to help people—retired on July 28 to much fanfare from his patrons.

"It's been nice. It's been real," Hochhalter told the *Idaho State Journal*. "I've enjoyed it; being a mailman is pretty cool."

The carrier has gotten to know his customers as he walks eight miles a day to deliver mail. Indeed, about 80 percent of his customers have his phone number and will call him when they're going on vacation and need him to hold their mail, Hochhalter said.

The Air Force veteran also has been known to shovel snow for households in need of assistance outside of his work hours. (See the January 2020 *Postal Record*.)

"Everybody should try to be nice to people," Hochhalter said.

And Hochhalter's customers return the favor, sometimes leaving water, chips, candy bars, cookies and thank-you notes out for him to pick up on the rounds.

The carrier owns a local roofing company, which provides a free roof for someone in need each year and volunteers to roof houses for Habitat for Humanity. After his postal retirement, he's looking forward to focusing on that business more.

Hochhalter won't forget the people he's served over the past two decades, though: "I'll still go visit my customers. I'll still stay in contact with them."

Longtime pen pals co-author book

After writing a bestselling book about their friendship, two longtime pen pals, Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda, have started a virtual tour to teach students across the United States about the value of letter writing and mail.

"My heart is so unbelievably happy going to schools and talking to young adults," Alifirenka told USPS Link.

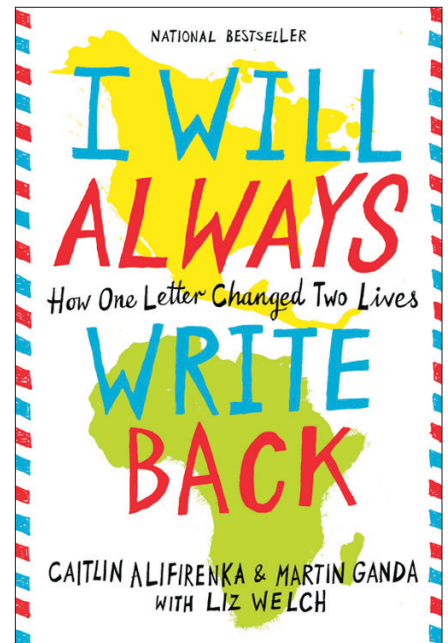
The co-authors of "I Will Always Write Back" routinely talk to school groups—both virtually and in person—where they explain how one letter in 1997 started their decades-long friendship.

That year, 12-year-old Alifirenka from Pennsylvania was matched with Ganda, a 14-year-old student in Zimbabwe, during a classroom pen-pal project.

Her letters shared stories about typical American teenage experiences and her middle-class life. His letters, while optimistic, told of his life in poverty as he and his family lived with another family in a one-room home.

Though they led different lives, the two students bonded through their letters, in which they regularly signed off with the promise "I will always write back."

Indeed, between one letter exchange, Alifirenka got concerned that she hadn't heard from Ganda in a while. She eventually received a discarded ice-cream wrapper from him because paper had become too pricey. He told her that he had to leave school because his family couldn't afford the fees. Alifirenka responded by send-



ing \$20 of her baby-sitting earnings. Touched, Ganda wrote back, saying that was "more money than my father made in several months" and that it had allowed him to re-enroll.

"I always tell people: We're so fortunate to have the opportunity to get our mail," Alifirenka told USPS Link. "I'm grateful to our mail carriers in the U.S. that we can rely on them and know the mail is coming, which is something we take for granted," she said.

That wasn't the case for Ganda. In Zimbabwe, customers must pay to both send and receive cards, letters and packages.

Alifirenka now works as an emergency room nurse outside Philadelphia, and Ganda lives in New York City and runs his own non-profit foundation to help impoverished students in his hometown in Zimbabwe.

During their appearances, the two friends emphasize the message that kindness is contagious.

"I'd like to thank everyone who shares and supports our story," said

Ganda. “Helping us share our message of kindness can truly change the world. One small act of kindness makes big waves around the world.”

Many young adults have written to the pair about feeling inspired to contribute to those in need after reading their book. They always write them back.

“That is the greatest reward, knowing that kids have taken our message and are doing small life-changing things,” Alifrenka said.

California carrier celebrated with surprise retirement party

After three decades on the job, San Diego, CA Branch 70 member **Russell Jones** is retiring.

In honor of the milestone, neighbors on his longtime route planned a surprise party and parade in a park for him on his last day in July.

“We have always appreciated his professional service and caring connections with us, but even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic,” Karen Austin wrote on the website of the San Diego Community Newspaper Group. “During the pandemic, Russell became a lifeline for many by delivering medicines, needed supplies, Social Security and stimulus payments, and important correspondence. ... We felt fortunate to get our mail and even luckier if we timed it right to get it from him personally.”

To show appreciation, customers included in the party a banner covered in messages of thanks and well wishes. “We stood with it, parade-style, along a portion of the street lined with American flags and cheering residents,” Austin said. “The USPS graciously had another carrier finish the last few streets of his route so that he could stay with us for a little celebration.”

It was clear that Russell made a difference in the lives of those on his route on a daily basis.

“Over the 42 years that we have lived in Alvarado Estates, we have appreciated the work and dedication of all our mailmen and women, but during the last few years, Russell has stood out as our favorite,” Carolyn Housman told the newspaper group. “He is the epitome of the mailman you can trust to deliver your mail through rain, sleet and snow. He drives up in that little truck or comes to the door with an enormous grin on his face, a bounce to his step and a quick story and a laugh that always puts a smile on my face.”

For her part, Austin wrote, “He didn’t rush through our neighborhood, he became a part of it, and that’s why he will be remembered and missed by all his friends in Alvarado Estates.”

Art project supports USPS

As he was recuperating from a near-fatal case of COVID-19 last year, Mark Mothersbaugh (best known as front

man for ’80s new wave band DEVO) was dismayed to hear anti-Postal Service rhetoric.

“We weren’t hearing anybody speaking up for the Post Office, so we said, ‘Well dang it, we’re gonna do it,’” Mothersbaugh told USPS Link.

So he and fellow artist-musician Beatie Wolfe decided to create “Postcards for Democracy,” a collective art project/show of solidarity that included a May to August exhibit at Florida Southwestern State College’s Rauschenberg Gallery.

All that was required of participants was to create a postcard and send it to the project’s address—and to buy a stamp in the process. Postcards were then uploaded to the Postcards for Democracy website at postartfordemocracy.com and saved for possible use in the exhibit.

Tens of thousands of people sent submissions, which Wolfe and Mothersbaugh then curated to create the exhibit.

Topics depicted included the importance of the Postal Service, Black Lives



Social media (continued)

Matter, climate change, feminism and much more.

“We’ve both been very touched by all the contributions—the art, poems, personal stories, sentiments,” Wolfe said, adding that it can be viewed as a “physical time capsule or portal in an increasingly digital age.”

“The Postal Service delivers tangible objects, not meaningless emojis,” Mothersbaugh said.

Mothersbaugh has always loved postcards. “I first started mailing and sending postcards in the form of art back in the late ‘60s,” he said, elaborating that he was inspired by Dadaists who required their art to be transferred physically by mail.

In fact, “I used to want to deliver mail as a kid,” he said. “But that was before I discovered The Beatles.”

Mothersbaugh has immense appreciation for postal workers. “There’s a sense of security and connectedness that comes from seeing a postal worker making their rounds and keeping us all a part of the bigger picture,” he said.

Clocking in at 1 million accident-free miles

After driving the equivalent of about two round trips to the moon without an accident, Greater East Bay, CA Branch 1111 member **Lorna Lualhati** was inducted on July 27 into the National Safety Council’s “Million Mile Club” at the Benicia Post Office and bestowed with a plaque to honor her achievement.

“Safety is no accident. We need to be safety conscious at all times,” Lualhati said in a news release.

The 37-year carrier delivered mail in Southern California and Honolulu before landing in Benicia in Northern

California, where she’s had the same driving route for the past 14 years.

“The truly remarkable achievement by our Benicia Post Office carrier exemplifies how postal employees continue to deliver on the promise of delivering their best every day with care, courtesy and concern for the safety of others,” District Manager Mike Mirides told local NBC news affiliate KNTV-TV.

USPS licenses new kids’ toys

The Postal Service and toymaker Kid Trax have created a licensed USPS ride-on vehicle for youngsters.

The mini mail delivery truck, aimed at kids ages 3 to 5, is available for purchase through Amazon and the Kid Trax website.

“It will be a great learning tool for kids to have fun, use their imagination and connect with the Postal Service employees who visit their home every day to deliver their mail and packages,” Amity Kirby, the USPS licensing manager, told USPS Link. “It is also an ideal gift for employees and retirees to purchase for the children in their lives.”

The Postal Service’s release of the vehicle comes amid the widespread appreciation that customers of all ages have displayed for USPS during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The vehicle follows the previous introduction of other licensed products, such as letter carrier costumes, for both kids and pets.

“It’s a great way for us to reach kids in this day and age and build brand loyalty at a young age,” Kirby said.

Unfortunately, because of the size of the box that the vehicle comes in, it can’t ship through USPS. However, Kid Trax also produces a Post Office play tent and mailbox set, available

The Postal Service has licensed its brand to Kid Trax to make a ride-on vehicle.



for purchase at usps.com, that will be shipped through the Postal Service.

The vehicle has been submitted for this fall’s annual Toy of the Year Awards, described as the Oscars of the toy industry.

Aside from the honor of a nomination, Kirby said that the new product is a “really positive brand story for the organization and a really great way for us to reach a generation of kids.”

Son of ‘Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood’ mail carrier a carrier IRL

Do you remember Mr. McFeely, the mail carrier from “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood”? David Newell played the role of a mail carrier for nearly 30 years.

Now, his son, **Alex Newell**, of Pittsburgh, PA Branch 84 is following in his father’s footsteps and tackling the job in real life by delivering the mail in his hometown as a letter carrier.

“When you’re living around it, you don’t realize how special and kind of cool it is,” Alex told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. “It was a lot of days being on set and in the offices and

going to appearances with my dad and meeting a lot of interesting and famous people.”

Newell isn't just a letter carrier in real life; he's also making an appearance as a letter carrier on an episode of the children's show "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood." The animated TV show on PBS Kids features one of Mister Rogers' puppet characters as a letter carrier who makes sure that a girl's care package for a friend makes it to her safely.

"In a way, Alex grew up in Mister Rogers' neighborhood, in reality and in pretend," Newell's father said. "He



David Newell (r) sits with his son Alex (l) and grandson Ashton.

watched the program as he was growing up, and now he's making a delivery on ['Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood']. And that makes me so proud.”

He added that among his children, Alex always had been the most interested in acting, even living in Los Angeles for a while and working on some independent films and reality shows before moving back home to Pittsburgh

to “settle himself and regroup,” and soon joining the Postal Service.

And what was Newell's father's reaction to learning that he'd become a letter carrier?

“You're kidding!” David Newell said. “How ironic he would be a delivery/postman, and I've been pretending to be one for over 40 years!”

When people hear about Alex's chosen profession, they like to remind him that “you were born for this,” the carrier said.

The “Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood” cameo opportunity presented itself after Fred Rogers Productions reached out to Alex. Supervising producer Chris Loggins told the *Post-Gazette* that the show had been looking for a mail carrier for that segment, and that they had decided to go with Alex to showcase “a serendipitous case of life imitating art.”

Alex said it is “definitely important to carry on the legacy of what Mister Rogers created,” which is why he embraced the opportunity to be on the kids' show. The delivery connection to his father made the whole experience even better, adding that it was great to honor his dad, who was the “greatest teacher for me and every other kid that grew up with the show.”

“Thank you for being the greatest role model there is,” Alex said, “besides Mister Rogers.”

UT carrier honored on route upon retirement

Grateful for his 33 years of service, residents on Logan, UT Branch 970 member **Dallen Jolley's** route organized a celebration in honor of his retirement in late July that included balloons, signs and decorated mailboxes.

Customer Daryla Cox told *The Herald Journal* that Jolley is a “nice and special guy,” adding, “He's very friendly. If you're outside, he'll come and help you. He's very polite and friendly. We just all have enjoyed him.”

Jolley told the newspaper that he's loved working for the Postal Service and that he tries to live by the golden rule.

“I try to be nice on the route,” he said. “If I see somebody struggling with a lawnmower and I can help start it or something, I'll take a few minutes to help out. If they want to visit for a minute I'll take time to visit and subtract from my breaks.”

The carrier began working for USPS after coming across an ad when he was home sick from his previous job at a meat processing plant.

“I was fumbling through the paper and I saw a company that was offering a seminar,” he said. “They said, ‘We will guarantee a high score for the Postal Service test.’ I've been happy ever since.”

Jolley said the patrons he delivers to are “fantastic.”

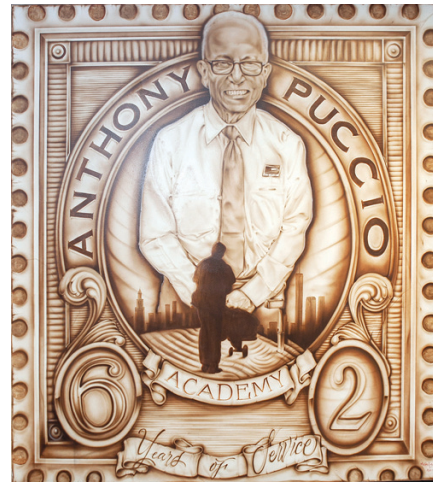
He added, “This is probably the best community to deliver mail in. I've done several routes, and it seems like it keeps improving and improving. It's a great place to be.”

WV carrier hangs up satchel

On Parkersburg, WV Branch 481 member **Brent Walter's** last day on his route on July 29, customers gathered to thank him and wish him well. Of his 34 years as a letter carrier, he's spent 29 years on the same route, so they know him well.

Though the carrier was surprised at seeing the balloon and “Happy Retirement” signs, he carried on as normal, stopping briefly to chat and joke with his patrons as he usually did.

This artwork was created for Anthony Puccio as part of the renaming of the Letter Carrier Academy in his honor.



Social media (continued)

Several neighbors came together to give Walter some gift cards and a card that they asked him to open and that expressed how they felt about his service over the years.

“Man, oh man,” Walter told Jackson Newspapers. “You guys are going to make me cry.”

He added, “The people are just great. I’m going to miss the people.”

The carrier plans to spend his retirement on his farm tending to his cattle. He said it’s bittersweet to close this chapter, but “it’s time.”

Drew Barrymore loves the mail

Actress, film producer and talk show host Drew Barrymore loves mail, and she’s not afraid to share that sentiment.

Barrymore posted a video on Instagram on July 6 telling her 14 million followers how excited she was after receiving a letter from her daughter, who was attending sleepaway camp.

“I’m the most proud parent right now,” Barrymore says in the video. “I got mail from my daughter and she’s at camp.”

She continues: “I think that letters and postcards and stamps and the Post Office are just so important. Letters are so beautiful and may we encourage our kids to be writers and send mail to us.”

Barrymore, who has shared her love of mail before in previous posts, also encourages fans to send her letters for the “Dear Drew” segment on her eponymous daytime talk show. She also selects a “ZIP Code of the Day,” and spouts fun local facts before opening correspondence on air.

In the video, Barrymore says that opening a letter from her daughter is “the day I’ve dreamt of since my kids were born—my kid writing me a letter from sleepaway camp,” adding, “It’s just such a sign that not only is everything

OK, but these rich, important, crucial traditions live on in our family. We love mail. And guess what? I’ve got mail.”

Carrier Academy renamed for late carrier

The USPS Letter Carrier Academy in New York City has changed its name to honor Branch 36 member **Anthony Puccio**, who began working as a letter carrier in 1958 and retired in 2020. He died in January.

The Anthony Puccio Letter Carrier Academy, located at a Manhattan post office, features a mural of Puccio and a plaque that reads, in part: “Dedicated to service, he delivered mail in NYC for 62 years.”

The carrier delivered mail on the same route for his entire career, was known by his co-workers for his strong work ethic and received many awards during his career.

Always neatly dressed, Puccio was affectionately referred to as “The Dean” by colleagues because he “was always willing to teach and mentor young carriers,” New York 1 District Manager Lorraine Castellano told USPS Link.

“He treated his customers ... with the utmost respect and they, in turn, grew to adore him,” she added.

Paying tribute to longtime IL carrier

After **Marcus Wheeler** of Oak Brook, IL Branch 825 unexpectedly died in August, customers on his route organized a police-led procession of Postal Service and civilian vehicles in his memory on his longtime route in Libertyville, just three days later.

“I’ve been in the post office for 32 years and in management for about 15 years,” Libertyville Postmaster Patrick Sweeney told *The Daily Herald*. “I’ve never seen this. He [was] loved by his customers.

He had a great personality and sense of humor. His smile was constant.”

Customers wanted to honor Marcus, a 33-year carrier who they said had a positive impact on everyone he met.

Libertyville resident Nicholas Wennerstrom told the newspaper that he had met Wheeler in 2012 and that they became close friends. His 9- and 5-year-old sons would shout “It’s Marcus!” whenever they saw an LLV.

“They broke down when I told them,” Wennerstrom said. “They liked him, too.”

For the procession, the sidewalks along Wheeler’s route were packed with patrons. Among them was Bob Castleton, who said that the carrier had come by his house after his shift the week before to help Castleton with a task after he had mentioned his to-do list to Wheeler.

Wheeler’s family was represented in the procession by siblings, daughter Camryn, her mother, Kimberly Price, and several nephews and nieces.

“It just says what we always knew about him,” his sister Aminah Woodhouse said.

“It made me so proud of him, and I was always proud of him,” niece Aminah Burns added.

Camryn Wheeler said that she believes her father’s example of finding friendships in a turbulent world is one everyone can follow, and that she was amazed to see such a tribute from people of so many different backgrounds and ages.

“I saw a veteran with one leg who was standing up for my father,” she said. “I know that if he was alive he wouldn’t even believe this, because he was so humble.” **PR**