

He Walks the (Route...)



Philip
Dine

What do you get if you start with a father and son's love for a country music icon, combine it with a letter carrier's move from Nashua to Nashville, add a Christmas Eve miracle baby who shared their sentiments about the Man in Black, and toss in a marvelous postage stamp?

You get the story of Mike Charest.

The Nashville Branch 4 member grew up in Nashua, NH, where he acquired from his father a devotion to country music and especially to Johnny Cash, whose first major hit—"I Walk the Line"—became his trademark song, one he played at every concert over his 50-year career. He would stride on stage clad in black, say simply "Hello, I'm Johnny Cash,"

and perform.

The Charest household contained a prized guitar autographed by Cash, which Mike wouldn't play, lest he degrade the signature.

Following a stint at a defense facility, Mike spent 14 years as a rural carrier. Twenty years ago, Mike's father arranged a trip to Nashville with his son and enlisted a local resident/Johnny Cash fan to guide them.

The moment Mike and Judy set eyes on each other, they knew. Their May 29, 2004, Nashville wedding featured the Cash classic, "Ring of Fire." They settled in Nashua, but so Judy could be near her family, Mike transferred to Nashville, where he met members of the Cash family and other country musicians.

Recently retired Branch 4 President Dave Clark (not, despite this column's musical focus, the Dave Clark Five's frontman) fondly recalls being inundated with questions from a new city carrier intent on doing the job right.

Judy, who'd been personal assistant to the legendary Waylon Jennings—a peer of Johnny Cash, whom she also knew—was known locally as the Christmas Eve miracle baby. Decades earlier, on Dec. 24, her mother had jumped off a bridge into the frigid river 90 feet below, clutching her 3-month-old baby.

A man took tiny Judy in his arms but didn't think she had survived—until, to his relief, she coughed up water. Her mother, also rescued, was successfully treated for bipolar disorder. A few years ago, Judy and the man who'd saved her, by then 90 years old, were reunited at the Charest home in an emotional event captured by Nashville media outlets.

Cash had died in 2003 and Mike and his father launched a drive to have the country star—who'd begun singing while picking cotton with his family in rural Arkansas, then served in the Air Force before moving to Nashville—immortalized on a stamp. After his father's passing, Mike took the reins, as-

sisted by Judy, and kept USPS headquarters informed of the petition's progress.

The stamp was created in 2013 and Mike arrived in style at the First Day ceremony at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium, adorned in his postal uniform and driven there by Johnny's youngest sister, Joanne Cash, a singer in her own right and co-pastor at the church Mike attends, Nashville's Cowboy Church.

"Everybody saw me go in with Joanne," Mike said. "It was like stardom. They were honoring me for helping make that stamp happen."

The appreciation is mutual.

"He's a good friend," Joanne Cash told me. "Mike was very much involved in getting the Johnny Cash stamp selected, and it was a very big honor not only for Johnny but also for the Cash family.

"Mike was at that ceremony when the stamp plaque was presented to members of the Cash family," she added. "I got one myself."

Inspired by how Mike lifted the spirits of an elderly postal customer fallen ill, in February Kentucky-based country musician Carl Brown composed "I Was Your Postman."

Mike is a man of few words, except regarding country music, but co-workers speak highly of him.

"He's one of us," Hermitage Post Office colleague Shane Bingham says. "He's a hard worker; he loves the city carrier job."

DRT representative and former branch vice president Paul Glavin describes Mike as a "very humble guy, very quiet, very understated."

"He has a unique personality. He is a wonderful, wonderful man. He's one of the first guys when I went into that office who came up and shook my hand. He's the absolute nicest guy; he's always there for the carriers."

Judy's death in March 2022 devastated Mike, prompting him to get even more immersed in the country music scene.

"He misses her so much; that's kind of how he deals with his grief, hanging with those old-time songwriters, at that church and elsewhere," Shane says. "It's going to make his day to get recognized."

Paul concurs: "Just the fact that the NALC is recognizing him for what he actually did with Johnny Cash and for the family—I'm thrilled that he's getting this recognition."

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