

Heroism of all types



Philip
Dine

NALC's Heroes of the Year ceremony never ceases to amaze. Each annual event is new and different, because the group of letter carriers being honored in any given year is, of course, unique. And the nature of the deeds that landed them there occupies its own distinctive place along the courageous-compassionate spectrum.

Moreover, their personalities and speaking styles are their own and the resulting blend of garrulous or guarded can never be predicted, even if the carriers invariably share a modesty reflected in the oft-repeated refrain that they're not a hero, they were just fortunate to be in the right place, anyone would have done the same thing.

In this magazine, you'll read all about the March 27 event in Washington, DC—including what the Heroes said, what they did that led to their being honored, who else spoke or attended, and what the atmosphere was like—in stories skillfully put together by Rick and Jenessa and Sarah.

You might read about a friend or a co-worker, perhaps a carrier a couple of towns down the road. Or maybe the nearest awardee is many hundreds of miles away and three states removed from yours.

Either way, I predict that there'll be a time or two where you'll pause and just shake your head.

What I found most noteworthy was the level of caring, of dedication, of persistence, of grit, displayed by these carriers as they did good for others or even for entire communities. Sure, there were acts of sheer courage in an emergency, which is a consistent—and extraordinary—hallmark of this event; there are grateful residents of Baton Rouge, LA, and Amarillo, TX, and elsewhere who can attest to the bravery exhibited by the letter carrier who delivers their mail, and whose quick thinking led to their being rescued in a moment of peril. This time around, such actions were complemented by stories of letter carriers' persistence and determination to make life better for others, actions that left me speechless. And moved.

And I wasn't alone.

Speaking prior to the event with a TV reporter from Florida about what her local Hero had had done and the impact of those actions, with the goal of spurring her to do a broadcast report, I noticed that she quickly fell oddly silent. I was initially taken aback, figuring that she was uninterested in the topic, or perhaps was being given a conflicting assignment in real time, until I realized what actually was going on:

She was, quite simply, processing the words and actions being communicated to her—and she, too, was moved. Understandably so.

The letter carrier in question had experienced difficult events in her own childhood, events that now played a role in prompting her to reach out to a struggling young boy in a way that immeasurably brightened the youngster's world. Already suffering from severe health issues and some family matters, he had a painfully simple request: to not be bullied. That was a request—and a challenge—that the letter carrier addressed, and then some.

The conversation with the reporter was, let's just say, one punctuated on both ends of the phone by several periods of silence.

So much for the stereotype of hard-boiled reporters.

A thousand-plus miles to the north, a letter carrier in our country's snowiest city, Buffalo, NY, exhibited alertness, decisiveness and just plain smarts in saving an elderly and disoriented woman from a raging fire that was melting the home's siding. With some neighbors content to merely film the event, the carrier, aware that in addition to everything else she had breathing problems, knew that her fate rested in his hands.

Told about the incident and the Hero's award, the local newspaper's Washington, DC-based reporter, who's covered the nation's capital since 1989 (and whom I've known for much of that time, first as a colleague and a competitor), jumped right on the story.

His enthusiasm rose as he was able to bring together the local Hero and the resident he had rescued for photos and interviews, as well as conversation between them.

Keep in mind, this is a grizzled reporter who's pretty much seen it all while covering national politics as well as a host of topics abroad, from Europe and Asia to the Middle East and Africa—yet he was as ebullient as I've seen him, as he pursued what he called this “really dramatic story.”

Why was he that much into it? Simple answer: “It's that good.”

I hope you enjoy the stories that follow in this magazine.

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The Postal Record (ISSN 0032-5376) is published monthly by the National Association of Letter Carriers. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, NALC, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144.

Subscription included in membership dues. First-class subscription available for \$20 per year (contact Membership Department).

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Circulation: 287,000. Union-printed using soy-based inks.

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