



READING, PA

Letter carriers are accustomed to serving their customers six days a week. But Branch 258 members go above and beyond delivering for those in their community. The Reading, PA, branch has been brightening families' Christmases for more than a decade.

It all started in 2001 with a "Dear Santa" letter from a young local girl. All she wanted for Christmas were beds for her brother and sister, and underclothing and socks.

"It kind of broke our hearts," Branch Vice President **Richie McDonough** said.

"President **George Cook** called me and we decided we had to help this family out because it was so different from the usual wish list," current Branch President **Fred Ranalli Jr.** said. (The event was officially named the George Cook Memorial Christmas Family Adoption Program following the longtime branch president's death last year.)

The carriers worked hard to make sure that family members got what they asked for. They

talked to the carrier who delivered to that address to find out more information about the family.

They went to deliver their haul to the home and knocked on the door. "We surprised them and showed up with LLVs, fire trucks and Christmas trees," McDonough said.

When a little girl answered, they saw that there was almost nothing inside. The carriers watched as she ran to the corner of the empty house and prayed to a Virgin Mary statue expressing her gratitude for the generosity of the carriers.

"That moment touched us all to tears," Ranalli said. "That was the start."

The tradition has continued from there. Each fall, the process starts. The branch collects money from about 150 postal workers, carriers, clerks and managers—usually \$3,000 to \$5,000 in total—and sponsors up to three families.

The carriers partner with local church organizations and also use their knowledge of their neighborhood customers.

"We have adopted working families who struggle to make ends meet, one-parent families, families with



Above and opposite page: Images from Branch 258's holiday parties

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medical struggles, families where tragedy has struck, elderly couples, veterans, and even some of our own co-workers' families serving in wars," Ranalli said. "It's people who need a hand up, not a handout."

The branch gets a wish list from the families, and members do their best to fulfill the wishes. Sometimes local businesses, such as a local shoe store, will pitch in and donate to the effort. "First things first: beds, blankets, stuff like that," McDonough said, "and always toys."

Once they have all of their bounty collected, Branch 258 hosts a big party for the families at the union hall. The carriers' families and others get involved, too. McDonough's son has played Santa Claus, Ranalli's son is an artist who has done sketches for the children, and most years their local congressman, Rep. Jim Gerlach (R-PA), shows up.

And it isn't over once the gifts have been delivered. "What's nice is that 75 percent of the families keep in contact with us and give us updates on the kids," McDonough said.

One woman whose family the branch had helped in the past got back on her feet financially and came to donate money to another family. Talk about paying it forward.

"It spreads like wildfire," McDonough said of the group's endeavor. "Every year, it gets bigger and bigger."

"I have the best branch. It's such a group effort and everyone chips in," Ranalli said. "It makes the Christmas season for many of us and never fails to touch all our hearts."

In selecting Branch 258 for the Branch Service Award, the judges said, "It's impressive that this is a continual program, not just a one-time event. They've made a deep commitment."

"We don't feel worthy," Ranalli said about the honor. "We see all the need that's out there and we try to help."

