

Heartwarming Treats

Delivering for the community

This holiday season, letter carriers will deliver millions of messages and packages conveying love and friendship. But sometimes letter carriers see a need among their fellow postal workers or in their communities and bring their own gestures of love.

They don't wait for someone else to act—they step up.

Whether they pass the hat around to buy a wheelchair for child on their route, or arrange for a portable mammogram truck to come to the post office to check women for breast cancer, or wrap toys and school supplies for children in need as Christmas gifts, letter carriers across the country find many ways to give back. But they don't wait for December to show they care—throughout the year, carriers support charities and respond to individuals in need.

The following stories provide a few examples of how letter carriers nationwide cared for the people in their workplace and their communities over the past year.

A new set of wheels

Some people would walk past the home of a boy with a disability who had outgrown his wheelchair but couldn't afford a new one and think nothing of it. Gerry Waksmundski walked past many times, but he did something about it.

Waksmundski, a carrier with New Jersey Merged Branch 38, met the 10-year-old boy, Marko, on his route. He delivers the mail to Marko's street about the same time the boy gets home from school on the bus. When he learned that Marko needed an expensive new wheelchair, he passed the hat around at his branch, and his fellow union mem-

bers responded.

"These good people weren't looking for a handout," Waksmundski said, "but I felt they could use a hand up."

With the help of his fellow carriers and several businesses on his route, Waksmundski collected more than enough money for a

new wheelchair. In fact, he had enough money to give Marko an extra surprise.

"We raised money for a wheelchair," said Waksmundski. "We had some money left over, so we bought him a three-wheeled cycle."

Marko came to the Garfield, NJ, post office to get his new wheelchair. Waksmundski unloaded Marko's wheelchair from his truck. Then he thrilled Marko by unloading a brand new Triton Ultimate three-wheeled cruiser.

"He told me he wanted to come to the office to meet and thank us personally for what we did," Waksmundski said. "He's a good kid; he deserves it."

Marko, who has cerebral palsy, can't balance on a two-wheel bicycle, but the special adult-style trike allows him to cruise around like any other kid. (Marko's parents asked that only his first name be used in media reports).

Waksmundski's efforts did not go unnoticed. In October, the Bergen County, NJ Division on Disability Services recognized Waksmundski's efforts in its annual "Salute to Champions" breakfast. "Gerry Waksmundski is a very special person," said Jim Theberry, director of the division. "A pediatric wheelchair can cost well over \$2,000. Local folks, led by one man, made a difference."

New Jersey Merged Branch 38 member Gerry Waksmundski is all smiles as Marko shows his excitement over his new wheelchair.



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Delivering for the community

Marrow registry grows by 46

Sometimes the devotion letter carriers have for their co-workers goes down to the bone.

At the Okeechobee, FL, post office, letter carriers, fellow postal employees and their family members pitched in to help rural carrier Linda Ledford in her five-year struggle with leukemia. With a simple, painless swab of the cheek, 46 of

postal workers have participated through the Postal Service's Delivering the Gift of Life program, which makes it easy for postal employees to join the registry. The program focuses on boosting the number of minorities in the registry to increase the chances that minority patients can find good genetic matches. The program has added more than 26,000 minority donor candidates to the registry.

"This program really took the fear out of myself to get on the registry," said Okeechobee Post Office letter carrier Melanie Jasa of West Palm Beach Branch 1690. "It only took a few minutes of paperwork and an easy Q-Tip swab."

A week later, a match in cord blood—taken from umbilical cords after a baby is born and sometimes used to treat leukemia and other diseases—was found for Ledford. But miraculously, her health improved before she tried the cord blood treatment, and she is doing well.

Letter carriers in her branch also donated annual leave to Ledford after she used up all of her sick time. The workers in the Okeechobee Post Office even sponsored a yard sale and barbecue fundraiser to raise more than \$3,500 for Ledford and other fellow employees who need help with medical bills.

"My co-workers have been unbelievable" in their support, Ledford said. "I can't say enough about everybody."



them added their names to the national bone marrow registry last June.

An experimental drug she was trying had stopped working, and chemotherapy did not help, so Ledford's last hope was a transplant.

The collected genetic data was added to a database of 7 million volunteers who might offer bone marrow or other tissue for people like Ledford who need transplants or similar treatment. Thousands

Left: A little paperwork and a cotton swab is all it takes to register to become a bone marrow donor.

Below: Cathy Hiers shows off one of the many little boxes that can help make a child's Christmas special.

'Just doing my part'

Because letter carriers are out in their communities each day, they have a unique perspective on the lives of people on their routes. They know when someone has died, when someone has gotten married and, sometimes, when people are in need.

Some special carriers take it upon themselves to help out. When Columbia, SC Branch 233 member Herb Garvin saw a woman on her route who lived by herself and didn't have much family around, it dawned on him: "Why don't I do something for her?"

But Garvin still wanted to do more. Ever since the 14-year postal veteran started this holiday tradition about a decade ago, his generosity has kept on growing. The following year he gave out a few more turkeys for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Last year he gave out 35 turkeys, and this year, with continued logistical help and a discount from a local Piggly Wiggly grocery store, he gave out 100 turkeys and bunches of collard greens to patrons. Those chosen "encompass some of the seniors, those between jobs and the ones who have lost family," Garvin said.

Just before the holidays, Garvin was presented with a check for more than \$1,700 raised by staff at the NALC Health Benefit Plan to help buy this year's haul.

"Overall, if you just hang in there, something good is going to come out in the end, and that's what this check represents," Garvin told a local NBC news affiliate. "A lot of my co-workers and persons in the union have stepped up, so that enables me to provide more for those persons out on my route."

During his day off a few days before Thanksgiving, Garvin put on his uniform and delivered the turkeys the same way he does his normal route.

"I'm just doing my part," he said. "I'm sure if they were able, they'd do the same."

Completely out of pocket, he provided an entire Thanksgiving meal for her, from turkey down to the sides, though that endeavor proved costly.



During the holiday season, Herb Garvin delivers turkeys to those in need along his route and in his community.



Operation Christmas Child

Another carrier, Cathy Hiers of Wal-terboro, SC Branch 6123, was inspired to help out needy children after she found out about fellow churchgoers who had lost their son, Noah, to the rare Severe Combined Immune Deficiency.

Hiers suggested packing gift boxes for Operation Christmas Child in Noah's honor. "He touched a lot of lives, and

through the love of his parents, he's still touching a lot of lives," the carrier told *The Press and Standard*. "I think we can all use his life as an example."

You can put so much into these boxes and they change lives, Hiers said.

With help from her church, her co-workers and the community, Hiers received donations such as toys, clothes, shoes, candy, toothbrushes

and school supplies and packed them all in boxes designated for specific age ranges. Some included personal notes and pictures for the recipients.

In the couple of years Hiers has coordinated the effort, she has received a good response—and its influence has grown. The program garnered about 174 boxes from her community the first year and more than 250 last Christmas. "I did it because it helps reach underprivileged children," she said, "who would never get anything for Christmas."



