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 members 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.”

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

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

Garvin said he has that endeavor proved costly. “I think we can get anything for Christmas.”

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Heartwarming Treats

Delivering Santa’s message

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Delivering for the community

POSTAL RECORD

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Books for the troops

The letter carriers of Aurora, IL Branch 219 are always looking for new ways to help the community. In May, they decided to extend their community service by providing American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines with books to read during the long hours away from home. Along with the Illinois State Association and a local community group, Branch 219 set up collection centers at bookstores for donations of books to Operation Paperback, a charity that sends paperbacks to fighting men and women serving overseas. Their efforts filled a flatbed truck with about 1,200 books, said Ken Christy, president of the branch and the state association. “We had books overflowing to the ground,” he said.

The collection also netted many hardback books, but shipping them overseas is quite expensive, so they were provided instead to local independent bookstores and schools.

“We’ve done so much locally that we decided to broaden our horizons,” Christy said. The branch was inspired to support the program by a letter carrier whose son had served in Iraq.

Operation Paperback has sent more than a million used books to troops around the world since 1999, helping them fill the long hours away from their families.

All in the family

“Dear Santa” letters also fell into the hands of Branch 219, Pierce, WA Branch 258. For the past 10 years, the branch has been adopting a family (or a few) undergoing a hardship found through letters, solicited through churches or homeless shelters, or discovered when they are out at people’s homes.

“I had read somewhere that another branch somewhere had done it,” Branch President George Cook said. He talked to the branch’s executive board to set up a plan, and it “went so well the first year, it’s snowballed.”

The inaugural year of the event, the branch helped a single family. The program has since expanded to provide for three to four each year, and “just about all our offices contribute and help out,” Cook said. This includes about 200 active carriers in the branch, as well as help from some clerks and managers donating money and volunteering their time.

The branch then sends the volunteers out to see what the families need and a list of what they want, and goes shopping for the items, big and small. Larger items get delivered to the families’ residences. One year, a girl had written to Santa asking for a bed. Shoppers went to work finding the family furniture and had it delivered to the house.

Around the holidays, Branch 258 holds a party at its union hall and invites all of the carriers and their families as well as the adopted families. It’s at this event that the families are given their presents to open, are provided with food and entertainment, and usually enjoy an appearance by Santa Claus and his elves.

“It’s a high point of the holidays,” Cook said.