

2010

HEROES OF THE YEAR *Awards*



Protecting our
communities—
**six days
a week**

As the dramatic story of how Arkansas letter carrier James Dupont put his own life on the line to save three people from a fiery car crash was related, the audience at a Washington hotel hushed.

And as Dupont's humble nature came across in his own remarks when he accepted the National Hero of the Year award, the audience burst into sustained applause.

The annual National Association of Letter Carriers Heroes of the Year Awards luncheon held on October 7 in the nation's capital before 135 guests had a little bit of everything—and a lot of gratitude and emotion.

There were appreciative remarks by Postmaster General John Potter about carrier heroism. There was the presence of key members of the Washington postal community. There were chuckles as NALC President Fredric Rolando repeatedly drove home the importance of six-day delivery by noting the rescues that occurred on a Saturday. There were farewells to two veteran Heroes judges. There were reporters interviewing their hometown heroes. There was even a

false fire alarm that briefly emptied the room and the hotel.

But at the center of it all were the deeds of the NALC award winners, many of whom were accompanied by family members, branch presidents, state chairs or local postmasters.

"The extraordinary carriers you will meet today are just the tip of the iceberg," President Rolando said. "They represent tens of thousands of people who are among the most courageous and caring folks you will ever find. They are a reminder that even as letter carriers provide a valuable public service to the American people and to America's businesses six days a week, they also play a crucial role in the lives of their customers and communities."

Those honored for what Rolando termed "selfless contributions...whose heroism and service make a real difference in their communities" included Larry Gunkel, a retired letter carrier from Wichita, KS, who was named National Humanitarian of the Year. A former president of Branch 201, Gunkel began his involvement with feeding the hungry as a strong supporter of the NALC's national food drive. Now, as



program manager for the Kansas Food Bank after retiring, he helps feed 35,000 families across Kansas and runs a Food 4 Kids backpack program that provides food over the weekend for 5,000 schoolchildren.

Accepting his award, Gunkel said he would cherish it for the rest of his life, just as he cherishes the recent honor of his 40-year membership in the NALC.

Western Region Hero Salli Hislop, a carrier with Branch 111 in Salt Lake City, helped save the life of a man having a heart attack after being alerted by a barking dog.

Central Region Hero Thomas Nehlen of Youngstown, OH Branch 385 helped get a resident out of a burning house one morning on his route, and then in the afternoon helped a 12-year-old boy whose bicycle had crashed into a van.

Branch President and State Chair John Dyce accepted for Nehlen, who was unable to attend. Dyce said that initially Nehlen hadn't wanted to accept the award, feeling he "just did what any other carrier would do," but finally agreed when Dyce told him what an honor it was.

Jeffrey Vollmar of Branch 924 in Freehold, NJ, saved a woman from a fire in her home after being told by her daughter that their house was on fire and her mother was still inside. The ceremony was an especially big event for Vollmar, who—in front of numerous family members—also received a Distinguished Service Medal from the State of New Jersey for his military service as a Marine in peacekeeping efforts in Lebanon in the early 1980s. The military award was presented by President Rolando on behalf of New Jersey Congressman John Adler.

Jack Hayes and J.D. Stewart of Branch 79 in Seattle accepted the Branch Service award for the work they, Cecil McKenzie, Brooks Bennett, Jack Gilmore and Connie Wigle, along with Rick Baird of Tacoma Branch 130, did with Habitat for Humanity to build homes for Louisiana victims of Hurricane Katrina. Washington

State Congressman Jay Inslee sent a letter lauding the work of the Seattle carriers and thanking all of the Heroes for "their contributions to communities across the country."

And two members of Branch 13 in Muskegon, MI, Deborah Czarny and Penny Bell, were given the Special Carrier Alert Award for saving an elderly resident after growing concerned because they didn't hear her television as usual.

The recipients all clearly lived up to Rolando's introductory remarks that letter carriers "deliver more than just the mail. They deliver service to their communities. They feel the pulse of everyday life as they stop at every home and business along their routes. Because these brothers and sisters are everywhere—and I use that union term because nearly all of them voluntarily belong to the NALC—they serve as a front line of safety for our communities. They sense danger and recognize trouble. They are often first on the scene and willing to act to help."

The renewing of friendships over lunch caused the award ceremony to begin a few minutes later than scheduled, but President Rolando's well-paced speech and presentation of awards—it took only 53 minutes despite the unplanned fire alarm—got things back on track.

But there was plenty of time for a generous expression of thanks to the Heroes—and to letter carriers as a whole.

Ruth Goldway, chairman of the Postal Regulatory Commission, spoke of the "heroism" of the recipients and of how inspiring she finds the willingness of the nation's letter carriers to serve and protect their customers.

Postmaster Potter said he

Opposite page: NALC's Heroes of the Year

Below: NALC President Fredric Rolando welcomes a crowd of NALC members, distinguished guests, and members of the media to the awards ceremony held in Washington on October 7.





Above: Postmaster General Jack Potter tells of how he looks forward to this event every year, and of how proud he is to have employees like the heroes representing the Postal Service.

Below: Postal Regulatory Commission Chairman Ruth Goldway says that she finds the recipients' heroism inspiring.



looks forward to the event all year. "I'm so proud of what our people do, not just delivering the mail but that you're part of the community," he said. "You are heroes—you rose to the occasion."

And President Rolando spoke of "how these exceptional men and women go above and beyond the call of duty every day to serve their communities in the most surprising ways."

Everyone present seemed to be listening with rapt attention as the president described Dupont's courageous actions

moving between the car and the truck, depending on where victims faced the most immediate danger. The 13-year letter carrier, who is president of Branch 1514 in Rogers, AR, managed to remove all three people to safety after witnessing the horrific head-on collision, in the face of fire and imminent explosions. All suffered injuries, but all survived.

Rogers has paid a physical and financial price for his bravery, undergoing recent surgery on one shoulder and facing surgery on the other. He has used up his sick leave and his vacation leave—and has lost thousands of dollars in pay the past few weeks.

Told by Rolando that he was indeed a hero despite his reluctance to accept that label, Dupont said on accepting the award, "As National Hero of the Year, I do not stand alone. I stand with all our letter carriers around the nation."

The honorees were selected from among 200 nominees, whose stories of heroism and community were published, several each month, over the course of a year in *The Postal Record*.

"We highlight hundreds of these stories—and we know that many of the most amazing acts of bravery and community service go unreported," Rolando said. "And why is that? Because they almost never seek recognition after helping someone, maybe even saving one or more lives—instead, they simply go back to work." ☒

How the heroes of the year were selected

Every month, letter carriers, union officers and Postal Service management send stories and news clips about the actions of heroic letter carriers to *The Postal Record* for publication in the Proud to Serve section. The dozens of stories, a testament to the extent to which letter carriers know and care about the communities they serve, represent only some of the many ways letter carriers serve the public every day through heroic actions large and small.

From these reports published in *The Postal Record* between the July issue and the June issue of the following year, a panel of three independent judges selects a Hero of the Year and several heroes representing three regions of the country, a Carrier Alert hero, a humanitarian hero, and a service-oriented branch.

The judges who chose this year's heroes were Shelby Hallmark, Director of the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs at the U.S. Department of Labor, and former letter carrier; Chief Richard Bowers of the Montgomery County, MD Department of Fire and Rescue Services; and Jordan "Bud" Biscardo, AFL-CIO Community Services Liaison at the United Way of America.

Hallmark and Biscardo are retiring as judges; at the awards ceremony honoring the latest heroes, President Rolando thanked them for their many years of service as judges.

Letter carriers are urged to send information or news articles about heroism and service beyond the call of duty on the part of their fellow carriers to *The Postal Record* for consideration. ☒

President Rolando consults with the judges as they make their picks.



NATIONAL HERO OF THE YEAR

James Dupont—Rogers, Arkansas Branch 1514

Arkansas member rescues three from fiery car crash

Driving home from work on June 6, 2010, letter carrier Jim Dupont encountered the horrible aftermath of a pickup truck that collided head-on with a car. Dupont, the president of Rogers, AR Branch 1514, stopped and tried to call 911, but had no cell phone reception.

He noticed a fire in the car. The car's driver indicated he could not get out on his own because his leg was pinned inside, so Dupont pulled the man free and dragged him to safety.

Dupont then saw flames in the cab of the truck. Its doors were jammed. The driver, a 21-year-old man, was trapped inside, screaming and banging on the window in desperation. The driver tried to push his head and shoulders out the broken back window of the cab, but could not get all the way out. Dupont pulled the severely injured man through the window to safety.

The rescued man indicated that his girlfriend was also inside. Dupont could not see anyone there through the flames and smoke. Thinking of his own wife and children at that moment, Dupont pushed himself partly inside the truck and managed to reach the 17-year-old girl and pull her out of the flaming wreckage. With the help of other bystanders, Dupont carried the two truck passengers away from the growing fire.

Emergency personnel arrived and the victims were airlifted to trauma centers as firefighters doused the blaze.

The 13-year postal veteran suffered burns and smoke inhalation and dislocated both shoulders. The three passengers he rescued had serious injuries, but all survived thanks to Dupont's selfless efforts.

"This was a remarkable situation of doing what had to be done," said the



Heroes of the Year judging committee. "In all the years we've been doing this, we haven't seen a more amazing rescue." Judging panel member Richard Bowers, chief of the Montgomery County, MD, Fire and Rescue Services Department, said "I'd like to hire him. I can count on one hand the number of 'gold medal rescues' I've seen. This is one."

Since the accident, Dupont has kept in touch with the three people he saved. He didn't stop being their hero either—he visited all three in the hospital and helped one victim in her efforts to obtain disability benefits.

"Winning this award certainly isn't one's goal or dream, because we all wish these accidents and health problems don't arise," Dupont said. "But because they do, we the letter carriers respond." ✉

Top: James Dupont (r) receives his award from President Rolando.

Above: The Branch 1514 member took the opportunity to recognize other letter carrier heroes throughout the country who often go unrecognized.



HUMANITARIAN OF THE YEAR

Larry Gunkel—Wichita, Kansas Branch 201



Left: President Rolando describes Gunkel's decades-long commitment to feeding those in need in Kansas.

Below: Gunkel with his wife, Densise, a former letter carrier.

Feeding the hungry Gunkel's priority

Larry Gunkel has been helping to feed hungry people in Kansas for a couple of decades. As a leader of Wichita, KS Branch 201, he participated in every NALC National Food Drive since it began in 1993. With Gunkel's backing, the Wichita branch has collected 1.7 million pounds of food to date. Gunkel now works with the Kansas Food Bank's efforts year-round.

By the time he retired from the Postal Service in April 2003, Gunkel was so committed and experienced with food collection that the Kansas Food Bank asked him to join its staff as program manager. Gunkel now uses leadership and organizing skills learned as a letter carrier and union leader to help the Kansas Food Bank feed nearly 35,000 hungry families across the state. Today, Gunkel's challenges go beyond collecting food—he must find and organize committed volunteers to help package and distribute it.

Gunkel supervises several food bank programs, including the Food 4 Kids backpack program. To fill in the gaps in school lunch programs, volunteers identify kids who might lack food over the weekend and send healthy food home with them from school each Friday. The backpack program serves about 5,000 students statewide. In his spare time, Gunkel helps his wife, Denise, herself a former letter carrier, work with the homeless through the group Advocates to End Chronic Homelessness, which she co-chairs.

“For Larry Gunkel, retiring was just another opportunity to devote more time to helping the community,” the judges said. “It’s a compelling and amazing effort.”

Gunkel says his work at the food bank is a natural extension of any letter carrier's job, since letter carriers see firsthand the needs of their communities and extend helping hands. “I feel very honored to be the person who represents what letter carriers do every day to help the community,” he said. “This never would have happened if I had not become a member of NALC.” ✉



EASTERN REGION HERO

Jeffrey Vollmar—Freehold, New Jersey Branch 924

Carrier tackles fire

A shout nearby caught the attention Jeffrey Vollmar as he delivered mail. A young woman told the Freehold, NJ Branch 924 member that her house was on fire and her mother was still inside.

Vollmar told the woman to call 911 and then, not stopping to consider the danger to himself, ran into the smoke-filled home and began a search for the girl's mother. Though the smoke made it harder and harder to see, he finally spotted the woman on the second floor, where she seemed disoriented and having trouble breathing. He grabbed her and assisted her down the stairs and outside the house.

"That's showing clear devotion to helping this family," the judges noted in choosing Vollmar as the 2010 Eastern Region Hero. "Without hesitation, he reacted."

But the letter carrier wasn't done yet. Once he saw that the woman was safely out of harm's way, he ran back into the house to look for any other residents. Finding none, he tried to tackle the fire that had by then engulfed most of the kitchen area. He was successful at extinguishing most of the flames before the fire department arrived to put out the rest.

Vollmar was treated for smoke inhalation and was later commended by the local borough council for setting aside concern for his own safety to help others. The carrier's bravery was "nothing less than a commendable random act of kindness and is just a shining example of the important and visible role that letter carriers serve in the community," the council said in presenting him with the accolade.

"When someone is in need of help, you can either let someone else respond, or do the right thing," he told the *News Transcript*. "I know that no matter what the cost to me, I will always do the right thing."

At the luncheon, Vollmar also received a Distinguished Service Medal from the State of New Jersey for his military service. In the citation, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie notes the carrier's "distinguished meritorious service in ground operations" in the peacekeeping effort in Lebanon.

On behalf of Congressman John Adler from New Jersey's Third District, President Fredric Rolando presented the carrier with the award for serving above and beyond the call of duty in the United States Marine Corps from 1981 to 1984.

"Jeff, you told us recently that for you, 'It's like a dream come true' to get these dual honors," Rolando said in presenting Vollmar with the awards. "Well, for us, it is an honor to have someone like you in our ranks." ✉



Above: In addition to awarding Jeffrey Vollmar the NALC Eastern Region Hero award, Rolando presented a Distinguished Service Medal from the State of New Jersey, honoring Vollmar's days serving as a peacekeeper in Lebanon with the Marines in the 1980s.

Below: Members of Vollmar's family were on hand to see him receive his recognition.





CENTRAL REGION HERO

Thomas Nehlen—Youngstown, Ohio Branch 385



Above: Nehlen gave an interview about his actions and his award to WYTV in Youngstown.

Right: Branch 385 President John Dyce accepted the award for Nehlen and spoke of the carrier's humility.

Below: Nehlen received his award in Youngstown, presented by Region 11 National Business Agent Dan Toth (l), OIC Michael Bachinger and Dyce.



Family safe from fire thanks to new carrier

Shortly after starting his post-military career as a letter carrier, Youngstown, OH Branch 385 member Tom Nehlen was making his rounds when he noticed thick smoke billowing from a window of a house nearby.

Quickly recruiting help from a neighbor, Nehlen carefully entered through a side door to gain access to the smoke-filled kitchen, where the home's occupants were clustered. He guided the family outside to safety just before firefighters arrived to quell the flames.

It was discovered that the blaze had started when a 3-year-old boy, playing with a lighter, ignited a mattress in a bedroom on the ground floor. There had been no working smoke detectors inside the home, and damages were assessed at \$15,000.

"At least everyone was safe," Nehlen told *The Warren Tribune*. "I never met them before. I just delivered their mail."

"He may never have met them," President Fredric Rolando said when presenting the award, "but he cared enough about his customers to risk his safety to protect this family."

After that bit of excitement, the carrier returned to his route to finish delivering his route, expecting the rest of the day to be typical. Not so.

While delivering in another part of town, the letter carrier saw a

12-year-old boy crash his bike into the side of a van in traffic. "I was the second vehicle in line behind the accident," he told the local newspaper. "I had to call 911." Nehlen then thought and acted quickly, getting out of his vehicle and rushing to the youth's side, making him comfortable and waiting with him until emergency personnel arrived.

Impressed with the carrier's heroic actions, judges remarked, "We wouldn't be surprised to see his name in the pages of *The Postal Record* again someday as a hero."

Nehlen was unable to attend the ceremony in Washington due to family commitments, but his branch president and state chair, John Dyce, was accepted the award on his behalf. ☒



WESTERN REGION HERO

Salli Hislop—Salt Lake City Branch 111

Dog points the way to fallen man

A small Yorkshire terrier came running over to letter carrier Salli Hislop as she was making a delivery, barking urgently as it attempted to climb into her LLV.

Knowing this was unusual behavior for the dog, the Salt Lake City Branch 111 member looked toward the home to see what was bothering the animal. There Hislop saw what the problem was: the dog's owner was lying on the porch, appearing to be suffering a heart attack. The man's wife was standing over him, unsure of what to do and looking very concerned for her husband.

Hislop assessed the man's condition. She then began trying to resuscitate him by starting CPR with chest compressions, per the 911 operator's instructions, keeping at it until paramedics arrived to take over. Although the man at first seemed unresponsive, the medical personnel were able to revive him because of the alert carrier's actions.

Judges pointed to Hislop's story as a good example of noticing what's around you and responding. "It was outstanding situational awareness," they commented. She began CPR "with no thought to her own personal safety or health," they added.

Hislop, a 32-year postal veteran, downplayed her involvement in the incident. "The dog was really the hero," she insisted to a local newspaper.

President Fredric Rolando differed. "For caring so much, and acting so quickly, Salli, you are our 2010 Western Region Hero of the Year," he said in announcing the award. ☒



Top: Western Region Hero Salli Hislop receives her award from President Rolando.

Above: Daughter Monique gives mom a proud hug.



BRANCH SERVICE AWARD

Seattle, Washington Branch 79

Seattle carriers never forgot Katrina victims



Above right: Branch 79 members J.D. Stewart (l) and Jack Hayes accept the Branch Service Award on behalf of the carriers who worked on the effort.

Below: Branch 79 President Rick Homer (2nd from l) and Hayes' wife, Barbara, attended the award ceremony as well.

Several active and retired letter carriers from Seattle Branch 79 contributed their sweat equity to the ongoing recovery from Hurricane Katrina by building two homes in the New Orleans area in just a week.

The small band of active and retired carriers, joined by a member of Tacoma Branch 130, trekked 2,100 miles from Washington state to New Orleans in April of last year, working with other Habitat for Humanity volunteers from

across the nation to build two new homes in Harvey, LA, a small town in Jefferson Parish, across the Mississippi River from New Orleans.

Led by Branch 130 member Cecil "Mac" McKenzie, the letter carrier contingent included Brooks Bennett, Jack Gilmore, Jack Hayes, Sally Knowle, J.D. Stewart, Connie Wigle, and Tacoma Branch 130 member Rick Baird.

Accustomed to long days in all kinds of weather, the letter carriers worked from early morning late into the evening to finish the houses in the extreme heat and humidity. They worked five straight days to bring two homes to near-completion. (One of the carriers had to quit because of dehydration.) Despite the tough conditions, limited training in construction, and tropical weather—which Jack Hayes compared to the heat from his service in Vietnam—they completed their mission. "We just got busy on whatever needed to be done," Hayes said. ✉



SPECIAL CARRIER ALERT

Deborah Czarny & Penny Bell—Muskegon, Michigan Branch 13

Teamwork saves a life

Carrier Penny Bell of Muskegon, MI Branch 13 noticed mail piling up in the mailbox of an elderly patron, Mildred Hasenback. She knew Hasenback usually had her television on at high volume because she was hard of hearing, but that wasn't the case this day. Bell saw no immediate cause for alarm, but instead of ignoring the situation, she asked her sub, 30-year carrier Deborah Czarny, to keep her eyes open when she served the route the next day.

When Czarny saw that the elderly patron had still not collected her mail the following day, she summoned a neighbor with a key to Hasenback's home. They pounded on the door until they heard a

faint reply. They then entered the home and found Hasenback inside on the floor, disoriented. They immediately summoned authorities. It turned out that Hasenback had collapsed four days earlier. She had a medical alert device, but it wasn't functioning.

"This is emblematic of letter carriers' knowledge of their patrons, attention to detail, and teamwork," the judges said. Bell could have forgotten about the elderly patron at the end of the work day, they noted, but "ending her shift did not end her concern for her customer."

"This is what every carrier would do," said Czarny of their heroic joint effort. ☒



Left: Penny Bell (r) and the sub on her route, Deborah Czarny, were recognized for their teamwork and as an example of all the carriers who make a point to look out for the elderly on their routes.

Above: The carriers' family members joined them in Washington—Penny's husband, Tom, and Deborah's mother, Ethel.

