



Leadership Academy

Developing tomorrow's **NALC** leaders



They trek to a classroom outside Washington, DC, 30 at a time, to devote their energy and talents to making all of our lives better.

The NALC's Leadership Academy is developing tomorrow's union leaders. Leadership Academy brings a class of 30 letter carriers—two from each NALC region—together in three week-long sessions to hone their leadership abilities.

"I don't know of any other union that has this kind of commitment to developing its leaders at every level," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "All letter carriers benefit from the Academy's efforts to improve our union's capacity to work for them."

After six years, 12 graduating classes (two each year) and 358 graduates, *The Postal Record* spoke to a few graduates to see how they are applying what they learned for the benefit of their fellow letter carriers.

Then-President William Young created the Leadership Academy in 2006, working closely with Jim Williams, who was executive vice president at the time. Students cram lessons on labor contracts, negotiation techniques, union finances, postal economics, running effective meetings, written and spoken communications, union governance and other topics into three one-week sessions at the National Labor College in Silver Spring, MD, a few miles from NALC Headquarters.

But the classroom is just the beginning of their learning experience. Young and Williams designed the program to stress real-world learning.

The students must devise and complete two "homework" projects between the classroom sessions. Also, each student has a mentor—an NALC leader, usually at the student's branch or region—to guide the student through the process.

"We set up the Leadership Academy to capture our institutional knowledge, to pass what we know on to the next generation of leaders," Williams said. "And we know that learning is about so much more than classroom work, so we get the students out there to do work in the field, doing the work they might do as union leaders."

Leadership Academy graduates go on to serve their fellow letter carriers in many different ways, President Rolando said.

"Some of our men and women go on to elected union office. But there are so many more ways the graduates become leaders. Leadership isn't just about a title," Rolando said.

"Some are working on specific projects or problems; some are leading grassroots efforts on legislation, or rallying the troops and keeping them informed through their writing in union publications, or sticking up for their co-workers as stewards. There are so many different paths they take in serving their union and their fellow carriers."

One overall message that is stressed at the Leadership Academy is the importance of taking what graduates learn back to their branches. "We talk about how, whatever they learn, we hope they take what they know and pass it on to the next generation of union activists and leaders," Rolando said.

Royal Oak, MI Branch 3126 member John Dick really took that message to heart.

While on his long motorcycle ride from Silver Spring back to Michigan after attending a Leadership Academy class in 2007, Dick contemplated how he could best serve his union. He decided to start his own version of the Leadership Academy at his branch.

"I had a little light go off in my head," he said. "It just became really clear what I had to do."

In 2008, Dick brought three enthusiastic NALC members together for his "NALC 3126 Leadership Learning Group" session. He chose a group of three because he saw how well that size worked at the Leadership Academy, where students were divided into groups of three for specific projects and discussions.

"It was sort of a distilled version of the Leadership Academy," he said.

The students worked on projects and learned about union business, activism and history with the help of special guests like local and regional NALC officers. Even NALC President Emeritus James Rademacher pitched in, speaking to students by phone.

"I took them on a field trip about Detroit labor history to see what the people before them had done," Dick said. The experience of running his own training "was a very, very satisfying experience, but a lot of work for everybody." Dick repeated the training for another group of three in 2010 and plans to do a third soon, and he is working with a letter carrier from another state who is interested in doing similar work.

Dick also was inspired to take on other new roles to further develop his knowledge. He became a full-time steward, health plan representative and Customer Connect coordinator for his entire branch. He also fulfilled the Leadership Academy's focus on

forging coalitions outside NALC by getting involved with Jobs with Justice, a group that brings labor groups together with community and student activists, where he is labor chairman for the Southeast Michigan chapter.

The mentoring Dick brought to letter carriers back home in Michigan reflects the purpose of the Leadership Academy, which is, as Williams puts it, "to get people on the escalator of activism" to better prepare our next generation of union leaders.

"The typical letter carrier might have only one model for learning how to manage—the managers at the Postal Service," he said. "We need an alternative to that, to put it nicely." The goal of the Leadership Academy is to develop people to be those new management models for others at the local level as much as training leaders directly.

"We spend time at the end talking about how the students can pay it forward," Williams said. "They are asked to mentor others to replicate themselves."

Looking at what students have done thus far, Williams says that nearly all the graduates are currently working in union activist roles.

For Dan Versluis of Tucson, AZ Branch 704, who serves NALC as a regional administrative assistant for Region 4, the Leadership Academy experience taught him a personal lesson.

"It opened my eyes," he said. During the self-assessment process Leadership Academy students go through, "I found out a few things I didn't want to admit. But if you're aware of it, you can change it."

Versluis realized that he could do a better job as a union leader by letting go of control and helping others lead with him. "It made me realize that you can't do everything yourself," he said. "Once I did that, it made it easier for me to mentor other people." It was a timely lesson for Versluis, who had





taken over as president of a troubled branch that desperately needed new leadership.

Versluis took that idea a step further by following the admonition of Leadership Academy instructors to always think about passing his knowledge to the next generation.

“Your job is to inspire and teach the person who is going to take your job,” he said. “I love the mentoring part because you see the lightbulb going off in their eyes.”

As part of his leadership, Versluis reminds letter carriers that they don’t need to serve as officers, or in any official capacity, to contribute or to get leadership experience. “Union members have outside skills they can use,” he said. He cited volunteers who have used construction skills to work on the branch office, including letter carrier Kevin Fort, who spent many hours renovating the roof—and is now vice president of Tucson, AZ Branch 704.

Versluis also values the friendships and contacts he made outside his own branch, which is another important purpose of the Leadership Academy.

“Leadership Academy is a great way to bring activists from different branches across the country together to share information, broaden their network and make contacts that will help them do their jobs as leaders,” Rolando said.

Bringing together the students from different branches across the country exposes them to how others approach their roles in the NALC, noted NALC Director of Education Jamie Lumm.

“Many students start with a pretty local view of the union,” he said. “They don’t have the 10,000-foot view of the NALC. When they meet nationally, they get the big picture.” Because NALC has only one contract instead of many like most other unions, the students can delve deeply into the National Agreement.

But a union is about much more than a contract, and the Leadership Academy experience reflects that. Students get broad exposure to all the elements of running a national union, Lumm said. “They get a little bit of everything. Each national officer comes out and gives them a bit of what they do.”

The experience knocks some students out of their comfort zones. Students are challenged with that No. 1 fear—public speaking. They all must give speeches, not only to each other, but at an event with national officers present. Even if they were comfortable in front of a crowd, most students had plenty of challenges to their skills that they had a chance to sharpen with the help of their fellow students.

For graduate Ami Nawrocki of Pueblo, CO Branch 229, the Leadership Academy was a safe place to work on her public speaking.

“It was painful, really, but unbelievably rewarding,” she said. “It’s very challenging, but they gave us a safety net of our brothers and sisters to learn how to put ourselves out there.”

The time she spent in the classroom honing her confidence, Nawrocki said, “literally flashes before my eyes each and every time I speak.”

Speaking to national officers, and getting to know them at training sessions and dinners, was invaluable to her job back at the branch and state levels. Talking about national policies is one thing, but to say she has a personal connection with President Rolando is another. “I’ve talked to this man,” she can tell her union members, “and I have confidence he’s fighting for all of us.”

Nawrocki, who is chief steward for her branch and secretary of the Colorado State Association, took a renewed sense of purpose home with her from the Leadership Academy, along with a determination to find new and creative ways to serve her fellow letter carriers.



"It infuses in you a definite sense of responsibility," she said. Last July, Nawrocki wrote an opinion piece published by the *Pueblo Chieftan* that confronted myths about the postal crisis.

Mary Smith is quick to sum up her achievement at Leadership Academy: "confidence."

Smith, from Greenwood, MS Branch 1080, came to the Labor College in 2009 with little experience as a branch activist but plenty of eagerness to lead.

"Everybody was already president of their branch or some other office," she said. "I was just a member who was so hungry to learn."

Smith took home newly acquired knowledge and a new drive to use it. "I thought I was shy," she said, but "those 30 brothers and sisters showed their love for me."

Before going to Leadership Academy, Smith knew she wanted to do something for her union but didn't know how to start. "I knew that I was paying dues. But I wanted to know more about the union. I knew the managers were treating the letter carriers wrong, but I didn't know how to get over the hump."

After she paid her own way to go to a regional training session, she impressed state and regional officers, who recommended that she apply to the Leadership Academy.

Smith chose to help her fellow carriers by looking back at those who came before her. For her "homework" assignment, she wrote a history of her branch that relied on the rich memories of branch members who had worked in her area for decades.

She discovered that the types of workplace challenges her predecessors faced had changed little over time. The most notable change from those days, she noticed, was a breakdown in unity. "Back then, everyone was involved in everything that came along," she said. "It's not the same today."

That set her on a path to find ways to inspire letter carriers to work together.

The solution she devised wasn't just to cajole the members to do more.

Instead, Smith is striving for participation in every branch activity, work-related or not. She uses each activity and function—such as raising money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association, participating in Customer Connect or joining the NALC e-Activist Network—as an opportunity to bring new volunteers into the mix and build the letter carrier team. "Everybody is getting a chance to do things," she said.

Smith also leads by example. She is now vice president of Branch 1080, director of education of the Mississippi State Association and workers' compensation state liaison. She hopes her efforts will sustain the union's future.

"One day, we're going to retire, and we want someone to come up behind us," she said.

Leadership Academy students are selected by President Rolando. Prospective students must submit an application that includes an essay question about why they want to attend the Leadership Academy. Students also must have a commitment from a mentor—typically a branch officer, RAA or any Leadership Academy graduate. Letter carriers who would like to apply for the next open classes should look for more information in future issues of *The Postal Record* or on our website, nalc.org.

"I applied to the Leadership Academy because I felt it would be an intense leadership educational training, the level of which I could not get anywhere else," said Region 7 National Business Agent Chris Wittenburg of St. Paul Branch 28. Wittenburg graduated from the first Leadership Academy class in 2005. "I would recommend the Leadership Academy to anyone who has a desire to learn, apply themselves, get more involved—all in the best interests of the NALC membership as a whole."

The lesson that has stuck with him most, said Wittenburg, is "don't be afraid to ask, fail, risk, lead." ✉

