



'Flashing Fingers' Feenan

It was almost 34 years ago, but I can remember my first day working in the post office like it was yesterday. To my good fortune, my on-the-job instructor was an Irish guy named Pat Feenan. At the time, Pat had this great route on "the Mesa," which is a bluff above downtown Santa Barbara overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Needless to say, it was a ritzy area populated with expensive homes owned by wealthy people. As such, it got a lot of mail, which Pat methodically cased at a just slightly better than 18-and-eight pace, earning him, in typical letter carrier sarcasm, the office nickname of "Flashing Fingers" Feenan, which he proudly embraced. Pat was the perfect OJI for me: steady, low-key and patient.

After spending a couple of hours trying to learn to case alongside Pat, putting up maybe a half a tray of letters to his four or five trays, we went to break. Sitting there with a cup of vending machine coffee in my hand, Pat told me I was doing great and not to worry, soon I'd be casing as fast as he did. This brought more than a few laughs from the others in the room. It took me a while to get the joke.

Finally, after what seemed like the longest morning of my life, we loaded up a half-ton postal vehicle and off we went, me sitting in the jump seat watching Pat make deliveries to the homes of famous sports figures, movie stars and local celebrities. It was kind of fun and didn't look too hard, but after about two hours, Pat said, "OK, now it's your turn." I immediately felt this urge to throw up.

Sensing my nervousness as we switched places and I moved into the driver's seat and buckled up, Pat said to me, "OK, first things first, are you wearing a watch?" When I told him I was, he said, "Give it to me," which kind of surprised me, but I handed it over. Pat put it in his pocket and said, "You'll get this back at the end of the day, but for now, I don't want you to worry about what time it is; I want you to focus on doing the job safely and getting the right mail in the right boxes." With that simple act and statement, Pat wiped away nearly all of the anxiety and stress I was feeling and helped me to believe that maybe I could do this job

after all. I also learned what was most important.

So I drove away from the house we were at and came to the next delivery. Pat watched as I clumsily gathered the letters and flats and placed them in the mailbox and got ready to pull away toward the next house. As I started to do so, he said, "Stop!" which startled me a bit, and he said, "What did you forget to do?" I had already checked and there were no parcels for the house, the road was clear ahead, I'd checked my mirror and put my turn signal on...what had I forgotten? Pat said, "When you stopped at the box, you left the vehicle in gear, you didn't put the transmission in neutral." I explained that I'd had my foot on the brake, but he told me that wasn't good enough. "What if your foot slips off the brake when your arm is putting mail in the box? Do you want to lose an arm?" Pat patiently explained to me that for that reason, carriers are required to put the vehicle in neutral on level ground and in park if it's on a hill. When I responded that they hadn't taught me that at driver training, he said, "Yeah, I'm not surprised."

I spent two days with Pat before I was assigned to another OJI with a park-and-loop route so I could learn that method of delivery. A few weeks later, I was reassigned to another station in Santa Barbara and, within a year, I had transferred to the Seattle area, and I never saw Pat again, but what he taught those first few days stuck with me for my entire career.

Indeed, one of my cherished memories as a carrier is the look of exasperation on the route examiner's face when, on my very first route inspection, I placed the transmission in neutral or park at each of the 745 mounted deliveries. It was especially nice when, after about 100 deliveries, he could stand it no more and asked me what I was doing. I'd anticipated such a question, so I'd brought along a copy of the neutral/park regulation and handed it to him. "We'll see about this when we get back!" he said. But after the inspection was complete, I heard nothing from him or anyone else about it. But I did get a 90-minute route cut. ☒