

Rest in peace, Tom Gates



**Jamie
Lumm**

I didn't think it would hurt so much, but I've had a lump in my throat ever since I heard this morning that my good friend, Tom Gates, passed away. I knew he'd been ill as of late, but at 69, the man was as strong as an ox and as stubborn as a mule; so I'd fully expected to see him in a few weeks when he came to DC for a meeting of the national Safety and Health Committee. His passing leaves a huge hole in many hearts and in the NALC.

I met Tom 26 years ago when I was working in the regional office and my NBA, Jim Edgemon, asked me to drive several large boxes of grievance files to Tom's home outside of Eugene, OR, so he could prep them for Step 3

meetings. Tom had nearly severed his leg in an accident that occurred while he was building his house and was unable to work for a number of months. So he'd asked the NBA if there was something he could do for the union while he was at home recovering. That's the kind of guy Tom was.

At the time, both of us were directors of education for our state associations, so Tom and I talked a lot that day about the NALC and ways to educate members to defend their rights against unscrupulous managers. We began a long friendship of sharing information and resources and of helping each other out. I've spent more weeks with Tom than I can count putting on national, state and regional training sessions, preparing cases for arbitration and working on committees and focus groups, plus hours and hours on the phone. Recently, Tom played the part of Postmaster Hugh Lyonsac in the steward training skit last summer at the national convention in Minneapolis.

No one I knew worked harder than Tom. As an RAA, I often would come to work and find several e-mails with lots of attachments he'd sent well after 2 a.m. and before I could finish reading them, Tom would be on the phone asking what I thought. And in spite of the many hours he spent delivering mail and working for letter carriers, he somehow found the time to, along with his dear wife Jan, raise a family, look after ailing parents, and manage pigs, cows, horses, sheep, chickens, peacocks and a variety of other animals on his farm. Like the old Army recruiting commercial, Tom got more done before breakfast than most people do all day.

Not everyone liked Tom, especially postal managers who violated the contract. If managers made an effort to comply, Tom was reasonable with them. But if he felt they didn't respect the contract or the NALC, Tom could make their job

a living hell. He would occupy them for hours interviewing them for grievances, explaining that, "Every hour they're in the office with me, they can't be out on the floor harassing my carriers." He used the "Undisputed Facts" portion of the grievance form like an artist, arriving at Formal A meetings armed with a long list of proposed undisputed facts for each grievance. He would painstakingly take the manager through every one of them. I once saw a case where Tom got the manager agree to more than 350 undisputed facts, each one a brushstroke painting management into a corner.

As much as Tom despised bad managers, he loved union letter carriers. Tom served as the president of Branch 916 for the last 18 years and was the director of education for the Oregon State Association from 1987 until his death. Along the way, Tom wore many other hats: E.I. facilitator, UMPS partner, Step B Team member, Truth Squad member and arbitration advocate, to name a few. But the role I believe he enjoyed most was when he was asked by the NBA to go into an office that was having serious problems with management and be the NALC's muscle on the workroom floor.

When Tom would arrive, the local managers would usually try to prevent him from entering the office, sometimes even calling the police, but to no avail. Once inside, Tom would spend each morning following the supervisors around with a notepad, writing down everything they did and said and he would be present whenever one of them spoke to an employee. When the carriers went out to the street, Tom would spend the day investigating and preparing dozens of grievances that he would file the following morning. If a manager left the building for street supervision, Tom would follow. He was the first one there in the morning and the last one to leave every night. One postmaster tried to avoid Tom by coming in earlier and earlier each morning, but each time, Tom was already there ready to greet him with a dozen more grievances. Finally, the postmaster showed up at 4 a.m...and there was Tom, sitting in his car in the parking lot waiting for him. After a week or two of this, management was ready to agree to pretty much anything just to get rid of him. He just didn't care what any manager thought of him.

Like the rest of us, Tom had his flaws. Some found him stubborn and he could get short with folks he didn't respect. But Tom was the guy you wanted handling your grievance, because you knew he would leave no stone unturned, consider every angle and exhaust every move to win it.

I know that Tom was not the only NALC activist to fit that description, but there's a special place in my heart for him, as some years ago he convinced a shop steward from a very small office in eastern Oregon to attend a steward training that I was helping him with—and five years later she became my wife. We both will miss him terribly. So long, Brother; enjoy your well-earned rest.