

A special week in an historic year



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In Philadelphia this summer, NALC will mark its 125th anniversary. As we struggle to strengthen the Postal Service for the 21st century and fight to protect the health and safety of our members in today's challenging conditions, we will seek inspiration by celebrating a remarkable history of collective action and progress. So it is appropriate that 2014 began with a very special week of remembrance and thanksgiving.

On Jan. 11, we held a memorial service and dinner for Vincent R. Sombrotto in New York, and on the weekend of Jan. 17-19, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the founding of Nalcrest in Lake Wales, FL. In between,

NALC scored a victory in Washington when Congress once again mandated six-day delivery in 2014 and the NALC Executive Council met to map out strategy for the year ahead. A nice start to our quasiquicentennial (yep, there's a word for it).

In New York, we invited Vince Sombrotto's family (including his wife Rae as well as their seven children and their families) to a memorial service at the Church of St. Francis of Assisi and gathered with hundreds of letter carriers from around the country for a dinner at Manhattan Center. (See page 11 for more on the two events.) We did that to remember Vince, the greatest president in the 125-year history of the National Association of Letter Carriers, on the first anniversary of his death. But we also did it to celebrate an extraordinary man and to take joy in the prosperity of spirit he helped create across the country in the homes of hundreds of thousands of letter carriers.

It was fitting that we met in the Hammerstein Ballroom at Manhattan Center. That magnificent ballroom, built by the Broadway writer and producer Oscar Hammerstein, is where Vincent R. Sombrotto first emerged as a truly gifted trade unionist—even before he held elected office in the NALC at any level. It was there, in that room, that the modern history of the NALC began on the evening of March 17, 1970.

Thousands of letter carriers gathered there to vote on whether to go on strike against the government of the United States of America. So serious were their grievances—the pay that left many eligible for welfare, the poor working conditions, the lack of fairness and dignity in the workplace—they were willing to risk their jobs and their freedom by withholding their labor.

They voted to go on strike—and that strike spread across the city and state, and then across the country. When it was over, the Post Office Department was set on a path of change that transformed the lives of millions of Americans.

None of it would have happened without Vince Sombrotto and his team of activists who decided to lead and to fight. If that is all Vince had done—galvanized an historic strike—he would have been remembered in our union forever. But he was just getting started.

He went on to lead Branch 36, and then a progressive reform movement within the union, and then the national union itself. The beneficiaries were millions of postal workers over the next several decades who were able to achieve the American dream and secure their place in the middle class.

All of us are the beneficiaries of Vince's amazing career. We are grateful, and many thousands of us have dedicated our lives to doing what we can to advance the cause he dedicated his life to—making life better for America's working families. God bless Vincent R. Sombrotto and God bless the NALC.

Later in the week, we celebrated the living legacy of another giant in our union's history, William C. Doherty, who created a retirement community for letter carriers in Florida called Nalcrest. That vibrant community celebrated its 50th anniversary over the third weekend in January.

When our union was founded in 1889, the idea of retirement barely existed, at least for working-class people. People worked virtually every day of their adult lives and rarely had the chance to enjoy a period of relaxation as a reward for decades of labor. It would take almost 30 years of hard work by NALC and other labor organizations to convince Congress to create the Civil Service Retirement System and, 15 years after that, to create Social Security. In 1889, only the rich could dream of a day when they could rest and enjoy living without the need to work to survive.

It took the labor movement and unions like NALC to democratize retirement and make it part of the American dream for all Americans, not just the rich. Nalcrest, a very special retirement community for letter carriers, demonstrates the fulfillment of that dream.

The 270,000 members of the National Association of Letter Carriers congratulate Nalcrest for creating and sustaining a special place for retired letter carriers for the past half century. We take great pride in its values of community and solidarity and pledge our continued support. (For more on Nalcrest's 50th anniversary, see next month's issue of *The Postal Record*.)

It was a special week to kick off this historic year. That it coincided with another victory in Congress was the perfect way to get started on the next 125 years.