

With USPS, ignorance isn't bliss



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“The mind is not a vessel that needs filling, but wood that needs igniting.” —Plutarch

I'd been a steward only about a month when I attended my first NALC training way back in 1982. I was asked by my branch president in Kent, WA, if I would take the position when the previous steward showed up for work one morning wearing a tie and carrying a clipboard.

I agreed to do it, but under one condition: The branch had to send me to some training. As demonstrated by my predecessor, my understanding of what it meant to be a steward was to go into the managers' offices and yell. Then I guess at some point they'd try to get me to become a

204-b. I assumed there was more to it than that, so I thought I should probably find out what it was. My branch of about 50 members had not sent anyone to training in recent memory, so I had no one to turn to if I had questions.

The branch president told me there was going to be something called a “regional rap session” in a nearby town in a few weeks, so he gave me a phone number and said I should call the NBA's office to find out more about it. I called and, to my embarrassment, discovered that the rap session had taken place about six months before. But they told there was another one coming up the next month in Salt Lake City, about a thousand miles away. Thankfully, the branch put its money where its mouth was and bought me a plane ticket.

I didn't know what to expect when I arrived, but I latched on to a couple of veteran NALC activists I met at the airport. They introduced me to some other NALC folks and showed me where to sit. The first session was held the afternoon of our arrival and was conducted by our NBA, Jim Edgemon. He spoke for several hours about things that were happening in the NALC and the Postal Service. Afterward, he opened it up for questions.

One of the items for discussion was the “safety” switches that management recently had installed in the seats of some of our postal jeeps. These switches automatically cut the engine off when the driver got out of the seat to exit the vehicle. One of the problems was that they also cut the engine off when smaller drivers' weight shifted when turning corners, leaving them in the middle of an intersection with a dead engine and no power steering. Not so safe.

We also talked about another postal gimmick, the tachograph. In the pre-digital, pre-GPS days, this was a mechanical device that recorded a vehicle's speed onto a circular

paper chart. It seemed that management was using this data to discipline carriers for exceeding the speed limit or parking in one place too long. Sound familiar? Anyway, the tachograph was mounted under the dash near the floor in a metal unit about the size of a child's lunch box. Apparently these could be rendered inoperable if accidentally bumped with sufficient force while loading, or so it was mentioned. This stuff was all very interesting and I learned a lot, but it was nothing compared to what happened the next day.

That morning the program was turned over to some guy who looked like movie critic Roger Ebert but was introduced to us as Arbitrator Joseph Gentile. He was there to talk about something called “just cause.” This sounded interesting, so I settled in my seat, got out my writing tablet and over the next four hours something wonderful happened.

You see, up to that point, if someone in my unit was disciplined or fired, the only thing I knew to do about it was to talk to management and try to convince them that they were being unfair. If that didn't work, my tactic was to get louder. I was basically powerless because I was ignorant. I didn't know that before issuing discipline, management had to follow certain steps known as due process and that discipline had to meet the tests of just cause or it could be thrown out.

With each new concept I learned, I felt like another weapon was added to my arsenal to defend the carriers back home. I discovered new phrases, like “This was an aberration from his normal pattern of behavior” and “disparate treatment” and how to use them. The longer Joe spoke, the more empowered I felt. By the time he was finished, I felt like a gladiator ready for battle. I couldn't wait to get home and overwhelm management with my newfound power.

Of course, things didn't exactly happen that way. Management was not all that impressed and denied everything anyway. So, I still had to appeal most grievances, but once they reached a level where the manager understood what “just cause” meant, they were usually settled in our favor.

But more importantly, I learned that knowledge was power and a fire was ignited within me to want to know more. I made it a priority to go to any NALC training I could find. We've all heard the expression “Ignorance is bliss.” That may be true when it comes to some things, but it's not true when you work for the post office. Even if you are not an officer or steward in your branch, knowing as much as you can about your job and what management can and can't do is empowering and will put you at an advantage when you have to deal with them.

About five years after that first training, I had the privilege of advocating a case before Arbitrator Gentile. Before the hearing began, I reminded Joe of that training in Salt Lake City and told him how much it had inspired me. “Well,” he said, “I guess we'll find out if that was a good thing.”