With USPS, ignorance isn’t bliss

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 to my embarrassment, discovered that the rap session had taken place about six months before. But they told there

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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.

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.”