

# Communicating through deeds



Philip  
Dine

**W**ords, obviously, are important tools in communications. But so are actions.

That's especially true in a case like ours, where we are not engaged in a talking-heads debate but rather are trying to move a nation in a practical sense. That requires buy-in—by the public, the politicians and the press—not only to the message but also to the messenger.

On that score, we start with an edge. True, our message is powerful on its own, but as we know, one of our advantages is that letter carriers are liked, trusted and respected. Anything we can do to bolster that inherent strength only helps.

So, winning our fight to preserve a vital American institution, the public's access to affordable universal mail service and, by the way, hundreds of thousands of good middle-class jobs, depends not just on what we say, but on what we do and who we are and how we're viewed.

That's the framework through which I took in our annual Heroes ceremony in Washington, DC, in early October, as I listened to President Rolando recount in understated fashion what brought each of the nine award-winners to the stage. He didn't have to hype or dramatize anything—their actions spoke for themselves.

Florida's Alan Symonette extracted an unconscious man from his sinking car just before it filled up with water. California's Scott Gallegos, an Iraq veteran, shielded and tended to a wounded woman while under fire from her assailant. Ohio's Kizzy Spaulding and Oklahoma's Steve Shipman pulled residents from burning homes. California's James Robledo, a Vietnam War veteran, helps fellow combat vets facing struggles. New Jersey's Denice Howard located and assisted an elderly customer who had fallen on ice. Oregon's Bryce McLean and Terrence Graves, the latter a veteran of both Afghanistan and Iraq, spotted and detained an armed suspect. And Maine's John Curtis helped inform today's workers about how workers succeeded in prior struggles.

Brave, dedicated, creative and uniformly humble—traits evident as each made brief acceptance remarks, just as they were in media coverage both before and after the Heroes event.

As I watched, my reaction to President Rolando's thoughts on public service, to his retelling of the extraordinary efforts of these carriers, to their humility about themselves coupled with pride in their craft and respect for their brothers and sisters in the craft, was simple: Letter carriers do this country proud.

And that was the tone of much of the news coverage surrounding the event.

The piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, quoted Symonette downplaying his actions, then noted how the former Marine, after swimming out to the sinking car and saving the driver, "...went back to delivering mail on his route."

We've previously discussed the ripple effect your letters and commentaries and interviews can have by leading to more coverage; the same applied here in intriguing ways.

No sooner had the *Tulsa World*, circulation 98,000, published an outstanding story on Shipman, than editors at People.com, readership in the millions, noticed it and used it as the basis for their own feature on the Oklahoma carrier—depicting a man courageous yet humble.

Similarly, when the otherwise good *Los Angeles Times* piece veered off track at the end with a misleading sketch of postal finances, President Rolando seized the chance to write a letter extolling the Heroes while also talking about the billion-dollar-plus operating profits. That turned the paper's flub to our advantage by multiplying the attention to the Heroes (and by citing the profits). And it followed by just 72 hours his powerful letter on finances and poor reporting in the *Washington Post*. (It's pretty much unheard of to have letters or commentaries back-to-back in two of the country's biggest and best newspapers.)

I'll close by noting just a few of the posted comments to the People.com piece; you decide whether our Heroes, who represent the good deeds of thousands of letter carriers throughout the country, help us get out the message.

"This is what heroes do—rescue/help someone and then continue on with life."

"What's the motto? Neither rain, nor snow, nor dark of night or something like that? Just add house fire to all that. Thank you, USPS!"

"That is one lucky girl! A hero was delivering her mail and she didn't even know it!"

"Great job from a humble man."

*The Postal Record's* coverage of this year's event begins on page 16.

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