



2015



OF THE
YEAR
AWARDS

“**L**etter carriers are part of the fabric of the communities they serve,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said as he welcomed the large audience to the 2015 NALC Heroes of the Year Awards luncheon. “Every day, in communities all across this vast nation, letter carriers are on the lookout for, and often chance upon, opportunities to protect the families and neighborhoods they know so well. They may find a missing child or stop a crime in progress; pull someone out of a burning car or notice something askew at an elderly customer’s home and end up saving a life.

“They do these things not because they’re supermen or superwomen,” President Rolando said. “They do them because they’re in the neighborhoods six or even seven days a week and they know when something’s wrong. They act because they’re often first on the scene. And because they know the families, having watched the children grow and the parents age, and they really care about the well-being of the residents and the safety of the community.”

The Heroes event was held on Oct. 8 in the nation’s capital, with attendees including the union’s resident national officers, top U.S. Postal Service executives, two members of Congress and reporters. The annual ceremony highlighted the special acts of courage and compassion performed by nine NALC letter carriers. Rolando called these NALC members “some of the best carriers to wear the uniform.”

Before presenting the awards, Rolando thanked the panel of independent judges who had reviewed the stories about heroic and humanitarian acts published in *The Postal Record* between July 2014 and June 2015. The judges were: Richard Bowers, chief of the Fairfax County, VA, Department of Fire and Rescue; Christopher Godfrey, chairman and chief judge of the Employees’ Compensation Appeals Board



NALC President
Fredric Rolando

at the U.S. Department of Labor; and Ana Avendano, AFL-CIO Community Services liaison at the United Way of America and vice president of Department of Labor participation.

Rolando also recognized a number of special guests who were on hand, including Reps. Ami Bera (D-CA) and Norma Torres (D-CA), USPS Postmaster General Megan Brennan and AFL-CIO Executive Vice President Tefere Gebre.

Both congressional representatives present congratulated and thanked the heroes and humanitarians from their districts and extolled their virtues as not only letter carriers, but also veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces.

Torres spoke about her hometown hero, National Humanitarian of the Year James Robledo. “As a mother of an Air Force veteran, I want to thank you, first of all, for your service, but also thank you for your continued service, serving our veterans by ensuring that they have a way with PTSD to demonstrate that they are cared for by learning to play the guitar,” she said. “Thank you for the work you do in our communities.”

Bera told the audience how impressed he was by National Hero of the Year Scott Gallegos’ remarkable story. “He just went right into action, not thinking about putting himself in harm’s way,” he said. “This is not the

first time Scott has served his community and his country. He is an Iraq war combat veteran, and that call to duty is what we are as Americans, and who we are. So Scott, you’ve made us very proud.”

Rolando then introduced PMG Brennan, who congratulated the heroes for their selfless acts. “You represent the best of the Postal Service,” she told the honorees. “Letter carriers are the face of this organization, and I want to thank you for being approachable in our neighborhoods, reliable, trusted and known to your customers. Thank you for all you do.”

Rolando explained why the USPS, and especially carriers as the face of the agency, are so trusted by the public. “The nation’s 180,000 city letter carriers crisscross the country, delivering to all of the neighborhoods that make up the American community,” he said. “They provide hand-delivered, personal service to every home, every business, every American. They do it when storms or floods or other natural disasters hit, when letter carriers often are the only sign of normalcy for many residents. They also carry on when man-made problems arise—such as a government shutdown.”

He highlighted all that letter carriers



Rep. Torres



Rep. Bera



Postmaster General Megan Brennan

do in addition to delivering the mail, from performing the country's largest annual one-day food drive, to leading the fight against muscular dystrophy, to preparing and training to deliver medicines and vaccines quickly in case of biological attack.

"And occasionally, individual carriers prove to be the difference between life and death, or manage to improve lives and even communities," Rolando said.

NALC honors veterans

Earlier in the week, representatives of the NALC had the honor of laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia directly following the noon changing-of-the-guard ceremony. Representing NALC were four of the letter carrier heroes who are also military veterans: National Hero of the Year Scott Gallegos of Carmichael, CA Branch 4494 (Army); National Humanitarian of the Year James Robledo of Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100 (Army); Eastern Region Hero of the Year Alan Symonette of Gainesville, FL Branch 1025 (Marine Corps); and Unit Citation Hero Terrence Graves of Eugene, OR Branch 916 (Navy).



"We know that many of the most impressive acts go unreported," he said. "And why is that? Because after responding to a need or a potential catastrophe, most of our carriers simply dust off their uniforms—or dry them off—and go back to work. That's because for many of our carrier heroes, looking out for the community simply comes with the uniform."

Rolando then recounted each hero's story to the audience. Their stories are found in the following pages of this issue of *The Postal Record*.

Rolando then presented each honoree with an award certificate and a special lapel pin that the carrier can wear to highlight the distinction.

This year's honorees were selected from among nearly 100 nominees, whose stories of heroism and community service were published over the course of a year in the NALC's membership magazine. Those stories were collected into a booklet, *A Year's Worth of Heroes*, which was distributed to the luncheon's guests.

"Our honorees' actions reflect something larger—they symbolize what is special about our craft," Rolando said. "They exhibit professionalism in the way they carry out their everyday duties, and every so often they get the opportunity to rise up and meet an unexpected challenge and improve—or protect—someone's life."

Heroes in the media

Reports on the heroes were run in various media outlets in the days following the event.

Articles appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*; Riverside, CA's *The Press Enterprise*; *The Gainesville Sun*; the *Akron Beacon Journal*; People.com; *The Tulsa World*; and the *Vinita (OK) Daily Journal*, among other outlets.

You can read all of the coverage, as well as watch videos of the heroes telling their stories, on the NALC website at nalc.org/heroes.

Denice Howard

Plainfield, NJ Branch 396



2015 SPECIAL CARRIER ALERT
HERO OF THE YEAR



Plainfield, NJ Branch 396 member **Denice Howard** was delivering her route on Feb. 11 when she came upon the car of her elderly customer, Steven Gordon, by his mailbox at the top of a hill. “He never leaves his car like that,” the carrier said. “I thought, let me give him his mail. He must have come to meet me.” Howard then saw the man lying on the ground with his back to her. “He wasn’t moving,” Howard said. She went over to him and found him coherent. He said he had slipped on ice and fallen. “I’m OK; I just can’t get up,” Gordon told Howard.

Howard called 911, then took off her jacket and other extra clothing to keep the man warm until medical personnel arrived to take Gordon to the hospital. “As of now, the injuries are healing and life is becoming normal,” Gordon wrote in a thank-you letter to the local postmaster. “Thank you for your concern and for having Denice as our mail carrier.” Gordon is back home but still recovering from his injuries.

Howard said what she did wasn’t unusual since she treasures all of her customers. “I was really glad I was

there at the right time,” the 30-year carrier said.

“In our line of work, we see these people as an extension of our own families,” she said. “It was like saving a family member.”

The Heroes of the Year judges said Howard demonstrated “incredible situational awareness. Her actions also say a lot about her character.”

“It feels fantastic” to be honored as the 2015 Carrier Alert Hero of the Year, Howard added. “It warms my heart.”



2015 SPECIAL EDUCATION
AWARD HERO OF THE YEAR

John Curtis

Central Maine Merged Branch 391



“The past is always present.”

That is the mantra of **John Curtis**, the retired NALC member and editor of *The Maine Letter Carrier* for Central Maine Merged Branch 391. “Sometimes the past is present as ongoing problems in our society, such as the evils of exploitation, racism and undemocratic laws,” he said. “But the past is also present as a step stool to help us overcome these problems by showing us how others have done so before we came along.”

Curtis attempted to relate that important past to the current generation through his booklet, *LOW WAGES and other HIGH CRIMES: Untold Stories of the 99%*. It is filled with short stories that show how workers have banded together and overcome long odds to make the impossible possible.

“I wanted to give more people access to labor stories, not as a historical footnote, but as something that would help them see that there are ways to better your conditions at work now, because this is what people have done in the past,” he said.

Curtis started writing the short 500-word stories more than a year ago for the branch newsletter, including one that won First Place in the 2014 NALC publication contest, but he realized he had enough topics to do more. So he set a goal of writing about 25 articles and collecting them. He worked on it for a year and published it late last year.

One of his main inspirations for the booklet has been his work on the local level with a coalition advocating on behalf of low-wage fast food and retail workers.

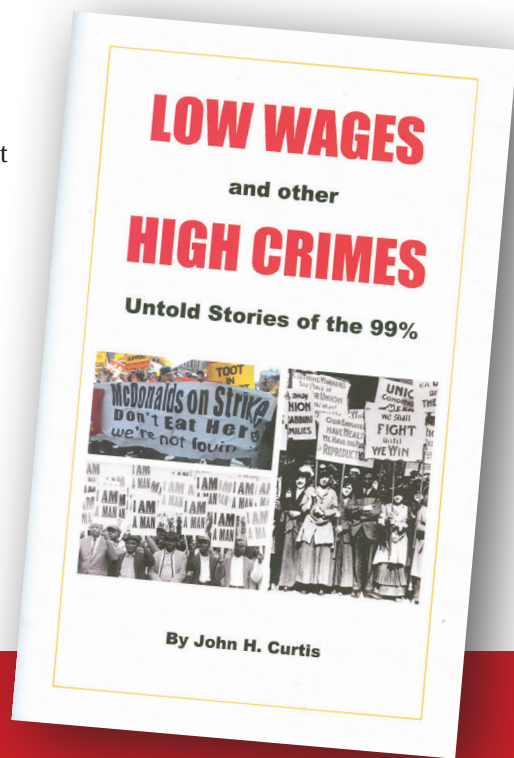
“Part of the impetus for this was to get this book into their hands, to give them a little bit of historical perspective, so they know that it’s not impossible to take on McDonald’s,” Curtis said. “I’ve tried to take history, particularly labor history, out of the library and put it

into the streets, into the hands of people, particularly young people, who are fighting today for a living wage and for fairness in the workplace.”

He hopes that the easy-to-read stories will encourage people to read more and to do their own research into the interesting history of the labor movement.

For Curtis’ work, the Heroes of the Year judges created a special education award. In a letter to him, NALC President Fredric Rolando wrote: “This booklet serves a much-needed purpose in worker education for union members who have an interest in labor history but don’t know where to start. I am especially pleased that you made the effort to connect the great battles of labor history with similar battles faced by workers today.”

“I am tremendously happy that the NALC is recognizing and appreciating my work by giving me this first-ever special education award,” Curtis said. “I am pleased, and humbled, to be in the company of my sister and brother carriers whose humanitarian actions are being honored by my union.”



Steve Shipman

Tulsa, OK Branch 1358



2015 WESTERN REGION
HERO OF THE YEAR

An unusual sound grabbed the attention of Tulsa, OK Branch 1358 member **Steve Shipman** as he was on his route on the morning of Feb. 4. “I heard a small explosion,” he said.

He looked up and saw smoke emanating from a house nearby. Shipman and a neighbor, Sherman Alberty, called 911 at the same time.

“I ran up, tried to kick the door down,” Shipman said. “Then I got off the porch because the fire was flying around.”

Alberty believed that no one was inside, but then they both heard a young girl screaming. An 11-year-old girl was home alone. She had awakened to see smoke and was trapped in her bedroom at the back part of the house.

“We didn’t know anyone was in there until we heard her holler,” Shipman said.

They rushed to the back of the home. “We grabbed a two-by-four and busted out the window,” Shipman said. The two men then began to clean out the glass from the windowsill.

There were people gathering around, so Shipman asked for a jacket. Someone handed him one, and they laid it across the shattered glass and pulled the girl out of the window to safety and onto a blanket that someone had brought. She said that no one else was inside.

The cause of the fire had not been determined, but firefighters were able to extinguish it. Even so, the damage

from the blaze caused a total loss of the house.

After Shipman saw that the situation was in good hands, “I gave [Alberty] a high-five and went along with my business,” he said. “I wanted to help, but I wanted to be under the radar.”

As it turned out, his actions didn’t stay under the radar.

The Heroes of the Year judges noted that Shipman “put his life in question to save another in this rapidly developing serious situation.” Because of that, they selected him as NALC’s 2015 Western Region Hero.

Shipman said he doesn’t consider himself a hero but that the award is a fantastic honor. “We were fortunate because we heard her holler. Everything fell into place,” the 25-year letter carrier said. “It’s something anyone would do in that situation.”





2015 CENTRAL REGION
HERO OF THE YEAR

Kizzy Spaulding

Akron, OH Branch 148

“I smelled some funny odor,” Akron, OH Branch 148 member **Kizzy Spaulding** said of going about her route on Oct. 7, 2014. As she approached the mail slot at customer Mrs. Watson’s door, she said, “It smelled like a burned egg.”

Spaulding yelled for her customer, but Watson did not respond. “I started to go on, but I turned around and went back,” she said. “It didn’t sit right with me.”

So she knocked on the door—no response.

“I looked through the crack, and I saw Mrs. Watson on the couch, but smoke was coming out, so I opened the door,” Spaulding recalled.

The carrier entered the house and noticed that Watson

was unresponsive. Checking the kitchen, Spaulding saw a fire and knew that time was of the essence, so she pulled the woman outside to the porch for safety.

The carrier then called 911 and used the woman’s phone to call people in its directory. Firefighters soon arrived to help put out the fire.

Spaulding later learned that the woman had been going into a diabetic coma, and her nurse wasn’t scheduled to arrive until later that day.

When Spaulding saw her customer the next day, “she gave me a big ol’ hug,” she said. But the 18-year postal veteran brushed off any major accolades. “I paid attention,” she said. “I don’t think I’m a hero.”

In selecting Spaulding as the NALC’s 2015 Central Region Hero, the Heroes of the Year judges said that “situational awareness is a key skill of carriers,” adding, “This was a very dangerous situation, and she acted calmly and heroically.”



Alan Symonette

Gainesville, FL Branch 1025

“I heard a crash followed by tires squealing, then a second crash and more tires squealing,” Gainesville, FL Branch 1025 member **Alan Symonette** recalled of his workday on June 17, 2014.

He had been delivering a parcel on his route at a large apartment complex when it all went down. Symonette stepped out of the hallway of the complex and realized that an SUV had hit multiple vehicles and then driven over a curb at high speed and into a retention pond. “I could see the SUV bobbing 40 yards out,” he said. “I couldn’t very well leave the man out there.”

The carrier, a Marine Corps veteran, immediately went to the bank of the pond and removed his shoes, phone and other valuables before swimming out to the car. “I went out there without a plan,” he said.

Symonette and an apartment maintenance man, Marcus Lady, checked on the driver, Gerald Bacoats, and saw that the SUV’s airbags had deployed. “He was awake and sitting in the car, but he wasn’t ‘with it,’” the carrier said.

The momentum of the SUV had carried it out to the middle of the pond. The men at first tried to pull the SUV back toward the embankment and into shallow water, but they were treading water and couldn’t find footing.

Symonette and Lady searched for a way to get inside the vehicle, but weren’t successful. “You have no leverage at all when you’re treading water,” the carrier said.

Lady headed to shore to get a rope while the carrier continued to tread water and try to free Bacoats. “I couldn’t pull him out alone and I was getting tired and the SUV was still sinking,” Symonette said. “I started looking to the shore for help.”

At this point, a bystander, Russell Gault, also entered the water. The SUV was flooding and sinking even deeper.

Finally, Gault and Symonette found

their way in through the driver’s open window. Symonette held the unconscious man’s head up and out of the water while trying to dislodge his legs—his feet seemed to be stuck under the gas pedal.

“There was nothing to lose,” Symonette said. “I got in the car and started yanking him by the seat of his pants.”

Meanwhile, Gault was pulling on the driver’s arms and chest trying to wrangle him from the driver’s seat. Just as the car was almost completely filled with water, together they pulled Bacoats out of his vehicle and onto the shore.

Symonette was thankful Gault was there. “I was fatigued,” he said. “Without his help, this never would have gone anywhere.”

Bacoats was alert and responsive by the time they reached shore. He was taken to a hospital and treated for minor injuries. Police said Bacoats had lost consciousness after apparently having some sort of seizure, which caused him to hit two vehicles and then crash into the pond.

When Symonette saw that the driver would be fine, he put his boots back on and resumed delivery on his route.

“I thought it could have been the worst day of my life, watching this happen,” the 29-year postal veteran said. “I feel fortunate that I was able to do what I did.”

The Heroes of the Year judges had no difficulty in naming Symonette NALC’s 2015 Eastern Region Hero for his “honorable and rare” actions. “Heroism just jumped off this page,” they said. “It was a cumulative effect of everything they did, and it shows incredible concern for others and commitment to his job as a letter carrier.”

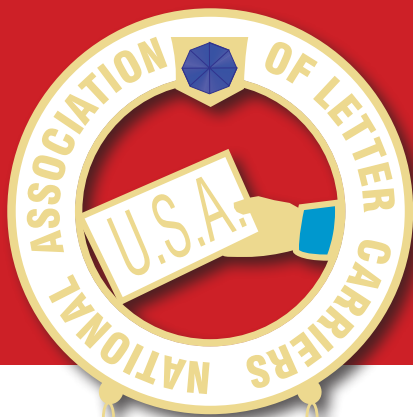
Despite front-page newspaper stories and other media attention, Symonette brushed off any major accolades. He summed up his actions simply: “I just thought I did the right thing that day.”



2015 EASTERN REGION
HERO OF THE YEAR



The SUV in the retention pond



2015 UNIT CITATION
HERO OF THE YEAR

Bryce McLean & Terrence Graves

Eugene, OR Branch 916

On the morning of June 12, 2014, a college-aged customer approached Eugene, OR Branch 916 member **Bryce McLean** and told him that she had had a package stolen from her that contained a \$425 dress she had just bought, as well as some expensive shoes. The woman showed McLean, and police officers, a grainy still image of the suspect that she had obtained from video surveillance.

Two days later, McLean encountered a man matching the suspect's description several blocks away at a 7-Eleven. The carrier notified the police and then called on fellow Branch 916 member

Terrence Graves to help him stall the suspect until the responding officer arrived.

Graves told the man, "You need to wait for the police, and you can run if you'd like, but I was a track star in high school, so you wouldn't make it 20 yards."

When police arrived, they found that the suspect was still in possession of the woman's dress, as well as hundreds of dollars' worth of various stolen property

belonging to multiple people—cell phones, laptops, even a diamond-encrusted cat collar—and was armed with a knife. "He had been stealing throughout the neighborhood for a day or two," Graves said, adding that the man had a lengthy criminal record.

With the suspect in custody, police were able to return valuable items to their rightful owners and prosecute the suspect. "Due to Mr. McLean's care for the community, his attention to detail, and his alert nature, the Eugene Police Department was able to solve several cases," police officer Branden Esch said. "Mr. McLean is, without a doubt, a benefit to this community and an asset to the United States Postal Service. I would like to extend my personal gratitude for his diligence and assistance. This community is a better place because of him."

Graves said that co-workers at his post office started calling him and McLean "Starsky and Hutch." The 22-year postal veteran said that the appellation is funny, but that their actions are "not a big deal."

The Heroes of the Year judges thought it was a big deal, though, and honored the two carriers with the 2015 NALC Unit Citation Award for their coordinated actions. "They used a high level of teamwork," the judges said, "not only with each other, but with the police. Their actions benefited the whole community, not just the victim."

"I'm proud of what we did and I'd do it again today," Graves said.

McLean, a former city carrier assistant who is no longer with the Postal Service, gave this advice to letter carriers: "No matter what—do the right thing."

Bryce McLean (l) and Terrence Graves



James Robledo

Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100

Retired Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100 letter carrier **James Robledo** found a path to relieving the stress he still feels from his military service in Vietnam. He picks up his guitar and softly plays it, and the stress melts away.

“I feel comfort with the guitar,” he said. “A guitar is made of wood, not metal. It’s warm, and the vibrations are soothing.”

Robledo learned to play through Guitars for Vets, a nationwide program that teaches military veterans to play the instrument for pleasure and therapy. Soon, he became a guitar instructor for other veterans and then the head of his local Guitars for Vets chapter.

Robledo served in the Army in 1969 as an air traffic controller. His job took him to helicopter bases in combat areas, and his responsibilities included guarding the bases in addition to his air traffic control duties.

“We landed aircraft during the day,” he said, “and we shot back at muzzle flashes at night.”

Robledo finished his military service in 1970 and held a series of jobs until 1984, when he became a letter carrier in Whittier, CA. He retired in 2009, but he had trouble adjusting. He found some of the difficulties he had brought from Vietnam bothering him again, and he sought help at the Veterans Administration (VA). “My time in Vietnam left me with symptoms I didn’t know I had,” he said.

A VA doctor referred him to the nearby Loma Linda, CA, chapter of Guitars for Vets, a non-profit group founded in 2007 that has grown from a single instructor teaching a veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to play guitar to a program with more than 50 chapters across the country serving thousands of vets.

The program’s goal is to help

veterans through both the healing power of playing the instrument and the process of learning with other veterans who have had similar experiences and emotions. The instructors are volunteers, and the lessons are free. (For more information, go to guitars4vets.org.)

The veterans have different problems, mental or physical, and playing the guitar can help them in different ways. Robledo recalled a veteran who couldn’t open a door with one hand due to a stroke. With guitar lessons as a form of physical therapy, the student regained some use of his hand.

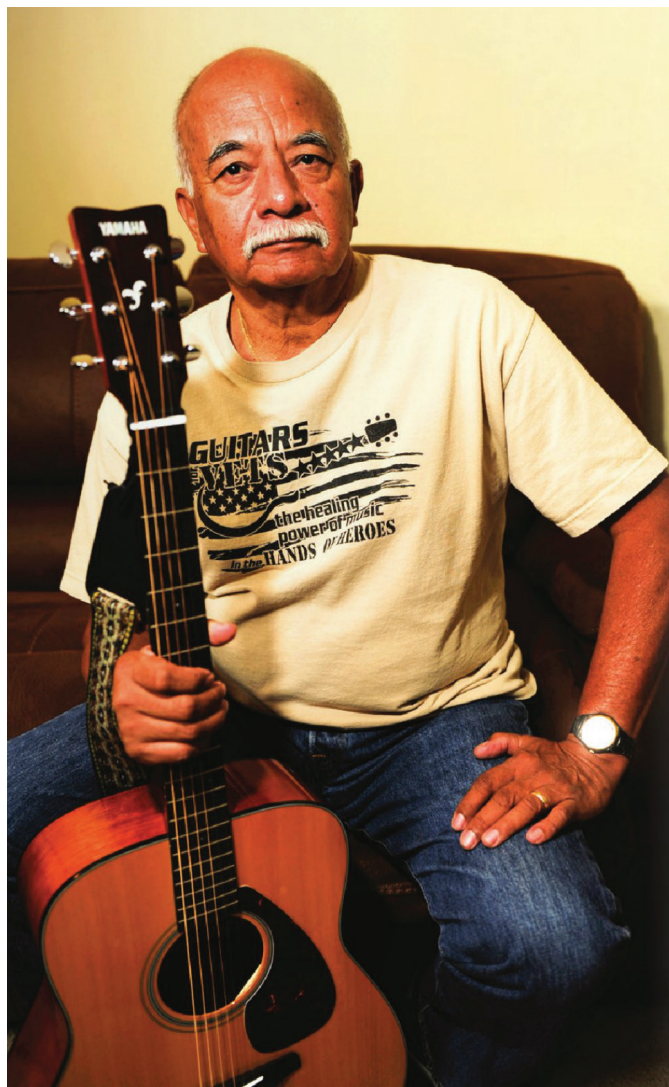
Since we published Robledo’s story in the December 2014 issue of *The Postal Record*, Robledo has moved from guitar instructor and “quartermaster” of the loaner guitars to chapter coordinator in charge of his local Guitars for Vets program, with five instructors working for him and a plan to graduate 36 veterans each year.

“What a great way to give back,” the Heroes of the Year judges said. “This is a very, very appropriate healing method.” The judges noted that this work is an extension of Robledo’s service in the military and as a letter carrier. “He’s been a person who has put public service at the forefront of his life for a long time.”

“I’m really honored to be receiving this award” as 2015 Humanitarian of the Year, Robledo said.



2015 HUMANITARIAN
HERO OF THE YEAR





Scott Gallegos

Carmichael, CA Branch 4494

About a month into his job as a city carrier assistant on the morning of April 27, Carmichael, CA Branch 4494 member **Scott Gallegos** had just started delivering mail on the route he was still getting used to. As he was looking for a place to park his vehicle to dismount and deliver to some houses, a small car quickly came up on his left, made a sharp right turn and stopped just in front of Gallegos, almost hitting him.

While the carrier was watching the car, a woman started banging at his passenger-side window, begging for help. “She was just drenched from the neck down with blood,” Gallegos said. “She had been shot. She started to fade out.” He quickly opened the passenger door and grabbed her, all while calling 911.

After shooting the woman in the neck, the gunman had fled. Gallegos applied pressure to the woman’s injuries using his shirt, and though she was fading in and out of consciousness, the carrier asked her where the shooter went. She pointed to a duplex nearby.

A sheriff’s patrol arrived and parked in front of the postal vehicle as they performed a perimeter check. Just then, more shots were fired in the direction of the police car and the van, but fortunately there were no further injuries. From there, a search and a standoff ensued as police tried to locate, and then talk with, the suspected shooter.

“When I heard gunshots coming at us, I knew it was pretty real,” Gallegos said. “Police said, ‘We’ve got to get her to safety.’”

Meanwhile, a resident from down the street also came to help. The sheriff’s deputy ordered Gallegos and the resident to take the woman to a hospital. But the postal van’s door wouldn’t open, and the street was blocked off.

Gallegos, an Army combat veteran, thought quickly. “I looked around and I saw some tall bushes,” he said. Gallegos picked up the woman and carried her through a split in the trees to get her some cover before continuing to put

pressure on her wounds. “When you see something like that, instinct takes over,” he told the local Fox TV station. “You just do what you have to do.” Eventually, the carrier was directed to retreat across the street to a restaurant for safety.

The woman had suffered injuries to her neck and abdomen from the bullets. She was taken to the hospital with life-threatening injuries. The next day, she was upgraded to stable condition.

The alleged shooter, Jeremiah Hankins, held up officers in a five-hour standoff, taking shots out of the windows of the house he had holed up in. Between the police department, the sheriff’s department, a negotiation team and SWAT officers, there were about 50 to 60 officers at the scene. A nearby elementary school and several businesses were locked down during that time.

Hankins eventually surrendered and was taken into custody, where he faced charges of attempted murder, assault with a deadly weapon causing great bodily injury, assault with a deadly weapon on a peace officer, possession of a firearm by a felon, and domestic violence.

A neighbor said that the victim and the alleged gunman lived at the duplex with a teenage son, though the couple’s relationship was unclear. She made a full recovery and has since moved off of Gallegos’ route.

Gallegos brushed off any major praise for his heroics. “I was brave for about 25 minutes. Those police officers who handled that, those are the guys who are the real heroes,” he said.

The Heroes of the Year judges disagreed. “He was under fire, and he intervened in a life-or-death situation—it’s just incredible,” they said.

Because of this, the judges said they had an easy time naming Gallegos NALC’s 2015 National Hero of the Year.

The carrier said he appreciates the award very much. “It’s kind of an overwhelming feeling to know that you can help somebody like that,” he told a local CBS TV affiliate. “It’s not something I’m ever gonna forget.” **PR**



Photo by Susan Skinner

