

# The Immigrant Experience

Letter carriers tell their stories of coming to the the United States



**L**etter carriers “look like America.” We are a diverse group of men and women of various races and cultures. Like earlier generations in our history, our ranks include immigrants who came to the United States and built new lives.

The post office long has been a place for workers to achieve a middle-class lifestyle in exchange for their hard work, including Americans who weren’t born here and needed a place where they could work their way up after starting a whole new life. Their stories intrigue and inspire the rest of us, and they serve as reminders of the importance of venerable institutions like the Postal Service in the overall American journey.

“Virtually every American either came here from another country or has ancestors who did,”

NALC President Fredric Rolando said. “The stories of recent immigrants remind us all of how we have helped to build this country, following in the footsteps of previous generations.”

Thanks to the NALC, carrying the mail is a steady job with good pay and benefits, something anyone starting a new life in a new country can appreciate. “But it can be more than that for some,” Rolando said.

“Letter carriers really get to know and learn about our communities, and contribute to the welfare of the customers and neighborhoods in each community. Wearing the uniform of the most trusted federal government agency garners admiration and respect from the patrons we serve.”

Immigration is a hot topic these days.

The United States has always been a refuge for people from other shores, but it has not seen a wave of immigrants this large since the early part of the 20th century. Meanwhile, it has never before seen so many immigrants



Rodney Tull leads the Pledge of Allegiance with his sons, Zion Tull (l) and Rodney Tull Jr. (r), after he was naturalized as an American citizen.

from so many different countries of origin or the sustained desire for so many across the world to seek refuge or opportunity here. To better understand the challenges and triumphs of immigrants in the letter carrier craft, *The Postal Record* collected a sample of the many stories of immigrants and the children of recent immigrants in our ranks. These letter carriers are as diverse as America, and as full of hope.

Is there a better date to become a U.S. citizen than the Fourth of July? Rochester, NY Branch 210 member **Rodney Tull** and his two brothers joined their mother in New York when they moved from their native Barbados in 1987. He was 19. This July 4, his sons Rodney Jr. and Zion proudly stood beside him as he took the oath of citizenship.

Tull said he had no trouble passing the citizenship test: "I've been living here close to 27 years."

Working as a letter carrier helped to cement Tull's status as an American and reach the middle class. "I've been blessed to be a letter carrier," Tull said. "It has given me the opportunity to live the American dream and to own my own home."

Soon after arriving in this country, Tull attended the State University of New York at Rockport, and at a job fair there, he met a Postal Service recruiter. "I didn't know anything about carrying mail," he said, and he was skeptical. But after working as a temporary carrier for two summers, he liked the job so much that he took the postal exam. He has carried mail in Rochester ever since.

Tull likes the opportunity to interact with people on his route. "It's great when you come across the older people," he said. "They want you to help them bring in their mail or groceries." Tull, who comes from a union family in Barbados, has been a shop steward for six years, and he has helped friends from Barbados get postal jobs, too.

Many immigrants have come through New York Harbor, but not the way Portland, OR Branch 82 carrier **Stevan Filipovici** did. As a sailor for the Romanian merchant marine in 1986, Filipovici defected from the then-Eastern bloc country when his ship docked in New York.

Born in Bucharest in 1956 to a mother who taught school and a father who was a university professor, Filipovici

enjoyed a time of relative prosperity in Romania before things turned sour as new leaders imposed a more centralized planning scheme for the economy and increased political oppression. "I grew up during the Communist era," he said, "but let me tell you that between 1960 and 1970 was the decade of plenty. Everything was abundant. It was the '70s when life changed for most of the people."

Filipovici knew some English when he arrived in New York. He got a job as a doorman at a residential building, getting to know some of the famous people who lived there, and for a time he had a second job at the flagship Macy's store on 34th Street in shipping and receiving. He also worked briefly for USPS in New York. His wife and young son managed to join him two and a half years after he defected, but she didn't like New York.



Stevan Filipovici

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“New York is a big city, the mecca of culture, and I enjoyed my 10 years there—not so my wife,” he said. They followed a friend west to Oregon in 1995, where Filipovici gave the Postal Service another chance and started carrying mail. The steady job gave him the means to raise his son, along with a daughter who was born in the United States.

What seemed like drawbacks have sometimes turned into good fortune for Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100 member **Carlos Yubeta**. As a teenager who often crossed the border at Nogales, TX, from

at age 19. Looking back, he said that the customs agent had done him a favor by encouraging him to seek residency.

A few months later, another bad situation turned out for the better. A friend played a prank on Yubeta by tricking him into enrolling in the Marine Corps. “I hated him for a long time,” Yubeta said, “but now I wish I could find him and thank him.” The Marine Corps turned out to be a great place for Yubeta to start his life in the United States. It led him to learn English quickly, and his military service provided a quick path to citizenship.

After leaving the Marines, Yubeta attended college, worked for family in a restaurant in Los Angeles and then got a job with a steel manufacturer. But when the U.S. steel industry collapsed in 1982, he was out of a job. An outreach program aimed at Latinos attracted him to the Postal Service, and a letter carrier involved in the program helped him study for the test.

Having held a string of jobs that never seemed to last more than a couple of years, Yubeta was cynical about carrying mail as a long-term profession. “Nothing was panning out,” he said. “I thought, ‘Well, here comes another two years; we’ll see what happens after that.’”

Thirty-one years later, Yubeta is still carrying the mail.

“It’s steady. It’s a dependable way of life,” he said. “It’s one of the best jobs I’ve had because of the dependability and the security.” As a letter carrier, Yubeta raised two sons and a daughter.

Of course, some immigrants faced difficult and risky journeys to our shores, particularly refugees seeking shelter from hunger, war or oppression. As a boy of 13, San Francisco Branch 214 letter carrier **Kim Truong** left his home in Saigon with his family one day in 1979.

They took along no possessions or baggage—not even family photos—because they didn’t want to alert authorities that they were leaving for good to escape post-war Vietnam.

The family paid a smuggler to take them by boat to Malaysia, a five-day trip. In the confusion, little food was loaded on the boat, and Truong and his family survived largely on ice cubes. Malaysian authorities refused to let them in the country, so the boat headed for Indonesia, almost sinking after hitting a rock. “We thought we were going to die,” Truong said. “That was the first time I saw my father cry.”

To celebrate their safe arrival in Indonesia, the family used what little money they had to buy their father some favorite drinks: Budweiser and Coca-Cola. Unfortunately, Truong’s father died in a refugee camp before the family found their way to the United States.

Truong worked in restaurants for a while in San Francisco to help his mother, two brothers and two sisters establish their new home. Following his older brother, who had become a post office clerk, Truong became a letter carrier in 1994.

“At first, I just wanted a decent job to provide for my family,” he said. “It was more than I expected.” He finally had steady work for decent pay. Truong has worked to assure others have the same opportunity to work in a steady job by coming to Washington, DC, to lobby to preserve six-day delivery. He is raising a daughter and a son on his letter carrier salary; his son attends the University of California-Davis.

Remembering his hunger in the boat, and the experience of living for a week on the streets of Indonesia when the family first arrived there, Truong also volunteers for his branch as food drive coordinator. “You don’t forget where



Carlos Yubeta with his son Carlos in 1985

his native Mexico to visit his father, Yubeta lost his wallet at the crossing one day in 1974. A U.S. Customs agent found it and, seeing his father’s U.S. address and U.S. dollars, assumed he was living in the United States illegally and sent him back to Mexico. In response, Yubeta’s father sponsored him for legal residency so he wouldn’t face the hassle again. Yubeta got his “green card” in May of the next year,

you came from,” he said. “You don’t take anything for granted. You help people, and your heart opens widely.”

The Castro regime kept putting up roadblocks to prevent **Adolfo Suris** and his family from leaving Cuba, but they prevailed and started a new life in New Jersey.

A member of Elizabeth, NJ Branch 67, Suris was just a year old when Castro took power in 1959. The regime confiscated his father’s customs brokerage and forced him to work as a farm laborer. The family applied to leave the country through “Freedom Flights” to the United States. More than a quarter-million Cubans fled to America on those flights between 1965 and 1973. An aunt in New York City helped the Suris family pay money to the Cuban government for a flight, but there was a large waiting list for them—and those who applied to leave Cuba were harassed and their property was seized.

As they waited, the family managed to get Suris’ older brother off the island before he reached the age for compulsory military service, which would have kept him in Cuba until age 27. “My parents put my brother on a plane not knowing if they would ever see him again,” Suris said.

After Suris’ 12th birthday, his family’s number finally came up, but the ordeal wasn’t over. The government confiscated all their belongings and harassed them over the smallest things. He recalled government agents saying the family couldn’t leave until they found a missing kitchen knife, which turned out to have been left in the refrigerator with a birthday cake. Barred from their home, they had to stay with neighbors before making their way across the island to Havana for the flight. Even at the airport, the government peppered Suris and his parents with questions.



## Wreath laying planned

**R**epresentatives of the NALC will have the honor of laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia as part of ceremonies honoring the 2015 NALC Heroes of the Year. All NALC members, their families and friends are invited to observe the event. It will be held on Wednesday, Oct. 7, directly following the noon changing-of-the-guard ceremony.

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is a monument dedicated to U.S. service members who have died but whose remains are unidentified. Traditionally, presidents and other dignitaries have laid wreaths there as a way of honoring the country’s military veterans.

The Postal Service is the largest civilian employer of veterans. Currently, 120,000 postal workers—21 percent of USPS’ workforce—are veterans. **PR**

“They tried to brainwash us into staying,” he said.

The family, including Suris’ brother, joined the aunt in New York and then settled in New Jersey, where Suris attended school and learned English. “It was a hard transition,” he said, “but once you get used to it, this country is great. There are opportunities if you put your mind to it. I’m thankful we came here.”

After holding down a few jobs in factories and machine shops, Suris joined the Postal Service in 1997 and never has looked back. “I’m here until I retire,” he said. He bought a home and raised five children, and now has seven grandchildren.

“I’m thankful that I was able to get a job at the Postal Service,” Suris said. “I love this country.”

Though Canton, OH Branch 238 President **Gloria Miller** was born in the United

States, her life reflects the immigration experience. Miller’s parents were poor, uneducated migrant workers of Mexican descent who spoke only Spanish, and



The first Freedom Flight from Cuba



Miller spoke no English as a small child. Growing up in the tiny town of Post, TX, Miller, whose maiden name was Martinez, spent summers picking cotton to earn money for her family instead of swimming or playing sports like many other children.

# ✓ Re-Elect Ron Watson part of the Rolando-O'Malley Team



**Ron Watson has the dedication and the vision to continue to lead the NALC on retiree issues.**

NALC needs leaders who have a clear focus on the future well-being of all letter carriers, including the retired members of this union. Ron Watson possesses the ability to protect letter carriers' interests by working with the Office of Personnel Management, the

United States Postal Service and the Department of Labor. His expertise in dealing with the Office of Workers Compensation is unsurpassed in the entire federal workforce. He has and will continue to fight for the rights of all active and retired members.

**1968-1970**—Served in U.S. Army

**1979**—Hired by Postal Service as clerk in Corvallis, OR

**1980**—Transferred to City Carrier craft

**1981**—Appointed Branch 1274 Shop Steward

**1982**—Elected Branch 1274 Secretary

**1983**—Elected Branch 1274 President (and reelected through 1993)

**1989**—Appointed Region 2 Local Business Agent

**1993**—Appointed Region 2 Regional Administrative Assistant

**2004**—Appointed Assistant to the National President for Compensation

**2008**—Worked as consultant for NALC on OWCP issues

**2013**—Appointed Director of Retired Members

**Paid for by the Rolando-O'Malley Team**

The work was hard and the weather was hot, but she enjoyed socializing with other people in the fields. Still, in the back of her mind, Miller feared that immigration agents would come in search of illegal immigrants working with her in the fields and, despite her U.S. citizenship, she would be swept up in a raid and deported. At

school, she was segregated in Spanish-only classrooms for a time but soon learned English. As she learned, Miller would help her two younger brothers with their homework and assist her parents with English-language documents. She graduated from high school as a member of the National Honor Society.

College wasn't an option, though. "Financially, there was no way that was going to happen for me," she said. Instead, she joined the Army, and she met her husband there. After they both left the service and she gave birth to two sons, Miller joined the Postal Service in 1988, moving to Canton because there were openings for letter carriers there.

Seeing the need for union activism, Miller became a steward. "Are you going to complain about it, or are you going to be part of the solution?" she asked herself. She has been branch president for five years and also serves on the Ohio State Association board.

Miller loves both the daily interaction with people and the steady work

that carrying mail provides. "To me, being a letter carrier is like winning the lottery," she said. "Though it's a physical job, if you really put your heart and mind into it, you can do it." Having worked in the cotton fields, carrying the mail was natural for Miller—except for the weather. "I did it in very hot Texas weather. It did not prepare me for Ohio winters."

The steady income from working for the Postal Service gave Miller the means to buy her parents, Billie and Elida, a cozy home in Post. It was the first home they had ever owned.

The contributions of immigrants to the Postal Service and to the NALC are positives for the individuals and their families, for the USPS, for letter carriers as a whole and for the entire country, Rolando said.

"I'm proud that getting a job as a letter carrier with good pay and benefits has been the path to the American Dream for so many people putting down roots in this country," Rolando said. "It's another way that our union brings us all together for everyone's benefit." **PR**



Gloria Miller with her father, Billie