

## Don't step back



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**T**here's a scene in the 1931 movie "Beau Hunks" that is a fairly accurate depiction of how many of us get involved in the union. In it, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy have joined the French Foreign Legion and find themselves in a post in the Algerian desert. At one point, all of the legionnaires are lined up in formation and the commandant explains that he needs two volunteers for a very dangerous mission. He asks for two brave souls to step forward.

Upon hearing this, everyone else in the platoon takes one step backward, leaving the oblivious Stan and Ollie out in front and on their own. That's kind of what happens to a lot of us.

We don't really want to volunteer for a dangerous assignment, but when no one else seems willing to do it, we find ourselves standing out in front.

I come from a relatively small branch. When I first got involved, we had around 50 members and, at most, there would be three or four who could be considered "activists." We had a president, secretary-treasurer and a steward, but that was about it. Branch meetings were held in the swing room right after work until one day the postmaster threw us out, so we started holding them at members' homes. All of our branch's records were contained in one small metal file. Branch property consisted of an old briefcase, a few copies of the National Agreement and some blank forms.

Few carriers knew their rights, so grievances were rarely filed. No one could remember the last time anyone had been to a convention or any kind of union training. This was several years prior to the minimum-dues provision that was voted into the *NALC Constitution* at the 1984 convention, so our union dues were so low that the branch received less than \$75 a month. When the treasury got large enough, we would throw a holiday party or hold a summer picnic. Although we meant well, we were an ignorant mess.

**It was with this backdrop that my fellow carrier José Guerra and I found ourselves standing in front of the platoon.** The previous president had just resigned, and the steward had become a 204-b. So when it appeared as if no one else was willing to step forward, José and I looked at each other, shrugged and said, "Why not?"

When José offered to take the president's job and I said I'd be willing to be the steward, everyone else eagerly nodded their approval, relieved that we were too young (both of us were under 30) and too dumb to know what we were getting ourselves into. In constitutional terms, we call this being

"elected by acclamation," but in reality, it wasn't much more commendable than Laurel and Hardy in "Beau Hunks."

So José and I found ourselves with these new titles and no idea what to do with them. Our predecessors had scant more knowledge and experience than we did, so we really had no understanding of how the union worked. Fortunately, we had placed one stipulation on the branch before we agreed to step up, and that was that the branch had to be willing to send us to training so that we could learn how to do our new jobs, since neither one of us wanted to look stupid.

**We sought out educating ourselves about the union.** José knew a letter carrier, Mark Myers, who lived on his route and was a member of Seattle Branch 79, the big-dog branch in our area, and told him what we had done. Mark thought it would be a good idea to for us to visit his branch meeting to see how they did things and to talk to their folks to get some ideas about what we should be doing.

So a few weeks later, we met Mark at his place and rode with him up to Seattle for their meeting. It was quite an experience. We were met with open arms. We got our first look at what a union was all about. We met and spoke with many of their officers and branch members. Everyone seemed interested in us and many offered to help us any way they could. Someone asked us if we were going to the regional rap session that was being held in a few weeks in Salt Lake City. We hadn't even heard about it and had no idea what it was, but on the way home, José said that if I wanted to go, he would make it happen. So I did. (I wrote about going to that rap session in my article in the May 2012 *Postal Record*.)

It's amazing how seemingly small acts can change your life and make a difference in others' lives as well. I've often wondered where I would be now if José hadn't been at that meeting and encouraged me to run for steward, or what would have happened if we hadn't gone to that Branch 79 union meeting and whether we would have kept at it if their members had not made us feel so welcome. I know my story is not unique, as many other union leaders have told me similar stories about how they first got involved in the NALC.

Some 33 years later, Mark Myers is the Branch 79 secretary-treasurer and has served in many other positions, including Step B designee. José served our branch for about 10 years then transferred to the maintenance craft and became an electronic technician. My little branch has about 100 members now and is still going strong—and they haven't missed a rap session, training session or convention in all these years. And I have the honor of serving as your director of education.

**So if you see a need in your branch, don't be afraid to step up.** You have many brothers and sisters out there willing to give you a hand. You won't regret it.