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When you see a wreath on a door
 on your route this holiday season,
 know someone took a little
 time to brighten the day for their
 neighbors with a festive decoration. Letter
 carriers are here to bring joy to the people

In this special holiday season,
 we bring you stories that
 stepped up so that everyone
 could share in the joy of the season.
 true holiday wishes
 looking out for each other.

We know that for every story in this issue, there are many more, because NALC members and branches help those in their communities year-round in many ways. If you have a story to share with us, please contact *The Postal Record* by phone at 202-662-2851 or by email at postalrecord@nalc.org.

A letter from the heart

Anthony DiDomenico is not Santa Claus, but he did demonstrate that the jolly old elf exists, at least in the hearts of letter carriers.

A letter addressed to old St. Nick somehow made its way to Secaucus, NJ, and to the case of DiDomenico, a member of New Jersey Merged Branch 38. The author, 13-year-old Evelyn DeJesus of the Bronx, thought Santa lives in New Jersey. DiDomenico knew that a company once located at the address used to answer Santa's letters but had relocated years ago, so DeJesus's letter would have gone unanswered.

With permission from his supervisor, DiDomenico opened the letter.

"I read the letter and I cried," DiDomenico said. "She didn't ask for any toys, any games. All she asked for was necessities—food, clothes, sheets—things I think everybody should have."

"I'm in a wheelchair," DeJesus' letter began. "No talk, no walk. We are poor." Evelyn listed items she wanted for Christmas—essentials such as food and clothes for her whole family.

"I need you; I wait for you," she wrote.

As he learned later, DeJesus was a special 13-year-old—she had been born with multiple sclerosis and adopted by her family when she was a baby. Multiple sclerosis is an unpredictable, often disabling disease of the central nervous system that disrupts the flow of information within the brain, and between the brain and body. It can cause severe disability in some people. DeJesus's grandmother had helped her write the letter.

DiDomenico asked for donations from his fellow postal employees to help Evelyn and her family. "I put out a box, and in one day, it was full," he said. Donations poured in and became a whole pallet's worth of supplies,

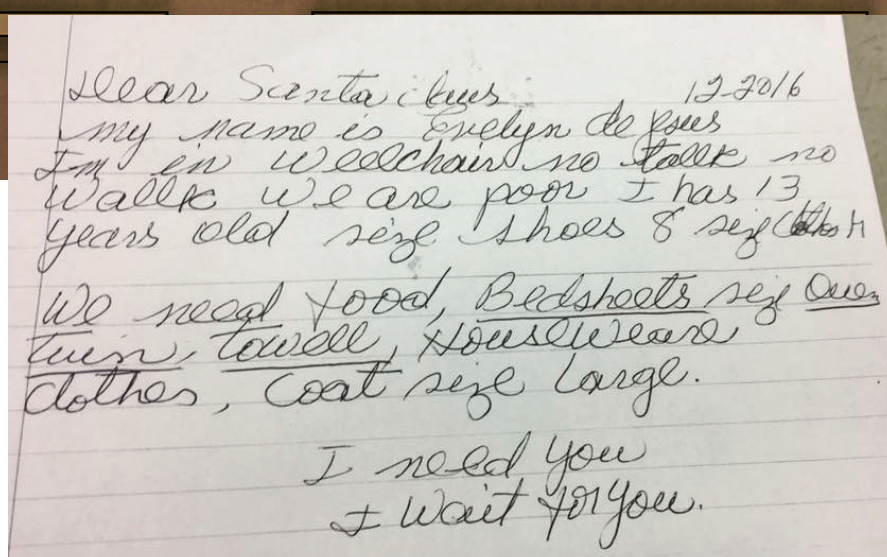
including food, clothes, blankets and other gifts.

With the help of his daughter Christine and fellow carriers **Joel Liuzzi** and **John Sprague**, DiDomenico loaded the donations into their cars on Christmas Eve and headed for the Bronx. They had collected so many gifts that they had to take two vehicles. Once in the Bronx, they stopped at a local police station

to ask for help. "We weren't exactly sure where this place was," he said, "or if we could safely park there."

After showing the police officers DeJesus's letter and explaining their mission, the police gave them more than directions—the sergeant on duty thanked them for their generosity and sent two police cars to escort them to the DeJesus home.

The carriers and police officers knew they were in the right place when they found DeJesus's door, as it was the only one in the apartment building with Christmas decorations. They surprised DeJesus and her family with the gifts. Her grandmother, who lived



Top: The letter from Evelyn DeJesus

Above (from l): Evelyn DeJesus and her mom, Anthony DiDomenico and his daughter Christine, Evelyn's grandmother and Joel Liuzzi

in the same building, was summoned quickly to share in the joy.

The police officers made sure the two vehicles full of gifts were safe, and they helped carry the presents up to the apartment, with DiDomenico and his helpers making several trips to deliver their Christmas bounty.

DiDomenico said his day as Santa Claus was almost as fulfilling for him and the helpers as it was for DeJesus and her family.

"It was a really humbling experience," DiDomenico said. "It felt good."

He praised his fellow employees for all pitching in: "Some people are better off than others in my office—but everybody contributed." **PR**



Getting *into the Spirit of the Season*

Filling hungry stomachs during the holidays and throughout the year



Letter carriers are members of the community and often see what goes on locally on a day-to-day basis. That gives us a unique advantage in being able to help where help is needed most. Just as NALC members collect food for the hungry as part of the Letter Carriers' Stamp Out Hunger® Food Drive each May, many also ensure that people in their neighborhoods and on their routes have food throughout the rest of the year, especially during the holiday season.

'Feed His Flock'

When Bristol, VA Branch 807 member **John Clement** and his wife, Kathi, were looking for a warmer place to move after she retired, they decided to relocate to Bristol, TN, from Lewiston, ME.

The couple had converted to the Greek Orthodox faith a few years earlier, and one reason they settled on Bristol was that it had a Greek Orthodox church.

On the Clements' first Sunday at

Bristol's Christ the Savior Greek Orthodox Church, they were stunned to see a large kitchen that was filled with commercial equipment. With their shared background of culinary arts, that sparked an idea.

"We wanted to start a ministry to serve our new community and quickly realized the kitchen was the key," John Clement said. "We thought about it and prayed for guidance, and one day I came up with the idea of baking bread for the local food bank and soup kitchen."

They created a ministry called "Feed His Flock." The only thing lacking was a large commercial mixer, so they raised money and applied for a grant through the Virginia Farah Foundation.

They soon were awarded \$4,785, which allowed them to purchase the 30-quart mixer they wanted. With the leftover money, they bought 30 bread pans and enough ingredients to last about nine months.

They felt the impact immediately. "It's only four hours a week," Clement said. "What would the world look like if everyone gave four hours a week?"

In May 2013, "We baked our first 50 loaves to verify the recipe and planned to do 60 loaves every two weeks," he said.

A few weeks in, more people wanted to help. "We quickly realized we could do a lot more, so we started doing 60 every week," Clement said. "That lasted for a few weeks and we increased it to 90 loaves a week."

About a year after they started, a woman in New York City's Bronx borough named Rose Faris heard about what

Kathi and John Clement prepare their bread for baking.





the Clements and their church were doing and sent \$2,000 to help keep the baking going.

"That allowed us to purchase 30 more pans, which gave us the ability to bake 140 loaves in less time than it took us to make 90," Clement said. "The cost is about 35 cents a loaf, so it is maximum impact for minimal cost."

The group has the process down to a science: They mix the ingredients of flour, water, soy oil, sugar, yeast and salt, put it in the oven, cool it down, put it in bags, affix labels to them, then close them with twist ties. Clement and his wife deliver the bread to the pantry each week. They can feed up to 1,200 people a month at the food bank.

The director of the Bristol Emergency Food Pantry, which also is the recipient of donations for NALC's Stamp Out Hunger food drive, told the group at first that "people were a little skeptical about a loaf of uncut bread with a plain label from a church," Clement said, "but now they get people coming in and asking if there is any fresh bread." Loaves also go to Haven of Rest, a local homeless shelter, soup kitchen and food pantry.

"We're feeding His flock," Clement told *The Bristol Herald Courier*. "Christ took five loaves and fed 5,000."

So far, the group has baked more than 11,000 loaves for the hungry in northeast Tennessee, and they project that they will do about 2,500 to 3,000 per year from now on. "It's a one-pound loaf of white bread," he said. "It can feed a family of four for about two days."

They bake in a group of about four or five people almost every Sunday for a few hours. "It's a fun way to get to

know our fellow parishioners," Clement said. "Everyone gets a chance to get their hands in the dough."

In addition to baking bread, Feed His Flock this year has started a second ministry called "Rose's Blessings" in honor of Faris, the Bronx benefactor who helped get them going. Church members fill brown bags with non-perishable food, an item of clothing, bottles of water and words of encouragement. Parishioners take a bag to distribute to people in need they see in their hometowns. When a bag has been given away, the parishioner picks up a replacement.

And the recipients of both ministries have been thankful. "They're grateful and slightly surprised that people care about them," Clement said, adding that they want recipients to know, "You're not alone and people are thinking about them."

Clement, an Army veteran who has been with the Postal Service since 1988, doesn't want praise. He just wants to pay it forward. "It's quite simple to do something. I know how lucky I am, with a great wife and a great job," Clement said. "It's a way to pay back the community."

Feed His Flock relies on donations, all of which go directly into the making of the bread. So far, the ministry has received donations from people in six states and two foreign countries. For more information or to contribute, go to facebook.com/FeedHisFlockatBluffCityTn.

Giving back at Thanksgiving

Sometimes just keeping an eye out on your route can lead to helping those

John Clement (l) delivers the bread to a food pantry with the help of the pantry's director.

in need, which is what happened for New Orleans Branch 124 members **Nick Oliveri** and **Kevin Thomas**.

For years, regular carrier Oliveri and T-6 carrier Thomas had delivered mail to brother and sister Kathy and Michael LeBlanc and their uncle, Ronnie Heidel, in Chalmette. Kathy and Michael lived together and Ronnie next door. The family has little money and, at times, can't afford basic items.

"They really have nothing. They struggle for food," Thomas said. "It's a sad story. I'm sorry to see people treated that way."

About four years ago, Oliveri had the idea to give this family a traditional Thanksgiving meal. He mentioned it to Thomas, who was all in.

"It kind of grew from there," Oliveri told the *St. Bernard Parish Post*.

Oliveri said he saw the family nearly every day and added that his heart goes out to them. Kathy had to have her leg amputated about two years ago due to diabetes and then was diagnosed with cancer as well. "I feel for them," he told the *Post*.

The two carriers pay for the supplies out of their own pockets each year, then recruit local restaurants to cook the food for the family. Word has spread since their endeavor started, and establishments nearby have been happy to help. After Thomas and Oliveri buy the turkey, a local chef cooks it for them. Another restaurant makes baked macaroni, while other establishments supply corn, crawfish soup, cornbread dressing, pecan pie and pumpkin pie.



Getting into the Spirit of the Season

An article in the *St. Bernard Parish Post* about Nick Oliveri and Kevin Thomas



Once the food is prepared, the carriers present it to the family the day before Thanksgiving.

But that's not all. "They also have three little dogs," Thomas said. "We got treats for them, too."

In the past year, both Kathy and Ronnie have died, but the two carriers planned to provide Michael a happy holiday again this year. "Until he's gone, he's going to get a Thanksgiving dinner," Oliveri said.

The carriers said the family is always gracious, surprised and happy. "They appreciate everything we do for them," Thomas said.

"They just have hearts of gold," Oliveri added. "They're just ecstatic."

The two carriers feel as if they can't

see what's going on and not help.

"They got bad luck in the world and it feels good to help them out," Thomas, a 33-year letter carrier, said.

Oliveri, a 40-plus-year postal veteran, echoed that sentiment. "I see how they live and I wouldn't ever want someone to live like that," he said. "If I see someone in trouble, I'm going to help them. I know they're good people."

And the carriers are not stopping or slowing down anytime soon. "This is something we are going to do every year," Oliveri told the *Post*. "It makes them happy, and it makes us feel good to do. That's about it."

They may even expand their effort. "We're going to try to pick up other families this year with other letter carriers in the post office," Thomas said.

Blessing boxes

Though the next Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive is still months away, Pittsburg, KS Branch 572 member **Richard Brooksher** tries to keep the hungry in his community fed. As a letter carrier, he sees how people in the local neighborhoods live.

He noted that the community is one of the poorest in Kansas. "There is a huge need," he said. "There are a lot of homeless and people struggling from paycheck to paycheck."

It all started just a year and a half ago. Through his church, the carrier and a small group started brainstorming how they could help. "That's what started the ball rolling," he said.

They came up with the idea to operate two "Blessing Boxes" in Pittsburg. The group spent the first three months planning and looking at any obstacles or opposition they might run into, as well as designing and choosing colors for the boxes.

"We set the first box, followed by the second a few weeks later," the carrier said. "The general idea is that anyone can use the box or put items in. Our motto is, 'Take what you need, leave what you can, but above all be blessed.'"

Brooksher constructed the boxes himself. They are posted into the ground like a curbside mailbox. "I made the boxes to be weather-proof as well as hold up in the elements while keeping the items inside safe and dry," he explained.

He, his wife and church members make sure the boxes are consistently stocked. "It's like a little pantry," Brooksher said. "We put food in ourselves. I keep food in my car."

The group also has had organizations and companies come forward



Richard Brooksher

at times to help with supplies to keep the boxes filled. “And after a time, the community as a whole has stepped up and helped keep the boxes full by placing items in themselves,” Brooksher explained. “Someone’s going by two to three times a day to make sure there’s stuff in there.”

The group has a brochure that they give out whenever an organization inquires about the boxes. In it, they recommend what to place in the boxes, including non-perishable food, toothpaste, new clothing, diapers and blankets, among other items.

Brooksher participates in the Stamp Out Hunger food drive, and this year he collected more than 700 pounds of food on his route. “More than last year,” he said.

But the Blessing Boxes remain close to his heart. “To this day, we’ve had zero opposition and an immense amount of praise and support,” Brooksher said.

He has seen an increase in both donations and withdrawals since the boxes were installed, along with messages of gratitude left inside the boxes.

And the idea of the boxes has spread regionally. “We’ve had half a dozen other boxes pop up in other

small towns within a 20-mile radius,” Brooksher said.

The 30-year postal veteran hopes this is something that will continue in the community for quite a while. “It’s been a huge blessing,” Brooksher said. “Every time you see someone use the box, it’s a good feeling.”

For more information about the Pittsburgh community’s Blessing Boxes, check out facebook.com/FeedHisPeople.

Your turn

Looking to help feed the people in your own community? The carriers interviewed had no shortage of advice for anyone wanting to make a difference.

The first step is recruiting assistance. “It’s really overwhelming for one person,” Brooksher said.

“Seek help right off, plan ahead, reach out to the community.”

Clement advises others to start slowly and build from there.

“It’s really simple to do small things to help the community,” he said. “Don’t be overwhelmed by how much it costs, how much it takes to get going, or how much time it takes.”

And, above all, Brooksher said, “Don’t be afraid to fail. We had a few people tell us it might be a flop, but it’s been the exact opposite.”

No matter how members across the country decide to help, these

carriers implore others to take action in their cities, towns and neighborhoods.

“If you see someone in desperation, try to help them,” Oliveri said. “It’s hard times for a lot of people. Help whomever you can help.”

Thomas added, “There’s plenty of them out there that we pass every day.”

NALC President Fredric Rolando commended all NALC members who assist in feeding people. “The holiday season gives us such rewarding opportunity to give back to the communities we serve in different ways,” he said. **PR**





Getting into the Spirit of the Season

Letter carriers deliver holiday gifts to where they're needed most



It seems letter carriers are always thinking of others, and when they see someone in need, they step in to use their particular talents to help others. These are a few stories about letter carriers capturing the spirit of the season by giving a little of themselves.

Santa Claus is real

Oak Brook, IL Branch 825 member **Kim Browning** goes out of her way to look after her customers, especially the children. On a new route in Grayslake, IL, she got to know a family with children ranging in age from teenagers to toddlers.

First, she approached the mother, Jodie Hicks, and asked for permission to help and for a family wish list. Hicks gave her a list of simple necessities, such as linens, as well as toys and other fun items.

Other letter carriers in Browning's post office offered to help. Then supervisors helped her pass the hat among all the employees. Brown also approached a few businesses on her route, and several contributors helped with donations and gift cards. The effort raised more than \$800.

With the funds in hand, Browning went shopping with her supervisor, who also helped by wrapping the presents.

"We ended up getting the kids bedspreads, some clothes and toys," Browning said. Fellow Branch 825 member **Cyndi Pilaski** and steward **Jim Richter** loaded their cars with the gifts, and Kim met them at the family's house two days before Christmas to deliver them.

on her day off took them to an amusement park.

Hicks called Browning's Christmas delivery "amazing." Browning said helping the family in need made her feel "very good."

Stepping up to help

Jason Nelson gets things done. The Allentown, PA Branch 274 member and Marine Corps veteran learned about a local family who needed help, and he volunteered to fulfill the need.

Nelson is vice president of the Lehigh Valley Labor Council, and when council members at a meeting donated funds to help the Quinones family children get school clothes, Nelson made sure they had what they needed in time. Stephon Quinones, 16, had lost most of his vision after brain surgery, and his mother also had health problems, making it hard for her to provide for Stephon and his 14-year-old brother Jacob.

Nelson found a local store on his route that was willing to provide clothing at a discount. Then, on his day off, the letter carrier took the Quinones family shopping to make sure the boys got properly fitting clothes they liked. Nelson and the boys bought shirts, pants, shoes, accessories and a pair of backpacks full of school supplies. He added \$100 of his own money to assure they got all they needed.

Jason Nelson took the Quinones family clothes shopping.

Nelson was motivated to help from personal experience. "My dad died when I was young, so I didn't get a chance to

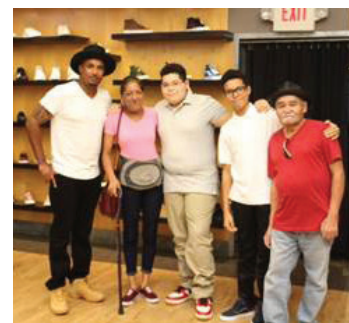


Kim Browning and Cyndi Pilaski delivered gifts to the Hicks family.

"I could tell that they were needy," she said. Throughout the year, she would give them secondhand children's books, and as Christmas neared, Browning resolved to donate a little of her own money so they would receive gifts from Santa Claus. But when she learned the family was a single mother raising six children, Browning decided to do more.

"We made sure they all got toys; they all got clothes," Browning said. "We tried to get them things on their lists."

This isn't Browning's first time taking care of children she has met while carrying the mail, something she has done in Grayslake since 1987. On a previous route, Browning befriended two children who spent most of their time at their parents' restaurant and



know him, and I didn't grow up with my mother, I grew up with my grandmother," he said. "So I know what it's like being a kid going to school and you don't have the appropriate clothing.

"I just took it upon myself to get that task done," Nelson said. As a letter carrier, steward and labor council officer, he added, "I have so many things on my plate. When things come up, I try to handle them."

Toys bring joy

In 2015, a postal supervisor asked Minneapolis Branch 9 member **Cynthia Blackmon** to take on her station's Toys for Tots drive. She doesn't know exactly why she was chosen, but she has a theory.

"I have a big mouth," she said. "I'm very outgoing and I like to talk a lot."

Blackmon's outgoing personality paid off for children in the Minneapolis area, as the letter carriers in her station and some businesses on her route helped her raise more than \$2,000 in cash and donated toys in 2015, more than all the other stations in Minneapolis combined.

"At first, I didn't want to do it, and then I decided, what the heck?" she said. "I love shopping, so that was right up my alley." With the cash that carriers donated, Blackmon bought additional gifts for Toys for Tots, a charity run by the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve that provides Christmas gifts to underprivileged children.

For her performance, Blackmon's supervisors nominated her for a Civil Servant of the Year award, which she

won. Blackmon, who is in her fourth year as a letter carrier, came back the next year to raise another \$1,200 in donated cash and toys, and she plans to be back this year for another round.

Blackmon said that by shopping for bargains, she stretched the money and still bought good gifts. "I went from store to store," she said. "I bought really nice toys." **PR**



Cynthia Blackmon

Spreading happiness with wreaths

Stacey Welsh's unique wreaths began as a hobby but soon turned into a way to spread joy and raise money for worthy causes.

Welsh, a Hammond, IN Branch 580 member, created wreaths as "just a stress reliever after a long day of work," she said. "After a rough day of delivering in the snow, it's something nice to do."

Welsh makes the wreaths from unconventional materials such as painted clothespins, putting a modern spin on the art of wreathmaking. She started making wreaths when she saw similar crafts for sale on the internet and decided she could make them herself instead of buying them. Soon she began donating some for charity fundraisers



so the causes could auction them.

"When I see charities that need donations for raffles, I let them pick something out and I make them one," she said.

Welsh has donated her art to support a person who needs a kidney transplant, to the Hike for Hope fundraising event to support mental health, and to charities that help women struggling with breast cancer. She also created a wreath for a woman to hang on her door to celebrate her recovery from breast cancer and another for a survivor of kidney disease.

Welsh was motivated by her desire to ensure everyone could have a wreath they wanted. "I began to think of how many other people would enjoy them," she said, capturing the spirit of the holiday season. **PR**



Stacey Welsh with some of her wreaths