



Postal Tales

Stories about the USPS

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Filmmakers set out to tell letter carriers' stories

Every letter carrier has stories. Stories about co-workers. Stories about routes. Stories about customers.

"What's interesting about letter carriers, they'll talk and talk," joked retired Johnstown, PA Branch 451 member Joe Antal.

Carriers often have so many stories because they've worked in the same place, sometimes on the same route,

for so long, he added. "We had carriers in Johnstown, and we probably have them in other areas, where once a guy got on a route, he never got off, 20 or 30 years. They got to know people.

"Even with me," Antal said, "I moved around a little bit, but you see the kids go to school, get married and they invite you to the wedding. That makes it very personal."

Recognizing this, a group of international artists based in Los Angeles is putting together a collection of these stories and hopes to create a library of videos and podcasts. The brainchild of renowned artist Christian Moeller, professor and chairman of the Department of Design and Media Arts at the University of California—Los Angeles, and his former student and current research assistant Dasha Orlova, "Postal Tales" intends to tell the stories of letter carriers across the United States. They've already made two videos and the results are beautiful.

Moeller was inspired when reading an article about letters to Santa that

the Postal Service received.

"I was touched by the beauty of how carefully the United States Postal Service handles those letters," he said. "We spent some time gathering more information about the 'Letters to Santa' program and came to realize that we were tapping into something way more interesting—an aspect of humanity revealed through the multitude of untold stories of letter carriers."

After doing some research about the Postal Service, the group started to reach out to postal workers and ask for their stories, through Facebook and its website, www.postaltales.org.

"One day, we were unexpectedly contacted by a retired letter carrier by the name of Don Podrasky," Orlova said.

The Branch 451 member, who lives in Windber, PA, told them, "You don't want to hear my stories." But Orlova insisted that they wanted any kind of story, whether it be scary, funny or sad.

What Orlova got was a story about "an old forgotten mining town called Eureka 40 where he delivered mail and came across a familiar ghost who saved his day," she said.

"Nobody can make up stuff like this and we wanted to find more," Moeller said.

Podrasky told them to contact his former branch president, Joe Antal, who



also gave them a few stories, including one about delivering letters to grateful immigrants from Eastern Europe during the era of the Soviet Union.

The tales made quite an impression. “Postal workers serve their community in much deeper ways than I could have imagined because being a letter carrier goes way beyond the daily job description,” Orlova said. “It is the empathy and humanity the letter carriers bring to their work that I found truly inspiring in the stories I’ve heard.”

Knowing that they had good stories to work from, the artists set out to the Johnstown area in the fall of 2015.

“Johnstown is a special place because it captures a glimpse of a classic American town where the post office is a center for the community,” Orlova said. “Driving around, we were fascinated by the sights of empty coal mines and abandoned storefronts juxtaposed with a vast autumn landscape that cast a golden glow on the surrounding homes and railroads.”

That November, a team of four started the film shoot. The team included Moeller and Orlova, along with multimedia artist and sound engineer Dino Zhang and photographer/filmmaker Serge Hoelschi, who has worked on independent photography projects as well as Hollywood productions.

The artists filmed Antal and Podrasky over the course of a week, which was quite unlike anything Antal had experienced before.

“I had done interviews for TV and radio for postal legislative issues, but this was entirely different,” the former state association president said. “The sound had to be right. The location had to be right.”

And while that meant repeating lines more than once, Antal found the experience to be enjoyable.



“But you know, for me personally, it was interesting,” he said. “It made me feel good, because I got to talk about the post office that I put 38 years in carrying mail. It was nice that people were interested in what letter carriers do and picking me out.”

Podrasky had a better idea of what to expect, having seen the filming of “Slapshot” and “All the Right Moves” in Johnstown, but it still took some getting used to. “They wanted me to talk to the camera and I said that I needed someone to talk to,” he said. “They said, ‘No, it’s like on TV, when the camera is on the guy and he’s talking.’ Everything I’ve ever seen on TV in my entire life is going through my head as I try to figure out what do I need to do to not look like a dork right now,” he joked before laughing.

“It was a lot of fun,” he said.

The filmmakers received permission from the Windber Post Office and local citizens to film throughout the area. “No one was averse to helping,”

Below and opposite page: Images from the two produced “Postal Tales” videos

Podrasky said. “Everyone I introduced them to, I was their mailman.”

They returned to Los Angeles and took a few months to edit the footage. They worked on the sound design and added carefully chosen pieces of traditional and contemporary American folk music to make the short films complete.

When Antal saw it, “I stopped for a minute and said, ‘It’s me!’ It really tells

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the story of the letter carrier,” he said. “They were always saying to me that this is art, but I say that this is the kind of stuff that we need because we’re always trying to keep the post office going, maintain six-day delivery and door-to-door delivery.”



Don Podrasky

Podrasky wants to see more carriers get involved. “If we actually get to tell our story from our point of view, rather than some kind of canned reference from the company, it carries a lot more weight,” he said. “I want to hear from the guys who are doing the actual jobs.”

You can watch both pieces at www.postaltales.org. But the artists hope you won’t stop there.

“We hope that letter carriers reading this in your magazine will be inspired to contact us and share their stories,” Orlova said.

“Everyone has a story to tell,” she said. “Whether the letter carrier is new to the profession or retired after 30-plus years of delivering mail, they have all experienced something worth sharing. The stories we are looking for span far and wide, from inspiring, funny, romantic, heroic, embarrassing, scary, supernatural—you name it.”

The site gives many ways to share a carrier’s story. Options including mailing in the story, submitting it through an online form, by e-mail, or even calling the artists to record the story by phone.

“We often contact our storytellers after receiving their story submission and interview them by phone,” Orlova said. “We have even helped letter carriers edit their stories into compelling pieces that capture the experience they intend to share.”

“I can see ‘Postal Tales’ becoming a large and constantly growing collection of short stories,” Moeller added. “A never-ending project dedicated to collecting stories and producing as many individual episodes, all three to five minutes long, that come our way. The internet and digital streaming technology have changed TV program-

ming and people’s watching habits, and luckily have made room again for content in short form.

“Similar to the fairytales of Hans Christian Andersen or the Brothers Grimm, the stories will become a vast collection of tales,” he said, “all told

by letter carriers to create a beautiful portrait of America through the eyes of the postal worker.”

Podrasky echoed that humanizing element. When people might first see a letter carrier, they see the uniform, he said. Then, “the uniform starts telling a story, and by the time it’s done, it’s not a uniform anymore. It’s a real human being.” **PR**

The Postal Tales team allowed us to reprint the story below to give a sample of the kinds of tales they’re looking for.

A Path Well-Paved August 18, 2015

When George retired, the best route in the Lorain Post Office went up for bid. I didn’t have much seniority, so I really didn’t think I had much of a chance of getting it. But lo and behold, I did! But with the route came the responsibility of living up to the standards that George had set for 30 years on that route. And I knew I couldn’t let him down. He was the best mailman ever, and all the people on his route loved him like family.

Halfway through the route there lived two elderly sisters. They were both blind. When I took over the route, George explained that I needed to read the mail to them every day. It wasn’t always an easy task—especially on birthdays and Christmas—but they were the nicest, kindest people you could ever meet. I know I’m not nearly as good of a person as George was, but following in his footsteps (literally) made me just a little bit better than I was before.

—Chris

