

A hard RAIN

Stories of survival,
helping others
and returning
to their routes

From his house near Braes Bayou, TX, Willie Ferguson watched in amazement as the flood waters—illuminated by the early light of dawn—kept rising on his Southwest Houston street.

"I sat on the porch and watched the water rise higher than I ever had seen in the 30 years I've been in this home," he said.

Ferguson's vigil began at 4 a.m. Sunday, Aug. 27, in Hurricane Harvey's early hours. By 7 a.m., theraging waters on his street had trapped him in his neighborhood.

As president of Houston Branch 283 for the past decade, Ferguson's thoughts quickly turned to his nearly 5,000 members and what the storm would mean for each of them.

By the very next day, Ferguson witnessed something else he'd never seen: "The Postal Service completely shut down the Houston District," he said, a decision he was alerted to Monday in a call from the USPS district office. Both Houston and the Rio Grande District were completely or



The Texas National Guard helped rescue people in danger from the flooding.

partially, respectively, shut down after Hurricane Harvey made landfall.

And by then, still unable to leave his neighborhood but connected by phone, Ferguson began receiving calls "from all over the United States, from letter carriers," asking how things were and offering to help.

"I want to thank all the brothers and sisters who've called from all over," Ferguson said. "It's been very touching."

What he didn't yet know was that this would soon develop into the greatest

Harvey dumped nearly 52 inches of rain, the highest total of any storm in U.S. history.

flood—and one of the costliest natural disasters—in U.S. history, wreaking devastation for hundreds of miles along the Gulf Coast of Texas.

"Words cannot describe what we saw," Conroe letter carrier and Branch 283 member Anne Taylor said, citing desperate residents, their houses submerged, awaiting rescue by helicopter or boat.

"The water was so deep, boats going through the neighborhood couldn't see the houses; they were hitting the roofs."

In the following days and weeks, from Houston (the nation's fourth-largest city) to nearby suburbs, from small towns to far-off cities, the storm's aftermath had varying impacts. Some neighborhoods experienced receding waters as others were subsequently slammed by the controlled releasing of water from reservoirs in a bid to avert uncontrolled flooding.

Images from the cover (from top): The Bear Creek branch post office in Houston; Branch 283's Shardea Harrison looks on at her 3-week-old baby, Sarai, being held by Dean Mize as he and Jason Legnon used his airboat to rescue them from their home; Branch 283 member Fateyva Miles wears a mask while delivering mail to the Scarsdale area; a carrier is thanked by his customers as he delivers mail on his route.

Through it all, letter carriers have overcome obstacles to deliver mail to grateful customers while facing personal challenges regarding their homes or families. And many carriers have helped residents recover from the widespread devastation—a process that will take months or years.

Houston's carriers have tales of heartbreak and heroism to share, even as they deliver to their communities something few others can—a restored sense of normalcy.

As **Mary McGuire**, a Port Arthur Branch 1179 member and shop steward in Groves, 90 miles southeast of Houston, put it: "In a storm like this, when the mail starts running again, the people in the community start to feel like everything's going to be OK now, things are getting back to normal."

That doesn't mean it's easy.

"I'm pretty sure in my office that half of the carriers have lost their houses," McGuire said. "They were rescued and brought to shelters, so we'll be splitting routes and doing the best we can."

Surviving

Many letter carriers were forced to get themselves and their families to safety.

When **Dietra Young**, a 19-year Houston letter carrier from Branch 283, heard on TV at 2 a.m. on Monday that the dam in her neighborhood was about to be opened—possibly engulfing her home—she wasted no time gathering belongings. She raced to her car and drove away.

But the water rose too fast and she soon had to ditch her car in the middle of a street. Knocking on doors, the 12-year steward found someone who offered to put her car in his driveway when the water allowed, so she gave him her keys. "No one was a stranger



The Bear Creek branch post office in Houston, TX

during this time," she said.

Continuing on foot through "that nasty, filthy, waist-deep water," Young finally hitched a ride with a couple on the back of their truck, before being dropped off when roads were blocked. Under the cover of a shed from the driving rain, she called a co-worker whose house wasn't flooded, then walked to a place where the colleague could pick her up.

Beaumont Branch 842 President **Yolanda Poullard** escaped from her house with her 8-year-old child but is mourning a close childhood friend, a nurse who braved the rising waters seeking to reach relatives on the other side of Beaumont.

"Her car stalled in the water," Poullard said. "She thought she'd get her and her baby girl to higher ground. She tripped and the flood washed her away into the canal. They found her about a quarter-mile away from the vehicle. First responders on a boat saw the baby's backpack, because she was carrying the baby on her back."

Responders tried to revive her friend, then "just took her immediately to the morgue," Poullard said. The little girl survived.

Letter carrier **Sonya Ashworth**, of Branch 1179, didn't know whether she'd survive the flood enveloping her Port Arthur house.

"I was trying to figure out how to get my three kids at home and my two big dogs to safety," Ashworth, a 17-year carrier, said. Her husband was out of town. The water was starting to rise, and she knew for safety reasons she'd soon have to turn off the electricity.

"What do I do?" she wondered. "The kids are calm; I can't let them see me blink."

Unexpectedly, Ashworth received a text from a young co-worker in Port Arthur checking on her.

"I said, 'We're OK,'" Ashworth said. "She said, 'No, I'm going to send you a boat.'"

The boat arrived at her front door and brought her to a drop-off area. Those with greater needs, including nursing home residents on stretchers, were being attended to, as Ashworth waited, "trying to figure out my next move, where to go from there."

As it got dark and resumed raining, the co-worker called to tell Ashworth she was coming to get her. "In her little car, she piled me, my three kids, my two big dogs, her and her daughter."

With the Beaumont Civic Center taking on water, the co-worker arranged for an Army truck to transport the family to a church providing shelter.

Lacking flood insurance, Ashworth and her husband plan to apply to FEMA and hope to get help from the Postal Employees' Relief Fund (PERF) to rebuild.

Helping

As letter carriers in South Texas help restore normalcy by delivering their routes, while facing their own struggles, many are going above and beyond.

The co-worker who arranged Ashworth's rescue was city carrier assistant (CCA) **Ebony Nobles** of Branch 1179. All of 90 days carrying mail behind her, she has plunged into deep waters to save people, coordinated rescues by helicopter and boat, led a clothing drive, bought food to shelters and performed her Army Reserve du-



Corpus Christi
Branch 1259
held a barbecue
to feed those
in need in the
community.



ties—while also delivering her route and helping customers in need.

At the point when she got Ashworth and her family out, the National Guard had been activated but not the Reserves, “so I couldn’t actually go out and do hand-to-hand rescues,” Nobles said.

Instead, she began checking on her co-workers’ situations, using social media to get contact information for those she didn’t know. “It started expanding from there, because there was such a need,” she said.

Nobles coordinated dozens of rescues in Beaumont and Orange, Port Arthur and Nederland, through her contacts with the civilian volunteers who form the Cajun Navy and the Texas Navy, groups of boat owners who assist with search-and-rescue missions. She did that for three straight days, while mail deliveries were stopped. Soon, she

was back delivering mail in Port Arthur. Once the Army Reserves were activated, she was able to rescue residents herself from homes and rooftops.

Some evenings she has Reserve duty after finishing her route, returning to her post office the next morning.

She also started a clothing drive—initially for postal employees, since expanded to the public. And Nobles has brought military MREs (Meals, Ready-to-Eat) to shelters.

An interview with Nobles as she delivered mail was interrupted. She later called to explain why; she’d asked an elderly customer why her furniture wasn’t on the lawn, like her neighbors.

“She said she had no one to help move it,” Nobles said. “So after I talked to her, I started calling around different places,” and a local college organization agreed to help.

How has she managed all this? By working some 24-hour, back-to-back-to-back days, countering fatigue by drinking lots of water—a tactic she learned while deployed in Afghanistan.

“I’m just doing what any human being would do in this situation,” Nobles said.

On the storm’s first day, **Joseph Gordon**, president of Pasadena Branch 3867 since January, saw the

county commissioner plead on television for volunteers.

“He said, ‘Everything’s flooding, people need to get out and there’s not enough first responders. This is Texas; everybody’s got boats and trucks. If you got a boat, got a big truck and can go and help people, we need you.’ ”

Gordon, who’d restored his 1995 truck so it could drive in three feet of water, said “Let’s go” to a neighbor watching the news with him.

They drove to a place in Baytown where people rescued by boat were being dropped off—and spent hours shuttling dozens of flood survivors through deep water to high ground to be transported to shelters or relatives. Gordon also helped keep the Good Samaritans’ boats from crashing into concrete barriers in the strong current.

After a couple of days there, Gordon located scarce water in a store and, with Branch 3867 Secretary **Derrick Derrick**, brought a truckload to a local charity needing it.

When **Ruben Livas** of Corpus Christi saw residents unable to get a decent meal because of lost power, spoiled food and mandatory water boiling, he acted. Livas, president of Branch 1259, organized a barbecue with 15 branch



members, assisted by members of other unions.

In the Rockport Post Office parking lot, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., the carriers served about 400 plates of chicken legs, sausage, beans and rice, and gave out cases of water.

"People were coming in droves. We served some for lunch, some for dinner, some for both, and some entire families," Livas said. "Even though there was a curfew, the local police commander said we could stay there until the food ran out.

"We heard so many 'Thank you' and 'Bless you' and 'You guys are great,' and they said we're very important to our community. It was very humbling to have people wait in line for 30 minutes for a good cooked meal."

Coping

In Harvey's aftermath, letter carriers must deal with damaged and destroyed houses and ruined personal property, producing financial difficulties as well as personal stress.

Vincent Ramirez, a Houston letter carrier for 13 years and a Branch 283 member, led his wife, 8-year-old daughter, elderly father and three dogs on an arduous two-mile trek through waist-deep water after the storm hit.

He's glad they left; he was told the next day by his neighbor, who'd lived there 40 years but never had seen flooding in the neighborhood, that the water was up to Ramirez' roof.

Still, he said, he now faces "a stressful and depressing situation" with his house "a total loss" and only a few items of clothing retrievable.

"It's definitely overwhelming," Ramirez said. "It's going to be a long process to get back on my feet. I feel like I have a lot of stuff on my plate to do."



Debris from houses lined many roads as residents, such as Branch 283's Vincent Ramirez (at r), tore out the ruined walls in their homes.

Ramirez lacks the resources to rebuild, even with insurance.

"I have to take it day by day and leave it in God's hands to help out," he said.

Others find even the prospect of rebuilding too much.

A week and a half after the storm hit, Houston native **Joey Aguilar**, father of four and grandfather of four, entered his Branch 283 union hall to make a heartfelt plea: a chance to start over carrying mail in a high and dry place that won't flood.

He was, he said, too physically and emotionally drained to rebuild—again. Sixteen years ago, Tropical Storm Allison destroyed his home. Lacking flood insurance, he still managed to rebuild. Now, the same house is once again destroyed, his car and his wife's car are total losses, and virtually everything he owns is in his yard waiting to be trashed. Though he now has flood insurance, the adjuster has told him he'll get a fraction of the value he lost.

He wants to live in a place "where I don't have to worry when it starts raining again." His in-laws live in San Antonio, and that's where he hopes to go.

"None of my in-laws have ever been flooded over there. They have room for me," Aguilar said.

He's eligible to retire in three years but loves delivering the mail, the only job he's ever known. He works at the same post office where his father spent 36 years as a clerk.

Unable to return to work so far, he's still being "bombarded with customers concerned about their mail."



"You would think I'm the post office," Aguilar said. "I know it sounds crazy for customers to have my personal cell phone number, but that's the area I grew up in. My mother lives on my route. I just love the people on my route. They know I would help if I can, but I tell them I'm in the same position you are right now. Pretty much all my customers are displaced, too. I have a lot of elderly people on my route that kind of depend on my doing extra little things for them."

He pleads with Branch President Ferguson to help him leave.

"I've got 32 years of service, but I'm willing to start on a walking route," Aguilar said. "I'm willing to work my way up, without losing my seniority. I want to see if somehow the union here

News

can work with the union over there. If they could somehow make that happen for me and my family, that would be awesome. I just want to keep my family high and dry."

"Heartbreaking," was how Ferguson described the situation. "Makes you tear up."

Delivering

When skeleton crews of letter carriers returned to their post offices mid-week, many mopped up flooded offices or, where the facilities permitted, cased mail.

Below: Port Arthur Branch 1179 CCA Ebony Nobles delivers on her route.

Bottom: Residents were grateful to see their letter carriers return to their routes.



Even as she sought to navigate the flooding and closed roads to get scheduled treatments for colon cancer, Port Neches letter carrier **Carol Meadows**, Branch 1179 secretary, went in to help with the cleaning as soon as her post office opened.

"We've got to catch up," she said. "I'm a union steward. We've got to get everybody together. A lot of the restaurants are closed, so I'm trying to make something and bring it in."

Once the routes began again, carriers delivered limited amounts of largely residual mail and some packages.

But for residents, just seeing the familiar sight of their letter carrier returning to the route was the first sign that things were returning to some semblance of normalcy.

"They were really surprised we were working but happy at the same time for our service," Dickinson carrier **Toni Datrice** of Branch 283 said.

Construction trucks assessing damage and hauling away debris, however, provided challenges.

"The route I was on today, I could barely get through," Datrice said. In the 19-year carrier's first neighborhood, the police officer directing traffic had set up a system under which cars entered and then left—so she was unable to loop around and deliver to the other side of

the street. She called her supervisor and was directed to leave the neighborhood for safety reasons.

A.G. Ramirez, a shop steward for Branch 283, owns a truck, so he was able to check the union hall early on—on his way back home after the former Marine "got

my baby granddaughter from my daughter's home, because their ceiling fell in."

His station was dry but the carrier trucks weren't. "When you started them, they spit out a whole lot of water through the exhaust. I know the vehicle I drove (the next day) felt like it was going to shut off all day, but it did stay on," Ramirez said.

And as water receded and more normal mail deliveries resumed, other obstacles surfaced, as homeowners filled their yards with furniture, carpets, drywall, refrigerators, clothes and household items to be discarded.

"People are gutting their homes, so it's gotten a little more difficult," Ramirez said. "In some areas where you might be driving house to house, they've got debris that might be blocking the streets or the mailboxes. Even when you park and loop, it might be blocking the parking spots."

Carriers throughout the region volunteered to work to reduce the backlog. In the town of La Port, **Melvin Santiago**, a member of Pasadena Branch 3867 and an Army veteran who's carried mail since 1973, worked Labor Day weekend to get his station caught up—as did a dozen station co-workers, including every CCA.

"We each did two routes so we could cover all 25 routes," Santiago said. "We delivered a lot of mail people were looking for—checks, letters from FEMA, letters from insurance. A lot of people were happy to see us on Labor Day. They couldn't believe it—they thought they had the wrong day."

Concerns that carriers might have had about getting paid, given the closings, the other logistical problems and the difficulty many had getting to work, were alleviated early on.

"A lot of carriers were worried about

Carriers had to deliver around debris-lined streets.



getting paid,” Pouppard, the president of Beaumont Branch 842, said. But in a Thursday morning teleconference less than a week into the flooding, the USPS district manager assured branch presidents and officers from other postal crafts that “not just regular carriers but also CCAs would get paid” whatever the circumstances, by averaging the hours individuals had worked the prior four to six weeks.

In that call, Pouppard said, the district manager also asked NALC officers to try to help contact the 843 postal employees (out of the region’s 11,200) then unaccounted for, so postal officials could keep track of their safety and well-being.

Pouppard added that someone from the national business agent’s office in Kingwood called every day to update her and other branches, as did officers from NALC’s National Headquarters in Washington, DC.

Days after her harrowing escape, Young, the Houston carrier, was back on the route.

“Customers, of course, are excited to see the mailman, they’re happy we’re out on the streets,” she said. To reassure residents and to catch up on undelivered mail from the storm’s early days, thousands of carriers—60 at her station alone—volunteered to deliver on Sunday and Monday of Labor Day weekend, a week into the massive flooding.

“I got so many comments, ‘I can’t believe you guys are working on the holiday,’ ” Young said. “They’re thankful, but I just say, ‘This is our job; we just want to get everything to you.’ We just want to provide that service.”

Branch 1179’s **Mary McGuire**, who began delivering mail at age 45 in her native Groves, after years in other postal crafts, looks at the challenges,

but also at how letter carriers are responding, and says this: “It is a team spirit down here. This storm will not destroy us. We are Texas strong and we will come back.”

One reason that letter carriers have delivered while many are coping with their own circumstances is that solidarity has been in full force.

“It’s been an incredible community with our co-workers,” Houston Branch 283 member **Christina Davidson** said. “Everybody’s saying, ‘I got your back if you need anything.’ All the workers and management, we’re all in the same boat here. We’re all group-texting. I know co-workers who were flooded. The spirit is, hey, what can we all do to help our co-workers? My supervisor called and said, ‘If you need to go anywhere, or need clothes, I can give you some of mine.’ ”

“It’s really helpful, really open, and just really generous.”

PERF

NALC President Fredric Rolando called on the nation’s letter carriers to be just as generous in the face of so much need. “NALC understands that a harm to one of us is a harm to all of us,” he said. “I know that everyone reading this will find it in their hearts to give when it’s needed most.”

The president asked members to donate to the Postal Employees’ Relief Fund (PERF), the special charitable organization operated by the various union and management organizations of the Postal Service to benefit postal employees. PERF provides relief grants to help qualifying individuals get re-established after their homes have been significantly damaged by natural

Branch 1179 letter carrier Mary McGuire is greeted by a customer

disasters or house fires. Charitable donations from letter carriers are needed now, not only to help those recovering from Hurricane Harvey, but also for postal employees dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, which tore through the Caribbean and Florida in mid-September.

The back cover of this magazine outlines the ways members can donate to PERF. Further, Rolando said that the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) had given special permission for agencies to solicit for Hurricane Harvey disaster relief funds such as PERF.

“This is separate from our work to obtain PERF donations from members through the Combined Federal Campaign,” Rolando said, asking members and branch leaders to be creative in their fundraising efforts for PERF, “because every dollar counts. For more than 25 years, PERF has provided financial support directly to letter carriers in need.” **PR**