

Proud to Serve

Proud to Serve is a semi-regular compilation of heroic stories about letter carriers in their communities. If you know about a hero in your branch, contact us as soon as possible at 202-756-7403 or at postalrecord@nalc.org. We'll follow up with you to obtain news clippings, photos or other information.

Honoring heroic carriers

Heroism, like the mail, comes in many packages—think of police officers or firefighters. But for some citizens in need of assistance, their heroes come in the form of concerned letter carriers.

Letter carriers are members of nearly every community in this nation and know when something is wrong. Spotting fires and injuries, they often are the first to respond. The following stories document their heroism. For them, delivering for America is all in a day's work.

Carriers use teamwork to help customer

Youngstown, OH Branch 385 member **Daniel Mathews**, delivering mail as part of his T-6 string on Aug. 30, arrived at the home of his 94-year-old customer, World War II veteran Don Wittenauer. The carriers who deliver the route regularly stop to check on the patron because of his medical hardship.

That day, Mathews noticed that something was wrong. "He's [normally] sharp as a tack. He was really out of it like I've never seen before," the carrier said. "His head was down and he was struggling to speak. I knew he needed help."

Mathews asked Wittenauer if he should call the paramedics, but the man declined and asked him instead to help him get a drink of water. The carrier fulfilled his request and then tried to notify Wittenauer's ex-wife, who is his caregiver and who lives across the street.

She was not home, so Mathews called retired carrier and Branch 385 officer **Helen Hancock** to notify her of the situation. Hancock lived a street over and was Wittenauer's former letter carrier.

"I've maintained a friendship with him," Hancock said. "I ran over to check on him. I could tell something was terribly wrong."

After talking with Wittenauer and calling his family, Hancock decided to call for an ambulance.

Paramedics soon arrived and checked

Wittenauer's sugar and heart rate; both were dangerously low. The man was then transported to the hospital for treatment. He soon recovered.

Wittenauer's family was grateful. "Don is paralyzed and in a wheelchair and is a diabetic," they wrote to the local postmaster. "We are very fortunate to have such good mail carriers who care for the elderly."

Hancock, who retired after 29 years of carrying mail, laughed at being called a hero. "It's our job," she said, insisting that Mathews deserved any credit.

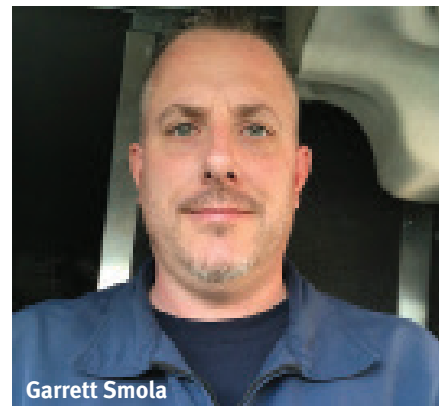
"I honestly feel if it weren't for Dan, he wouldn't be alive today," Hancock continued. "I personally don't believe he understood he was a hero that day."

Mathews says that even though he has known Wittenauer for a decade, they have become friends since the incident. But don't try to call him a hero, either.

"I just got him medical attention," the 10-year postal veteran said. "I hope someone would do that for me if I was in the same state."



Youngstown, OH Branch 385 members Daniel Mathews (above, left) and Helen Hancock (inset) helped their customer who needed medical treatment.



Garrett Smola

'Doing what's right'

On Sept. 15, Western Massachusetts Branch 46 member **Garrett Smola** was doing a package pickup when he noticed something disturbing. An elderly couple was walking down the street with a man following close behind. The carrier kept tabs on them as he



Cyprian Ugwu

continued to load his vehicle.

He soon heard the man making a rude and threatening remark. “He was walking toward the elderly woman with his hand raised,” Smola said. He saw the woman’s husband jump in.

“They were tussling,” the carrier said, and the suspect was trying to steal the man’s wallet.

Smola quickly ran over and positioned himself between the two men. He touched the assailant’s shoulder and told him to stop and get off the octogenarian man, who had suffered a broken nose.

“Now you have to go through me,” Smola told him.

The thief grabbed his own backpack from the ground and ran off.

Smola tried to comfort the husband, who said he was scared that his attacker might have had a knife.

The man’s wife had called 911 while this was going on. Smola stayed with the couple until EMTs and police arrived about 15 minutes later. The carrier provided officers with the information he had. He later found out that the husband had undergone treatment at the hospital and had gradually recovered. The man

later contacted the post office to thank Smola for saving his life.

Despite the attention he’s received for his actions, the 12-year postal veteran rebuffed any heroic accolades. “I feel if it happened again, I’d do the same thing,” Smola said. “It’s about doing what’s right.”

Instincts kick in to help a fiery situation

On Jan. 17, Cincinnati, OH Branch 43 member **Cyprian Ugwu** was delivering mail to a house on his route when he noticed something strange. “There was a fire alarm going on and no one was responding to it,” he said.

The carrier knocked on the door and, when there was no answer, went around to the back of the house. “There was smoke coming out of the windows,” Ugwu said. “And there was smoke coming from the roof, and that’s when I knew the whole house was on fire.”

He ran back to the front. “Boom, boom—I knocked again on the door,” he said. No answer.

Ugwu’s phone was in his postal van,

so he quickly flagged down a woman driving by. “Can you call 911 for me?” he asked her.

Ugwu checked to see if an outside water hose worked, but it didn’t.

Firefighters soon arrived to put out the fire, and they credited the carrier with potentially saving the lives of the five dogs they found inside. When Ugwu saw that the situation was in good hands, he simply returned to his route without telling anyone what happened.

The homeowner, Brian Rose, had been at work at the time and when he later found out that it had been his letter carrier who had taken action, said he was grateful to Ugwu. “Thank you,” he told local Fox News affiliate WXIX-TV. “Unfortunately the house...I don’t know if that’s savable, but he saved my dogs. That’s all I care about.”

Ugwu, who is in his first year of carrying mail, said that when he saw the fire, he told himself, “I have to do something.” But he doesn’t think he’s a hero. “I was happy that the dogs were saved,” Ugwu said. “We were lucky no one was home.”

Neighborhood watch



“This lady flagged me down,” Eden, NC Branch 3712 member **Thomas Tetterton** said of an incident that occurred as he was delivering parcels on the morning of Jan. 4. “I didn’t recognize her. It was unusual for someone to be out walking since it was so cold,” he added. The carrier rolled down the window of his LLV, and the woman, Barbara Dawkins, told Tetterton that she was lost. He asked the woman her address, but she didn’t know it, saying only that she lived

near some shopping centers. Tetterton attempted to give Dawkins directions to where he thought she might live. “Something just didn’t seem right,” he said. “She seemed incoherent and disoriented.” Tetterton put his coat around her to try to warm her up, contacted his supervisor and called 911. The carrier asked the woman her name, and he realized that she was one of his customers on another part of his route whom he hadn’t yet met. Police soon arrived and brought Dawkins

to the hospital for evaluation. “She wasn’t hurt,” Tetterton said, adding that he later found out that the woman had dementia. Dawkins was admitted to the hospital until a family member could take her home, and she soon went to live in a nursing home. Despite receiving praise from members of the community for his actions, Tetterton insists he is not a hero. “It’s not a big deal,” the 11-year postal veteran said. “Luckily, we got her some help and got her to a safe place.” **PR**

Fire can't hold back this carrier

On Feb. 6, Evansville, IN Branch 377 member **Shane Nicholson** was delivering mail on a cul-de-sac on his route when, he said, "I saw a little bit of fire and smoke."

The carrier went closer to inspect the home and knocked on the door. There was a storm door that was open, so he yelled into the house. He discovered that a resident, Lois Suydam, was home.

He saw the woman under a recliner close to the door. "I could hardly see her [because] the smoke was so black," Nicholson said. "She was on oxygen and [the chair] had caught fire. She was trying to put it out."

The carrier ran inside the home and pulled Suydam to the porch and fresh air. "She kept screaming for her dog," Nicholson said.

A neighbor had called 911 and helped Suydam once she was outside. Nicholson called their actions a "community effort."

The fire had been contained to the living room. After quashing the flames, responding firefighters removed a pet dog and cat from the house and Suydam was taken to the hospital.

Firefighters found that there were no working smoke detectors in the home.

The Jasper Police Department later tweeted about Nicholson's actions: "Initial reports advise that local postman deserves credit for saving the female occupant."

The nine-year letter carrier said that nothing like this had ever happened to him, but added, "I ain't scared of fire," describing his actions as a reflex.

"I was just part of the community, helping out somebody," Nicholson said.

Seconds count when saving a life

As Minneapolis Branch 9 member **Kristine Selbitschka** was delivering mail on another route on Oct. 4, she happened to look over at a home and saw a man on a ladder wobbling.

"I could see him stumbling from the second level to the first level, and then down head-first on the sidewalk," she said. "I was running across [the street] playing 'Frogger' trying to get to him."

Knowing how dire the situation looked, Selbitschka called 911 as she ran.

"I thought for sure he was going to die in front of me," she said. "Blood was pretty much everywhere. He hit his head so hard, his teeth came out."

Despite the extent of his injuries, the customer, Angel, attempted to get up. Selbitschka tried to keep him lying down and calm until firefighters arrived to load



the man into an ambulance.

Angel's wife soon came over, but she didn't speak English and was having trouble understanding the firefighters. Selbitschka tried to help by getting a pen and paper and writing down the address to the hospital so the woman would know where to meet her husband.

Selbitschka soon heard from the couple's daughter that her father was alive but on life support. It didn't look good, the daughter said.

Two weeks later, the carrier received another call from the daughter with different news: Angel was now expected to make a full recovery. "That made my whole year," Selbitschka said. Doctors, she added, had told him that, had Selbitschka not been there, he would have died on his front lawn.

Angel and his family now refer to the carrier as *their* guardian angel. "The only thing he remembers from that day was my voice telling him that help was on the way," the carrier said.

Selbitschka has spoken on the phone with the family regularly. "I've made some friends," she said. They plan to get together soon to finally meet again face-to-face.

But don't try to call her a hero; Selbitschka maintains that she was just in the right place at the right time to help—and that seconds count. "I just happened to make a difference," the 13-year letter carrier said. **PR**



Help on the way

On Saturday, Dec. 23, Southern Illinois Merged Branch 1197 member **Eric Hirsch** had just finished delivering mail to a cluster-box unit in an area with little traffic when he noticed something concerning. "I came across a young man lying on his back on the sidewalk," he said. The carrier

approached the man to ask if he was all right. "He was breathing, but I couldn't get him to respond," Hirsch said. So, he called 911 and waited for help to arrive. Ambulance personnel soon showed and said they believed that the man had overdosed. They gave him some Narcan, which woke him up. "I

helped hold his arm," Hirsch said, adding that the man was thrashing around. EMTs told the carrier that he likely saved the man's life. But the 19-year letter carrier and Marine Corps veteran denied any heroics. "I think anyone else would have done the same thing," Hirsch said simply. **PR**



Help on the way



Rick Milleville

As Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 member **Rick Milleville** was delivering mail to the home of an elderly couple on Dec. 13, one resident emerged from the house. “I walked up the driveway and he was walking down the driveway to meet me and wiped out,” Milleville said. The man was on the ground and couldn’t move. “There was a sheet of ice. He couldn’t get up by himself,” the carrier said. “I helped pick him up and got him into the house.” The man’s wife was inside, but she couldn’t drive, so the carrier called 911 and waited with them until an ambulance arrived. “He [had] dislocated his elbow,” Milleville said. “They put it in a sling.” The couple thanked the carrier for his actions. Brushing off calls that he was a hero, as “over-kill,” the nearly 20-year postal veteran called the incident good timing. “I just helped the guy out, like I’d help anyone,” Milleville said.

Grand Rapids, MI Branch 56 member **Amy Helsley** had just delivered to a home on her route on Feb. 3, 2017, and was pulling away when “I saw feet sticking out of the garage,” she said. “He

wasn’t moving.” The carrier quickly parked her LLV and approached. She found her elderly customer lying on the ground in the frigid cold without a hat or gloves on. “He slipped on the ice and fell,” Helsley said. “I assessed him and asked if anything hurt.” The carrier determined that he was not injured. “He said, ‘I just can’t get leverage to get up,’” she said. The carrier found a chair in her customer’s garage. “I sat him up enough so that between the two



Amy Helsley

of us, we get him into the chair,” she said. Helsley then used her own gloves and hands to try to warm him up. From there, she got enough leverage to stand him up and help get him into his house. The octogenarian told Helsley that he had heard her start to leave and didn’t know what he would have done had she not spotted him. She made sure that he was all right before continuing to deliver her route. The 14-year postal veteran has received praise for her actions, and she said that she feels a bit “silly about all the hoopla. I feel anyone in this situation would do it.”



Ajay Singh

On Aug. 10, 2017, Baltimore Branch 176 member **Ajay Singh** was on his route when, “I heard this sound for help,” he said. The city carrier assistant rushed toward the noise and found his elderly customer, Dottie Finklestein, stuck between a wall and a tree. “She fell from her front porch into the bushes,” Singh said. The nonagenarian had been gardening in her front yard but had taken a misstep and was unable to move. She had been there for about an hour without her phone, and no one was around. Singh said that when she saw him, she said, “‘Oh, mailman, thank God. I’m stuck here.’” To extricate Finklestein, he offered his hand, and then, he said, “I carried her like a kid.” Singh asked if she wanted him to call 911. Finklestein declined, so he instead informed the woman’s neighbor, who took her to the hospital. Doctors there said that Finklestein had broken her back, though she soon returned home to recover. “Dottie, her family and all here in the neighborhood are very grateful to Mr. Singh,” the woman’s neighbor, Jeanne Yuspa, wrote to the local postmaster. “Thanks to him, we still have our Dottie.” Though Singh said he was “proud” to be called a hero, he said it was just indicative of how he watched out for people on his route. “Whenever I see anyone having difficulty crossing the road, I help,” the second-year letter carrier said.

Buffalo/Western New York Branch 3 member **Anthony Brancato** was delivering mail on his route on Dec. 18 to a nonagenarian customer. “He

sometimes will come out and get his mail,” he said. That day, “I saw his screen door swing open.” The carrier looked closer and saw the man lying on the ground after apparently having fallen into the door. “His head was bleeding,” Brancato said. The carrier asked his customer if he was all right. “He said, ‘I’m fine,’” Brancato said. The customer declined a call to 911. The carrier instead helped the customer up and then went to the man’s son’s house three doors down to let him know what was going on. The customer sent a letter of appreciation for Brancato to the post office, and the carrier soon saw the man out and about just a few days later. But the fourth-year letter carrier brushed off any accolades for his actions. “I’m not a hero,” Brancato said. “I was just checking to see if he was OK. He just needed a little help.” **PR**



Anthony Brancato