

# Delivering care beyond the last mile





Every December, letter carriers work hard to assure that families across the country experience the joy of the season by delivering special messages and packages. But they don't stop there. After their shifts end, they deliver care beyond the last mile.

Carriers bring extra joy to their communities in many forms. Sometimes they supply gifts to families in need. Others make sure that hungry people don't go without food, care for the most vulnerable newborns in the hospital or deliver special messages to heaven from grieving children.

In this special holiday issue of *The Postal Record*, we bring you stories about letter carriers who go above and beyond to assure that everyone shares in the delight of the holiday season. Their extra effort reminds us all that the spirit of the season is about spreading joy to others.

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, by email at [postalrecord@nalc.org](mailto:postalrecord@nalc.org) or write us at 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001.

*"You're not going to solve the world's ills, but you can solve one thing."*

Letter carriers are members of the community and 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 and clothing throughout the rest of the year, especially during the holiday season.

### Providing meals on his route

When New Philadelphia, OH Branch 711 member **Justin Stingel** took over a new route in July 2017, within a few months, he began to get to know his customers.

That included Timothy Caul, whose wife, Georgia, spent eight months away from their house receiving medical care.

"He needed someone to talk to, and I was there at that moment," Stingel said.

The two men struck up a friendship, and Timothy told the carrier how much he missed Georgia's home cooking.

In early October, the carrier started

bringing his patron one or two meals a week. Timothy began telling Georgia about the close relationship he had forged with their letter carrier. "I couldn't wait to meet him," Georgia told New Philadelphia's *Times-Reporter*.

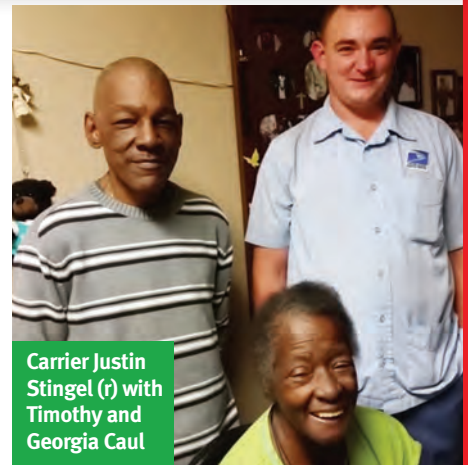
Stingel continued delivering food after Georgia returned home from the hospital. "I enlisted help because I couldn't get over there as much as I wanted to," he said.

He turned to his mother, Faye Stingel, and her small group from church, which began supplementing his meals, especially large-batch meals like casseroles.

"I think he's an angel, that God sent him to us," Georgia told the *Times-Reporter*. "I can't explain how much it means to me to know that he's getting a decent meal, with me being sick like this."

Georgia explained to the newspaper that she was a kidney transplant recipient who was vulnerable to contagions because she takes anti-rejection drugs that suppress her immune system.

"I don't believe that there's anybody that's ever done as much as this means to me," she said of Stingel. "I cherish him."



Carrier Justin Stingel (r) with Timothy and Georgia Caul

Before Stingel stepped in, Timothy's cooking skills were limited to making bean soup. The meals the carrier and his mother provide are "a pretty good variety of stuff," he said. "We've done just about everything." That includes soups, shepherd's pie, turkey, sautéed zucchini, cheeseburgers, pizza, glazed pork loin in a bacon basket with sweet potato casserole, and apple crisps.

The carrier went through a route adjustment soon after he met Timothy, so the Cauls' house no longer is on his route. Georgia sadly also died earlier this year. But Stingel hangs out with

The supplies donated by Branch 51



Timothy as much as he can. “I like to get over there at least once a week,” he said, and he provides food as often as he can. “He enjoys when we get together for lunch or dinner.”

It was the Cauls’ family friend who first called media attention to Stingel and his mother, saying that there was good in the community.

“It’s something that’s nice and I was able to do it—not for recognition,” Stingel said. “When the story came out, people donated some stuff. I was happy people joined in.”

Timothy appreciates his relationship with Stingel. “I can’t cook, never could cook, and to have him do what he did, it takes a real man, a real person with a real heart,” Timothy told the *Times-Reporter*. “You don’t find too much of that no more. It’s just been a godsend. We need more people like this in the world.”

Stingel downplays any attention he’s received for his kind actions toward Timothy. “It’s one of those things that, I didn’t expect anything from it. It was something I thought would be nice,” the three-year letter carrier said. “It seemed like he could use a friend when I first talked to him, and it grew exponentially from there.”

### Warmth for the elderly

Sometimes, just an idea can spur a person or group into action. That’s what happened with Fall River, MA Branch 51 last winter.

Branch member **Patty Joseph**, an NALC assistant to the president for

contract and field administration, had a connection to a local nursing home in the community and saw a need for socks and blankets there in January.

She gave Branch President **Paul Knarr** a call and asked, “Can you see what you can do?”

“That’s all the impetus we needed,” said Knarr, who became the coordinator for this effort.

The branch president quickly recruited others and delegated work. “We put someone in charge of every station,” he said.

At the branch’s five post offices, they gained permission and posted information about the endeavor at the time clocks so that everyone would be aware. Volunteers placed a cardboard box there for sock and blanket donations. Those designated station volunteers kept an eye on the receptacles, and once boxes got full, they’d collect the donated items and place empty boxes back out to receive more.

During service talks, carriers would remind everyone about the effort, which garnered more donations. Carriers, clerks, managers and other co-workers all participated.

From there, “We would just collect it and then contacted the nursing home,” Knarr said. “When the carrier went to deliver there, they dropped them off.”

The donations of socks and blankets benefited residents of four nursing homes in the area.

“They were very grateful,” Knarr, a 20-year postal veteran, said. “Unfortunately, some of the people may not have family anymore.”

The branch tries to stay busy with charitable endeavors throughout the

whole year. During back-to-school time in September, they have a drive and provide donated backpacks of school supplies for homeless kids. They have an annual bowlathon in November that benefits the Muscular Dystrophy Association, and explain to letter carriers how to donate during the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC) open season to benefit any number of causes at the end of the year.

“If someone comes up with an idea, we’re willing to try it,” said Knarr, who added that they probably would do another sock and blanket drive this winter. “Letter carriers work out in the city and see the need. It’s not hard to get people to participate.”

### Food drive, Round 2

Though the next Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive still is months away, letter carriers in Cape May County, NJ, know how to keep their community’s hungriest patrons fed.

Since 1983—years before the union’s national drive began—carriers there have collected food on their routes to benefit those in need during the holiday season.

Cape Atlantic, NJ Branch 903 member **John Vollrath**, who delivered mail for 35 years before retiring in 2007, has served as countywide coordinator for the holiday food drive since its inception.

“As mail people, we’re on the front lines and we see that hunger,” he said. “I felt it would be a great idea to fill the food banks over the holidays.”

The drive began in Wildwood, NJ, and then spread through the county. Now, more and more food banks rely on their holiday effort, which this year will be held on Dec. 8.

Prior to the drive, carriers deliver flyers to customers’ mailboxes, ex-





plaining what it is and what types of non-perishable food to donate. The New Jersey carriers also get the word out to the community through newspaper, radio and TV ads as well as social media.

"It works the same way the national one does," Vollrath said. It's a one-day collection effort, and carriers there pick up the donated food on their delivery rounds and bring it back to their stations. The food collected by each post office stays local.

Pantries come to the post offices to pick up the donations. Sometimes, with permission, carriers will drop donations off at the pantries, churches or food banks. More than 60 organizations share the collected food. Some offices take it a step further and purchase turkeys to donate, Vollrath said.

People in the community have grown used to it and make a point to donate each year.

"It's been highly successful and I've heard nothing but good comments," Vollrath said.

The coordinator says that the drive is a group effort and that he has help in each part of the county from fellow Branch 903 carriers. **Frank Rohrer** covers Cape May Court House, retiree **Dean Umscheid** is responsible for Cape May (and also is Branch 903's food drive coordinator come May), and **Michael Calise Jr.** coordinates in Ocean City.

Vollrath said they get a lot of support from city carriers, rural carriers, clerks, maintenance crew, managers and postmasters. "I've got to give them credit," he said. "I couldn't do it without all the help."

He added that carriers "break their humps to get it all in," and pointed out that it's an all-volunteer effort, saying, "I don't force anyone to do it." Different organizations and volunteers

pitch in on the day of, too—including retired carriers like him.

"The enormous effort by all the postal employees and volunteers involved is really heartwarming," Vollrath said. "You have to see it to believe it."

He especially wants to thank all those who donate food, saying there are so many who are generous.

The Cape May County holiday food drive has become an institution, and food banks there couldn't be more grateful. "They call me in October. They expect it now," Vollrath said of the effort.

"They need it. We feel good about it. For at least a month or two, people will be fed."

Even though the Cape Atlantic branch has had plenty of success, they hope to help even more people. "I'd like to expand it from Cape May County to Atlantic County," he said. "I'd help them get it started."

As letter carriers, he says it's hard to ignore those who are food-insecure. "The need is there. We are on the front lines," Vollrath said. "They see the hungry faces on the children. It's something they can do."

### Paying it forward

Looking to help feed or clothe the people in your own community? The letter carriers interviewed shared advice for fellow carriers around the country looking to make a difference.

Stingel said just chatting with patrons allows carriers to get an idea churning about how to help.

"There's nothing I can really advise except talking to people," he said.

"Most carriers will know who they can talk to and who they can't. It's just being open and being receptive to what you can do."

If someone comes up with a suggestion for a volunteer activity, "It's worth giving it a shot," Knarr said.

For any group endeavor, the carriers said recruiting volunteers comes first.

"Start out small, then expand as more catch on and get more help," said Vollrath, the food drive coordinator. "Start it at your office first. Talk to carriers. Come up with a date. Then, before you do anything, talk to the postmasters. Then advertise it."

Keeping your branch's goal in mind and effort in perspective is what helps Knarr. "Each person can give a little, and it makes a difference," he said. "It builds camaraderie in the station, which can be lacking. You're not going to solve the world's ills, but you can solve one thing."

Whatever way branches or individuals decide to help those they serve in their community, the carriers implored fellow carriers to take action in their neighborhoods, towns, cities or counties.

"Do it," Vollrath said. "It's needed."

NALC President Fredric Rolando commended all NALC members who assist by feeding or clothing their fellow citizens. "The holiday season gives us such a rewarding opportunity to give back in different ways to the communities we serve," he said. **PR**





## Replacement wheels

Sandee Modders (l) and Kyle Williams



**W**hen Sandee Modders of Royal Oak, MI Branch 3126 saw the local news report of a young man's motorbike being stolen at a Detroit gasoline station, she became angry—and sad. "I was literally crying when I watched it," she said. "It broke my heart."

"It was really scary," the motorbike's owner, Kyle Williams, told WXYZ-TV in Detroit. He described how three men had approached and asked him questions about his moped. "I didn't think too much of it," he told the station, until one of them displayed a gun and another went around to take the bike from him, all captured by a security camera.

"Makes me feel empty. I work hard. I don't bother anybody nor do I steal. I

go to work every day," Williams added.

Modders was perplexed that there was little public outrage at the brazen daylight theft, and she could find no GoFundMe page. "It was his transportation to and from work!" she said. "So I contacted Detroit Moped Works."

The stolen bike was a vintage 1994 Tomos Targa LX, and Modders said the shop didn't have a similar one available. "I'm not gonna have him drive off on a rebuilt crummy thing. He deserves better," she remembers thinking. So she opted for a brand-new 2018 Tomos Sprint, which retails for \$1,749. "I didn't think about the price tag," she said, adding, "We work a lot of overtime."

And Kyle? "He seemed quite happy with the one he got"—a remark that surely qualifies for the understatement of the year.

The story may have struck a nerve with Modders because she experienced something similar at a young age. Her 1972 pumpkin orange VW that she adored was stolen from outside her Detroit apartment building and the police were in no hurry to help. "It's on its way to Mexico," she remembers them saying.

Such indifference is not in her repertoire.

"I care a lot about people. This job enables me to do that," she said. "That's why I love my job! I could retire but I love my job."

Branch President Paul Roznowski said, "She goes out of her way to help people. Customers love her." As for Modders buying the moped? "It doesn't surprise me in the least," he said.

She and Williams are now Facebook friends. She says he's "a hard worker" who "just got a promotion"—a promotion that would not have been possible if he had no way to get to work. **PR**

## Carrier volunteers to help soothe babies through withdrawal

**I**n his family, Donald Liebau Jr., a retired member of Western Wayne County, MI Branch 2184, is known as "the baby whisperer." "The joke was, I had the kids till they were 4 and Nancy [his wife] took them after that," Liebau said with a laugh. Even his nieces and nephews will hand him their babies when they need them to sleep. "What does this say about me?" he wonders. "Am I that boring?"

While no babies could be reached for comment, perhaps—and this is merely speculation—they sense the experience behind the embrace of this father of five and grandfather of nine.

Liebau, who now lives upstate in Le-roy, MI, brought his baby whispering

to a program begun earlier this year at Munson Healthcare Cadillac Hospital. The "baby rockers," as they're known at Munson, are trained to soothe infants experiencing withdrawal symptoms after being born to mothers addicted to drugs. Volunteers feed, change diapers and comfort the babies around the clock to free up nurses in the neonatal intensive care unit.

However, Liebau has yet to put his training and natural baby skills to work. "As of now, we have only had one baby come into the program," he said. The program only began this year, so it is still gaining support.

"Word has to get out that there's a program," he added. "I appreciate

that you want to do a story about me doing this, but I think there's a bigger story behind it...It's not about me."

While he waits, Liebau is keeping busy with his other volunteer activities. Every Thursday he and Nancy work in Munson's emergency room; he also helps out with Habitat for Humanity.

"This is something my wife and I talked about before we retired," Liebau told the *Cadillac News*. "I just believe you give back to your community and your church."

As for baby rocking, he's of two minds. "I've always wanted to do it," he said, but he's aware that it's better that his services have not been needed yet. "It's a blessing in disguise." **PR**



# Branch adopts families for the holidays

**F**ollowing a branch tradition, letter carriers from Ballwin, MO Branch 5050 will “adopt” a few needy families in the community this year to help them enjoy the holiday season by providing gifts and food.

The tradition began about 15 years ago when Branch 5050 member **Kevin Holmes** encountered a family on his route who needed help—the father had lost his job and the mother was sick. To assure that they and their children had a festive Christmas, Holmes asked his co-workers to donate

gifts for him to deliver to the family. “It was just amazing, the response that we got,” Holmes said.

Because of the response, Holmes made it an annual event. With the help of a social worker his wife knows, Holmes finds a family or two in need to help each year, or helps families that other carriers have identified on their routes.

“We’ve had as many as three families when times are really tough,” he said. He asks the family to provide a wish list for his co-workers to fulfill.

“A lot of our employees will bring stuff in; a lot just donate money,” he said. “It’s incredible how generous our employees are.” The money goes

toward buying more gifts. At “wrapping parties,” Holmes and his co-workers gift wrap the presents for delivery.

Holmes said coming together to bring joy to others in need is a great cure for the holiday blues.

“Sometimes you get down that time of year,” he said, “but this will cheer you up when you see what people will do to help others.” **PR**



## Delivering a special message all the way to heaven

**S**ometimes, the unofficial USPS motto—“Neither snow nor rain nor gloom of night”—can be figurative as well as literal.

Last year, the Panther family was experiencing its own personal gloom of night. Six-year-old Bryce Hill was battling cancer and his beloved brother Grant Hill, 21, was battling depression. In November, Grant succumbed to his illness; the terrible discovery was made by a friend of Grant’s, the daughter of Aurora, IL Branch 219 member **Eugene Azarskis**.

In February, Azarskis got a private Facebook message from Gina Panther, the boys’ mother, explaining that the grieving Bryce had written a letter to Grant. “He actually wrote a letter a couple of

weeks before I messaged Gene but I think I was having a harder time sending it,” Panther said. “It was a Saturday, and Bryce was really upset and he kept crying, and I found the letter and said, would he feel better if we sent this letter? And he said yes. That’s when I messaged Gene privately and said, ‘I need a special letter sent to heaven because Bryce is having a hard day.’”

Panther asked Azarskis not only because he’s a friend but also because he’s the letter carrier on the family’s route. Even though it was his day off, “I told my wife, ‘I gotta go,’” he recalled. So he drove the mile to the Panthers’ home. As he turned the corner to their block, Eric Clapton’s “Tears From Heaven” came on the radio. “It didn’t hit me until I got in the driveway,” he said. “I got chills and sat there for a minute or two and got myself together.”

When he got inside, Azarskis assured the boy that his letter would get to its destination. “I know the right people, it will get there,” he told him.

Panther posted a note and photo of the encounter, a digital thank-you of sorts, on a Facebook page chronicling the boy’s life with juvenile pilocytic

astrocytoma (JPA), a form of brain cancer. “Next I knew, there were 16,000 views,” she said. “It was amazing.”

When Azarskis returned home, he and his wife discussed what to do next. The carrier turned to Google and searched terms related to “letters” and “heaven.” “It came up with a couple of different letters and poems,” he said, “so I took part of a poem and added my words to it,” as if Grant were responding to Bryce’s message. After waiting a few days, Azarskis delivered it and remembers Bryce being “excited beyond belief.”

“That made him very happy,” Panther said. “He just felt like, [Grant’s] there. He sees him.”

It’s now a year later and Bryce still has JPA, but his prognosis is rosier: Surgeons were able to remove 75 percent of the tumor, and chemotherapy has kept any growth in what was left at bay. “He’s happy and he’s OK,” Panther said. She is grateful to all the everyday saints who have been there during these difficult years for her family—including a dedicated letter carrier who swiftly completed one unappointed round. **PR**

Eugene Azarskis and Bryce Hill



# Turning tragedy into triumph



**M**itchell Rivas is a man of contrasts—contrasts that have propelled him on a journey that helps medically fragile children and their families while imbuing a community with a sense of service to others.

Rivas, a member of Cleveland Branch 40, is a tough-looking former Marine with a big heart. A letter carrier with 1,000 houses on his route who's engaged in his branch yet finds the energy to run a large organization. A father who's overcome personal tragedy to help others.

"We've been through a lot, but we've taken our tragedy and turned it into triumph," Rivas said.

Maryssa's Mission Foundation, which he founded on Dec. 2, 2015, provides cheer, love and toys to hundreds of hospitalized children in Ohio, especially during the holidays. It began as Rivas's way to deal with the loss of his daughter Maryssa from congenital heart failure, and has taken on a life of its own.

Rivas, who joined the Postal Service in 2006 after five years in the Marine Corps, is an assistant steward and delivers mail in the Cleveland suburb of Berea, where his foundation is based.

Local police have set aside an entire weekend in December when, as volunteers, they will escort Rivas and his wife, Mindy—along with Santa—from hospital to hospital, bringing toys as well as food for the families. Starting Nov. 1, police engaged in a month-long toy collection campaign for the foundation.

"He's an inspiration," Berea Police Chief Joe Grecol said.

"He and his wife have put together a great effort to reach these families when they're going through one of the toughest times of their lives, to try to make it just a little bit easier for them," Grecol said. "His life is one of service, whether it's delivering mail to people or allowing parents to spend the time concentrating on their kids while he takes care of some of their day-to-day needs."

Among organizations that donate to the foundation are the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers, who contributed memorabilia for silent auctions. Additionally, with Rivas's help, the family of 3-year-old Gabriel, who has cancer, was able to attend a Cavaliers' playoff game last season.

"They really were a light during our darkest hours," said Olivia Samarin, the boy's mother, calling the game "an out-of-this-world experience" for Gabe and his brother. She was one of several people eager to share their stories.

Maryssa, a twin who died at 28 months on Nov. 13, 2015, spent half her life in hospitals, getting most of her care at Cincinnati Children's Hospital. While there, through a church connection Rivas met Nelson Soto, provost and vice president of academic affairs at nearby Union Institute & University.

After the two families grew close through his daily visits to bring food to Rivas at the hospital, Soto moved to a house large enough to accommodate Mitchell and Mindy.

Having exhausted his postal leave, Rivas entered a leave-without-pay status as he remained with his daughter. He used the G.I. Bill, getting tuition and a stipend, to earn his master's degree in organizational leadership at Union, then used it to establish the foundation in Maryssa's memory.

"I'm just impressed with what Mitch did during that time," Soto said. "He took his education studies seriously and did something to benefit his daughter and others."

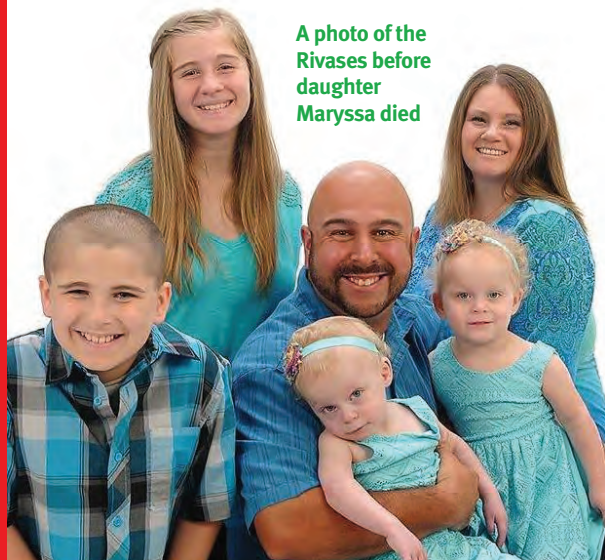
"He has touched 1,500 families," added Soto, now the foundation's vice president. "When you meet him, you'd think he's somebody who's rough around the edges, with a hard personality, but in reality he has dedicated his life to helping families who have medically fragile children. So he's reliving on a consistent basis what he walked through."

Berea police decided early on to support Rivas's efforts, something Rivas says was key to the foundation's success. "It gives us a certain amount of credibility that you can't get overnight," he said.

Berea Police Sgt. Patrick Greenhill called it an easy decision.

"Mitch and his wife, Mindy, stopped by the police department last Christmas and were explaining their organization," Greenhill, the department's community engagement officer, recounted. "He just wanted us to put out a box for their toy drive in our lobby, and he thought that was a big deal asking for that. We looked at him and said, 'What can we really do for you?'"

"We knew from the beginning that we wanted to work with them,"



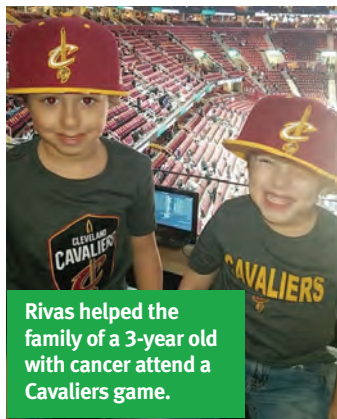
A photo of the Rivases before daughter Maryssa died





Greenhill added. “It was an easy decision for our officers to select Maryssa’s Mission Foundation as our cause in the community. The work they do is amazing, and when you see it in person, it’s hard to put it in words.”

Some letter carriers in Rivas’s station have helped by attending fundraisers. The Berea mayor’s office has donated some of the blankets made by the 150 participants in its annual blanket-making party. Several local businesses have contributed food for the hospital visits. Next year, police will vol-



Rivas helped the family of a 3-year old with cancer attend a Cavaliers game.

unteer at a foundation charity golf outing.

When Lisa Drew’s nephew went to the hospital for emergency surgery after a liver transplant, Mitchell and Mindy, who learned of the situation through mutual acquaintances, met with Drew just before she left to join her family.

They provided the family with funds for accommodations and food.

“They also gave us a bag of goodies and blankets,” Drew said. “You could really feel the love in that donation. You can tell this is where his heart is. It really touched me.



The Berea Police Department has made Rivas’s foundation one of its major charities.

“They went through such a huge loss, and they’re giving back. Their hearts are so big.”

Drew’s family reciprocated, taking part in a fundraiser this summer at a minor league baseball stadium that raised money for the foundation. “You saw a number of families at that event who’ve been helped by Maryssa’s Mission Foundation and who came together to help,” Drew said.

The spirit the foundation has ignited impresses Sgt. Greenhill: “Just the perseverance to take the tragedy and turn it into a positive for the community and to a commitment to service by the entire community, that’s just amazing.” **PR**

## Delivering care to the homeless

**D**uring the holiday season, Veronica Wilcox and her fellow carriers of Baton Rouge, LA Branch 129 think about more than their families, friends and co-workers. They think of the less fortunate. Last December, Wilcox organized a drive for the homeless in her city, collecting donations from fellow carriers at Baton Rouge’s Woodlawn Station to buy items for care packages.

“Some people donated money, and some donated items,” she said. The effort yielded about \$150 as well as items and supplies, including blankets, socks, shoes, jackets, food items and gift cards to local restaurants.

With the cash, Wilcox bought simple essentials such as toothpaste and soap that the carriers put in care packages.

With the help of a branch member



who had assisted the homeless at her church, Wilcox learned of a group of homeless people living under a bridge. On Christmas Eve, Wilcox and some other postal employees met at the bridge to deliver the care packages and donated items. Among the appreciative recipients were two children. The postal employees gave the gift cards and donated toys to the children.

Wilcox was glad that the items were



Carriers from Baton Rouge (above) delivered supplies (l) to a group of people living on the streets

received so well. “Some letter carriers thought of some other things people could benefit from,” she said, “and somebody needed everything we had—we got rid of everything.”

Wilcox said she was pleased with the level of generosity. “I didn’t expect us to do as well as we did,” she said. With the donated money, she was able to make 75 care packages. “They were more than gracious with their giving.” **PR**