



2019



OF THE YEAR AWARDS

“As letter carriers see it, what they do is more than a job—it’s a career in public service.

They’re proud of the work they do, providing Americans with the most affordable and efficient postal services anywhere,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said as he welcomed a large audience to the 2019 NALC Heroes of the Year Awards luncheon. “But there’s a more personal side to the job as well—and it shows up in their commitment to the people and the neighborhoods that they serve. On a daily basis, letter carriers assist people who need help.

“Let me make one thing clear—they do not do these things because they are supermen or superwomen,” Rolando added, “but rather because they know the neighborhoods they serve, and so they know when something’s not as it should be. They’ve watched the families grow over the years, and they care about their well-being and safety.”

The Heroes event was held on Oct. 30 in Washington, DC. The annual ceremony highlighted the special acts of courage and compassion performed by six NALC members to improve—or save—lives along their routes. Attendees included the union’s resident national officers, NALC employees, U.S. Postal Service executives, members of the Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC), labor leaders, journalists and many others from the postal community.

Before presenting the awards, Rolando thanked the panel of independent judges who had reviewed the stories about heroic and humanitarian acts published in *The Postal Record* between July 2018 and June 2019. The judges were Richard Bowers, chief of the Ocean City, MD, Fire Department; Christine Miller, director of labor engagement at United Way Worldwide; and Christopher Godfrey, chairman and chief judge of the Employees’ Compensation Appeals Board at the U.S. Department of Labor.

Rolando also recognized special guests including AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka; Postal Service COO and Executive Vice President David E. Williams; USPS Vice President, Labor Relations Doug Tulino; PRC Chairman Robert Taub and newly appointed commissioners Ann Fisher and Ashley Poling; National Association of Postal Supervisors Secretary/Treasurer Chuck Mulidore; National Postal Mail Handlers Union President Paul Hogrogian; American Postal Workers Union Executive Assistant Al Cholger; National Rural Letter Carriers’



USPS COO and Executive V.P. David E. Williams

Association President Ronnie Stutts; and United Postmasters and Managers of America President Daniel Heins.

President Rolando asked attendees to observe a moment of silence for Alan S. Moore, longtime USPS vice president for Labor Relations Policy and Programs, who had recently died. “This has been a very sad week for our postal family,” he said.

Rolando then invited USPS’s Williams to the podium, where he thanked letter carriers for their service and positive impact in their communities. “It has been said that whenever and wherever there is a need, Postal Service employees step up,” Williams said. “And time and time again, it’s our letter carriers who lead the way. Letter carriers...are the face of the Postal Service, they have an unmatched sense of service, and they bleed postal blue. In addition to being public servants and trusted friends of the community, letter carriers care about our customers and communities, and demonstrate on a daily basis how we keep America connected through more than just the mail.”

Williams lauded the Postal Service’s widespread and deep-rooted spirit of heroism and compassion. “Heroism doesn’t happen just because you happen to be on the scene and do the right thing in the moment,” the USPS official told letter carriers. “Heroism is about character, will and a commitment to action even in the face of great adversity. Our heroes represent the country at its very best. Thank you for the work you do each and every

day to deliver for America, and for the extraordinary, selfless acts you have performed.”

Rolando then returned to the podium and explained why the Postal Service, and especially the nation’s 200,000-plus active city letter carriers who are the face of the agency, are so trusted by the public. He said that they, along with the union’s 90,000 retired carriers, go beyond the call of duty every year. And he addressed the traits that spurred the 2019 Heroes’ wide array of feats.

“Though their actions differed, they stemmed from the same factors,” he said, “knowledge of the neighborhood they served, dedication to the well-being of the residents in those neighborhoods, awareness of their surroundings, and a willingness to act when necessary, whatever the dangers. That, by the way, is a pretty good summation of what letter carriers are all about. And because they’re out delivering the mail six—or even seven—days a week in every community across the vast country, they are often the first one on the scene when action is needed.”

Rolando told the crowd that if the past were any indication, the heroes would downplay their accomplishments while asserting that any of their colleagues would have done the same thing under similar circumstances.

“That speaks to how we typically learn about these events in the first place,” he said. “We hardly ever learn about the event from the letter carrier who was involved. After taking action



Above: NALC President Fredric Rolando commends the selfless nature of carriers who look out for their communities.

Bottom: The awards event was held at a hotel in Washington, DC.





Top: The Heroes onstage at the awards ceremony

Below: President Rolando presented award certificates and Hero pins to the Heroes of the Year



to save or help someone, they just continue delivering the mail, and likely check up on the resident later on to see how things are going.”

Rolando also mentioned that almost a quarter of letter carriers are military veterans who are wearing their second uniform. “Situational awareness and protecting others are second nature to them,” Rolando said, adding that “individual carriers are the ones who put principles into practice by performing acts of heroism or kindness on their routes.”

He then recounted each hero’s story to the audience.

Their stories are found in the following pages of this issue of *The Postal Record*.

The NALC president presented each honoree with an award certificate and a special lapel pin that the carrier can wear to highlight the distinction.

This year’s honorees were selected from nearly 150 nominees, whose stories of heroism and community service were published over the course of a year in this magazine, as has been done since 1974. All of these stories were collected into a booklet, *A Year’s Worth of Heroes*, which was distributed to the luncheon’s guests.

“We are immensely proud of what the six Heroes being recognized did,” Rolando said. “They represent our country’s best in public service. They truly are our heroes.”

Visit nalc.org/heroes for video of the Heroes of the Year event. **PR**

NALC Heroes in the spotlight

Following this year’s Heroes of the Year Awards ceremony, all of the honorees met with congressional representatives, who were eager to thank them for looking out for their customers and their communities.

Senators who met with their award-winning constituents were Sens. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Mike Braun (R-IN), Todd Young (R-IN), Chuck Grassley (R-IA), Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Sherrod Brown (D-OH).

Members of the House who took similar meetings were Reps. Paul Cook (R-CA), Jerry McNerney (D-CA), Larry Buchson (R-IN), Abby Finkenauer (D-IA) and Marcy Kaptur (D-OH).

Meanwhile, news coverage of the ceremony and honorees was extensive, with stories running in a number of print outlets across the country, including *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Barron’s*, the *Federal Times*, *El Tiempo Latino*, Iowa’s *Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier*, New York’s *Lockport Union-Sun & Journal*, *Buffalo News* and *Niagara Gazette*, and Press Associates Inc.

Broadcast outlets that reported on the event included Buffalo, NY’s WKBW-TV, WGRZ-TV and WBFO-FM; Cedar Rapids, IA’s KCRG-TV; Cleveland, OH’s WOIO-TV; Evansville, IN’s WFIE-TV and WEVV-TV; Fargo, ND’s KVLV-TV and KXJB-TV; Henderson, KY’s WEHT-TV; Omaha, NE’s

WOWT-TV; Vincennes, IN’s WZDM-FM; and Waterloo, IA’s KWVL-TV. **PR**



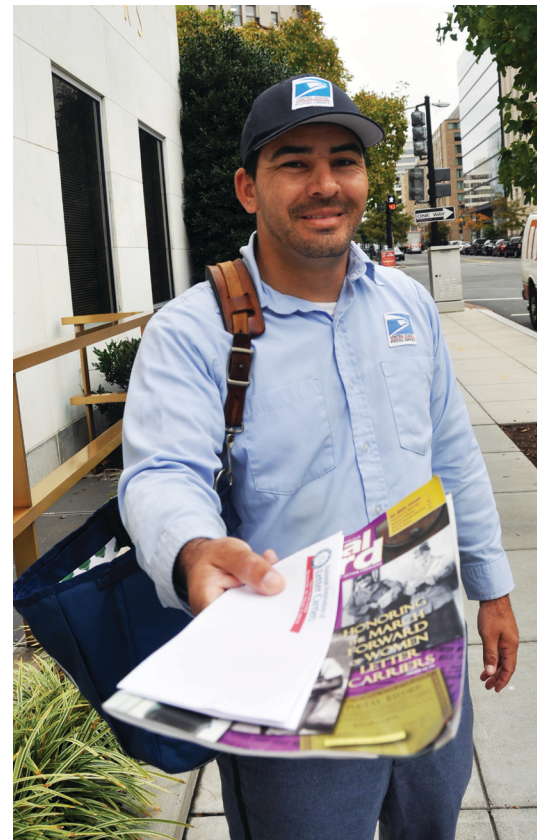
National Hero of the Year Austin Rentz (l) with Iowa Sen. Chuck Grassley

Michael Musick

Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100



2019 WESTERN REGION
HERO OF THE YEAR



On Feb. 14, 2018, Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100 member **Michael Musick** was having lunch with fellow Branch 1100 carriers **Areli Ramirez** and **Noemy Martinez** on the curbside in front of Ramirez's LLV.

"All of a sudden, this car started swerving," Musick said. "I noticed it out of the corner of my eye." The carrier quickly jumped to the side and yelled for the his co-workers to watch out as the car barreled toward them.

He immediately grabbed Ramirez, who was closest to him, and attempted to pull her away. Musick almost got her out of the path of the car, but she sustained a crushed ankle.

"It just scraped me," he said of his own injury. "I was really lucky."

Martinez, who was out of reach, was not as fortunate. "I noticed her leg was gone," Musick said. "I was trying to keep her calm."

Musick thought quickly and applied his belt as a tourniquet to keep Martinez from bleeding out.

After hitting the two carriers, the careening car then struck the LLV head-on, sending it into a light pole, which finally brought both vehicles to a halt. Three children were in the back seat of the out-of-control car, but none was hurt.

Police and paramedics soon arrived. Martinez's leg was amputated at the scene, and the injured carriers were taken to the hospital. Martinez is now learning to walk with a prosthetic leg.

Ramirez had nothing but kind words to say about her co-worker.

"While I panicked and feared for my life, he sprang into action and took care of Noemy and comforted her while paramedics were on their way," she said. "He paid us many visits at the hospital and even drove me to visit Noemy when I was able to get around. He really cared for us and for that I'll always be grateful."

The judges praised Musick for his calm actions despite the sudden, terrifying experience, and lauded the way he saved two fellow carriers. "There's no greater action than saving some-

one's life," they said, "but there's no greater love than saving two of your own." They named Musick the 2019 Western Region Hero.

Musick told the Heroes of the Year crowd that he didn't expect to be recognized as a hero. "I was just there taking care of my friends," the 12-year letter carrier said. But he said that being vigilant is important: "Be aware of your surroundings, and always keep watch." **PR**

Mark Schuh

Evansville, IN Branch 377



Evansville, IN Branch 377 member Mark Schuh likes dogs—so when he first spotted the “gentleman walking a beagle” while delivering his route on March 4, he wasn’t nervous.

Another dog, however, did raise some concerns. On the opposite side of the street, a man was trying to put a leash on his pit bull. “[The owner and the pit bull] were going in opposite directions,” the carrier said.

Schuh passed both dogs, but soon heard a commotion behind him; he headed back to the scene, where he found the pit bull attacking the smaller beagle and its owner.

The aggressive dog’s owner was attempting to get control of his dog, and Schuh stepped in to help. “Every time we’d get him away, he’d go after the dog again,” he said, adding that this happened at least twice more. “I helped the pit bull owner pull off his dog, but it continued to attack.”

The carrier pulled out his dog repellent spray from his satchel and used it on the pit bull until it retreated. “I sprayed almost a can,” Schuh said. “The pit bull would have killed the dog. He was determined.”

The smaller dog used the opportunity to get away. The beagle was later

found nearby on a porch, shaking, and spent three days at the vet getting its wounds tended.

The pit bull and his owner began walking home, and Schuh checked in with the beagle owner, an elderly man who had been injured during the attack. “He was bleeding from his hip and arm from the bites,” Schuh said. The carrier drove over to tell the customer’s wife so that she could take him to the hospital.

“What a wild day,” Schuh said, adding that adrenaline had kicked in and he had reacted instinctively.

The beagle’s owner had to receive stitches for his wounds, but both owner and pet fully recovered after some time. The injured man later visited the post office to thank the 39-year letter carrier for his actions.

In selecting Schuh as the 2019 Central Region Hero of the Year, the judges noted that “he took immediate action and put himself in danger.” They added, “His bravery really stands out.”

Schuh doesn’t believe he’s a hero and was surprised by the media attention he received for his courageous deed. “I’m a quiet person and I don’t like a lot of attention,” he said. “Any of my co-workers would have done it. If I was in trouble, I’d hope someone would help me.”

Asked for his advice to other carriers, his words were simple but sincere: “Treat and serve your customers the way you would want to be treated.”

In accepting his award, he told the crowd, “I’ve been on the same route for 30 years; I’ve seen a lot of people, good people, and they’ve really been good to me as a carrier. They’ve treated me really great, and I’m just happy I was able to be there for this gentleman on my route and help him.” **PR**



Theresa Jo Belkota

Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3



2019 EASTERN REGION
HERO OF THE YEAR



It was the evening of June 1, 2018, and Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 member **Theresa Jo Belkota** was home preparing dinner when she heard screams of “Call 911!” coming from her cousin’s neighboring yard.

The carrier ran out the door to a terrible scene. Her cousin’s 10-year-old son, Gavin, had been run over by a riding lawn mower, which had severely injured his foot. The boy’s father, Jason, had been mowing and avoided his other two children in front of him, but hadn’t seen Gavin as he began backing up. “It was a horrific, horrific accident,” Belkota said. “No one was to blame.”

The boy was lying on the ground, and his parents were in a panic. Gavin’s mother, Jackie, also yelled for Belkota to call 911.

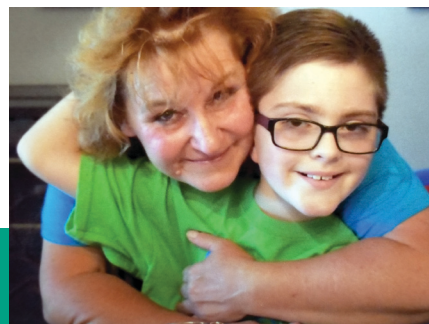
The carrier asked Jackie to call 911 instead, since Belkota knew what she needed to do to stop the bleeding. She took off her shirt to wrap the boy’s leg and used it to apply pressure to the femoral artery at the top of the leg to limit blood loss until medical assistance arrived. “There was tissue just hanging

there,” she said. “He had no big toe.”

The carrier instructed Jason to search the yard for the rest of the foot. Additionally, Belkota told the other children to get ice and a blanket for their brother. She was worried that “[Gavin] might get cold,” she said. “I was afraid he’d go into shock.” She told Gavin to recite the Lord’s Prayer repeatedly, trying to distract him while his parents stayed on the line with the 911 operator.

A medevac helicopter and a police officer with an ambulance arrived a short time later. The officer had a tourniquet and assisted Belkota as she applied it to the injured leg. To ensure that pressure was continuously applied, the carrier firmly supported both

Theresa Jo Belkota with Gavin



sides of the boy’s leg.

Belkota, who has no professional medical training, attributed her quick thinking to watching an episode of the TV show “Law and Order: SVU,” in which a child bled out of his femoral artery in less than a minute. “I never thought I’d have it in me to do something like that,” she said of her actions. “It was a miracle I was even there.”

The helicopter had landed on a golf course nearby, so once Belkota and the medical personnel had Gavin stabilized, they put him in the ambulance for transport to the medevac. Gavin was in the hospital for a few weeks and had his foot amputated three inches above the ankle, but his leg healed well; he also was fitted for a prosthetic foot and underwent occupational therapy.

The carrier’s quick actions and decisiveness have been credited for saving the boy’s leg and possibly his life. While selecting her to receive the 2019 Eastern Region Hero award, the judges noted the criticalness of her role. “It was a very traumatic situation, but she handled it with real poise,” they said. “She probably saved the young man’s life.”

The boy’s family gave Belkota a shirt that reads, “Superhero neighbor,” but the carrier said it’s strange to be called a hero. The 25-year postal veteran said she attributes “all of this to divine intervention and divine providence. I’m just a mailman.”

While accepting her award, the carrier added, “It’s been a beautiful thing to watch [the family] grow and thrive, and out of everything that’s happened, that’s what makes me the happiest—to know that Gavin is going to grow and have a full life.” **PR**

Ivan Crisostomo

Sacramento, CA Branch 133



2019 SPECIAL CARRIER ALERT
AWARD HERO OF THE YEAR

“**B**ehind this tree, there was this young lady, crying,” Sacramento, CA Branch 133 member **Ivan Crisostomo** recalled about delivering mail on June 8, 2018.

The carrier stopped to check on the girl, 16-year-old Crystal Allen. He asked her if he could be of help, but she didn’t want to talk. The carrier made sure that the young woman knew it was safe to speak to him, and she finally did.

“She started to point to her arm, saying: ‘They were putting things in me. They were putting things in me. They are coming to get me,’” Crisostomo later recounted to the local Fox TV news affiliate.

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “Nobody is going to get you. I’m here for you.”

He helped Allen call her mother, Stacy Ohman, who in turn called 911.

“I couldn’t even understand her, she was so upset,” Ohman told the local ABC-TV affiliate. “She gave the phone to Ivan, and he instantly kicked into gear and told me that he would save my daughter.”

Crisostomo stayed there with Allen until emergency responders arrived and helped to barricade the girl from view.

“There were very gruesome people driving around, looking and kind of slowing down,” he said.

Fox reported that Allen allegedly had been “drugged, tortured and abused” for three months before she escaped. Ohman told KOVR-TV, the local CBS affiliate, that her daughter had met a “friend” who lured her into a world of drugs and



Crystal Allen thanks Ivan Crisostomo for helping her get home safely.

sex trafficking. “I was kidnapped and held captive and abused,” Allen told KOVR.

Authorities eventually pieced together more details of the events that the teen had shared with the carrier, including her account of fleeing from the vehicle of her captors, who were looking for her when Crisostomo came to her aid. She had managed to grab a cell phone on her way out.

“I just cried all the time and prayed that I’d get to see my mom again,” Allen told Fox. “They told me that they were taking me somewhere to hurt me and I kind of just thought I’d grow the balls and jump out of the car.”

Allen was taken to a local hospital and was soon reunited with family at home.

“He stepped up where a lot of people would have continued driving down the road, and he made a huge, positive impact in this young girl’s life,” Sacramento County Sheriff’s Deputy David Cuneo told the CBS affiliate.

Crisostomo told the station that he was happy Allen was safe. “The way I see her, she has a wonderful future ahead,” he said. “She’s doing so well. I’m happy. I’m really happy.”

Allen and Ohman later thanked Crisostomo in person at a Postal Service event where he was honored for his heroism. “Ivan himself is a hero for saving me,” Allen told Fox, “even though he doesn’t think it.”

“I was very happy to see her,” the carrier said. “The mother and father were very grateful.” He’s also remained in touch with Ohman, to keep up with



Allen’s progress.

Crisostomo’s heroics received media attention worldwide, appearing in outlets such as the *New York Post* and CNN; *The Independent* and *The Mirror* in the United Kingdom; and *El Comercio* and Andina news agency in Peru. He said that the media coverage was far beyond his expectations.

He advises fellow carriers to be aware of what is going on around them and to not hesitate to provide assistance to others.

The Heroes of the Year judges were impressed with Crisostomo’s keen situational awareness. “He could have kept walking,” they said. “He took so many definitive actions, and his caring for the victim made a huge difference immediately and certainly long term.”

Because of this, they named him the 2019 Special Carrier Alert winner.

Of his own actions, the 21-year letter carrier said he had just wanted to help Allen. “I don’t see myself as a hero,” Crisostomo said. “One thing was for sure: I was not going to abandon her in that situation.”

He told the crowd while accepting his award, “It’s hard to express the pain that she expressed with her crying. It’s something that you cannot forget.”

Crisostomo also extolled the virtues of letter carriers. “We love what we do. We do it with love,” he said. **PR**

Mitchell Rivas

Cleveland, OH Branch 40

Mitchell 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.

"We have helped more than 2,000 individuals, provided hundreds of meals and kept displaced families who were far from home in safe lodging for more than 400 nights," he said. "Our goal is to bring food, love and lodging to in-need families so we can be the blessing we prayed to receive."

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.

Maryssa, a twin who died at 28 months of age on Nov. 13, 2015, spent half her life in hospitals, getting most of her care at Cincinnati Children's Hospital. While there, Rivas met Nelson Soto, who is the provost and vice president of academic affairs at nearby Union Institute & University, through a church connection. After the two families grew close through Soto's daily visits to bring food to Rivas at the hospital, Soto moved to a house large enough to accommodate Mitchell and his wife, 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."

As an example, 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."

"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 last 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.

His community has rallied behind the effort.

Local police set aside an entire weekend in December when, as vol-



Above: The Beria Police Department has made Rivas’s foundation one of its major charities.

Below: A photo of the Rivases before daughter Maryssa (center) died



unteers, they escorted Rivas and Mindy—along with Santa—from hospital to hospital, bringing toys as well as food for the families. Additionally, the police engaged in a month-long toy collection campaign for the foundation.

“He’s an inspiration,” Beria 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.”

In naming Rivas the 2019 Humanitarian of the Year, the judges were highly impressed by the dedication and spirit of service he demonstrated. “He turned personal tragedy into triumph,” they said. “He has overcome



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

challenges with losing a child and turned his experience into a way to help others.”

Rivas called his customers his favorite part of his job and thanked them for their support. “After losing my 2-year-old daughter, I returned to my route that was decorated in pink ribbons, everywhere, hanging from mailboxes, trees and telephone poles,” he said. “I definitely feel their love.”

Rivas described receiving the award as “amazing.” He praised his community and colleagues for their vital role in supporting the foundation’s efforts.

“We’ve not only united our community, the public and private sector, in a spirit of volunteerism, but the Post Office is on board,” he said. “My brothers and sisters in the letter carrier field are supporters and come out and volunteer.”

While accepting his award, Rivas noted that, after the death of their child, “We knew we had to do something to make a difference.”

Mentioning that they were about to reach the four-year “angel-versary” of losing their daughter, Rivas said that “life is fragile, life is fluid,” adding, “I encourage each and every one of you to live life to its fullest. There’s nothing that is worth stressing out about—nothing. I encourage you to love one another, to unite and to serve.” **PR**

Austin Rentz

Waterloo, IA Branch 512



2019 NATIONAL
HERO OF THE YEAR



An unusual sound at the home of an elderly patron alerted Waterloo, IA Branch 512 member **Austin Rentz** while he was on his route on March 13, 2018. He heard a beeping noise through the walls, and thought that it might be a home security alarm.

Knowing that it was the house of the postmaster's mother, the carrier called Branch 512 President **Thomas Kinn** and asked him to alert the postmaster, just in case. He then continued on his route.

"As I was coming back on my swing, [the noise] got louder," Rentz said, adding that something just didn't seem right. He said that he told himself, "You should go do something."

He went up close to the woman's house. "I saw the front door open and saw this black smoke coming out," the carrier said. He realized that the beeping sound had been from a smoke detector.

His instincts kicked in. "I went inside to help the lady get safely out of her house," he said. The homeowner had started to cook something on the stove, but had walked to another room

and forgotten about it.

Rentz then went back inside the home to try to let the smoke vent. "The smoke was so thick, I had to cover my mouth going in," he said. "I was opening windows as best I could."

Afterward, he rejoined the woman outside and stayed with her until the postmaster arrived; shortly thereafter, firefighters arrived to put out the fire.

The postmaster later told Rentz how grateful he was and how he now had an even better idea of the ways in which carriers sometimes have to go above and beyond on their routes.

In naming Rentz the 2019 National Hero of the Year, judges noted how compelling this event was. "He placed himself in very grave danger to save a life and protect property," they said.

While the six-year letter carrier said he was "very honored" to receive this award, he insisted that he doesn't see himself as a hero.

"I just did something that anyone would do," Rentz told the crowd at the Heroes of the Year ceremony about his actions. "I'm thankful for my job, the union and the great customers I have." **PR**