

An enduring bond



**Philip
Dine**

I happened to walk by a TV in a common area recently as ABC was doing a news segment on a Georgia letter carrier whose retirement sparked a public outpouring of appreciation for his service to the community.

Just a few days earlier, someone had sent me a link to a Fox report. Newspapers also covered the story, which took on a life of its own on social media.

While the specific developments surrounding the event were indeed interesting, my thoughts were more general: Why does this keep happening? What gives rise to the unique relationship between letter carriers and the neighborhoods

where they deliver? Why do carriers and customers often form an enduring bond?

I turned to two highly respected U.S. experts on labor and worker issues, whom I've known for decades and whose insights I frequently sought as a journalist or while writing a book on unions. I hadn't spoken to either for a good 10 years, but it took about a minute to get each on the phone—a sign of their interest in the topic.

William B. Gould IV, professor emeritus of law at Stanford Law School, served as chairman of the National Labor Relations Board in the Clinton administration. He's been a prominent voice in worker-management relations for more than a half-century.

I mentioned the ties between carriers and residents, and he jumped right in. For Bill Gould, the personal and human aspects—forged daily, sustained over years—as well as the attentiveness of letter carriers, are the key.

"That's been my experience growing up when I was a kid in New Jersey, as well as being out here [in California]—we always had a very close relationship with the postmen. They're somebody who would know a great deal about your family, sometimes would converse with you about that: 'Where is so and so now; what are they doing?'"

"I can remember, when we would take the kids back to my parents' home in New Jersey, my mother and father would take them over to the post office and would introduce their grandkids to the letter carriers, and they'd often have a big conversation about their own lives."

Gould is a prolific author, and the sixth edition of *A Primer on American Labor Law* was published just days ago. As NLRB chairman, he helped end the 1994-95 baseball strike (and, naturally, wrote a book about baseball and bargaining). Labor

law, workplace justice, the Boston Red Sox and the Boston Celtics are among his passions, but I was intrigued to learn that he'd done some thinking about the multiple roles letter carriers play in the community, and the impact of the care and vigilance they bring to the job.

"They alert people about difficult circumstances when the mail is piling up. And they frequently made sure, when we've forgotten to notify them that we're away, to put the mail in a place that's less noticeable so that attention from the wrong people won't be attracted, and your house won't be vulnerable."

Robert Bruno is professor of labor and employment relations at the University of Illinois, where he also directs a research center, the Project for Middle Class Renewal.

He too required no prompting to weigh in. For Bob Bruno, it's about the mail—both in a practical and a symbolic sense—and, thereby, the folks who deliver it.

"I really think it's cool to be bringing some attention to the degree of community warmth felt for letter carriers. I think of connectedness. This is old school, but what made you feel present, have identity and be part of a neighborhood was that you got mail. It had your name on it. You could recognize, 'Yes, I do exist, it has my name on it.'"

"Even today, my wife says: 'Did you get the mail?' The walk to the mailbox is this kind of a pathway that connects you to your neighbors and to a greater, larger society. And letter carriers do that, they bring that to you—whatever they're carrying."

Bruno has written several books about labor, most recently co-authoring *A Fight for the Soul of Public Education: The Story of the Chicago Teachers Strike*.

In addition to connectedness and belongingness, the mail brings something else, he says.

"There's this sort of anticipation that at 1 o'clock or 2 o'clock, you're going to get something. There's that possibility that it'll be something really compelling, that something marvelous is going to show up."

Two contrasting, but complementary, takes on why the public appreciates what you do every day and, every so often, celebrates you directly.

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