

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 202-662-2489 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.

Carrier rescues two after plane hits post office

On the morning of Saturday, Dec. 28, 2019, carriers at Lafayette, LA Branch 1760 were busy casing their routes in the post office when everyone heard an extremely loud noise outside. "I said, 'Is that thunder?'" and then the lights went out," shop steward **Gerald Soileau** recalled. The postal workers ran outside, where they saw a scene from a nightmare—a mid-size plane had crashed into their parking lot, hitting several vehicles and setting most of the area ablaze.

Soileau reacted quickly—he realized that the main gate was blocked by the fire, so he rushed around to the other gate, which was normally padlocked shut. He was able to open it and sprint through to the parking lot. "I saw power lines down—there was fire everywhere," he said. "It was like everything slowed down, and I could see the plane in the distance."

After crash-landing and breaking into pieces, a large part of the plane had landed in a field next to the post office. The carrier ran over to that part of the plane and helped rescue the only survivor of the crash, who was severely burned. The other five passengers on the plane had been killed in the crash. Once Soileau pulled the injured man to safety, he ran over to another victim of the crash: a carrier's spouse, Danielle Britt, had driven to the office to surprise the carriers with donuts. The plane had crashed into her car, throwing her from the vehicle.

Soileau and a holiday clerk carried Britt out of the flames and away from the area. She was badly burned, but survived. Soileau was later transported to the hospital to be treated for smoke inhalation and stress, but has since fully recovered.

The 21-year carrier described the experience as surreal. "It seemed like I was having an out-of-body experience," he explained. "I wasn't scared that I was going to die—I just knew when I heard them crying for help that I had to help."

Having spent 10 years in the Air Force, Soileau thinks his training helped him keep calm in the extraordinary situation. "I don't consider myself a hero," he said. "I was just doing what anyone should do. It was my duty."

Dog spray saves the day in domestic assault

On Feb. 12, Buffalo-Western NY Branch 3 member **Sydney Rodgers** had finished delivering to one of the houses



Gerald Soileau (r) was responsible for saving the lives of two people after a plane crashed into the Lafayette, LA post office parking lot. One of the people saved by Soileau was the wife of a postal worker, whose car (l) was hit by the plane.

Eye on the elderly

Milwaukee, WI Branch 2 member **Timothy Grzegorzcyk** was delivering mail at an apartment building on his route on Nov. 30, 2019, when he noticed that an elderly tenant was breathing heavily while she waited for her mail. He asked her if she needed medical assistance, but she declined. After he finished sorting and delivering the mail for the building, he noticed that her breathing was getting worse. The carrier asked again if she needed him to contact emergency services for her. This time, she asked if he could call 911. After calling emergency services, “I stayed with her and put my arms around her,” Grzegorzcyk recalled. The emergency responders arrived a short time later, and she was taken to the hospital. The carrier later heard that she had recovered, but was moving to an assisted living facility. “I don’t think of it as a big deal,” Grzegorzcyk said. “I just got her the help she needed.” The 30-year carrier added, “The other people in the building were really appreciative—they feel better knowing that someone is keeping an eye on them.”

Despite having only recently transferred to his new route, Providence, RI Branch 15 member **Edward Machado** quickly picked up some of his new customers’ patterns. So, when he noticed that one customer, an elderly woman named Margo, had left two

newspapers in her driveway on July 31, 2019, he thought something might be wrong. “I knocked on her door, but I didn’t hear anything—but I could see that the lights had been left on,” he said. The 23-year carrier was now even more concerned about the customer’s welfare, so he went around to a window and looked through the blinds to see if anyone was home. “I saw a chair lying down on the ground, and then I saw part of a woman’s leg on the floor,” Machado said. He yelled through the door slot that help was on the way, and then called 911. The fire department had to break down the door to rescue Margo, who had been lying on the floor, helpless, for two days. The customer recovered, and moved into a nursing home. Machado said that he “felt great” knowing that he had been able to help his customer. “There aren’t that many people who would come by [her house], so she would have been in a bad situation.” Machado’s efforts were praised by the Postal Service. The postmaster said, “[Machado] demonstrated that there is more than just delivering mail—it’s showing concern and compassion for those [you] service.”

When Tampa, FL Branch 599 member and CCA **Jamie McMiller** was delivering mail on Jan. 27, he recognized a retired Lakeland, FL Br. 1779 letter

carrier, **Dueward Little**, approaching the mailboxes. Suddenly, Little stumbled toward the carrier. “He looked like he wanted me to catch him, and then he just fell [on his face]—he didn’t break his fall at all,” McMiller, an Army veteran, recounted. The CCA rushed to Little’s side, where he could tell that the older man had been severely injured. “He was lying in a pool of blood, and he wasn’t moving,” he said. The CCA called 911 and then began trying to comfort and reassure Little. “I started asking him about his dog, and I eventually got him back around to where he was talking,” McMiller said. Little asked him to contact his son; the carrier did, and Little’s son was able to get there and join his father in the ambulance. Little was transported to the hospital, where his blood pressure was abnormally low. His nose had also been broken in the fall. However, thanks in part to McMiller’s swift reaction, the retired carrier has since fully recovered. “He’s doing well. He was very grateful,” the CCA said. McMiller was also thanked by Little’s family, who told him that Little would have died without his intervention. But McMiller rebuffed the praise: “I saw a person down, and I couldn’t walk away,” he said.

On Dec. 17, 2019, Ballwin, MO Branch 5050 member **Robert Hough** was delivering



mail to one of his customers, an elderly man who lived alone. The man walked out in the snow to meet the carrier and grab his mail. Hough watched the customer walk back to his house and was moving to the next delivery when “I heard a bang, which was pretty unusual,” he recalled. He hesitated, then heard a scream for help. The six-year carrier ran back to the door, where he could see the customer lying on the floor and screaming in pain. “He was in really bad [shape],” he said. As Hough found out later, the man’s feet had gotten wet from the snow, and he had slipped when he went inside. The man had been recovering from hip surgery, and the fall had seriously injured his hip. “I eventually got him up,” Hough said, “but he couldn’t walk or sit, so the only thing I could do was call 911.” The carrier waited with the customer and tried to keep him as comfortable as possible until emergency services arrived. The man spent two weeks in the hospital, but recovered from his injury. The man and his family later warmly thanked the carrier for his help, but Hough was modest about his actions. “It wasn’t a big deal,” he said. “I’m happy I was there at the right time.” **PR**

on her route and had returned to her LLV. As she began to drive away, a car pulled into the house's driveway.

As the three-year carrier watched, a man got out of the car, dragged his female passenger out of the car, and recommenced attacking her. "Her face was [already] covered in blood," Rodgers recalled.

The carrier called the police, and then ran to the woman's aid. "I told the guy to get off of her, and then he started coming at me," Rodgers said. "So I dog-

sprayed him twice."

The carrier's stand gave the woman time to flee inside, but it didn't stop the attacker for long. He began to come after Rodgers again. Fortunately, the Buffalo police showed up at that moment, prompting the assailant to flee the scene.

Rodgers said it "felt great" to be able to help someone on her route. "I don't know what would have happened to her if I hadn't been there," she added. "But I stepped in and did what anyone should."

Carrier takes down violent attacker

Grand Junction, CO Branch 913 member **Pedro Mendoza** was on his route on Jan. 13, when he saw a man yelling at a woman. "I thought it was a domestic disturbance at first," he said, and was going to quickly intervene, when he realized the woman was screaming at the man to get away from her and her baby. "I heard him telling her, 'I'll kill you,'

Eye on the elderly

"I was headed to the mail room [of the senior living facility] when I heard a voice calling for help," Cleveland, OH Branch 40 member **Marc Hill** recalled about his route on Jan. 13. The six-year carrier looked around for the source, and found an elderly resident on the floor—she had fallen, and was unable to get up. "The lady had hit her head pretty hard, and there was some bleeding," the carrier said. Hill helped her off of the floor and called 911, then stayed with her until emergency personnel arrived. The other residents at the senior facility later wrote a letter of thanks to Hill, praising him for his quick decision-making and crediting him with saving the woman's life.

"I might have missed it if I hadn't happened to have mail for the lady across the street," Milwaukee, WI Branch 2 member **Darla Dahlbacka** recounted about her route on Dec. 13, 2019. While delivering

across the way, she glanced over and saw a bizarre sight: one of her customers, a 93-year old woman named Myrtle Truchan, was lying down in the bushes just outside her house. Truchan had propped up one leg so that the carrier would see her, but was otherwise unable to move or stand. The 16-year carrier immediately rushed to the woman's aid; Dahlbacka helped free her from the bushes and then assisted the shaken woman back into her house. Truchan was adamant that she did not want 911 called, so the carrier contacted a neighbor to look after her and made sure that Truchan's family was aware of the situation. She then waited with Truchan until the neighbor arrived. Dahlbacka later

found out that the woman had accidentally fallen off her porch and landed in the bushes. She had injured her legs and arms, but had made a full recovery. Dahlbacka's intervention was potentially lifesaving, given the harsh weather and the fact that the woman's son was away from home for the week, but she downplayed her contribution, stating, "Don't make me out to be a hero." She added, "When you're on the same route for 15 years, you know who in the neighborhood to look out for. I just like to help people."

the window," the carrier said. When Dougherty parked her car and approached the woman, it became clear that the woman was confused. The woman was able to remember that she had recently been diagnosed with dementia, and the name of her dog, but she could not recall any other identifying facts. "I told her, 'I'm going to stay with you,' and then I called the police," Dougherty said. The carrier explained the situation, and then took the woman to her LLV and sat with her. They talked until police arrived, by which time the woman had remembered the name of her husband. "It was a real reminder of our role in the community," the five-year carrier said. "There were other cars driving past, but she chose to flag me down. No matter how confused she was, she remembered that the postal truck was something safe." **PR**



Help on the way

Boston, MA Branch 34 member **Robert Brown** was delivering to a customer on Sept. 20, 2019. He typically went up to her house to give her the mail in person, because the customer did not have a mailbox. “When I opened the door, [the customer] was on the ground, lying down in the fetal position,” the five-year carrier recalled. She was unconscious and barely breathing—“her stomach was moving faintly,” Brown said. When he was unable to get her to wake up or respond, he called 911. He then waited with the woman until emergency services arrived at the scene. Thanks to the carrier’s quick actions, EMS could transport her swiftly to the hospital. Brown said that the emergency workers later told him that the woman had been pronounced dead on the scene, but they had been able to revive her. The carrier went to her house after the woman had been released from the hospital, to check that she had fully recovered.

“I’ve seen her plenty of times since then,” he said. As for the overall experience, Brown described it as surreal. “It was crazy,” he added. “You want to talk about right place, right time.”

In late July of 2019, Las Vegas, NV Branch 2502 member **Brian Steik** saw one of his customers, Angel Michael, sitting by her front door. The carrier had a pre-existing friendly relationship with the customer—Michael is legally blind, so Steik usually went out of his way to deliver her mail to a bin next to her front door, rather than to the mailbox by the curb. Subsequently, “when I saw Angel on the porch, I was curious as to why she was out there,” he said. Michael explained that her power had been shut off. Steik went to get her some water, and then contacted a neighbor to ask if Michael could wait inside. As it turned out, Steik had intervened just in time—he later found out that she had been outside in the 100-degree

weather for more than four hours, and had to be taken to the hospital to be treated for dehydration. Michael was very grateful to the carrier for his help, but Steik was modest about his role: “I like to help people and take care of people,” he said. “I think that anyone who has the skillset to take care of a community member should [do so].”

On July 24, 2019, Harrison, an 8-year-old boy who lives on Youngstown, OH Branch 385 member Ian Wade’s route, approached the carrier’s vehicle while he was out delivering. “He was crying, and he had to cross a pretty busy road [to come over to the vehicle], so I knew something was going on,” the nine-year carrier and Army veteran said. The boy told Wade that he had woken up from his nap and found himself alone



Ian Wade

in the house with his baby sister—their parents were nowhere to be found. The carrier knew where Harrison lived, so he walked him back to his house. Wade then called the police and told them about the matter, and comforted Harrison until they arrived on the scene. “I stayed and watched the kid while [the police] searched the house,” he said. At some point during the search, the children’s parents returned home. For Wade, the situation was unexpected, but he was pleased that he had the opportunity to help Harrison. “I love my job; I love getting to interact with the community,” the carrier said. “It’s a great responsibility to be able to help out like we do.” **PR**

and I thought, ‘Oh no, you’re not. Not on my watch,’” the 20-year carrier said.

As the carrier moved forward, another man also stepped in from across the street. The other neighbor, Carlos Garcia, yelled at the man to get away from the woman, and “[the man] turned around to go for him,” Mendoza recalled. To keep the man from attacking Garcia, Mendoza asked him what his problem was, and the man turned on him, too. This time, however, the man pulled out a knife. “He came towards me, swinging the knife,”

the carrier said. “I took off my postal coat and wrapped it around my right arm. Then, I waited for the right moment to punch him or take him down.”

Finally, Mendoza saw his moment—he rushed the man, tackling him to the ground and placing him in a chokehold. “I slammed him to the ground until I heard the knife drop,” he said. Garcia then came over and grabbed the knife, and they waited for the police to arrive. The man struggled to free himself, but Mendoza kept him pinned, telling him,

“I’m not going to let you go—I’m not going to let you hurt anyone on my route.”

When the police arrived, the suspect attempted to escape, but Mendoza helped the officers recapture and handcuff him. “Then I picked up my scanner and went to deliver the mail,” the carrier said.

Mendoza’s actions were later covered by several local news affiliates, and a local fourth-grade class put up a large sign thanking him for his bravery. “I didn’t feel like I was [a hero]; I just did the right thing,” Mendoza said. **PR**