

# 2021



## OF THE YEAR AWARD WINNERS

**L**etter carriers are in the communities they serve every day and often are the first to notice when something is wrong. They smell smoke, hear someone calling for help or notice something that just doesn't seem right. Often, they are the first to respond and lend a helping hand.

Each year, NALC highlights the special acts of courage and compassion performed by letter carriers who improve—or save—lives along their routes, by recognizing some of them as NALC's Heroes of the Year.

The 2021 Heroes of the Year honorees were selected from more than 100 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.

A panel of independent judges reviewed the stories about heroic and humanitarian acts published in *The Postal Record* between July 2020 and June 2021 and gathered in a virtual meeting to determine the winners.

The judges were Christopher Godfrey, chairman and chief judge of the Employees' Compensation Appeals Board at the U.S. Department of Labor; Kim Dine, retired chief of police of the United States Capitol Police; and Warren L. Broughton, lieutenant/assistant fire marshal of Prince William County, VA.

Because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the traditional in-person fall event could not be held to recognize the 2021 Heroes of the Year. NALC plans to hold an in-person event to honor these recipients, as well as the 2020 recipients, when it is safe to do so.

"We are immensely proud of what the eight heroes being recognized did," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "They represent our country's best in public service. They truly are our heroes."

President Rolando also thanked the judges for their help with the selection process. The Heroes' stories are found in the following pages of this issue of *The Postal Record*. **PR**



# Michelle DeCosta

New York Branch 36



2021 SPECIAL CARRIER ALERT  
AWARD HERO OF THE YEAR

**O**n a summer day in the city, it's not unusual to smell the smoke of a barbecue from somewhere nearby. But on one block on Aug. 21, in New York City, residents didn't recognize the smell and alert authorities, at least not until Branch 36 letter carrier **Michelle DeCosta** came along on her route.

The six-year letter carrier saw white smoke hanging over the block and "thought some customers might be having a cookout," she said. "It wasn't until I got closer to the house, with my knowledge of fire from being in summer camp, when I saw the smoke go from white 'happy smoke' to gray, that I realized the house was on fire and that the fire was spreading."

Having been on the route for three years, she used her knowledge to quickly react. "[The residents] have two little girls," she remembers thinking. DeCosta knew that the girls were being homeschooled during the COVID-19 pandemic and were usually home every day. She immediately rushed to the house and "started trying to break down the door," she said. "I was choking on smoke and screaming [to alert people]."

As she was doing this, she was also on her cell phone with her friend and fellow Branch 36 carrier **Janina Browne**. Browne called 911 and alerted authorities to the fire while DeCosta banged on the door.

Unable to get through the door, DeCosta called 911 herself, afraid that

the family might be unconscious from smoke inhalation. She also moved on to look after her other patrons who were in harm's way. "The neighbors are elderly," she explained, so she ran next door to warn them about the fire, as they might have needed more time to escape than some of the others.

Once the next-door neighbors were safely evacuated, DeCosta continued down the street, warning residents of the danger.

"The houses are so close together," she said. "If one catches, they all might go."

Firefighters arrived and "started bashing down the door [of the burning house]," the carrier said. Once inside, firefighters found no one at home—the girls were visiting with a half-brother who was in town that day—but rescued several trapped dogs and cats. They put out the electrical fire, which had been slow burning for nearly two hours. Firefighters kept the house from burning down and the fire from spreading to the neighboring houses.

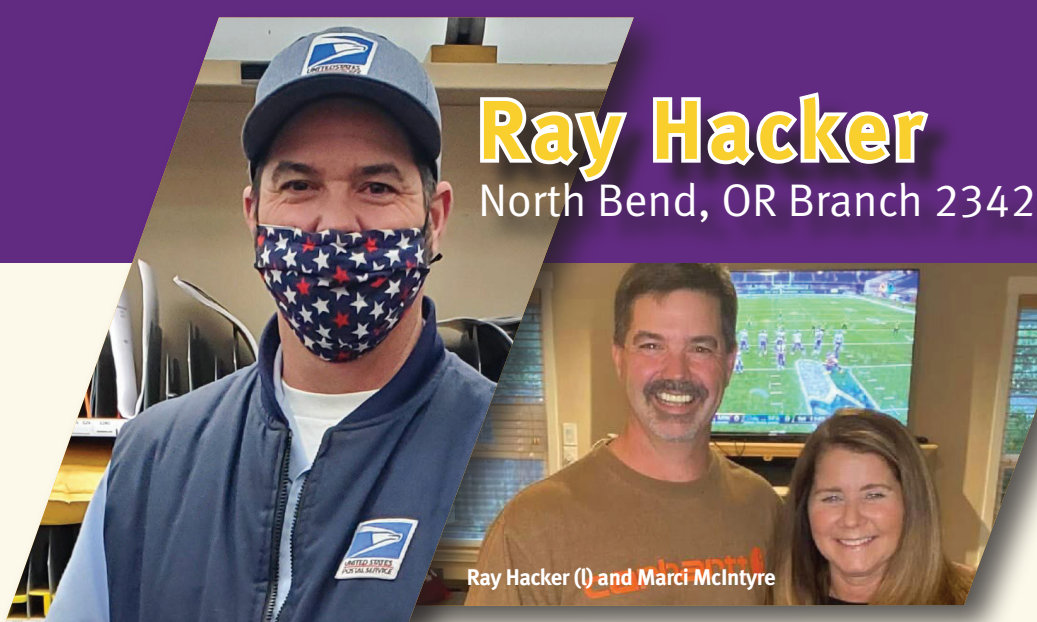
Once the firefighters arrived, DeCosta continued on her route. She returned later to check on her customers. The homeowners of the burning house told her that everyone on the block was saying, "It was the mail lady [who told us to evacuate]—if it wasn't for her, it could have been really bad."

After the fire, DeCosta didn't tell anyone at her station and didn't seek recognition. "I honestly felt like I was there at the right time and I was the person who needed to be there," she said. "I just did

the right thing." But when her station coworkers and managers found out, they told her she was a "she-ro."

The Heroes judges cited DeCosta's awareness of her surroundings and remarkable mindfulness of her patrons—knowing who lived in the burning house and which neighbors it was most critical to notify about the approaching danger. These qualities are why so many letter carriers are the first to notice dangers in the communities they serve and why they know when something is wrong with their customers or residences. Because of that, the judges named DeCosta NALC's Special Carrier Alert Hero of the Year.

DeCosta wasn't thinking of awards or accolades, though. "I was scared thinking that the little girls were inside the house," she said, and added, "I was just doing what I thought was right—and I had to do what I had to do." **PR**



Ray Hacker (l) and Marci McIntyre

**S**ome letter carriers are heroes because they run into a burning building. Some are heroes because they pick up on the clues that tell them a patron is in trouble. **Ray Hacker** is a hero because he gave of himself.

In February 2020, the North Bend, OR Branch 2342 president and local shop steward found out that his former schoolmate Marci McIntyre needed a kidney. McIntyre was born with reflux nephritis, a condition in which kidneys are damaged by the backward flow of urine. She received a kidney transplant at 20 from her younger brother, but after 25 years—an exceptional track record for a donated kidney—it was starting to fail, and she needed a new one.

“She’s the nicest person in the world,” Hacker said of his high school acquaintance. “She’d do anything for anyone [and] deserved to have somebody step up.”

The Navy veteran was in good health and physically fit, and over his 27 years with the Postal Service—19 as a letter carrier—he had built up a collection of sick leave. Once he received the support of his wife, he volunteered to donate a kidney to McIntyre.

McIntyre had been down this road before; prior to Hacker’s involvement, eight other people had volunteered to donate but hadn’t followed through.

“I knew that anybody who reached out to me was going to be a long shot,” McIntyre told *The (OR) World*. “A lot of people have good intentions. Once

they find out the logistics of it, and the recovery and everything you go through—you have to be committed. You have to be all-in.”

There are blood tests, tissue type tests (which match the number of antigens—toxins or other foreign substances that induce an immune response in the body, especially the production of antibodies—that the donor and recipient share), and tests for various diseases. There also are health requirements that donors have to meet, as well as a psychological evaluation to make sure that donors know what to expect. Hacker passed all the tests.

“I was the perfect candidate,” he said. And he wasn’t backing off. “The risk did not outweigh the reward for me.”

Although most people have two kidneys, the National Kidney Foundation says that people with just one kidney can live normal, healthy lives. And live donations, as opposed to organs from deceased donors, have been shown to last longer in transplant recipients.

The COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of complications to the process. “COVID got in the way and they shut down the program,” delaying the spring procedure, Hacker said. The summer of 2020 was a lot of “hurry up and wait,” he said.

Hacker and McIntyre eventually got on the schedule for October. They both went in for the operation on the same day, which is common for live organ transplants. Hacker’s surgery began at

6:30 a.m. and lasted until noon. Surgeons make incisions above and below the belly button, and then go past the stomach and intestines and extract the kidney. “They pull it right [through] your belly button, basically,” he said.

McIntyre went in immediately afterward for her operation, which lasted six hours.

After a couple of days of recovery in the hospital, Hacker was discharged. He knew he could take advantage of the Postal Service’s program that allows up to 14 days of administrative leave to recover; he then used his sick leave to recuperate further at home afterward. “My fellow carriers gave me their full support, along with the other employees in other crafts,” he said. “We have a small office, so everyone knows everyone.”

“You’re sore for a while, especially in the abdomen area,” he said. The worst part of his recovery was “my first sneeze. Oh, my goodness, that hurt so bad.” He added, “I have to drink a lot of water now.”

After five weeks, he returned to work and has been telling people about his experience ever since. “If you can give a donation and keep them alive, you are affecting their entire family,” Hacker said. “Why wouldn’t you do that if you’re able?”

The carrier has a history of organ donation in his family—his wife’s niece has had kidney and liver transplants; his uncle has had a liver transplant; and his aunt, who had lupus and other medical issues, donated her body to a



# Dixie Manns

Michigan City, IN Br. 455

university for testing following her death.

After a short stay in the hospital, McIntyre returned home to recover. She has had a lot of post-transplant testing, and took anti-rejection medications to help her transplant take hold. That imposed a financial burden. Hacker and other members of their high school class set up a GoFundMe page for McIntyre, which raised more than \$11,000, and then put together an online auction that raised nearly \$10,000 more. The money went to help pay McIntyre's medical bills and medication not covered by insurance or Medicare. Hacker helped by asking local businesses for donated items. "We had a great class of '89 in high school. We're close and know everybody," he said of the endeavor.

Hacker has checked up on her monthly since the transplant and said, "It's a true blessing to see her enjoying her life again and not having to go to dialysis three times per week."

The judges were impressed with the letter carrier's decision and follow-through in donating an organ to someone in need. That he then became an advocate for organ donation demonstrates the way he went above and beyond. The judges declared Hacker NALC's Western Region Hero of the Year.

"I appreciate the honor and recognition of the Hero Award," he said. "It's not something I was seeking."

The media attention that he and McIntyre received in local outlets has helped greatly, Hacker said, in getting the word out about living organ donation. "If I get one person to do it, I have a part in saving another person's life," he said. "Who knows how many people this could affect?" **PR**



**O**n March 12, 2020, Michigan City, IN Branch 455 member **Dixie Manns** arrived at one of her regular delivery stops, a building that housed mostly elderly residents. When she walked in, "I heard the fire alarm going off," the six-year carrier said.

Looking around, she saw an elderly man standing in his doorway. "I asked the guy if he had burned some popcorn, but he said, no, it was a paper towel," Manns recalled. "I was going to put the fire out quickly, [but] when I walked into the apartment it was a grease fire on top of his stove—a fire too big for me to handle."

Knowing how serious the situation was, especially given the limited mobility of the older residents, the carrier knew that they did not have time to waste. "I told him to go outside, [but] he didn't walk too well, so I picked him up and put him by the door," she said.

Once that man was out of immediate danger, Manns started thinking about evacuation plans for her other vulnerable customers. The carrier knew that the woman living across the hall was on oxygen, so she rushed over to warn her about the fire.

While dialing 911, she started banging on residents' doors and telling everyone to leave the building. "By the time I got upstairs," she said, "it was pitch black [from the smoke]." Still, she continued along the upper level, knocking on every door she passed.

After making her way back to the main floor, Manns noticed that the elderly man she had carried had not exited with the other residents. Worried that he would be trampled in the chaos, the carrier picked him up again and carried him outside.

Manns then went back into the building, determined to make sure that all those inside had evacuated.

Eventually, the smoke conditions made it too dangerous for her to continue. "There's three sections of this one apartment building," the carrier explained. "I couldn't breathe [enough] to go into the third [section]." However, by the time police and firefighters arrived on the scene, she had managed to alert and evacuate the other two sections. All in all, Manns may have saved 40 people with her warnings.

For her bravery and dedication to her community, the judges named her NALC's Central Region Hero of the Year.

While Manns said that receiving the Central Hero award "feels really good," she added that she didn't think of her actions in a heroic context. "I don't feel like I was a hero," the carrier said. "I just feel like I did what needed to be done."

"I knew those people would be in trouble if I didn't help," Manns elaborated. "I was just doing what I felt anyone should do." **PR**

# Erin Pennington

Pittsburgh, PA Branch 84



**P**ittsburgh, PA Branch 84 member **Erin Pennington** was delivering packages in a neighborhood on her route on July 6, 2020, when she noticed an unusual odor in the air. “It smelled like wires burning,” she recalled.

“I thought it was my truck at first,” the two-year carrier said. She parked and then checked her vehicle, but she couldn’t find anything wrong with it. Pennington glanced around, but she didn’t see any smoke coming from the nearby row houses either. She decided to continue with her route.

As Pennington went on with her deliveries, she turned down an alleyway that ran behind the houses. It was at that point that she saw the source of the smell. “It was the back corner of a vacant house—about three feet of [the house] was on fire,” she said.

The carrier immediately leaped into action. She spotted a neighbor coming out of a nearby house, and Pennington asked him to call 911. Then, she raced up to the front to evacuate the other houses. “They’re row houses, so there’s only about a foot between the houses,” Pennington explained. She was terrified that the whole neighborhood might go up in flames.

At the house next door to the fire, the carrier could hear dogs barking, but the homeowner was slow to respond. “She was asleep upstairs,” Pennington said. “I was screaming, hitting the doorbell—I was getting ready to kick the door in and grab the dogs and see if anyone was inside.”

Finally, the carrier heard a woman’s

voice through the door. “She asked who it was, and I told her it was the mail lady—that there was a fire, and she needed to evacuate.

“She grabbed her dogs and their leashes and ran out of the house,” the carrier said. Once that resident was safe, Pennington rushed across the street and began knocking on their doors. “I evacuated four houses, and I got them to move their vehicles” away from the fire, she said.

The fire quickly spread through the houses, including into the bedroom of the woman who had evacuated just in time. “The flames were so hot [that they] were melting the siding on the houses across the street,” Pennington recalled.

The fire department arrived within 10 minutes, but the damage already was severe—three houses were engulfed in flames. In total, seven houses were damaged; however, due in large part to Pennington’s warnings, nobody was injured.

For her bravery and knowledge of her route, Pennington was selected as NALC’s Eastern Region Hero of the Year.

Despite the acclaim, the carrier was modest about her role in the situation. “I don’t really see myself as a hero,” she said. “I just did what anyone should, and I’m glad that a woman is alive because of those actions.”

Pennington added that she thought these kinds of actions were necessary in a community. “We have to protect each other, look out for each other,” she said. “I don’t know why anyone would have a second thought.” **PR**



# Kevin Bystrak & Jody Kotowski

Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3

**O**n a hot summer day in 2020, Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 carrier **Kevin Bystrak** was on his route when he came upon an elderly man standing outside his home. “Something told me to stop” and speak to the man, he said. “He seemed in an ill state.”

The elderly man, whom Bystrak knew as Mr. Queeno, was wearing a Korean War veteran’s hat. He told the carrier that the heat wave gripping the area was getting to him. Queeno was out of breath and said he was feeling dizzy. Bystrak offered to give him some water, but then Queeno’s daughter, who has special needs, came outside and gave him a glass of ice water. Bystrak took his lunch break and ate as he sat with Queeno to keep an eye on him. When Bystrak asked the patron to go inside and stay in the air conditioning until he felt better, he learned that the home Queeno shared with his daughter had no air conditioning.

“I felt a deep concern for them,” Bystrak said. He also felt the urge to watch out for a fellow veteran—Bystrak served in the Navy Reserves and was deployed to Kuwait during the Iraq War.

“So, knowing how well carriers work together to help each other, I took to Facebook to ask for assistance for Queeno, looking for an air conditioner.” He posted the appeal to Branch 3’s Facebook page that day.

Seeing the post, fellow Branch 3 member **Jody Kotowski** came to the rescue with her husband, Frank, the next day. The couple, who also had a daughter with special needs, went to buy an air conditioning unit for Queeno. In the middle of the heat wave, however, every store they tried was sold out. That didn’t stop the Kotowskis, though—they had an extra window unit in their home, so they took that one and installed it at Queeno’s home.

Kevin Bystrak (l) and Jody Kotowski (r)



“I knew we had a really good unit,” Jody Kotowski told *The Postal Record* last year, “and if he needed it, I knew I couldn’t see it sitting there.” They also learned that Queeno’s home had a bug infestation, so the Kotowskis contacted a local non-profit that serves veterans, which donated funds to clean his home and clear the infestation.

Because Bystrak and Kotowski worked quickly as a team to make the life of a vulnerable man safe and comfortable, the judges awarded both carriers with the NALC Unit Citation award.

“I just did what anyone would do,” Bystrak said. “I’m no hero.” Bystrak credits the Kotowskis for their heroic efforts.

Sadly, Jody Kotowski later contracted COVID-19 and passed away in December of 2020, so her selection for the award was made posthumously. She was 56 and is survived by her husband and her daughter, Francesca.

“Jody is a prime example of a one-of-a-kind person, mail carrier and friend,” Bystrak said. “God bless her family as she rests in heaven.” **PR**



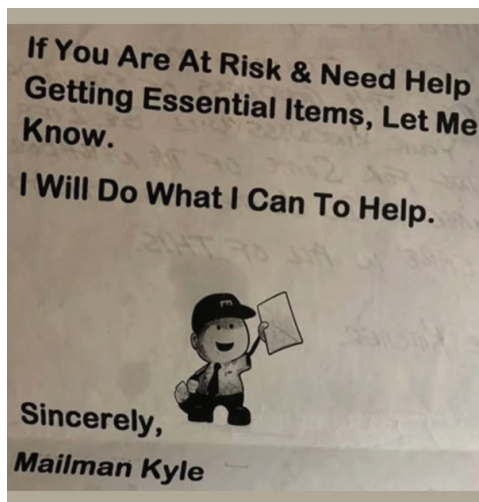


# Kyle West

Cincinnati, OH Branch 43



2021 HUMANITARIAN  
HERO OF THE YEAR



A copy of the letter West gave to his patrons

**L**etter carriers have always known that their jobs are essential, but the pandemic made them more important than ever. When the COVID-19 pandemic reached Colerain Township in suburban Cincinnati, OH, in the spring of 2020, three-year carrier **Kyle West** went above and beyond to serve his community.

West, a member of Cincinnati Branch 43, knew that many of his customers were elderly and sheltering at home, depending on carriers like him to bring them supplies. But when a customer asked for help finding toilet paper, which was in short supply at the time, he knew that others also must have been struggling.

"I take pride in giving my customers great service every day, and a big part is getting to know them," West said. But the pandemic had affected his communication with them, as social distancing became the norm. "I went from talking to hundreds of people a day to not seeing more than five people a day," West said.

Worried that his customers needed help but might not be able to seek assistance, West asked his mother to print letters to the postal patrons on his route who he suspected might need extra assistance with supplies. West then distributed the letter to about 400 customers. "If you are at risk and need help getting essential items, let me know," the letter read. "I will do what I can to help." He signed the letter with the name his customers know him by: "Mailman Kyle."

West had more than supplies in mind. "I knew some people needed

help," he said, "but I also knew some people were lonely, so I wanted them to know I was still coming every day."

About 30 customers responded with requests for help. What West didn't expect was that other customers would respond by donating their own supplies for West to give to others. His customers left essentials like toilet paper, cleaning supplies and hand sanitizer at their doors for West. When local media outlets picked up his story, people in the community began bringing supplies and gift cards to his post office as well. West never had to buy any supplies—everything was donated.

West's actions even earned him a trip to the White House in May of 2020. He received a message from White House staff, he said, "and the next day, I was in DC. It was wild." President Donald Trump introduced and praised West at a media event. "Customers often tell us during difficult times that seeing us out every day gives them a sense of normalcy in their lives," the letter carrier said at the White House event. "The gratitude we are receiving from our customers is greatly inspiring."

In recognition of his efforts, the judges named West the NALC Humanitarian of the Year.

West was humble about the award. "I never thought this would be recognized, because we all do these things," he said. "I'm very grateful to be able to represent all of my fellow carriers who provide great service to the American people every day." **PR**



# Ramique Hill

Rochester, NY Branch 210



**R**ochester, NY Branch 210 member **Ramique Hill** already had noticed the police officer's car parked across the street during one of his deliveries on Oct. 4, 2019, but "I didn't really think anything of it," he said. A few minutes later, however, his attention was caught by some unusual sounds coming from the house.

"I heard a tussle, and it sounded like someone fell," the three-year carrier, who was a city carrier assistant at the time, recalled. Then, suddenly, "I heard a gunshot go off," Hill said.

The carrier quickly called 911 and reported what he had heard. At this point, a resident ran out of the house, shouting, "He's trying to kill the officer!" When Hill relayed this information to the emergency operator, the carrier was asked to check on the situation if he felt comfortable approaching the house.

Hill went up to the house; when he reached the porch, "I saw a lot of blood," he said. At that moment, another shot went off inside, and Hill entered the residence.

He was met by a frightening scene. The police officer, Denny Wright, was lying on top of the assailant, Keith Williams, who was scrabbling under the couch with his hands. Hill found out later that Williams had been trying to locate his knife. Hill also would learn that Wright had been doing a routine welfare check when Williams, who had not been taking his medication for a mental health issue, attacked him.

Wright was the source of the blood that now covered the entryway; he

had been stabbed multiple times, including in the eye. "[He was] crying that he couldn't see," Hill recalled. The officer had fired the shots that had attracted Hill's attention, but he had not hit Williams. Now, he was using his waning strength to try to prevent Williams from reaching the knife.

Hill rushed over and dragged the assailant's arms away from the couch before helping Wright pin him to the floor. Another neighbor, who had followed Hill into the house, restrained Williams's legs.

However, Wright was too seriously injured to keep fighting with his assailant. He released his grip on Williams's midsection and collapsed. The other neighbor let go of the attacker's legs to help the officer, and Hill was the only one left to prevent Williams from going back on the attack.

Despite his precarious position, the carrier continued to shout encouragement to Wright. "I was telling him, 'I'm on the phone [with 911], backup's coming,'" Hill said. While the neighbor held Wright in his arms, Hill fought to keep Williams restrained.

After a few minutes, another police officer rushed into the house. Together, he and Hill worked to get Williams under control. "I got [Williams's] arms out, and then the officer cuffed him," Hill said.

More officers arrived a short while later, and Williams was taken into custody. He has since been indicted on several charges of attempted murder.

Wright was transported to the hospital and eventually recovered, though he ended up

losing his sight in both eyes. At a ceremony to honor Hill's heroism, Wright said, "I owe a debt of gratitude that I can't begin to figure out how to repay."

The incident received extensive coverage in the Rochester news media; Hill and two other individuals were praised for their role in helping the officer. Hill also was recognized by the Rochester Police Department and the city of Rochester, and received the Postmaster General Hero Award in 2020 in recognition of his bravery.

The carrier was modest about the attention. "I just did at that moment what I thought was the right thing to do," he said.

That selflessness in the face of extreme danger was why the judges named Hill as NALC's National Hero of the Year.

For Hill, he said that more important to him than any praise was helping save the officer's life. "[Wright's] a great person," he said. "I'm glad I was able to allow him to still be here with his family." **PR**

Hill (r) with Officer Denny Wright

