

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 shows bravery in the face of fire

"It was a regular day," New York, NY Branch 36 member **Michelle DeCosta** recalled about her route on Aug. 21, 2020. Suddenly, she spotted smoke hanging over one of the neighboring city blocks. "It was summer, so I thought some customers might be having a cookout," she said.

As she turned onto the street, however, she saw that the smoke was emanating from the first-floor window of a house. The five-year carrier quickly realized that she was looking at a house fire. "[The residents] have two little girls," she remembers thinking, "and the kids are usually home."

Frantic to alert the family, "I started trying to break down the door," DeCosta said. "I was choking on smoke and screaming." A carrier on a neighboring route called 911 while DeCosta tried to gain entry.

After she was unable to get through the door, the carrier realized that others in the neighborhood also were in harm's way. "The neighbors are elderly," she explained, so she ran next door to warn them about the fire.

Once the next-door neighbors 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."

It was then that firefighters arrived. "They started bashing down the door [of the burning house]," the carrier said. Once inside, firefighters determined that nobody was in the house, though they did rescue several trapped pets.

Firefighters also were able to keep the house from burning down and the fire from spreading to nearby residences.

DeCosta, meanwhile, continued on her route, but returned later to check on her customers. The homeowners of the house that had caught fire 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."

Later, a neighbor told DeCosta that he, too, had assumed that the smoke was coming from a grill, and so he ignored the smell. The house had been on fire for almost two hours by the time emergency services were contacted.

At the time, the carrier says, she felt terrified—but not for herself. "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."

Carrier's quick thinking helps apprehend burglar

"I was driving back to the office" after finishing her route on July 17, 2020, Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 member and city carrier assistant **Sarah Garner** said, "when I noticed a guy with a hammer hanging around" one of the local businesses. The carrier knew that the store was closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and she was suspicious as to why he was lurking at the company's front door.

She pulled over in front of the store, Garner said, and watched as he began breaking down the door with his hammer. The carrier rolled down her window and yelled at him to stop, but the man turned around and began advancing toward her.



Michelle DeCosta

Eye on the elderly

In June of 2020, Royal Oak, MI Branch 3126 member **Scott Backer** was making deliveries on his route when he noticed an older customer doing yardwork near her driveway. After Backer put the woman's mail in the box on her front porch, he turned to wave at her. Horrified, he saw her lying, motionless, on the ground, and raced to her side. She had fallen and hit her head on the pavement. "When I got to her, I thought she was dead," the 25-year carrier said. "There was a pool of blood behind her head." However, after a few moments, she regained consciousness. Backer immediately called 911, and spoke to and comforted the woman until paramedics arrived. After she was taken to the hospital, it was determined that the woman had fractured her skull. Both the woman and her family credited Backer with saving her life. "Where she was lying, she wasn't visible from the street, and she was in direct sun," the carrier explained. The local postmaster wrote in a letter to USPS: "The customer lives alone and could have been there for a very long time before anyone else may have noticed she was badly hurt." Backer said that the customers on that block now refer to him as the "neighborhood hero," but he added that he simply was glad to have been able to help. "It



feels really good, knowing that I might have saved her life," he added.

Harrisburg, PA Branch 500 member and city carrier assistant **Bill Stokes** was driving down the street on Oct. 23, 2020, when he spotted one of his older customers sitting down by the curb on the opposite side of the road. The man had a leaf blower on his back and had clearly just been doing yardwork, but something about his posture struck the carrier as unusual. As Stokes watched, "he was hunching his back more and more," the carrier recalled. Stokes pulled over and parked, and then jumped out of his vehicle to investigate. But as he approached, the man collapsed. "He was just lying in the street, and he was shaking profusely," the carrier said. Stokes quickly realized that the man was having a seizure and called 911. "[The operator told me] to keep talking with him and be prepared to do CPR," he said. "I kept rubbing his back

and telling him that help was on the way." The man lives in a remote area, so it took the emergency responders a while to arrive at the house. While he waited, Stokes made sure that the man's airway was clear and that he was still breathing. The carrier stayed by the man's side until an ambulance took him to the hospital. Stokes said that, even though he was "panicking" during the situation, he was happy he had been able to help. "It felt good," he added, "because it could have gone a different way."

Kansas City, MO Branch 30 member **John Stratton** was delivering to a hospital on his route on Dec. 3, 2020, when "I saw a lady picking up a gentleman [who lives] on my route from the hospital," he recalled. As the 23-year carrier completed his route, he was making deliveries on that customer's street when he saw the elderly man get out of the woman's car and begin moving toward his house with his walker. "I was at the house next door when I heard a 'boom,'" Stratton said, and he immediately guessed what had happened. Rushing over, he saw that the man had fallen off of his porch steps. "He was lying on the ground, saying 'I'm OK!' over and over," the carrier said. "I got behind him and got him picked up, and then we got him and the walker up the steps" and into the house, he continued, where they were

able to get him settled in his wheelchair. Stratton repeatedly asked him if he needed to go back to the hospital, but the man insisted that he was fine, so Stratton left to finish his route. The customer was "super appreciative" of the carrier's assistance, but Stratton was modest about his role. "I just said, 'I'm glad I was here; it's what we do,'" he said.

New York, NY Branch 36 member **Nailah Yorke** was delivering on her route on Sept. 25, 2020, when she noticed something unusual. One of her customers, an elderly woman, always picked up the mail from her mail slot. The eight-year carrier and her customer had worked out a system where "I don't push the mail all the way through the slot," Yorke said, so the woman wouldn't have to bend over to collect her mail. But on that day, "I saw that she [hadn't] taken the mail from the day before," the carrier recalled. Concerned, Yorke peered inside the mail slot, and was horrified to see that the customer was lying on the floor. The carrier called out to the woman, but she was unresponsive. Yorke immediately called 911, and waited until paramedics arrived. The woman was taken to the hospital, but subsequently died from a long-standing illness. "She was one of my favorite customers," Yorke said. "I looked forward to her coming to get the mail every day." **PR**

Garner decided to drive away, given the risks to her safety, but saw that there was only one car in the parking lot, which presumably belonged to the burglar. She quickly wrote down the license plate, and then drove back to the office.

Once there, she called 911 to alert police about the situation. She also gave officers the license plate information and a description of the suspect.

Police called back a few hours later to let her know that the man had been arrested. The shop owner credited Garner's

quick thinking with reducing the damage done by the perpetrator.

Garner said that the whole experience felt surreal. "You don't expect it; you can't believe that this is really happening," she explained. "I just felt like I should do something." **PR**