

In our hands



and
hearts

Letter carriers reach out to help their communities

Each year, the holiday season brings reminders of how letter carriers give back to their communities in so many ways. It starts with delivering special packages, but our caring for the people on our routes extends far beyond doing our jobs. Letter carriers assure that letters to Santa Claus are answered—and sometimes that requests for gifts are fulfilled. Carriers collect and donate toys and books for needy children, and food and clothing for their families.

The spirit of goodwill prevails year-round, when letter carriers work to keep their customers cool in the summer heat and

gift gloves to kids so their hands stay warm in the frigid winter.

In these trying times, many more people need help than usual—and letter carriers have responded. Likewise, we could all use some heartwarming stories to remind us that caring and resolve can overcome any obstacle. In that spirit, *The Postal Record* brings you these stories of letter carriers and branches lending a hand in their communities.

If you have a story to share with us, please contact *The Postal Record* by phone at 202-662-2851, by email at postalrecord@nalc.org or by letter at 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001.

Lending a helping hand

Better carrier Wendy Jeter was raised with the mindset that with great power comes great responsibility.

Growing up with a letter carrier as a father (retired former Chicago Branch 11 member Edward Ball), Jeter saw him and his co-workers put on a toy drive during the holiday season every year, and he'd always include her.

"It's about people first," Ball would tell her, and "he'd take me to the store to pick out a toy," she said.

Inspired, the South Suburban Merged, IL Branch 4016 member started up a program at her own small post office in 2018. Initially, she was planning to run it the same way as her dad's office did—every carrier whose route had a school on it put the name of the school in a hat, and one was chosen at random.

However, they realized that one underprivileged school in the area could use the attention more than any other, so the carriers unanimously decided to turn their focus there. Jeter soon kicked off the process by reaching out to the elementary school principal.

"Principals are like the Mother Hen of the school," the 16-year letter carrier and union steward said. "They can only do so much when there is a lack of funding."

Each year, Jeter and the principal choose a class of 30 to 40 students to sponsor. Just before Thanksgiving, the carrier figures out the gender breakdown of the selected group of students and creates a spreadsheet to hang in the post office. Some of her co-workers like to sponsor a specific student, while others prefer to give a general donation. The carrier takes any donated money and goes to the store to buy toys and supplies for the kids.

The drive began as mostly letter carriers and a clerk the first year, but "it grew into a whole station effort," Jeter says, with management, clerks and custodians joining in.

Because it was such a success, Jeter expanded her ask to include gloves and hats for the students for the second endeavor in 2019, to make sure that they stayed warm all winter. That year, NALC regional officers and branch officers also contributed. The post office crew ended up with more than 30 pairs of gloves and hats for the youngsters, along with 50 toys.

After she collects the donated items, the carrier goes to the school, where she turns over the gloves, hats and toys to the principal. The school then holds an event for the children to distribute the items.

"I'm so proud that we, as letter carriers and postal employees alike, were able to come together and put a smile on every kid's face in that class," she said. "That's truly what life's all about—giving back." The carrier hopes to eventually grow the program to be



Wendy Jeter shows off the gifts she and her co-workers got for students at a local underprivileged school.

able to donate to each child in the school.

It's important to Jeter that she and her postal brethren have ties to their neighborhoods. "It's really my hope, as with the food drive, to raise awareness of how [carriers] help," she said, adding that the annual drive "bridges the gap between the community and the Oak Forest Post Office. We are the example to the community. They see us every day."

To Jeter, it's about thinking beyond oneself: "If everyone has the theory in life that they're not alone, it will make the world a better place."

Debbie Edwards Thompson delivers books from Dolly Parton's Imagination Library.



'Charity coordinator'

Helping is Debbie Edwards Thompson's M.O.

The Muncie, IN Branch 98 member delivers joy to kids on her route as part of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, a book-gifting program that provides free books to children from birth to age 5 in participating communities.

She was serving on her local United Way's Board of Directors, covering Delaware, Henry and Randolph counties in Indiana, when the organization became the local coordinator of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in 2015.

The legendary country singer's Imagination Library provides one age-appropriate book per month free of charge to children in the program. "The purpose of the program is to get them kindergarten-ready," Edwards Thompson says. "Getting children ready for school is a huge priority."

Any child in the participating area

can sign up, and the books are sent through the Postal Service, but that can make the delivery process "kind of tricky," the 26-year carrier and branch vice president said. She knew she could help navigate it for United Way.

Edwards Thompson explained that because the books in the program come from a nonprofit with no service endorsement, if a child's family moves, the books can't be delivered—they will go back as undeliverable bulk business mail. With permission from the three counties' postmasters, she tries to intercept books before that happens and return them to United Way. From there, she and a clerk will try to get correct addresses to help children finish the program.

Since the program's inception in the carrier's area five years ago, 46,868 books have been sent out, some of which Edwards Thompson's delivered herself.

"I have little kids who love to come out to get the mail," she said, asking, "Miss Debbie, did I get a book?"

Seeing the kids' excitement is gratifying, the carrier says, adding that it's an "honor to be a part of a child's growing experience. Education is important, and we have the perfect opportunity to get involved."

Edwards Thompson has hopes for the future of the program. "It's just going to be bigger and better," she said, adding that more participants join in the three counties each year. The entire Dolly Parton Imagination Library program sends out more than a million books each month around the world, and more than 150 million internationally since the program began in 1995.

And it appears that the pandemic has played a role

in the program's growth, with more youngsters being at home with time to read. "Just this year alone, we've added 800 children," she said.

The carrier also has served as Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive coordinator for her branch for the past 25 years. In that role, she fostered a relationship with the local United Way, which asked her to be on its board.

"She's pretty much our charity—and everything—coordinator," Branch 98 President **Cody Reum** said. "She's all about that. That's her realm."

Edwards Thompson and other volunteers provide holiday stocking stuffers like socks, hats, gloves, shampoo, stuffed animals and blankets to nursing home residents on their routes. Edwards Thompson coordinates with facility administrators, to whom the carriers drop off the gifts.

She and her co-workers also provide food baskets for 50 less fortunate families within their community.

Carriers will nominate families on their routes, and then the postal family of all crafts will hold small fundraisers such as bake sales and bowling tournaments, with the profits going toward supplies for the food baskets that are delivered just before Christmas.

Being a letter carrier, Edwards Thompson says that she has a unique perspective of her area. "My occupation gives me an opportunity to give back," she said. "We see the need in the community."

So why does Edwards Thompson give so much of her time? It's simple, she says: "I love my community that I serve. I'm just thankful I'm a part of it."



Dolly Parton's charity has given away more than 150 million books.

A calling on her route

Five winters ago, Lisa Wiebking experienced a revelation while out on her route in Chatham, VA. The Lynchburg, VA Branch 325 vice president was delivering mail to a business on her route on a frigid day when “a still, small voice spoke to me,” she recalled.

“While hearing the customer’s remarks about staying warm, I was getting perturbed at having to be out in the cold. Then I heard a whisper saying, ‘at least you have a warm home, a coat,’” Wiebking, a 29-year letter carrier, said. “I called my pastor, crying, because I knew God had made clear my mission in life was to help the less fortunate.”

That’s how Grace A LOT Ministries was born. Based in a former church building,

the nonprofit organization offers essential items, including clothing, school supplies, personal hygiene products and food, for needy people of the area. Its mission also includes providing emergency assistance for people who lose their homes to fire or other disasters. As children head back to school each fall, Grace A LOT offers free backpacks, each filled with school supplies.

The “LOT” in the ministry’s name is an acronym for “least of these,” a term used in a biblical passage referring to the least fortunate people among us.

The ministry relies on donated cash and items, with volunteers donating their labor. In its five years with Wiebking as president, she said, Grace A LOT has served several hundred families.

Based in a former church building, the nonprofit offers essential items to those in need.



“Grace A LOT was formed as a ministry to give the less fortunate in our community a start in the road to self-sufficiency and resilience,” she said.

For more information, go to gracealot.com.

Melissa Stinsman



A letter to Santa Claus never goes unanswered

Each Christmas season, the postal employees of the Bloomsburg, PA, post office can guarantee that every letter addressed to Santa Claus from local children will receive a response from jolly St. Nick. Sometimes they also make a special delivery.

Harrisburg, PA Branch 500 member **Melissa Stinsman** has taken on the duties of Secret Santa in Bloomsburg, with the assistance of the carrier who previously filled the role, **Adam Ulmer**. After a day of work that includes collecting letters addressed to the North Pole, Stinsman sometimes spends several hours a night writing letters to hopeful children.

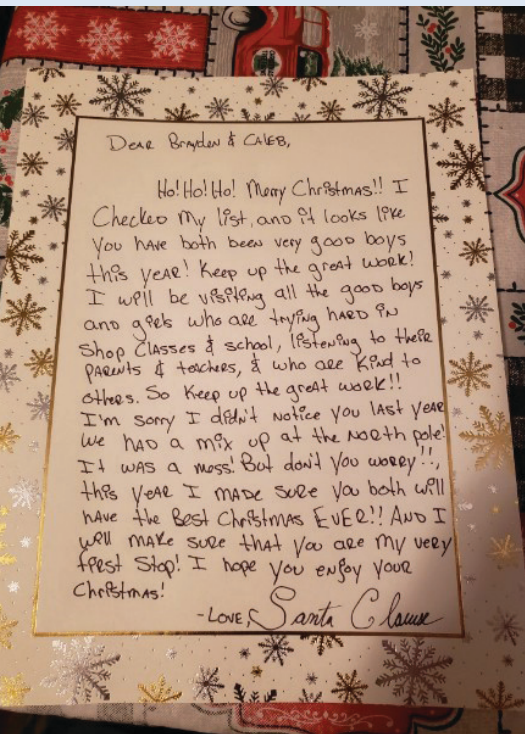
“It’s an exciting thing for them to get a letter from Santa,” Stinsman said. “It makes their day.” She answers about 20 each year. Of course, because she

isn’t *really* Santa Claus, Stinsman must find a way not to promise children a gift they request in case their parents don’t give it on Christmas morning.

“You have to keep it vague,” she said. For instance, if a child asks for a science kit, she will write something such as, “I see you like science—keep your grades up in school and you could become a scientist.”

But sometimes a letter requires more than just a cheerful reply.

Last December, one of the letters made her cry. Along with requests for the usual Legos and other toys, a 9-year-old child’s list included “food for family” and “clothing for family.” What’s more, inside the envelope were two more letters. One, from the same boy, read, “Dear Santa, last year you didn’t notice me, so



A letter from Santa

I hope this year you notice me, and this year I will be good. I pinkie promise.” The other letter was a similar wish list from the boy’s little brother.

“That was a tearjerker,” Stinsman said. She decided to offer help to the family, but wanted to ask permission first. “I knocked on the door and talked to the mom,” she said. “Some people don’t like charity.”

The mother accepted the gesture, after initially making sure of the offer. “Is this real?” the woman asked.

Yes, it was real. Stinsman’s plan was to buy the family a \$50 gift card, but when she notified her supervisor, word of her efforts got out, prompting dona-

tions from postal employees and the community. “It just blew up,” she said, and the gifts ballooned into about \$500 in gift cards, toys, clothing and food.

Some gift cards were from local grocery stores, so Stinsman delivered them early to give the family time to prepare a Christmas feast. On Christmas Eve, Santa Claus himself (who, amazingly, looked just like Ulmer in a Santa suit) and one of Santa’s elves, resembling Stinsman in an elf costume, brought the gifts to the grateful family’s door.

Stinsman hopes to help more families if she receives similar letters in the future. “It’s doable if everyone comes together,” she said.

Carriers put needed food on the table

Each holiday season, the letter carriers of Clearwater, FL Branch 2008 look for customers who are struggling financially. As Thanksgiving approaches, they bring those households enough food for a family feast, and then deliver donated gifts for Christmas.

“The carriers know their routes better than anybody,” Branch President and Florida State Association President **Al Friedman** said. He relies on them to compile a list of postal customers who seem like they could benefit from help. The letter carriers pitch in to raise funds to buy food and toys, and then deliver them. It’s an annual tradition for the branch, one that stretches back 15 years.

In November, the branch served up 122 Thanksgiving donations of food for needy families. “Turkeys, stuffing, pumpkin pie, green beans—it will be an entire meal,” Friedman said. “[The postal supervisors] let us deliver it like Express Mail,” he added, because the food is perishable.

One Thanksgiving delivery last year generated interest from the local news

media, after a carrier dropped off a surprise feast for a local couple. The man, Lee Mathis, and his girlfriend, Janet Wetherington, had finally found a place to live after spending the previ-

ous Thanksgiving without a home. The carrier left the supplies before the couple could thank him.

“When he stepped up at that door, and I opened it, it blew my mind,”

Members of Clearwater, FL Branch 2008 pose for a photo with the Thanksgiving food they’re about to deliver.



Mathis, the recipient of the Thanksgiving dinner, told the local NBC TV affiliate. The man said he and his girlfriend could not afford such a feast. “I didn’t know anything else to say, except thank you,” he said. “I’d really like to give him a big hug.”

The story generated a search for the carrier by local media outlets, who

asked the public for help identifying him. Branch 2008 reunited the carrier, **Nick Brue**, with Mathis and Wetherington, who gave Brue a proper thanks.

Each year at Christmastime, the branch gives toys and gifts to about 20 to 25 families, though at *Postal Record* press time, as Friedman was still compiling the list for 2020, he

guessed it might be more because of the struggling economy. “I don’t know what number we’ll come up with this year,” he said, “because everybody’s hurting.”

Customers always appreciate the thoughtful donations as much as the carriers enjoy delivering them, he added: “There’s rarely a dry eye.”

A branch comes together to help a vet in need

Delivering on his route last summer, Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 member **Kevin Bystrak** saw one of his customers standing outside his home. “Something told me to stop” and speak to the man, the city carrier assistant recalled.

When Bystrak approached the customer, an elderly man wearing a Korean War veteran’s cap, he immediately could tell that the man was not well. “He said he couldn’t take the heat, that he was out of breath and dizzy,” the carrier, a Navy veteran himself, said. “So, I offered to get him a bottle of water.”

When Bystrak returned with the water, he still was concerned about the customer’s health, so he continued their conversation. Given the heat of the day, Bystrak recommended that the man go back inside and stay in the air conditioning until he felt better. The customer responded that he did not have an air-conditioning unit in his home.

As he continued on his route, Bystrak felt troubled by the man’s situation, especially because the customer was older and living with a daughter with special needs.

He knew that his fellow branch members were invariably willing to assist their community—“they’re always there to help,” the carrier said—so he posted a message on the branch’s

Facebook page. In it, he outlined the customer’s situation, and asked if anyone in the union could obtain an AC unit for the veteran.

The next day, fellow Branch 3 member **Jody Kotowski** saw the post and reached out to Bystrak. She wanted to help, so Kotowski and her husband, Frank, went to Lowe’s to purchase one.

Unfortunately, given the heat, all of the most-desired AC units were sold out. So, the Kotowskis decided to donate one of their own AC units. “I knew we had a really good unit,” she said. “And if he needed it, I knew I couldn’t see it sitting there.”

They drove over to the customer’s house with the AC unit, which Frank installed for the man. Bystrak and

Kotowski also were able to connect the customer with a veterans’ service volunteer group that was able to care for the man’s lawn and have his house professionally cleaned.

Through Bystrak’s attentiveness and networking skills and Kotowski’s initiative and kindness, the two carriers were able to significantly enrich the man’s living experience during the summer. “Letter carriers are not afraid to roll up their sleeves and use a little elbow grease to help a U.S. veteran in need,” Branch 3 President **David Grosskopf Jr.** said. “Total cost: zero dollars. Letters carriers caring for their community: priceless.”

The carriers themselves said that they were simply following their



branch's example. "When you're a letter carrier, you see people every day," Kotowski explained. "Our purpose is not just delivering mail; it's to take care of the community."

Kotowski, a 23-year carrier, added, "I'm closer to retirement than Kevin is, but it's great to know that newer carriers are still continuing that purpose." Bystrak also was reluctant to accept

praise for his actions. "I was just there to help someone in need," he said. "It was because of the example of people I work with that something told me to stop [and help]."

Bringing the holiday spirit to her community

During her holiday delivery season in 2017, Shawnee, OK Branch 883 member **Jennifer Kirk** kept seeing "Dear Santa" letters from the children on her route—and though they were being answered by postal workers, she wanted to do more to help the children's Christmas wishes come true.

"I wanted to give all the kids presents," she said, but she didn't have the resources to do so.

Then, in 2018, Kirk attended the NALC national convention in Detroit. At the convention, she spoke with members from Pennsylvania, who told her that their branch ran a program that adopted families for Christmas to

connect them with donated gifts.

Kirk took the idea back with her to Oklahoma, and decided to give it a try in her community. Instead of adopting families, however, Kirk used the letters she collected on her route to match kids with their desired presents.

Along with several fellow carriers and her friends and family, she set up 12 donation boxes around Shawnee to collect the toys.

The first year, she didn't know how much support she would get for her project. "I thought, even if we only help 10 kids, that's still 10 kids" who would have gone without presents that year, she said.

In 2018, they were able to give presents to 115 children—and the next year, the number increased to 186 children.

The toy drive also adopted

classrooms to donate to in 2018 and 2019. This year, however, because the COVID-19 pandemic has closed many schools, Kirk decided to adopt families instead.

But the "Dear Santa" donation program is still going strong. "Any letters from kids in the community will still get presents," the carrier said. "I try to match what they ask for in their letters to the donated gifts."

Then, the Christmas magic really begins. Kirk and her fellow volunteers dress up as elves and deliver the presents in person to the children.

"It's great to see the expression on their faces," she said with a laugh. "Some are so shocked that they don't have anything to say, and some act like they just won a Publishers Clearing House [sweepstake]. It's fantastic."

Kirk says she feels a call to give back to her community in any way she can. Besides the toy drive, the carrier also has served as her branch's coordinator for the annual NALC food drive.

"God gave me a service heart," she explained. "Community service is my drive." **PR**



Left: Jennifer Kirk (l) with Santa and Mrs. Claus
Below: Some of the gifts Kirk and others were able to collect to be given away during the holidays

