

## 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](mailto:postalrecord@nalc.org). We'll follow up with you to obtain news clippings, photos or other information.

# Honoring heroic carriers

**H**eroism, 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.

## An 'angel' to the rescue

One Saturday morning in the fall of 2020, Galesburg, IL Branch 88 member **Dave Stephenson** had just pulled up to a duplex on his route when he realized that something was seriously wrong.

"I could smell gas as soon as I got close to the house," the eight-year carrier said. As he approached the building, firefighters also appeared on the scene—they had been called after one of the residents had backed into the gas meter with her car. "It had been dumping gas for about two hours" by the time emergency responders arrived, Stephenson said.

The carrier soon realized that the firefighters were having difficulty communicating the need to evacuate to one of the families who lived in the duplex. Stephenson knew that the family primarily spoke in French, so he volunteered to translate.

"I speak conversational French and Spanish," he said, "so I explained to them, in French, 'Come on—we need to get out.'"

As the family evacuated, the carrier realized that a car was parked in front of the other side of the duplex, indicating that a resident might be home. "You can't

really tell that it's a duplex" from the outside, Stephenson explained, so he told the firefighters how to find the other door.

After firefighters banged on the door, they found three young girls, all fast asleep—they had been having a sleepover and were unaware of the commotion outside. "They had really bad headaches" from their exposure to the natural gas, Stephenson said, "so the girls went to the hospital and got oxygen."

Stephenson stuck around the scene to translate and make sure that everyone was safe. He later heard that everyone had fully recovered from their exposure to the gas.

Family members of two of the girls wrote to the post office to praise Stephenson for his quick thinking. "We truly feel you were their angel who saved them from death," the letter said. "You are our whole family's hero." But the carrier deflects the "hero" label. "When you're in the moment, you just react, and then you go on with your day," he said.

"It's kind of a cool thing about being out in the public—you just try to react in a good way," Stephenson added. "It's all in a day's work for us."

## Carrier helps initiate fire evacuation

After parking and walking to the first building on his route on April 5, Louisville, KY Branch 14 member **Ronnie Garrett** recalled, "I could see smoke coming out of the gutters and pouring out from under the roof."

The 21-year carrier and Marine veteran rushed toward the building, a three-story apartment complex; several residents had already evacuated and were calling 911. Garrett, however, wanted to make sure that all of his customers were safe, so he entered the building and began knocking on doors.

The carrier rushed through the complex, warning customers about the fire and urging everyone to get outside. One resident, Brian Mitchell, who had been unaware of the fire before Garrett's

alert, told local ABC affiliate WHAS-TV that "the mailman rushes up to pound on my door—tells me to get the heck out of the building."

By the time Garrett reached the third floor, "I was being choked by the smoke," he said, but was able to help everyone inside the building evacuate by the time firefighters arrived on the scene.

No residents were injured in the fire, although two cats died and there was significant property damage.

Mitchell praised Garrett and some of the other residents for their assistance in the evacuation effort, calling them "heroes." But the carrier shrugged off the praise.

"I just did what anyone else would do," he said.



Louisville, KY Branch 14 member **Ronnie Garrett** was instrumental in the evacuation of residents after an apartment fire. Above, a firefighter tackles the blaze at the building.

## Eye on the elderly

In February, Salem, OR Branch 347 member **Laura Reitz** noticed that one of her customers had not been picking up his mail. “You get to know your customers,” the 32-year carrier explained, and she knew that this was unusual. After days went by without the mail being collected, the carrier asked his neighbors if they had seen him recently, but was unable to find anyone who had. She was especially concerned given that the man was elderly and lived alone. Going around the house, “I knocked on the doors and windows, but I didn’t see anything,” Reitz said. Finally, after the customer still had not been seen or heard from, his neighbors decided to call police for a welfare check, based on Reitz’s tip. When officers entered the house, they found that the man had

collapsed and had been unable to stand or call for help. He was taken to the hospital, where he was treated and reunited with relatives. The man’s brother later sent a letter to Reitz, telling her that the customer would not have been found alive without her intervention. While he informed her that the man had subsequently died, he thanked her for ensuring that his brother did not die alone. Reitz, who keeps the letter with her while on her route, said that while she had hoped the man would survive, “the most important part is that he didn’t pass alone.”

In the fall of 2020, Rochester, NY Branch 210 member **Mark La Due** noticed that there was a mail buildup in the mailbox of one of his elderly customers. However,



**Mark La Due**

the man had changed his habits over the past year—while in years past he had picked up his mail every day, recently “he was only getting the mail every three or four days,” La Due said. “But then it went [uncollected] over the weekend,” which was more unusual. The 23-year carrier knocked on the man’s door but received no response.

Looking for advice, La Due walked across the street to the man’s neighbor, a retired carrier himself. The neighbor hadn’t seen the man either. The next day, they decided to call 911 and ask for a wellness check. “The police ended up busting down the door,” La Due said, “and they found him in there—unconscious, but alive.” The man, who was hospitalized after his rescue, did recover, but has not returned to La Due’s route. One of the customer’s friends contacted the post office to thank La Due for his actions. “Mark La Due saved his life,” the friend wrote. “The family and I can’t properly express our gratitude for being a watchful eye.” The carrier, however, was modest about his role, saying, “I don’t think I did anything that anyone else wouldn’t have done.” **PR**

## Carrier’s medical training saves co-worker’s life

“I got in my truck, ready to leave the [post] office” on Saturday, March 27, Lancaster, PA Branch 273 member **Billy O’Connell** recalled, when he looked up and saw a frightening scene. One of his co-workers was lying face down in the parking lot, apparently having a medical emergency.

The eight-year carrier jumped out of his truck and rushed over to her; their supervisor was already kneeling next to her and trying to revive her. O’Connell, who was a CPR instructor in his previous job, quickly took over.

“She wasn’t breathing, and she didn’t have a heartbeat,” he said, so he immediately started doing chest compressions. Despite his time as a teacher, “this was the first time I had to use [CPR]” in an emergency, O’Connell said. He also directed the supervisor to call 911.

By the time paramedics arrived, the woman was still unconscious without a heart rate. She was taken to the hospital and resuscitated; doctors later determined that she had had a heart attack. The carrier has since returned home, where she is still recovering.

Though O’Connell’s actions were praised by his supervisor as being crucial to his co-worker’s survival, the carrier was modest about his contribution. “I just responded, reacted and did what I needed to do to save her life,” he said.

## Watching over child lost on neighborhood street

On April 13, Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 member **Mariah Norris** was on her route when she noticed an unusual sight—a toddler, wandering alone outside. “I was getting all my mail ready when I saw her, in her diaper, running up and down the street looking very

lost,” the four-year carrier recalled.

Norris immediately went over to the child and picked her up, then wrapped one of her shirts around the girl. Looking around, she couldn’t see anyone outside searching for the child, so she called 911.

After hanging up with the emergency operator, the carrier and the toddler “just hung out,” Norris said. “We did ABCs and colors while she ate my lunch and had a good time.”

Officers arrived about half an hour later, and Norris and the child “hung out in a cop car” while police searched for the girl’s parents. When the parents were eventually located, they were unaware that the child had even left the house.

Norris said that despite the stress of the situation—“I could never be a cop”—she was delighted to have been able to help the young girl get back home. “I was just glad I could help,” she added.

## Help on the way

In June of 2020, Fort Worth, TX Branch 226 member **Tiffany Lewis** was making deliveries when she noticed that one of her regular customers wasn't in her usual spot. "She's normally sitting outside," the six-year carrier explained, so she glanced around. At that moment, the woman came out of her house. "She stumbled down to the ground and grabbed her chest," Lewis recalled.



Tiffany Lewis

The customer was holding her phone, trying to call 911, but couldn't complete the action given her condition. Lewis grabbed the phone and connected her with an emergency operator. The carrier then stayed with the woman while she explained her symptoms, which seemed to indicate a heart attack. While waiting with the customer for the paramedics, Lewis realized that they would probably have difficulty finding the location, since the home is tucked away down a side street. She rushed out to the street and was able to flag down the ambulance as it drove by. The woman was taken to the hospital, but has since recovered and returned home. "I was so happy to see her," the carrier said, "and she said, 'I was so glad you were there!'" Lewis,

who previously worked as a police officer, said that while this was the first time she responded to a medical emergency as a letter carrier, she was glad that she could apply some of her former training in her current job. "I love helping people and the community," she added. "It comes naturally to me."

On Feb. 10, Concord, NH Branch 72 member **Geana Baum** was making deliveries when "I heard someone yelling," she recalled. "But I thought it was someone yelling for their dog." The four-year carrier had started to move on when she heard an even louder yell. This time, she could hear what the person was screaming: "She was yelling, 'Help! Help me!'" Baum said. After looking around, Baum finally located the woman, who was



Geana Baum

under a nearby garage overhang. "She was sitting on concrete steps with shorts on, a T-shirt and one sock," the carrier said. "And it was 20 degrees." The customer didn't know how long she had been trapped outside; due to a recent surgery, she was unable to stand on her own. Baum tried to pull her up, but she was unable to raise the woman by herself. Instead, she called 911, and stayed with the customer until paramedics arrived. Baum says that she has spoken to the woman since the incident, and that the customer moved her mailbox to make it easier to collect the mail. "I'm just glad I was there for her, and glad I heard her," Baum said. "But it's something anyone would have done." **PR**

## Retired carrier rescued by former co-worker

"It was first thing in the morning on a very cold morning—probably 15 below [freezing]," Baraboo, WI Branch 507 member **Daniel Kaehne** recalled about his route on Feb. 17. "I had pulled up to start a park-and-loop when I heard someone hollering."

Assuming that the person was trying to call a dog, the 33-year carrier ignored the noise and went around to open the LLV. Then, he heard the noise again. This time, "I thought, 'Something's wrong,'" Kaehne said.

There was nobody outside walking, but the carrier kept looking across the street. Finally, Kaehne heard the noise a third time. "I heard Woody, plain as day, yelling 'Help!'"

Retired Branch 507 member **Gene Woods**, known as "Woody," had gone

outside earlier that morning, despite the icy conditions, to check on his furnace. While going down his porch steps, Woods had slipped and fallen, landing headfirst on the sidewalk.

The retired carrier was unable to stand and was in distress, given his head injury and the freezing temperature. He tried to call for his wife, but she was unable to hear him, and the shock had caused Woods to forget about the emergency call button around his neck.

Fortunately, his former colleague came to the rescue—Kaehne managed to locate Woods after peering around a snowbank, and immediately rushed over to help. Woods was in bad shape: "There was blood all over the snow," Kaehne said. "And when I rolled him over, there was blood on his face."

Moving Woods carefully, so as not to aggravate a potential spine or head

injury, Kaehne got the injured man to his feet and inside his house. Once inside, Kaehne told Woods's wife about the incident, and wrapped a paper towel around Woods's head to staunch the bleeding.

Given Woods's injuries and exposure to the cold, Kaehne called 911 and waited with the Woodses until paramedics arrived. "I called him that night, and he was already home," Kaehne said. "He was fine—just black and blue."

Woods, who later wrote a letter to the post office praising Kaehne for "surely [coming] to my rescue," has since made a full recovery.

Kaehne shrugged off the praise, saying that he had handled the situation as part of his job. "[Woods] is the fourth person I've rendered aid to," he said. "You just get a sense when you know your territory. I'm glad I happened to be there at the right time." **PR**