



Living one note at a time

In sixth grade, “I picked up the trombone and thought, ‘This was it,’ ” Bradley Niblock said. “My parents will say I never put it down.”

A local musician recently had visited his school, given a presentation about the instrument and played some jazz tunes for the students. Though Niblock had played piano for a few years, there soon was an instrument tryout night, and that’s when he picked up the trombone for the first time. He never looked back.

It didn’t hurt that the trombone was used in all of the music for the

cartoons Niblock enjoyed watching, such as “Tom and Jerry” and “Looney Tunes.”

“My mom could play piano,” he said. “My dad could [only] play the radio, but they were so supportive.”

The Kansas City, MO Branch 30 member continued playing trombone throughout his school years, and he also was a member of the marching band in high school and then at Truman State University in Missouri, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in music.

Later, serving in the Marine Corps, Niblock played in military bands while stationed in Kanehoe Bay, HI. He played in numerous concerts and parades, as well as at special events such as airfield dedications. Niblock and his military bandmates also went to Sydney, Australia, to play.

After spending four years in the Marines, in 1997, Niblock and his wife moved back to Kansas City. He began with the Postal Service as a clerk the next year, before switching to the carrier craft in 2003. (He’s now also a steward and a CCA Academy instructor.)

The carrier soon auditioned and joined a local community symphony. “You learn about other openings” while participating, he says, and he tried out for the Kansas City Civic Orchestra. Niblock earned a spot playing his bass trombone.

The orchestra plays at the Kauffman Center for Performing Arts, as well as other venues such as large churches, at concerts that are free and open to the public. Some of Niblock’s co-workers have come to see him play from time to time.

Crowds can sometimes reach 800 or more at events in the community. “It’s really exciting,” Niblock said. “I like playing in front of a crowd like that. It’s a different crowd, [including] families. It’s not as formal as a professional symphony. It’s great exposure to music.”

Niblock loves helping people connect to music in person, through live concerts. That way, he says, “you can feel the music notes instead of it being played at you.”

The 80-plus-member orchestra tries to put on seven concerts per year. They play many classical pieces by composers including Brahms, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, though on occasion, they’ll also have pops concerts in which they play more modern music. They also usually play a few Christmas concerts each winter.

If Niblock has time in his schedule, he’ll try to squeeze in other concerts where possible, including with the local Lee Summit Orchestra. “I also



Bradley Niblock

Opposite page, top: Bradley Niblock (r) plays in the orchestra's trombone section.

play with them occasionally, if they need someone," he said. "I'll play wherever."

And practice makes perfect. "I play throughout the week, or else [I] won't make it through a concert," the carrier said. "It's a physical activity."

Practicing helps him play better, both mentally and physically, he says. "Sometimes it's tough with two kids, but I do what I can," he added.

The orchestra holds rehearsals every Tuesday night throughout the year, and performances are held on week-ends. Before a major concert, they have four to six dedicated rehearsals.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic put a damper on the 2020 season. "Most of the season got canceled last year," the carrier said, "but what can you do?"

To keep playing, the members got creative, and "Civic in the City" was born—a series of outdoor recitals performed around town while maintaining appropriate safety measures. "We started breaking off in groups—wood-

winds, brass—and started playing in neighborhoods," said Niblock, who was excited to participate.

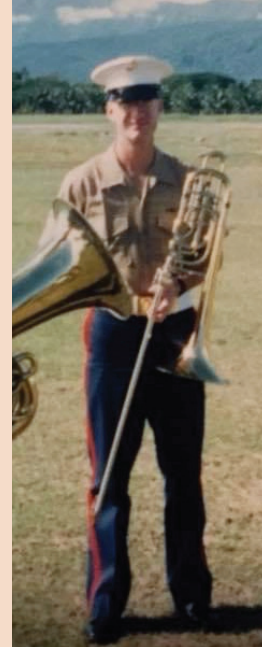
The orchestra has also held some virtual concerts, one of which featured the winner of a young artist competition, a talented high school freshman violinist.

And they performed their first pandemic-era in-person concert in April. "It was great" to be back, Niblock said. The musicians spread out at a community college hall and played pieces by Beethoven and Haydn, among other composers.

Niblock's absolute favorite piece is Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5. "I've been wanting to play that since college and I finally got to," he said. The carrier also enjoys playing pieces by Brahms, who he says "writes so well for trombone."

The carrier says that over decades of performing in front of large crowds—and even serving as a drum major of his high school marching band and occasionally conducting with his Marine

Niblock was a Marine and stationed in Hawaii.



band—he's never gotten stage fright. "The big thing is to prepare," Niblock said. "Half is

preparation, half is getting used to it." He wants to play plenty more concerts once the pandemic ends. "I hope to keep playing around town," he said, adding that there are "plenty of opportunities in Kansas City."

One thing the carrier knows for sure is that he'll always be surrounded by music. "It's just always been in my life since I can remember," he said, both playing and listening to music. In addition, his wife is a music teacher, and one of his children plans to be a music major in college.

Niblock's favorite aspect of being part of the civic orchestra is community. "It sounds kind of corny," he said. "It's doing something you love, but you're also giving back." PR

What's happening on social media

Various news stories and interesting anecdotes that celebrate letter carriers and the mail have been flying around social media. We plan to collect the best ones in this space. If you come across a story you'd like us to consider featuring, send it to social@nalc.org.

Dancing Oregon letter carrier raises youngster's spirits

Over the past few months, you may have seen a dancing letter carrier taking over your social media feed.

While quarantining during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, 3-year-old

Avalina Whitlow would connect daily with her letter carrier, Portland, OR Branch 82 member **Ian Simon**. The two would share a dance through the living-room window, and the toddler's father, David, captured a montage on video to post online.

The video, appeared on major social media outlets such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, received millions of views and soon garnered attention from various media outlets, including the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), "Good Morning America," Britain's *The Daily Mail* and HuffPost Canada.

"Even the smallest gesture during these times, any kindness that



Avalina Whitlow and Ian Simon

someone can pay, means everything, because it's been a struggle for everybody," David Whitlow told PBS NewsHour in December. "Anybody that does something nice for someone else,



Social media (cont.)

it really means a lot. And it meant a lot to me and my family.

“A lot of positivity has come out of this video,” he added. “And so, I thought the world needed something to feel good about. And Ian was a huge part of that, obviously.... I am really glad that everybody else felt so happy when they watched it.”

Simon has received a lot of reaction since as well.

“I’m getting messages from people all over the world thanking me. It’s very inspiring,” he told the news program. “One lady started doing Meals on Wheels [which distributes meals to elderly residents and people with disabilities]. And her first week on her route, she started dancing the food up to the door. And a lot of the messages, I tear up. It’s just so heartwarming.”

Resourceful New Jersey carrier helps young football fan

When Princeton, NJ Branch 268 member **Mark Egan** was handed a letter from 9-year-old customer Rishik Pannala in December, he noticed that it didn’t have a mailing address on it. It was addressed to Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback Tom Brady.

Egan wanted to help. He and his postmaster found a potential address for the Super Bowl-winning team, and mailed the letter.

A few weeks later, the carrier delivered Pannala a missive from the Bucs, which thanked him for being a fan and included a signed photo of Brady.

The boy was thrilled, and Pannala’s father was grateful, too.

“My wife and I very much appreciate our mail carrier Mark’s kind gesture,” the father told local TV news stations. “It is efforts from people like Mark the mailman that remind

us of what a wonderful community we have and how fortunate we are to have Mark looking out for our family. To us, Mark and his postmaster are the real heroes who made it possible for a young kid to have a very special experience.”

Texas carrier delivers care package to customers with COVID-19

Houston single mom Lisette LeJeune was surprised to receive a care package from her letter carrier in December while she and her two sons, ages 14 and 3, were at home sick with COVID-19.

“I was really sick the first week, so it was really hard trying to take care of both of them,” LeJeune told ABC’s “Good Morning America.”

After opening the package that contained cans of chicken soup, orange juice, crackers and cookies, LeJeune discovered a note from her carrier, Mary, saying: “Get-well wishes... I hope you all are feeling better!”

Touched, LeJeune wanted to share the story.

“The sweetest thing happened this morning that made my entire year,” the customer wrote on Facebook. “I’ve been home in quarantine with COVID. I opened the door one day with my mask on and told my mail lady that we had COVID[-19] and I would put a bucket in front of the house so she could just drop it in without touching our mailbox as I get the mail out. This morning we received a care package from her.”

She told “GMA”: “I guess she saw the bucket was still there in front of my door two weeks later,” adding, “What made me emotional was just the thought of her getting the bag ready, in the morning before starting work or

the night before, just her having us in mind with her daily routine.... She’s a stranger to us, and that was the kindest part.”

In a statement to ABC News through a spokesperson for the Postal Service, Mary called the act “a small gesture of kindness.”

“The customer expressed concerns about my well-being with contacting the same mailbox as her while she was sick,” she said. “After a few days, I left a get-well gift at her doorstep because I appreciated her concern. I didn’t expect it to get so big, but I would have done the same for anybody.”

Longtime Ohio carrier receives special sendoff before retirement

To honor their longtime letter carrier’s retirement in March, customers on Cincinnati, OH Branch 43 member **Brett Wittwer’s** route got together and planned a surprise send-off for him, including balloons, decorated mailboxes, gift bags and a large banner with well wishes.

One neighborhood resident, Glenna Weber Stricklett, told “Good Morning America” that Wittwer is “always friendly” and would take great care when handling their packages.

“Like if it was a rainy day, and we had something that was kind of large, he would bring it to the door,” she said, since many in the area had mailboxes far from the front door.

Wittwer, who delivered mail for 35 years, was delighted to see the surprises waiting for him along his route.

“It was crazy,” Wittwer told the show. “It kind of brings a tear to your eye. I probably won’t see most of these people ever again. It’s kind of a strange feeling. I felt happy, but I felt sad.” **PR**