



A year of giving back

The end of an old year and the beginning of a new one offers a time for reflection. For letter carriers, it's a time to look back at the way they've given of themselves. In 2021, letter carriers fed the homeless, assisted those in poverty or in grief, and brought holiday goodies to their canine friends. Letter carriers don't simply deliver to their communities, they make those communities stronger by the act of caring. That's something we can all carry forward as we move into a brand new year full of possibility.



Veteran shares the bounty of food with homeless people

Devin Coy used to eat his way through Veterans Day. The Louisville, KY Branch 14 member and Army veteran who served in the Iraq war took advantage of a free meal program in downtown Louisville, where he delivers the mail. Several Louisville restaurants give out free meals to vets every Nov. 11. All Coy had to do was show his VA card to get free food.

“I would go out on Veterans Day and basically hit every restaurant in my area,” Coy said. “It was extreme gluttony,” he said.

But all that eating prompted Coy to notice all the hungry homeless people in the streets of Louisville. On Veterans Day in 2018, Coy did something about it. Instead of eating the free meals, he brought them to homeless people. “There were so many people who needed food,” he said. “I just wanted to pay it forward.” The restaurants took care of veterans like him, Coy reasoned, so he could continue his service by bringing the bounty of food to others.

Though he had already done a good deed, it wasn’t enough for Coy. Feeding a few hungry people made him realize how many more still needed help.

“It was overwhelming, because I couldn’t feed everybody,” he said.

Coy realized that he could get more food to the needy by asking restaurants to support his efforts, and he went to numerous restaurants in the area, not just those that participated in the free meals for veterans program.

“And I just tell them the truth,” he said. “I’m not keeping any of this. I’ve got a good job. My fridge is full of food. All of this is going to the homeless downtown.” The restaurants trusted him and supported his efforts. With the help of a friend, also a veteran, he distributed more meals the next year.

Now, every Veterans Day, instead of taking his day off, Coy makes more deliveries—he brings meals to the homeless in Louisville. This past year, he distributed upwards of 60 meals. “I had a couple of restaurants that really stepped up and gave me 10 meals” apiece to give out, he said, allowing him to get that many meals to hungry people in a single day.

In November, on Veterans Day, local TV news outlet Spectrum News 1 followed him around as he handed out meals, and then ran a story about his work. The resulting publicity gave Coy an opportunity to grow his enterprise even more, with one restaurant manager suggesting that he bring a copy of the Spectrum News website’s article about him to more restaurants in 2022 ahead of Veterans Day. After seeing the article, the manager said, other restaurant managers might agree to schedule food donations in advance, helping Coy to get even more meals out.

“If I have a dozen people who want to help me [in 2022], and I have a dozen restaurants that say, ‘Yeah, you know what, we’ll give you 20 meals or we’ll give you 30 meals, we’ll schedule an appointment,’” Coy said. “I can hit 200—maybe 500. That would be awesome.”

His continuing success led Coy to dream of expanding his efforts even



more. In September, he founded a non-profit group called Free Brown Bag to assemble and distribute food bought from bulk food vendors using cash donations.

“I’d like to get a food truck to do this, and set it up downtown,” he said. The truck would be a hub both for giving out food to the needy and for attracting donors to sustain the effort. He also hopes his work will inspire other veterans to help.

“It just feels really good to help people out.”

The experience of personally handing food to hungry people has changed Coy’s outlook on life.

“It was so powerful, man. It’s so moving to do this,” he said, recalling one of his first requests for a meal to hand out. “I didn’t realize how good it makes you feel to help other people. I was in tears basically trying to tell the [restaurant] manager what I was doing.” **PR**



Santa Paws is coming to town

“I’m very fond of dogs—period,” Northern VA Branch 3520 member **Scott Arnold** said. That’s the best explanation he can provide for why he started delivering customized stockings, complete with a Christmas newsletter, to every dog on his route.

This annual delivery of the stocking with canine goodies, which has been running for more than 25 years, has changed form a few times over the years, but has never lost the holiday spirit at the heart of it.

“All the hustle and bustle of Christmas, and the dog—except for when it’s time to eat—gets left out,” Arnold said. So, he created a Christmas custom, “Santa Paws,” which gives the dogs their special holiday gift.

“I thought it would be a neat idea to give them something,” the carrier, who will mark 40 years with the Postal Service in May, added. “I had no idea it would explode into what it’s become.”

The first year that Arnold delivered the stockings, he estimates that he had about 40 dogs on his route. “I did over 300 this year,” he said, an increase that reflects both the growing number of dogs as well as his ability to include ones he initially didn’t know of.

Arnold says that he orders the stockings wholesale after the holiday season ends, and that he’s always “looking for something different.” The stockings are unique each year, which means that several of his customers have kept collections of the brightly patterned socks.

Each stocking is personalized with the dog’s name and includes a newsletter from the carrier. Originally, “before [the amount of work] got too heavy, I would take the dog’s picture” and include that as well, Arnold said, but given the

increasing scale, he’s had to adjust the tradition.

“Then, I was doing them while I was watching a football game or something,” he explained. Now, “because of the amount, I do them in my garage, and I have a great big workbench out there.”

The carrier keeps all the dogs listed in a database on his computer. “When new [dogs] come, I would add them, and I just kept going,” Arnold said. “It got to the point where if [the customers] got a new dog, they would let me know.”

Arnold’s list is now about six pages long; writing all the names on the stockings has been by itself labor-intensive. “Yeah, it’s a lot of work!” he said.

Once the stockings are done, Arnold delivers them to the door on a Sunday morning in December. In some years, he’s even donned a Santa suit while making the deliveries. He’s often been



joined by co-worker and fellow Branch 2520 member **Rob Receveur**.

“He’s been doing that with me for many, many years,” Arnold said. “I really appreciate his help.”

In addition to his co-worker, Arnold’s own dogs also have joined in the tradition. “I would always put them in some sort of garb” like a Santa outfit or hat, “and in-

clude their photo with the newsletter,” the carrier said with a laugh. “When I had grandkids, I started including them with the dogs—it’s just been a progression like that,” he added.

Despite the work, Arnold says, the holiday custom has been a way to connect with the people and animals on his route, which he’s been delivering for 30 years.

“The customers have really, really looked forward to it,” Arnold said. “It’s become a tradition.” **PR**

Above: Scott Arnold shows off an NHL championship ring from the Washington Capitals’ 2018 Stanley Cup victory.

Below: Some of the many stockings he makes for the dogs on his route.





Providing cheer where it's needed

For many letter carriers and branches, the time for giving back comes at the end of the year, as the holidays remind people 'tis better to give than to receive. Branches and members have a variety of ways to give back, from raising money to give to the Salvation Army or other charitable organization to having carriers nominate families in need on their routes and branch members then buying the gifts for them. No matter how the branch chooses to get involved, the act of giving brings everyone some much-needed holiday cheer.

Delivering for kids on the route

For **Lamont Scott** of Staten Island, NY Branch 99, delivering gifts to kids was the best part of being a letter carrier. Though he retired this past year and moved away from Staten Island, he's still proud of the gift giving and left it for others in the branch to carry on.

At the New Dorp station where Scott worked, there was a program where children could write a letter to Santa about what they wanted for Christmas, with carriers pulling some of the letters out and fulfilling the wishes. But the program was stopped more than 10 years ago. Another carrier soon asked Scott, "Why don't we start it back up?" Scott decided to do so with a twist, though—rather than answer letters youngsters sent in the mail, he would select families on his route that he knew needed the help.

"I picked the families that I saw on my route that met our criteria: Kids who were 11 or younger, were needy and they believed in Santa Claus," he explained.

He'd approach the parents and have the kids write a letter to Santa, which

the parents gave to Scott. He started with two families. To pay for the gifts, "I hit up everybody at the station for \$20," he said. "The clerks, the bosses and everybody."

Over the years, Scott also accepted unwrapped presents, sometimes receiving them from other municipal gift programs that had more gifts than children to distribute them to.

"Before you know it, every year, it just got a little bit bigger and bigger and bigger," Branch 99 President **Richie Ray** said.

Scott would tell people about what he was doing, and "guys picked up on it," Ray said. "He needed help wrapping. He needed help getting the gifts out there. And he also needed help to find out: 'Do you know any families that are struggling during Christmas? Is there anybody on your route that could use assistance?'"

About two years ago, Scott approached Branch 99 and the branch voted to donate \$500, allowing Scott and the other carriers to get gifts for more families. The branch donation plus contributions from other people allowed Scott to deliver gifts for seven families a year before he retired.

He and **Konstantin Litvak**, another Branch 99 member, would get the gifts, and then, alongside other volunteers, they giftwrapped them and delivered them on Christmas Eve. "We would tell the kids, 'Listen, Santa Claus came by. He asked us if we could give him a hand. He's going to come later on tonight, but he just dropped this stuff off early,'" Scott said.

He remembers one special delivery a couple of years ago. It was for a single mom with four kids who lived in a one-bedroom apartment. Scott and some other carrier volunteers went to deliver



Above: Lamont Scott and Richie Ray deliver gifts to two young boys.

Below: Konstantin Litvak brings some holiday cheer to a young girl.



on Christmas Eve, but the mother wasn't at home. Scott and a few other letter carriers arrived at the apartment on Christmas morning and, with the



Providing cheer (continued)

mother's help, put out the gifts before she woke the kids up. As the kids excitedly opened the gifts, one little boy pointed to Scott and told his siblings, "I told you guys he knew Santa Claus."

"It's one of the highlights of my life," Scott said.

While other municipal workers do gift donations, the Branch 99 program is different in that it identifies families on the letter carriers' routes. Also, it finds families that might not ask for help from others, whether because of shame or a sense that they would be rejected, Scott said.

Letter carriers who pay attention to the communities where they deliver can tell who needs the help, Scott said. "If you're delivering your mail and you're there every day for the past four years, you should know the kids," he said. "You should be aware of it."

In retirement, Scott lives in Pennsylvania. The branch is struggling to find someone to replace him and take over the program. As for Scott, he's still keeping his eyes open to see whom he might be able to help in his new community. "I'm starting small," he said.

'We can do it'

Over the years, Canton, OH Branch 238 would help the community through various methods, but giving back has been more complicated the past two holiday seasons.

"In years past, we've done food drives," Branch 238 President **Josh Roe** said. "I know some stations have adopted a family. But [with] everybody being affected by COVID these past two years, unfortunately, that's kind of not been going on as much."

One of the branch's main programs was the "We can do it" food drive. "That was just the little title we gave it,"



The Canton, OH branch teams up with the Ex-Newsboys to help those in need in the community.

retired Branch President **Gloria Miller** said. They also made it a "Gimme 5" drive, asking carriers to bring in five canned items, naming it after the NALC political action committee (PAC) campaign from the early 2000s. Stations would adopt a family and donate money or items for the family. At other times, the carriers, along with clerks and other postal co-workers, would find elderly people to assist; Miller said it was easy to forget that there are older folks who need help because everyone thinks of the kids during the holidays. "We collected money and went out and purchased stuff that [the seniors] were wanting," she said.

Despite the difficulties of the pandemic and of letter carriers being overworked with all of the deliveries, they are finding ways to continue giving back. "Carriers are such a vital part of the community," Roe said. "We go to every house every single day, so we

do get to know the people in our community. So being one of those trusted people that the public looks to, I think it's good that we participate in our community."

Because many of the branch's retirees were former paperboys, the branch has partnered with the Canton Ex-Newsboys for holiday season donations and will continue to do so this season. The Ex-Newsboys was founded in 1960 to provide clothes and shoes to children in Stark County.

"This year we're taking up a collection around each one of the different stations and see what we can come up with to donate to them," Roe said.

"We're just doing what we can with what we have," Miller said. "It just feels good to help."

Carriers helping carriers

Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100 is the largest branch in the country, with more than 6,500 members. And sometimes it is letter carriers who need some good cheer around the holidays.

Trustee **Sharon Peralta** and Board Member-at-Large **Gigi Estrada** just finished their second year running a program to provide just that, though others in the branch ran it before them. They start by reaching out to the branch's stewards, asking them to put forward names of letter carriers in their offices who are in need.

"These are all letter carrier families," Peralta said. "One is a carrier with terminal cancer who has young children and another one just lost their spouse to COVID. A few weeks ago, another one lost their twelve-year-old child to cancer. And they're all going through really difficult times doing things like planning funerals during the month of December, rather than Christmas parties."



Once the branch picks five families, the stewards go to find out what the families need or what is on the children's wish lists.

"We're trying to help out the children who need a little extra cheer," Peralta said. "Most cases, their families are struggling because of the loss."

"The children want certain specific toys or clothing," Estrada said, "and typically for teenagers, we don't buy the clothing because they have different tastes than we do. So, we provide gift cards for them."

"The families, especially the parents, are so overjoyed with it," Estrada said of the reaction when they deliver the gifts and gift cards.

"They're just overjoyed and very thankful," Peralta agreed.

It's mostly letter carriers who contribute to this program, including some retirees and others who don't participate in other branch activities and fundraisers. Carriers contribute with monetary donations or by buying items from the wish lists.

"This can be a very stressful time of year, and we kind of get overwhelmed," Peralta said. "It brings back some of the joy to it when you're able to help others. It's not just about the stress and all the different things you have to get done this time of year. But we found the people who contribute are really grateful to be a part of this, where they can see they made a difference for someone else who's struggling."

"This time of year, it might be another letter carrier who is struggling," she added.

Start small

The carriers who run the branch holiday giving programs encourage

other branches and carriers to get involved and give back. And they offered some advice on how to do it.

"Start small," Branch 238 President Roe said. "You don't want to try to swing for the fences if you're just getting started. Start something that your members feel passionately about or something in the community where you see that there is an area of need."

For helping out other letter carriers, Branch 1100's Estrada and Peralta suggested reaching out to the stewards.

"Stewards are the ones who know what's going on in their specific office," Estrada said.

"It's always hard for people to ask for help, but when you realize maybe a co-worker is struggling with a unique situation, people will contribute ideas," Peralta said.

And Branch 99's Scott boiled it down to very simple advice: "Pay attention," he said. If you do that, he added, you'll know who needs help the most. **PR**

Branch 1100's Sharon Peralta sorts some toys to be given away.

