

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 alerts customers to garage fire

"I was on my way to work" the morning of March 24, Peoria, IL Branch 31 member **Joana Cole** recalled, "and I saw a car stopped in the middle of the road." The six-year carrier looked ahead to see what the problem was, and she was horrified when she realized what had attracted the other driver's attention. One of the neighborhood houses had caught fire, and "smoke was billowing out of the garage," Cole said.

The carrier immediately leaped into action. After parking her vehicle, she got out and raced up to the front door of the residence. "I was pounding on the door," Cole said, trying desperately to get the attention of anyone inside the house. The other driver, meanwhile, had called 911.

Eventually, the homeowners, a husband and wife, realized what was going on. Neither had been aware that the garage was on fire, and they immediately grabbed their cat and evacuated.

Shortly after everyone was safe on the street, the fire department arrived and extinguished the blaze. "[They] were able to contain it to the garage because of the fast action" the other driver had taken to notify emergency services, Cole said. "The house and everything was salvageable."

Thanks to Cole's warning, everyone

inside the house escaped injury.

Sometime after the fire, the homeowners tracked Cole down through a mutual friend and gave her a card thanking her for her actions. Cole, however, was modest about her contribution. Of the experience, she said, "it was a very big adrenaline rush."

Looking out for unsupervised children

On Sept. 25, Arlington Heights, IL Branch 2810 member **Roland Decena**

was walking on his route when "I saw two kids wandering around" the neighborhood, he recalled. He "didn't pay much attention to the children" at first, the 20-year carrier said, as he assumed that a parent was watching them. However,

a few minutes later, he saw the young children playing in the middle of the street—and there was no adult in sight.

Decena, concerned, walked over to them. "I started questioning the older girl," he said, but the children just laughed at him—he was unsure whether they even spoke English.

Determined to find the children's parents, the carrier started knocking on doors, asking his customers if they recognized the kids. One of the neighbors was able to get the little girl to come to him, but the young boy, who was still in diapers, dodged between the adults. "[He] ran away so fast," Decena said, that the toddler was almost at the main road when a woman stopped her car and was able to grab him. She brought the child back while Decena continued to knock on neighborhood doors.

Eventually, they decided to call 911 and report the situation. Shortly



Roland Decena



Joana Cole

Eye on the elderly

In the beginning of March, Central Iowa Merged Branch 352 member **Sarah Stevens** became concerned about one of her elderly customers. “The gentleman was always very regular about picking up his mail daily,” the 15-year carrier explained. While she knew that he occasionally went out of town to visit his sister, he was never gone for more than a few days. As days passed without any sign of the customer, Stevens became increasingly nervous that something was wrong. “By the fourth day, I was extremely worried,” she said. On March 6, after five days had passed, she and a supervisor decided to contact police and request a wellness check. When officers entered the home, they found



Sarah Stevens

the man lying on the floor, unable to stand. As Stevens was later told, the man had gotten up in the middle of the night, become disoriented and fallen—and could not get back up. The man was hospitalized for a week, during which time he was treated for

dehydration and muscle loss. After some time in physical therapy, he was able to return to his home. His sisters wrote a note to the carrier, thanking her for her actions. “You absolutely saved his life,” they wrote. The paramedics who helped the man at the scene also told Stevens that if he had been found even one day later, “he wouldn’t have made it,” the carrier said. Stevens says she feels torn about the situation; while she wishes she had called sooner, she said, “I’m thankful I did call.” She added, “It feels pretty amazing that I was able to help him.”

Clinton, IA Branch 126 member **James LaShelle** exchanged waves every day with Bill Berner when the 15-year carrier saw his customer through the window of his residence. But one Thursday in October, LaShelle noticed that Berner was not seated by his window. The carrier was even more troubled when he realized that Berner had not collected his mail in a couple days. “He always picked up the mail,” LaShelle explained. Fortunately, the carrier had a connection who he thought could help him with checking up on the elderly man. “[My wife] is good friends with the woman who used to live upstairs,” above Berner’s apart-

ment, LaShelle said, and he knew that the woman, Angela Simmons, still had a key to Berner’s place. LaShelle’s wife contacted her friend and explained the situation. Simmons went over to check on Berner. When she entered the home, she told *The Clinton Herald*, she found Berner “on the floor in front of the refrigerator,” lethargic due to a bite from an infected dog suffered the week before. The wound had given him a high fever and rendered him delirious. Berner was immediately taken to the hospital and treated; he has since fully recovered. Berner described LaShelle as “an awesome human being.” For his part, LaShelle, who served in the Army for 24 years prior to joining the Postal Service, insists that helping members of the community is just part of his routine. “I’ve always checked on my customers,” he said. “It’s part of our job, I think, to keep an eye on people.”

On Nov. 15, 2021, Hudson Valley, NY Branch 137 member **Deborah Maher** noticed that one of her elderly customers, Paul Schuchman, had not collected his mail in several days. “He gets a lot of mail, and I always bundle it—and it’s usually gone by the next day,” the 19-year carrier said. While it wasn’t unusual



James LaShelle

for him to occasionally miss a day’s pick-up, Maher began to get worried after several days passed and the mail was still uncollected. She decided to ask a neighbor across the street if he had seen Schuchman recently, but he hadn’t. “He told me to bang on the windows” of Schuchman’s house to see if she could get a response, Maher recalled. The carrier did so, but couldn’t hear anyone inside the residence, and the blinds were closed. She decided to report the situation to her supervisor, who called police for a welfare check. When officers entered the house, they found the elderly man “lying literally right behind the door,” Maher said. Schuchman had been on the floor for several days, and he was immediately taken to the hospital. Sadly, he died a few days later. The story was reported on the local news site HudsonValley360, and the carrier was praised for her alertness. Maher, who previously had helped a customer in a similar situation, said that she always keeps an eye on her customers. “For me, it’s just natural,” she said. “I think of myself as a neighbor.” Maher added that letter carriers have a unique opportunity to aid people. “You get to learn the pattern of people,” she said. **PR**

after officers arrived on the scene, the parents of the children came rushing out of what the carrier had thought was a vacant house—the family was so new to the neighborhood that they hadn’t begun receiving mail.

“The mother was saying, ‘Oh my god, oh my god,’” Decena remembered, and told officers that she and her husband

had been upstairs while the children played downstairs. Unbeknownst to their parents, the children had managed to open a door and get out of the house. The kids had been missing for half an hour before the parents realized they were gone. Thanks to Decena’s vigilance, no harm had come to the children, and they were safely returned home.

The carrier said that he didn’t think his actions merited any special praise; a similar situation involving a child in distress had happened to him a few years earlier, and at this point, he viewed it as part of the job. “[Letter carriers] are the ones who know who lives in the community,” he added. “I tell all my customers, ‘If you need anything, let me know.’” **PR**

Neighborhood watch

“I was pulling up to a park point when I saw a big, black pit bull” coming down the sidewalk, Central California Coast Branch 52 member **Jordan O’Byrne** recalled about a day on his route in October of 2020. “It got my attention, but I just thought, ‘Oh, a loose dog.’” The carrier, who was a city carrier assistant (CCA) at the time, looked around to see if he could spot the dog’s owner or a nearby yard that it might have escaped from. Just as he was about to move on, however, he noticed something that concerned him even more. “About 10 to 12 feet behind the dog, there was a little girl, still in diapers and holding a sippy cup,” he said. “And I didn’t see any adults around in the vicinity.” The carrier, now determined to find out where the dog and the toddler lived, secured the mail in his vehicle and went up to a neighboring house. He asked the customer who lived there if

she knew where either the pit bull or the child lived. The woman didn’t recognize the little girl, but she did know the dog—his owners lived down the street. While the neighbor went to knock on their door, “I corralled the pit bull and the baby,” O’Byrne said. “I gauged the dog’s temperament” before approaching, he added, but the dog “seemed pretty calm.” O’Byrne watched them until the customer returned with the dog’s owner, who was also the little girl’s mother. Both animal and child were safely returned home. The CCA said that while his attention had first been caught by the dog—“I’m a sucker for animals”—once he saw the toddler, he knew he couldn’t leave. “I had to make sure that someone was responsible [for her],” he said.

Last spring, Rochester, NY Branch 210 member **Jeffrey Wilson** was delivering mail when something unusual caught his attention. “I happened to be walking between two houses,” he recalled, “and I could smell it, clear as day.” He thought that he recognized the odor—the rotten egg smell matched what he had been told about natural gas. A couple of days later, the eight-year carrier spotted the homeowner in her front yard and quickly went over to let her know about the smell. Concerned, the woman called her gas company. “[The company investigators] were out within



Jeffrey Wilson

minutes,” Wilson said. After finishing their investigation, the gas company told the customer some frightening news—she not only had one gas leak; she had two. “There were leaks out in the front yard and in the house,” the carrier said. The homeowner was extremely grateful to Wilson for his tip—in a happy coincidence, unbeknownst to Wilson, the customer turned out to be his aunt’s sister, who lived there with her daughter. “So, I saved a family member,” Wilson said. The carrier said that his timely intervention came about because he was “just being observant.” He added, “Not only are we the eyes and ears of the public, but now I can say we are the nose of the public!”

“I was walking on the street, delivering mail,” Buffalo-Western NY Branch 3 member **Mohammed Al Dawood** recalled about his route on Oct. 9, when he

saw an elderly man standing next to his car on the opposite side of the street. “He was calling someone to assist him,” the two-year carrier said, and the reason was clear. The carrier could see at a glance that the man’s car had a flat tire. “I crossed the street and asked him, ‘Do you need any help?’” Al Dawood said. The man said he did and showed the carrier his tire. He added that he had been waiting for half an hour for assistance. Using the spare tire from the man’s car, the carrier was able to replace the flat tire. The man was so grateful to Al Dawood for his timely assistance that “he offered me money,” the carrier said. “But I refused to take it.” The man then drove away, and Al Dawood returned to his route. However, that wasn’t the end of it—the man still wanted the carrier to be recognized for his actions and so he called the post office. He told Al Dawood’s supervisor about his kindness and passed along his thanks once again. Al Dawood reiterated that he didn’t think his actions deserved any special praise. “I always try to put myself in other people’s shoes,” he explained. “If I was in the same situation, and someone came along, I would want them to help me.” The carrier added, “Helping citizens is what USPS and the National Association of Letter Carriers are all about. We are always here for them—not just while delivering mail.” **PR**



Jordan O’Byrne