

# Convention vignettes



**Philip  
Dine**

**E**very major gathering combines official events (see page 18) with an informal side. Here are some personal takes from the Chicago convention.

**Dakota Oglesby, 7 years old, was** all business as she made her way here, there and everywhere. She is, after all, an old hand at this after three conventions, starting with Los Angeles at age 1. “I’m trying to teach her right,” explained her mother, Torisha, a 24-year Chicago Branch 11 member (as is Dakota’s dad, Denon). “Unions are about being for each other,” she added, “and Dakota gets to see that firsthand.”

**Oklahoma City Branch 458 President Ken Mayfield** told me about

Johnnie Bell, 90, still delivering after 66 years and whose Navy stint gives him 70 years of federal service. A 2014 USPS publication called him, even then, the nation’s senior-most letter carrier. “I admire the heck out of him,” Ken told me. “Every time I bring new letter carriers to the union hall, I brag on Johnnie. Everybody in Oklahoma City loves him. He’s proud of his career and he’s always got a smile on his face.”

**Sen. Dick Durbin’s speech offered a chance to reconnect** with someone I covered for many years. The most significant story involved the single deadliest attack on U.S. forces in Iraq, with 16 Illinois National Guard troops perishing in 2003 when their helicopter went down. Those articles, bolstered by Sen. Durbin’s knowledge of the matter, revealed how the Pentagon provided inferior equipment to reserve units, prompting the military to change its practices.

**Seattle Branch 79 provided a hospitality suite for delegates** to relax after busy days while taking in the vistas of Chicago and Lake Michigan. Pioneering female presidents Jo Ann Pyle and BJ Hansen, who led the branch for a combined 24 of 26 years until 2020, lent a sense of history, while seven-year letter carrier Scott Anderson, a self-described “geography nerd,” informed inquisitive visitors about the origins and functions of any building visible in the hotel’s 30th-floor panoramic view.

**President Rolando’s unique blend of traits—a self-effacing nature, one-of-a-kind sense of humor, razor-sharp ability to meet the moment, and the power this combination produces—was evident when he ad-libbed while announcing candidates for national office:** “Damn, couldn’t even get nominated,” followed by a heartfelt “Thank you. That was nice,” when delegates, aware of what had just transpired, rose in prolonged applause. Come to think of it, those characteristics pretty much define his tenure at NALC’s helm.

**Matty Rose’s depiction of his role in the 1970 postal strike** was priceless. Two days into the walkout, the Hollywood, FL, postmaster called Matty to his office and called him “a long-haired hippie Communist,” prompting this reply: “You’re right about two of those things. I have long hair and I’m a hippie. But I’m not a Communist. I just returned from Vietnam.”

**My admiration for the attentiveness of NALC convention delegates** was reinforced when I encountered Rep. Hakeem Jeffries backstage after the New Yorker’s rousing speech. If his remarks resonated, he said, it was because “The crowd was great.” That reminded me, I noted, of the sentiment expressed earlier by United Mine Workers of America President Cecil Roberts, who related how legendary predecessor John L. Lewis, when asked from where he derived his power, replied simply: “I derive my power from the membership.”

**Late Friday night, convention over, James Henry, newly elected as NALC’s vice president,** sat with a small group that included his best friend, Christopher Hill, a retired Marine master gunnery sergeant whose 30 years of service included Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo and the former Soviet republic of Georgia. He’d traveled from Tampa at his own expense to witness the nomination of James, himself a 26-year Marine vet and former gunnery sergeant. “I can’t tell you what it means to me that he’s here,” James said, “but it doesn’t surprise me.” As a non-letter carrier, did Christopher enjoy the convention? “I loved it,” he said. “The camaraderie you guys have, it’s like the Marine Corps.”

**Downpours in western Pennsylvania’s mountains and Ohio’s valleys** slowed traffic to a crawl, getting me to Chicago at 2:30 a.m. Saturday. Fortunately, the first person I saw in the hotel lobby was Branch 11 President Mack Julion, who had a ticket for the WNBA champion Chicago Sky’s game Sunday. I thanked my lucky rain the next day, when a thrilling contest ended with an unexpected courtside chat with the Sky’s owner, Michael Alter, about how the women’s teamwork and passing mirrored the early NBA. An equally grueling drive back to Washington was offset by his email thanking *me* for *my* time. I told him that if the Sky have a playoff game in the nation’s capital, at least one local resident will be rooting for the visitors.

**EDITORIAL STAFF:**  
Director of Communications and Media Relations Philip Dine  
Designer/Web Editor Mike Shea  
Writer/Editor Rick Hodges  
Writer/Editor Jenessa Wagner

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