

Flipping the script



Philip Dine

We know of letter carriers saving residents. This story reverses that, yet it too involves heroism, modesty and gratitude.

On a Saturday evening in October 2021, Thomas Barnes, retired 53-year-member of Aurora, IL Branch 219, was at a railroad crossing—and in peril. Thomas, who had health problems, had lost his way in the poorly lit area.

Lewis Medina, longtime road construction driver and Teamsters Local 673 member, had just left his nearby driveway to take his grandson home. The night was warm, his windows were down. “I heard a car’s wheels squealing,” he recalls, “and I see this car teetering on the tracks, tires spinning.”

He parked, called 911, told his daughter, Hannah, to wait in the car, and went to help the driver. Suddenly Lewis spotted a train barreling toward the stuck vehicle.

As crossing alarms sounded and gates descended, he got the unresponsive Thomas in a bear hug and pulled him from the car, saying, “We got no time.” The carrier fell between the railroad tracks, but the construction driver “slung him to the other side of the tracks,” then dragged him 17 feet to the hill’s bottom.

Six seconds later, the train hit the car, sending it 1,000 feet as parts flew everywhere.

“I was terrified trying to locate my dad,” Hannah says. “I heard the train horn, then the bell. I was holding my nephew, trying to calm him down. Then I heard the squealing of the brakes. After that I couldn’t hear anything. I was thinking, ‘please don’t let him be on the tracks still.’”

Emergency personnel arrived at Barnes Road (by coincidence—named after local farmers); a deputy sheriff told Lewis he’d get him “recognition” for his actions. Lewis demurred.

“I’m proud of him,” Hannah, 21, says. “He’s a hero. No matter if he believes that or not, he’s a hero.”

Lewis doesn’t believe it: “I had to get him out of the vehicle. I was just doing what I thought anybody would do.” (Sound familiar?)

Tom’s view: “He undid my seat belt and got me out of the vehicle. So I owe him my life. I’m a very lucky man to be rescued by Mr. Medina.”

A few days later, after reading his deputy’s report, the sheriff asked Lewis, “You don’t want any publicity on this, right?” Right, Lewis said. The sheriff countered, “There’s no way we cannot say something”—citing recent negative news and a need for something “positive.”

Lewis relented and the sheriff gave his number to a TV station.

Within an hour, his phone “went wild” with reporters’ calls at his construction job. The sheriff later honored Lewis as the 2021 Citizen of the Year, leaving Lewis “humbled by the whole thing.”

Let’s sketch the two men. Thomas Barnes, 73, carried mail for 49 years. Currently branch sergeant-at-arms, he also has served the branch in other roles.

As a youngster, “Rocky” played tuba in his high school band at the 1964 New York World’s Fair. (I told him that for all we know, we might have crossed paths at the fair.)

He then worked for Illinois Bell as an installer/repairman, until the IBEW went on a national strike. After being laid off from a factory job, “The next day the Post Office called me. Talk about lucky.”

Two weeks later, the 1970 Great Postal Strike began, and Tom found himself “on picket duty.”

Over the next five decades, Tom followed his father’s advice: “You’re in a good place, be all you can be.” Besides delivering mail, he was a vehicle operations maintenance assistant (VOMA) and crisis intervention officer—counseling carriers using skills developed from his night job with people experiencing mental health needs—while helping postal customers facing health crises.

And, he notes, “I still have the dog-bite record in our office. I got nailed 23 times.”

Lewis Medina, 61, has worked 23 years at a unionized road construction company. After years of “trying to make ends meet” he considers himself “blessed”—using the same term to describe the chance to rescue someone.

In yet another script flip, the resident got a national award for rescuing the letter carrier. On Dec. 13, Lewis received the Carnegie Medal from the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, founded in 1904 by steel magnate/philanthropist Andrew Carnegie—featuring an individually struck medallion specifying a hero’s name and action, Fund President Eric Zahren said. Recipients not only saved or attempted to save someone’s life; they risked their own.

Margaret Parker, a regional grievance assistant, carried mail in Aurora and was branch president. “Tom has always been a devoted union member,” she says, “and I’m very thankful that Mr. Medina was there to rescue him in his time of need.”

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