



HEROES OF THE YEAR

“**O**ur union, the National Association of Letter Carriers, represents nearly 295,000 active and retired city letter carriers that work at the United States Postal Service,” NALC President Brian L. Renfroe said as he welcomed a large audience to the NALC Heroes of the Year Awards luncheon held in Washington, DC, on March 20. “Our members—public servants—they devote their entire professional lives to service in serving the people of our country. And as we’re going to hear all about this afternoon, we do a whole lot more than just provide an essential service of delivering the mail. We become familiar with our communities, and we often serve as the eyes and ears of those communities.”

Renfroe emphasized that letter carriers do this because they are proud of the work they do and of the role they

play. “We take a lot of pride in our work of delivering the mail,” he said, “but we also take a lot of pride in being a part of our communities and the positive impacts that we can have.”

Because letter carriers are out in the community, the NALC president pointed out, carriers often are the first to notice when something is out of the ordinary on their routes. “Even the smallest little thing, we notice,” Renfroe said. “And that often puts us in a very unique position to help those that are in need. So, we are here today to honor a very, very special group of letter carriers that have been selected as NALC’s Heroes of the Year.”

Renfroe thanked the panel of independent judges who selected the 11 Heroes from numerous nominees, whose stories of heroism and community service were published over

the course of 2024 in this magazine, as has been done since 1974. This year's judges were Brea Ellis, union service representative at Union Plus; Devan Zeger, cinema marketing specialist at HighRock; and Chelsea Bland, communications specialist at the American Federation of Government Employees.

The annual ceremony highlighted the special acts of courage and compassion performed by NALC members to save or improve the lives along their routes. Attendees included the union's resident national officers, NALC Headquarters staff, U.S. Postal Service leaders, members of the Postal Regulatory Commission, representatives from the USPS Board of Governors, journalists, and many others from the labor and postal community, including leaders from the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association, the American Postal Workers Union, the National Postal Mail Handlers Union and the National Association of Postal Supervisors.

Renfroe invited then-Postmaster General Louis DeJoy to the stage, where he lauded letter carriers for their alertness on their routes and their care for their customers. "Our official motto is 'Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom or night will stop a carrier from delivering mail.' We all know that," DeJoy said. "But that's not necessarily true. You stop when you see something going on that shouldn't be going on. That could be mail backing up at a residence, the smell of gas or smoke, an accident when you're the first on a scene, like our National Hero of the Year."

He continued: "When these unexpected events happen, you take notice and spring into action and help people in distress. You do the right thing. That is what we honor here today: the heroic acts of these men and women who did the right thing without hesitation."

DeJoy noted that this is why letter carriers are trusted friends in every community, and he praised them as true public servants and heroes with

compassion, courage and a sense of duty: "Today these heroes are much bigger than themselves. They represent all of our carriers who each day humbly perform their duties and stop to bring both joy and assistance to individuals in their communities, and then simply go back on their routes and deliver their mail. In honoring you today, we honor all of them. Thank you for your dedication and congratulations to all of you."

Returning to the podium, President Renfroe then individually invited each Hero to the stage to sit with him and have a conversation about their incredible stories—stories that included letter carriers helping those in medical distress or in danger from vicious animals, runaway automobiles or fires.

He then presented each honoree with an award certificate; they also received a lapel pin. The stories of the Heroes are found in the following pages of this issue of *The Postal Record*.

"There really is one constant about everyone that we honor: They just think it's no big deal. And it's just part of what we do," Renfroe said in concluding the event. "And while it is true that it's part of what we do in serving our communities, there are still extraordinary acts that, the humility you all display, I think makes them even more admirable."

"If those of us in this room take one thing away, I hope it's that they realize that what letter carriers in the Postal Service do is way more than simply delivering the mail," he added. "Letter carriers serve our communities every single day in more ways than one. We deliver mail, but we look out for those that we serve, and for every heroic story—like we talked about here today—literally every single day, there's some relatively small deed that no one ever knows about that positively impacts the people that we've served."

Video of the Heroes of the Year event is available on NALC's YouTube channel at youtube.com/ThePostalRecord.



NALC President Brian L. Renfroe

HONORABLE ACT

DAVID MOULTON

MASSACHUSETTS NORTHEAST MERGED BRANCH 25



A 3-year-old boy whizzing past him in the opposite direction immediately caught the attention of Massachusetts Northeast Merged Branch 25 member **David Moulton** as he delivered his route in Salem on Dec. 9, 2023.

“He didn’t have any shoes on; he didn’t have a jacket on and a hat,” Moulton, a nine-year carrier, said. “He was basically wearing a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants, and I thought that was kind of odd, seeing that it was 30 degrees outside and I’m wearing four layers of clothes.”

The toddler then ran into a park. Concerned, Moulton stayed at the mailbox for a minute and kept looking around but didn’t see the boy, so he moved on to the next house and began delivering.

He then saw the boy running down the sidewalk out of the corner of his eye—this time heading toward a busy intersection.

Moulton knew that meant trouble. “This isn’t going to happen on my watch,” he said of his thought process. “I just dropped my bag, hopped down the stairs and made a beeline straight for him.”

He scooped up the boy right before he hit the street.

“You can imagine his reaction being grabbed by me,” Moulton said. “He’s scared. He doesn’t know me, he doesn’t know what’s going on. So, he was wailing.”

“It’s a good thing that I did make a run for him, because, I mean, he’s just a tiny little kid and there were cars coming,” the carrier

said. “They would have never seen him. He would have been struck.”

The carrier sat him down on the sidewalk a few feet back from the street.

“I felt bad that I scared him half to death because I’m a stranger to him,” Moulton said, but added that he was glad he had intervened, because the child’s skin was showing effects from having been out in the cold for so long. Moulton pulled off one of his sweat-shirts to give to the toddler, who at that point was “beet red.”

He called 911 and then his supervisor. Emergency personnel showed up a few minutes later and were eventually able to deduce that the child had wandered away from a nearby day care facility 90 minutes earlier.

Moulton’s story appeared on multiple local news outlets, and the child’s parents called Moulton to thank him for rescuing their son.

Judges also praised Moulton for his vigilance and quick thinking. “He recognized, like, ‘Wait a minute. I see this kid running around, but also this kid has no hat on. It’s too cold for this. I have to step in,’” they said of the carrier’s honorable act. “Most people are stuck on their phones now walking down the sidewalk, and they’re not going to notice this little kid in the middle of winter without much on about to get hit by a car, but he’s like, ‘Hold up.’”

The carrier insisted that he simply was in a position to help because he was in the right place at the right time. “I don’t think I’m a hero,” Moulton said upon accepting his award. “I just reacted to a situation that unfolded in front of my eyes, and I did something about it—and that’s the bottom line.”



HONORABLE ACT

SKYLER WILBURG

LONG ISLAND MERGED, NY BRANCH 6000

After finishing up deliveries to some local businesses on May 13, 2024, **Skyler Wilburg**, a city carrier assistant in Albertson, NY, returned to the post office to get more mail to finish his next route assignment.

When he got to the office parking lot, an older woman driving an SUV spotted him. “She kind of waved me down a little bit, so I stopped,” he said. “She had two letters that she wanted to give me, and she thought giving it to me will be better instead of taking a trip inside the post office. It will save her some time.”

The woman got out of her SUV, thinking she had put it in park—but she was mistaken. While in reverse, the vehicle began slowly rolling backward and the door hit her, knocking her to the ground.

“Somehow both of her legs end up under the vehicle,” the Long Island Merged Branch 6000 member said. “In a situation like this, there was no thinking—just reaction.”

Wilburg ran to drag the woman from underneath the vehicle. “I jumped into her car, slammed on the brake,” he said, adding that he put the car into park just as it nearly smashed into the gate of the parking lot.

After saving the woman, the carrier went inside the post office to let his supervisor and postmaster know what had happened.

“Not even 20 minutes after the situation occurred, the lady returned to the post office to find me on my route to thank me multiple times and say, ‘God bless you for saving my life,’” Wilburg said.

“And I wanted to ensure that she was OK,” the one-year carrier added. Wilburg repeatedly asked the woman if

she wanted him to call 911, but she declined, saying she was all right.

That customer was not the only one who commended him. While telling his story to his mom, she told him that “I was her ‘hero,’” he said.

In selecting Wilburg as one of NALC’s honorees, judges pointed out the carrier’s alertness. “This is such quick thinking,” they said. “You’ve got to keep your own wits about you and then be able to do all these other actions to make sure it doesn’t turn into something really horrendous. He not only saved her, but he also saved her car from running into the gate.”

But Wilburg doesn’t think his actions are any big deal. “I would believe anybody else would do it,” he said in accepting his award. “Like if it was my late grandmother, I would want somebody to do the same thing.”



THE VIGILANT AWARD

TAYA CRADLE

LAUREL, MD BRANCH 3755



Walking into a high-rise apartment building on her route on Feb. 28, 2024, Laurel, MD Branch 3755 member **Taya Cradle** looked to her left, where she noticed four people standing in front of an elevator observing an unconscious man lying in his own vomit.

“I’m scanning the whole room within, like, a matter of seconds,” the two-year carrier said. “So, I look to the left, I’m like, ‘Did you contact 911?’ And they’re looking at me. Didn’t say anything.”

With no response from the adult or three teenagers standing by, Cradle quickly dialed 911 and told the operator, “I am a mail carrier, and I see a man lying unconscious in his own throw up.”

The operator was instructing Cradle to check for a pulse and to count to see if he was breathing. “I’m thinking in my head like, ‘Oh, this is really happening,’ ” the carrier said. “So, I’m like, ‘OK, just listen and just breathe,’ because I get a little nervous. But that nervous[ness] went away. It was just like, ‘I’ve got to save this man’s life.’ That’s what’s in my head.”

She followed the operator’s instructions, but the pulse was very faint. She asked one of the patrons to help her roll the man over.

The 911 operator gave instructions on how to give chest compressions, telling her to count to four and keep giving CPR until the ambulance arrived. “This is just shocking, because I never did CPR,” Cradle said. “I don’t want to mess up. I’m just listening and still praying in my head.”

The carrier and operator continued to count together. The 911 operator told her, “ ‘You’re going to keep doing it until the ambulance comes.’ So, I’m like, ‘OK, I got it.’ ”

Once an ambulance arrived, the EMTs took over and continued to give the unconscious man CPR. The EMTs then placed the man on a breathing machine and loaded him into the ambulance.

Knowing that the man was in good hands, Cradle headed inside the mail room. At this point, “I broke down, because what if I wasn’t there? Then what would’ve happened?” Cradle asked. “I’m glad that I was there to help save someone’s life, because I would want the same treatment.”

For going above and beyond, the judges named Cradle one of NALC’s Vigilant Award Heroes. This story “stuck out because she stepped up when others didn’t,” they said, noting how labor-intensive providing CPR is. “The poor guy probably had his life saved because one person had the courage to have compassion and empathy for him when others were just going to stand there and watch.”

Cradle was glad to be in the right place at the right time. “To know that God placed all of us here for a reason,” she said of herself and her fellow Heroes, “I’m just grateful.”



THE VIGILANT AWARD

MICHAEL WAITE

NEW HAVEN, CT BRANCH 19

Diving on his route one day in late December 2023, Michael Waite had just dropped off a package in the townhouse complex he was delivering to with 80-some units that are split into six buildings.

“As I’m walking back to my truck, a guy comes staggering out of his apartment,” the five-year carrier and New Haven, CT Branch 19 member said. “And you could tell on his torso and his face, he was covered in what looked like black soot. I looked at his apartment door next, and black, thick smoke is billowing out.”

The carrier first checked on the man. “Are you OK? What happened?” Waite asked him. “He was kind of out of it. He didn’t really answer. At that point, I had recognized there was a fire.”

The carrier swiftly dialed 911 on his phone. “The flames had started bursting through the windows,” he said, adding that there were medical oxygen tanks inside for a resident who lived in there.

“I realized, you know, there’s 13 other units in this building, and the fire started to spread pretty fast,” Waite said. “And as you can imagine with the oxygen tanks, those started to explode, and it was blowing windows out and things like that. So, it was getting a lot worse very fast. I started to fear for my own safety, because it didn’t seem to me like just a normal fire.”

But Waite knew that as the only person around, he needed to act. “I sprinted from door to door, 14 different units banging on the door,” he said, urgently knocking to ensure that any residents in the vicinity were safely evacuated before the fire had a chance to engulf their homes.

“It was pretty crazy,” Waite said of this situation. The 14 units in the

townhome were heavily affected, and “they’ve been vacant since that day, but luckily no one was injured,” the carrier added.

Returning the next day, after the fire had been put out, “that’s when it really started to kick in,” Waite said of his actions. “You know, I’m in the complex again, and I have people coming up to me and saying, ‘Thank you.’”

He was told one story he’ll never forget. “A young woman drives up to me in her car and she asked me what my name was,” he said, adding that the woman’s mother was a clerk at a neighboring station. “In their particular apartment, she was asleep upstairs with her four kids in the bedroom. Her 10-year-old son had heard me banging on the door, but she didn’t. So, her son woke her up and got them all out. They left the apartment, and she told me that her room where they were sleeping ended up being destroyed by the fire. So that stuck with me, still sticks with me.”

The saved clerk, Monique Johnson, later wrote in praise: “This man is my hero forever.”

The judges took note. “Just seeing someone come out of their home, seeing that the situation is deteriorating quickly, and then having the where-withal to go to all the neighbors and make sure everyone knows what’s going on and getting out of their homes” was impressive, they said in naming Waite one of NALC’s Vigilant Award Heroes. “He didn’t stop till the job was done. Just the magnitude of it—what if he hadn’t paid attention?”

Waite seemed to take things in stride. “I was just grateful to be in the right place at the right time, and grateful nobody was hurt,” he said on receiving his award.



HUMANITARIAN

MATTHEW ROSS SR.

SYRACUSE, NY BRANCH 134



Matthew Ross Sr. always looks for ways he can help in his community. As a letter carrier, he sees more than most the needs of the people he serves. As an artist, he helps his community to see in new ways.

Contributing to the community has long been a commitment for the Syracuse, NY Branch 134 member. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, he helped raise funds for the local community center on his former route in Westcott for a new van to transport seniors.

In December 2023, when he delivered mail and noticed that some report cards from the local middle school were going to a hotel, he decided to find out more.

"Syracuse is No. 1 in the nation for child poverty. I don't like that," Ross said. Determined to help, he checked in with the school counselor to see what he could do. "I told them that if they needed me to help out somewhere in a specific spot, to let me know," he said.

"He told me, 'We got a problem here, Matthew,'" Ross said. "Some of these parents have called us. They need help and assistance. They're not going to have Christmas."

"I'm going to be Santa Claus for all these kids," the carrier told him. Though the counselor said that that might be a "tough task," he suggested some students who might benefit from holiday help and reached out to the parents, giving them Ross's phone number.

Ross said he felt for the kids, some of whom were constantly moving. "They're growing up in a place that's not so nice, and they don't really have any options, and they're just going

from house to house, always getting evicted," he said. "It was important for me to be able to help out these people."

The seven-year carrier soon fundraised every cent he could from the community to buy some local middle-school students Christmas gifts. He was proud that he was able to connect all the dots to be able to cover every kid in the school for the holiday who needed something.

"I was able to help out three different families," he said, providing items such as a Christmas tree, toys, video games, winter clothes, craft supplies "and most importantly—art."

Ross said that he's a recovering drug addict and alcoholic. "I use art as a therapy to get by in life," he said.

Ross picked up abstract acrylic painting in 2021 and created Mattropolis Art Gallery. He uses social media to show artwork in what he calls a "nice, safe little area of the internet." It wasn't long before Ross figured out a way he could use his pastime to help in the community as well.

When he visited the school, Ross met one youngster in particular who was having behavioral issues. "He was breaking pencils and being rather violent," the carrier said. "I was a mailman just trying to use the restroom, minding my own business. I saw him snapping the pencils and I stopped. I poked my head in there and I said, 'Hey, what are you doing?' And he looked at me like I'm crazy."

Ross pulled out his phone to show the 13-year-old boy some abstract art he had made. "He was in awe. And I told him that art is very important, that we don't snap the pencils—we use them to draw," he said. "So, I challenged this kid to draw me

something. A week went by. I'm in the school again. Get dragged into the counselor's office. And there he is, smiling ear to ear. He painted me two paintings."

Ross continued: "He started to pick up painting as, like, a way to not get angry anymore. And I got a couple of his little paintings here in my art gallery. I wouldn't sell those for a million dollars. They're the most important pieces that I own."

In addition to donating paintings to raise money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association, he had proposed to the local Young Women's Christian Association on one of his routes the idea of making a group painting on a 36-inch by 48-inch canvas sometime in December to be displayed in the YWCA building's foyer afterward.

"Unfortunately, one of our letter carriers died this past year, and I'm using all the paint that he had bought and left behind," Ross said. "I'm going to take all of these young girls and the coordinators and everyone there and we can make a painting."

Walking around the city every day, "I find it very depressing," Ross said. "I walk through a lot of trash and filth and garbage. I try and let people know that art's a way of escaping from what you're dealing with at a certain time and place, and that can alleviate some stresses in your life."

Ross uses his "imagination and dedication" to try to be a good role model for others, but he never expected recognition for any of his good deeds. He's been featured over the years on local TV and newspapers in the Syracuse area, sometimes getting honked at by parents on the street, indicating that they want their kids to be like him.

"It was very self-gratifying, because I had planned on doing this without being on TV," he said of his efforts, adding, "Because this happened, I know that these people look up to me and they know that I can, you know, do the right thing. You can do things to impact your community at a local level."

The publicity has helped his cause, though. At a basketball game, he even made a connection with a company that builds beds for kids, and that offered to help any child Ross knows who needs somewhere to sleep.

Delivering mail makes doing good that much easier, too. If any carriers want to make a difference on their route, it's easily doable, says Ross.

"Chances are, they already know with their gut intuition who actually needs the help. [They need] to just follow through on their own intuition and use their own creativity. It doesn't have to be elaborate," he added. "As letter carriers, we have access to a lot of involved people, places, things—and if you just put all that together, you can make good things happen."

The judges were impressed with Ross's efforts, naming him NALC's Humanitarian of the Year. "We picked Matthew because he hasn't just done one initiative. It seems like he is vigilant and looks out for people that he can help," they said. "He's spending some of his paycheck on things for these kids to make their life better and letting them know that people are there for them."

"As a mail carrier," he told those gathered at the Heroes of the Year event, "the most important thing that I could ever do is give back to my own community."



PARTNERSHIP AWARD

ANDREW FONTANETTA & TONY PAOLILLO

FLUSHING, NY BRANCH 294

Some branches measure the success of their community service by amount of dollars, food, clothing or toys. Flushing, NY Branch 294 measures its progress in pints of blood.

After two decades, the branch's blood donation efforts have reached a milestone—1,500 pints of blood donated. Since each donor gives about a pint, that represents 1,500 times a letter carrier or other donor sat down and gave their life-saving gifts over the years.

The tradition began in 2001, when then-Vice President **Brian Keelen**, who served in Vietnam as a combat medic, organized the branch's first blood drive as a service to the community. The branch made it an annual tradition, then began holding them twice a year. When **Tony Paolillo** became branch president in 2010, he appointed blood drive coordinator **Andrew Fontanetta**, and they have jointly organized the events ever since. Now they hold three every year—in winter, spring and summer.

The local Knights of Columbus Hall hosts each blood drive after a regular branch meeting. To remind branch members of the role their donations play in saving lives, the branch votes to dedicate each blood drive to a deceased branch member. The branch also holds a "hero's night" before the blood drive to recognize a heroic member who has come to the aid of someone while out on their route or who has gone out of their way to serve the community, Paolillo said.

To reach the milestone, the branch must first coordinate with the New York Blood Center, a not-for-profit blood bank that sends medical personnel to collect and store the blood.

The branch's main job is to bring people out to donate—the more people giving



blood, the more blood they can collect and the more lives that can be saved, of course.

"In theory, to donate, we get anywhere from 30 to 50 people" for each drive, Paolillo said. But sometimes would-be donors find that they are ineligible for medical reasons—anything from high blood pressure to low iron to having a recent tattoo could disqualify a donor, to protect either the health of the donor or the recipient.

Even if carriers know they can't donate blood, he added, they can still help. "We always encourage the members, even if you yourself can't donate blood," he said. "We tell them, 'Perhaps you could bring a family member, a neighbor, a friend who is eligible to donate.'"

The branch attracts donors by sending flyers to each of its 21 postal stations, while the New York Blood Center mails reminders to previous donors. "Once you donate, they email you, they text you," Fontanetta said, "and we find out people are coming back, and they're bringing friends. And it's really snowballing, getting bigger and bigger."

"It's just a great feeling knowing that you made a difference, knowing that one donation can save up to three lives," Paolillo said, because a donated pint might be used in more than one transfusion. "There's always an emergency blood shortage going around. It's something that I'm very proud of our branch [for] that we've been able to host this on a regular basis."

In selecting the duo for NALC's Partnership Award, the judges noted all of the coordination, logistics and organization it takes to put on these blood drives. "Even just managing all the volunteers and teams to coordinate one of those a year is so much work, let alone three," they said. "It addresses this huge need in the community, and gives people the outlet to go and donate. Just think of the countless lives that they've saved by putting on those blood drives. You can't even put a number to it. It's great work."

NALC President Brian L. Renfroe told the crowd that this "is in some ways a little different than other awards, because there's so many people that have been involved in this over the years," and he added, "On behalf of all of us here and all the members of our union, please convey to all the members of Branch 294 our appreciation and congratulations for receiving this award."

The branch leaders, who both served nearly 40 years in the Postal Service, agreed—and implored others to become donors.

"If 1 percent or more Americans donate blood, you'll see the blood shortages start to dry up, according to New York blood services," Fontanetta told those at the event.

Paolillo concurred. "It's a simple, straightforward process. But believe me, the impact you can make is immeasurable."

To learn more or help with the branch's campaign, please go to nalc294.com.

WESTERN REGION

GERALD LONEY

TOPEKA, KS BRANCH 10

“My customer Jordan’s running out to me,” Topeka, KS Branch 10 letter carrier **Gerald “Jerry” Loney** recalled of that fateful day, adding that the 33-year-old man was “flailing his arms and yelling and screaming.”

On March 29, 2024, Loney had just finished delivering mail to apartments on his route and was returning to his mail truck when Jordan, a customer he was familiar with, had approached, showing Loney his bloody wrists. He told Loney that he had just attempted suicide.

The carrier started care for the young man and called 911. The operator asked questions about the man and talked Loney through the process of finding something to use as a tourniquet and how to apply it to both wrists.

The customer was wearing a long-sleeved flannel shirt over his T-shirt. “I said, ‘Jordan, get that shirt off! I need it more than you do—I need it for you,’” Loney said. “I wrapped the sleeve around the wrist as tight as I could, took the other sleeve, and then put his arms in a cross.”

Loney, who was previously a preacher, kept talking to and praying over the man, all the while keeping the 911 operator informed. “She said, ‘Is he faint?’ and I said, ‘Well, I don’t know, because I’m pushing him back against the wall so he doesn’t pass out,’” Loney recalled. “She said, ‘Well, keep him talking, so we can get him taken care of.’”

Finally, Loney said, “I heard in the background the ambulance coming.” He kept comforting his customer and soon paramedics began to load Jordan on a stretcher.

Police officers also came to take a statement. “They said the street isn’t well traveled very often,” Loney said. “It’s a one-way street, and they said [if]

anybody else would have seen a young kid waving his arm bleeding profusely, they would have swerved around and took off.” They thanked the carrier and took down his information.

Loney suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder due to a personal incident that occurred five years ago. “I had to get calm” while helping the man, he said. “I have PTSD, so I had to overcome that and try to work through it.”

Partly because of Loney’s quick and selfless actions, the man survived. The carrier brushed off the effusive praise, saying that he was always taught to “follow the golden rule—do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

“The letter carrier is one of those people that is a trusted community member. So, whatever happened in this suicide attempt, that’s the person that they walked out of their house and sought out, and that really spoke to us,” the judges observed before naming Loney NALC’s Western Region Hero.

In addition, they said, because “Gerald was dealing with his own PTSD, seeing that triggered so many things. But because that person trusted him, he knew he had to be here for them. And especially then being smart enough to use the tourniquets so quickly. He was practical and really efficient in saving the man’s life, while also calling for help all by himself.”

Loney keeps in touch with Jordan, and took his customer out to lunch prior to coming to Washington, DC, for the Heroes of the Year ceremony. “I said, ‘Jordan, I’m not the winner of the Western division of the Heroes of the Year award,’” Loney recalled. “I’m the recipient—but Jordan, you’re the winner ... because you got a second chance at life.”



CENTRAL REGION

RUNGPHET BODNAR

MID-MICHIGAN BRANCH 256



“I noticed children at a bus stop running and screaming,” Mid-Michigan Branch 256 letter carrier **Runghphet Bodnar** says about an incident that occurred as she was delivering on her mounted route on April 11, 2024. “As I got closer, I saw a horrifying sight: a 9-year-old girl being dragged across a lawn by a pit bull.”

The 28-year carrier acted quickly, stopping her LLV. “I blocked all the kids with a mail truck across the street so he wouldn’t go after them, and I grabbed my spray. I was like, ‘I’ve got to help this little girl,’” she said. “A woman was desperately trying to save the injured girl, but the dog was relentless.”

“The pit bull had her by the leg, and he was yanking on her. They were playing tug-of-war,” Bodnar said. “So, I got as close as I could, because the last thing I want to do is spray the mom or a little girl. So, I got within a foot, sprayed him in the eyes, he let go of her.”

The situation was further complicated, because the woman was deaf. “We had to work together without verbal communication to try and save the girl as best we could,” Bodnar said. “I continued to spray the dog, being careful to avoid the girl’s wounds, while the woman tried to lift her.”

The girl started to run, but the dog snatched her leg again. “He shook the spray off like it was nothing,” the carrier said. “Everybody’s screaming. There’s chaos. I’m trying to concentrate on just the dog. I kept my eyes on him. Every time I sprayed him, he would run and go immediately right back around both of us and clamp on her arm, her legs, her side, whatever he could get.”

After several failed attempts to free the girl from the pit bull’s grasp, Bodnar was able to spray the dog long enough to force it to retreat into a back yard. She continued to chase the dog with the spray. “As he was running, I’m thinking, ‘Please don’t run out of spray,’” she said.

With the dog finally gone, the woman was able to pick up the girl and rush her to get medical attention.

When Bodnar came back from the yard, everybody was gone. She wondered what to do next.

“There was another busload of kids that were coming within minutes,” she said. “The high schoolers were going to get dropped off, and this dog is still back there. So, I called 911, and I told them, ‘You’re going to need to get a police officer out here to guard this house before these kids get off this bus.’”

Responding officers soon arrived and contacted animal control. Seeing the situation in good hands, Bodnar returned to her route and finished her deliveries.

A police officer called her the following day and said, “I just wanted to thank you,” adding, “It was the worst mauling I had seen. You probably saved her life, but at the minimum, you saved her arm.”

The girl underwent multiple surgeries for her injuries, and a month later, she was able to return to school. “She was doing really well,” Bodnar said. “She comes up to me and gives me hugs. Every time she sees the mail truck, she comes running.”

The judges, impressed with Bodnar’s training and efforts in jumping in to protect the girl, named her NALC’s Central Region Hero. “This stood out because somebody was already trying to help, and it wasn’t working, so this is one of those ‘If this person wasn’t there, this could’ve gone terribly wrong’” type of situations, they said.

“The dog, as they often are, was very persistent,” NALC President Brian L. Renfro told the carrier at the Heroes of the Year ceremony. “But you were more persistent.”

Bodnar was just glad that she had been there to help. “I feel like me and the other woman just did what anyone would have done in that situation,” she said.

EASTERN REGION

BRIAN MEYERS SR.

JOHNSTOWN, PA BRANCH 451

Delivering mail on his route on Aug. 10, 2024, **Brian Meyers Sr.**, a 15-year letter carrier, saw a man outside of a half-way house yelling for help.

As the Johnstown, PA Branch 451 carrier approached, he saw that there were two men wrestling, and one appeared to have stabbed the other in the stomach twice.

“The only thing I could think of doing is running up to the guy and taking him down to the ground, which I did,” Meyers said. “I just ran over, grabbed ahold of the guy’s arm ... and threw him on the ground.”

Meyers’s quick action prevented the assailant from stabbing the victim again.

“And while I was holding him on the ground, he’s kind of saying to me, ‘Mailman, let up on my arm.’ I said, ‘OK. But if you try to get up or something, I’m going to make it hurt more.’”

He subdued the man until the police, who had been called by someone who heard the commotion, arrived.

“I had the situation under control,” Meyers said.

“It’s incredibly courageous, and if you had not done that, who knows what would have happened,” NALC President Brian L. Renfroe told Meyers at the event.

Once officers arrived, Meyers answered their questions, and the victim was taken to the hospital. Police soon charged the suspect with felony aggravated assault.

Meyers talked to the man after he returned from the hospital and learned that he had two big gashes on his stomach. “He made a full recovery, but he almost got stabbed in the spleen,” the carrier said, adding that

had it been a centimeter over, he might have bled to death.

In bestowing the honor of NALC Eastern Region Hero of the Year on Meyers, the judges commended the carrier for inserting himself in the situation to help. “Brian stood out to us because of the risk factor that was so high,” they said. “He did a phenomenal job of intervening, and also capturing the person and saving the man’s life.”

Meyers sees the situation differently. “I don’t think I was a hero,” he said. “I did what I had to do. I stepped up. Never thought of it—because if you think of something, then you don’t do it right.”



NATIONAL HERO

TESFAYE DEYASSO

MINNEAPOLIS, MN BRANCH 9

Driving home from work in St. Louis Park, MN, on April 18, 2024, on I-94 East during the evening rush hour, **Tesfaye Deyasso** noticed a car driving off the roadway and into a highway barrier. As the vehicle smashed into a light pole, the front caught on fire.

“Everything happened within, like, a second,” the Minneapolis Branch 9 member said. “Everything happened so fast, so I don’t know what to do. I only watched those kinds of situations on YouTube, but I [had] never seen it in real life.”

The four-year letter carrier quickly parked on the side of the busy highway and ran up to the car. “It was so scary to pull over because everybody was driving, like, 60 miles an hour,” Deyasso said. “I’m glad I stopped first. And then after I stopped, everybody came to help.”

Another man had stopped and was running with him. By the time they reached the crashed car, the fire had intensified.

Seeing that the driver was unconscious and wasn’t responding, Deyasso attempted to open all of the doors, but they were locked. “I was punching the window because I couldn’t open the door,” he said.

Deyasso finally got the attention of the driver, who had just come to. The driver unlocked the door. The good Samaritans got the door partly open.

“We tried our best to open the door [farther], but it was like 6 inches from the barrier ... so we could not let him out,” Deyasso said.

With the erupting flames, it “was really, really hard to get that close,” he added, especially with the wind blowing. “And then we just kept going back, because we have to save this person.”

They also knew that time was of the essence, and even in calling 911, emergency personnel might not get there in time during rush hour.

The carrier told everyone to find something to smash the window. “We tried, we tried, we tried to break the window. There was no way,” Deyasso said. “And then ... explosions keep happening. And then I was thinking about it: ‘I’m going to die in here.’ ”

Finally, a highway assistance person arrived with a device that could be used to open the window. The group hoisted the driver out of the car and to safety unharmed.

The rest of the car, including where the driver had been sitting, burst into flames. “I think, like, maybe 20 seconds later the whole car just burned,” Deyasso said. “Everything happened so fast.”

Seeing that the driver was in good hands, Deyasso, who was feeling the effects of the spreading smoke, left the scene. For the next six hours, he struggled to breathe and wheezed due to smoke inhalation. As he was driving back, he recalled it being so bad that he called a doctor, who instructed him on how to slow his breathing.

The smoke had been intense enough that one of the good Samaritans had to go to the hospital with the driver due to smoke inhalation, the carrier said. The driver is doing fine now, having sustained only minor injuries.

Many local and national news affiliates aired footage from a dashcam that captured the incident, which went viral online. In it, Deyasso can clearly be seen at the forefront in the recognizable blue Postal Service uniform.

“A lot of people think that we only deliver mail and packages, but I would like to let them know we can also save



a life,” Deyasso said of letter carriers.

In selecting Deyasso as National Hero of the Year, judges noted how dire the situation was, and that the carrier risked his own safety during the rescue. “That car was going to blow literally at any second, and so he jumped in immediately to help, and so did others,” they said. “Nobody gave up in trying to get this person out of the car.”

Despite the accolades, the carrier maintains that he simply did what he thought was right. “I don’t think I was a hero,” he said in accepting his award. “I just [did] what I was supposed to do as a human being.” **PR**