

Tales from the postal beat



Philip Dine

The phone call, from northern Kentucky, was about an election notice to run in this magazine. The caller was intent on getting it right in every way—the timing, the content, the process.

He had, he noted, just recently assumed the position of branch secretary, adding, “I’m still getting the hang of this. I don’t want to mess things up.”

I put my other work aside, to get him the information he sought. After all, the enthusiastic approach, the eagerness to learn everything needed to accomplish the mission, suggested a newcomer.

Hardly.

As I would soon learn, 33 years into his uniformed federal career—starting with about nine years in the Army (including service in the Cold War’s waning days), followed by 24 years and counting on Kentucky mail routes—Allen Dotson remains as eager to get things right as he was on his first day in field artillery, fresh out of high school.

“In the military, if you give somebody bad information by trying to act like you know everything, that’s the worst thing you can do,” Allen said. “If you don’t know something, you try to get the information.”

Toward that end, during 22 years as a Northern Kentucky Branch 374 steward, “learning as I went,” he tapped the knowledge of others, including the man who’s been his president or vice president for his two dozen years carrying mail, Gary Smith.

“Gary has been my mentor from the start,” Allen says. “He taught me how to do things right. Where I am today, I owe to him.”

In turn, Allen tried as a steward to do the same. “I tell the new carriers all the time, it’s not about being fast. Remember, this is a marathon, not a race. Be consistent, be steady, and management will know what they got.”

He looked around a few months ago for another way to contribute, saw a vacuum in the secretary’s position, and was elected.

None of that surprises Gary: “He’ll do anything, sacrifice as much time as he can, to help the brothers and sisters on the workroom floor. You couldn’t pick a better person to write about.”

One more twist in this brief tale. You might assume I’m writing about Allen because the just-described traits set him apart. On the contrary, they do not—and that’s precisely the point.

Having reported on the labor movement for nearly a quarter-century, with the context that provided, I realized soon

after arriving at NALC that our ranks abound with the likes of Allen and Gary, and that the level of dedication, of selflessness, of mentoring throughout the union—of members giving their all however they serve fellow letter carriers—go a long way toward making NALC what it is.

Country music’s home, Nashville, has branched into cinematic art, with Branch 4 member Mike Charest’s movie “Miracle on Shelby Street” drawing rising media attention.

It’s about Mike’s late wife, Judy, known locally as the Christmas Eve miracle baby after the 3-month-old survived a 90-foot jump from Nashville’s Shelby Street Bridge in her depressed mother’s arms into a frigid river on Christmas Eve, 1956. Judy would become a fixture in Nashville’s country music scene, including as personal assistant to legendary singer Waylon Jennings.

Nashville’s Fox affiliate’s April 29 story called the movie “a love letter on the big screen” that is “appearing in film festivals across the world.” This followed a *Hollywood Times* cover article saying the movie shines a “spotlight on an unbelievable true story of survival and legacy.”

Mike had traded his mail route in Nashua, NH, for one in Nashville, TN, after meeting Judy. She later assisted him in his campaign for a stamp honoring Johnny Cash.

In the movie, actors Ciara Hanna and Aaron Mees play Judy and Mike, respectively, though Mike plays himself in his later years. He also co-wrote the script.

“Miracle on Shelby Street” is currently being considered by several major distributors, according to Michael Giancana of Bright Morning Star Films, which produced the movie. “I think they’re waiting until later in the year, because it’s really a Christmas movie,” he said. “That’s the time most people will watch a movie like that.”

Bright Morning owner Jack Hager plays Mike Charest’s father, who instilled in his son a love for country music and, especially, Johnny Cash. Twenty-two years ago, the father and son visited Nashville, where the father hired a local resident/Johnny Cash fan to guide them. That turned out to be Judy; a year later they were married.

“I’m just happy to be a part of this film,” Jack said, “to bring Mike’s wife, Judy, out into the light.”

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