

Proud TO SERVE

“It happened so fast, I didn’t have time to think. I just acted.”

—Branch 245 letter carrier **Matthew Polnow**, who pulled a handicapped woman from the wreckage of a fiery car crash

What is a hero? Someone who rescues a drowning child? Letter carriers do that. Someone who rushes to the aid of accident victims? Carriers do that, too. Someone who keeps watch over a neighborhood? Again, carriers do that. This month, we offer stories of NALC members who did all of that and more. These brief accounts document and honor their heroism. For them, it’s all just in a day’s work.

Former Boy Scout gets wet to rescue young girl

While delivering to boxes at an apartment complex on his route, 20-year postal veteran **Keith McVey** heard a cry for help. He turned toward a nearby lake and spotted a pre-teen girl about 25 yards out, desperately holding onto a ball as she struggled to stay afloat. “Please help me, I can’t swim!” she cried. The girl’s younger sister, standing at the shoreline, was screaming.

“I took my cell phone and wallet out of my pockets, whipped off my shoes and jumped in,” McVey told the *Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal*. When the carrier reached the child, the water was well over his head. The girl grabbed him, causing them both to go under, but the carrier managed to pull her to safety, and was greeted with applause from people who witnessed the scene from their apartment balconies.

McVey had learned life-saving skills as a Boy Scout, but told the *Beacon Journal* it had been 30 years since he had used them. The soaked Akron Branch 148 member returned to his route after the

rescue, then went back to the office without broadcasting his adventure. “If someone hadn’t called to tell us, we wouldn’t have known anything about it,” said Memory Valentine, supervisor of customer service for the Kenmore post office. “He saved this little girl’s life. That’s not the least out of his character.”

Carrier saves wheelchair-bound woman from fiery crash

As he was delivering his route, carrier **Matthew Polnow** witnessed a crushing three-vehicle accident. In a matter of seconds, he ran to the first car, checking to make sure that the occupants were not injured, then went on to the second vehicle, a truck, where fortunately no one needed assistance. The fast-moving NALC member continued to the third vehicle, a van used to transport handicapped and wheelchair-bound individuals, which was beginning to burn. The driver’s airbag had deployed, and the driver alerted Polnow to a handicapped passenger still inside the smoke-filled van.

With smoke continuing to circulate and flames erupting from the engine, the carrier went to work. He managed to free the side door that had been jammed by a ramp. Maneuvering the ramp into place, he unhooked the restraining belts and dragged the wheelchair—and the now terrified woman passenger—from the vehicle. Once free from the smoke, the Rockford, Illinois Branch 245 member located the controls on the chair and engaged them to move the woman to safety. “It happened so fast, I didn’t have time to think,” Polnow said. “I just acted. I feel any other carrier would have done the same.”



JOHN BARSOTTI MAKES A HABIT OF checking up on a 95-year-old patron on his route. When she failed to answer her door one day, despite his ringing the bell and repeated knocking, the carrier became worried. The customer had told him where she hides her emergency key, and since Barsotti knew the woman only rarely left her home, he used the key to gain entry. Once inside, he found the patron lying helpless on her back and immediately went to render aid. The Staten Island, New York Branch 99 member called the woman's family and waited with her until they arrived.

WHEN CARRIER DAVID BOURBONNAIS arrived at the house of a 76-year-old customer to deliver the day's mail, he discovered she had taken a tumble near the door. As the resident later told the local newspaper, "I pushed the (Lifeline alert) button I wear around my neck to get help, but help came from another direction." The woman was visibly shaken by the fall, so the Shawnee, Oklahoma Branch 883 member tried to calm her down. Bourbonnais moved her from the doorway and made sure she was comfortable before calling 911 to ensure the Lifeline call had gotten through. The 33-year postal veteran stayed with his patron until help arrived. "It's nothing that letter carriers across the United States don't do every day," he told the *Shawnee News-Star*. "It was just my turn to do something." The resident expressed her gratitude with a letter to the Shawnee post office. "Mr. David Bourbonnais is not just my mailman," she wrote, "now he's my hero and my friend."



Dayton, Ohio Branch 182 member **Daniel Wolff** poses for a photo as the woman he helped thanks him for his actions.

DANIEL WOLFF KNEW SOMETHING WASN'T quite right when he saw that one of his elderly customers hadn't collected her daily newspaper as she always did. Knowing she lived alone, the carrier began to investigate. When there was no answer to his knocks on the front door, he started to peer through windows and

noticed the TV was on. Unable to gain access, he went to a neighbor for assistance and they contacted the police. A short while later, Wolff gained entry into the residence through a window that police pried open. The patron had fallen and was incapacitated on the floor. The Dayton, Ohio Branch 182 member immediately called 911, and emergency personnel soon rushed the customer to the hospital. Paramedics at the scene said without Wolff's intervention, the woman would not have survived another 24 hours.

WHEN JIM SMART NOTICED AN ELDERLY woman on his route had not picked up her mail, he was worried. He went to a neighbor to ask whether the patron was home, and when they returned together, they heard weak calls for help coming from the garage. Inside, they discovered the woman lying under her vehicle, severely dehydrated. Medics praised the Milwaukee, Wisconsin Branch 2 member and the neighbor, telling them the elderly woman would have soon expired had they not found her.

CALLED IN ON HIS DAY OFF, BOISE, Idaho Branch 331 member **Jerry Harmon** helped deliver mail on another carrier's route. At one home, he found the screen door locked and he wasn't able to reach the mail slot. Once he realized that he had a couple days' worth of mail to deliver, Harmon rattled the screen door and knocked to see if anyone would answer. He heard a faint cry for help in reply. The carrier tried the surrounding neighbors to get access to a phone, but no one was home. He was finally able to flag down fellow carrier **Paul Jahner**, who had a cell phone and was able to call 911. While Harmon waited for the emergency response team to arrive, Jahner continued to deliver on the route. When authorities arrived, they found the 92-year-old resident on the floor after suffering a stroke and discovered she had been incapacitated for four days. The woman's son called to thank the carrier for coming to his mother's rescue.

DELIVERING ON HIS REGULAR ROUTE, **Rod Schoenbacher** noticed a woman lying incapacitated in the roadway. He rushed to her aid and called 911 before calmly talking to her as they waited for paramedics to arrive. When the ambulance arrived, Schoenbacher helped the emergency personnel carry the woman's stretcher before finishing his route and returning to the office without

telling anyone about what happened. Fire department officials called the Kerrville, Texas Branch 3028 member's office to commend him for his selfless actions.

DONNA HAMLETT NOTICED THAT AN elderly customer's mail from the previous day had not been retrieved and she grew concerned. The woman lived alone, and Hamlett knew it was unusual for mail to stay in the box overnight. The carrier rang the doorbell and, receiving no response, went to a neighbor who had a key to alert them to the situation. The neighbor entered the house to find the woman lying on her bathroom floor, immobilized with a broken leg, and immediately called emergency personnel. The patron's son, who estimated that his mother had spent 30 hours on her bathroom floor, wrote to the post office to commend St. Louis, Missouri Branch 343 member Hamlett's actions.

WHILE DELIVERING MAIL TO AN OFFICE building, **Danny Mendoza** noticed an elderly woman having difficulty walking. The carrier assisted her several times, offering her water and asking how he could further help. The woman refused any more assistance and continued her walk, presumably to her home. Mendoza, a Greenwood, Indiana Branch 2421 member, hurried into the building to ask if anyone recognized the woman or knew where she lived. Two employees went outside to see if they knew her, found her looking ill, and an ambulance was called to take the woman to the hospital. The mayor of Greenwood wrote to Mendoza, commending his compassionate aid to a stranger and expressing appreciation for his efforts.

MAIL AND NEWSPAPERS BEGAN TO accumulate at a residence on Ottawa, Illinois Branch 316 member **Kevin Trovero's** route. Alarmed, he contacted a neighbor to call the police department, and the two of them returned to the residence. Receiving no response, they finally broke in and discovered the 93-year-old customer had died. Her family extended gratitude to Trovero for his concern about for the woman's well-being.

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

ARLENE ESTRELLA IMMEDIATELY KNEW something was awry when she saw her customer's mailbox stuffed with mail. The customer, who Estrella had known for two years, was elderly and retired and always picked up her mail regularly, sometimes meeting her at the mailbox. "It was just weird, kind of a gut feeling," the carrier said. Estrella went to the front door and looked through the glass inset, alarmed to see drawers pulled out and papers scattered everywhere. Jiggling the doorknob, Estrella opened the door and began calling "Dr. Mulligan?" and heard a faint voice in response. She ran to the voice, finding Mulligan on the living room floor, flat on her back. She explained she had been robbed and had been lying there for two or three days. Estrella, a San Diego, California Branch 70 member, called 911 and waited with her patron until paramedics could arrive. After being released from the hospital, Mulligan told the carrier that she was the one who saved her life.

CARRIER JIM SAUM GREW CONCERNED WHEN HE smelled the odor of natural gas while delivering his route. So, the St. Paul, Minnesota Branch 28 member called 911. A team was dispatched to look into the matter and discovered a gas leak, which was repaired. Saum was credited with possibly saving the lives of people in the neighborhood.

WHILE DELIVERING MAIL ON A RAINY DAY, **CARA GRITSCH** was approached by a man coming out of his house, who stated he had just been robbed. Gritsch called 911, relaying the description of the suspect to the police. While waiting for authorities to arrive, the carrier drove around the neighborhood looking for the suspect's vehicle and spotted him running into a nearby yard. The Lodi Police Department credits the Sacramento, California Branch 133 member's actions for helping recover the victim's laptop computer without damage. The suspect was arrested a few weeks later and was believed to be responsible for a string of residential burglaries. Gritsch was able to identify the thief in a police photo lineup.

SMELLING GAS WHILE MAKING A DELIVERY, carrier **Michael Endress** notified his customer right away. The patron called the gas company, whose employees came to inspect the situation, discovered a leak and replaced the fittings and meter on the home. The customer thanked the New Castle, Pennsylvania Branch 22 member for looking out for her. ☒

Eye
on the
ELDERLY



WHEN HE NOTICED AN ELDERLY couple on his route had not collected their mail recently, **Donald Squyres** decided to notify local authorities. When police entered the house, they found a woman who was bedridden and unable to call for help to report that her husband had passed away. The Woodbridge, Virginia Branch 5921 member was credited with possibly saving the woman's life.

WILKES-BARRE, PENNSYLVANIA Branch 115 member **Michael Yashowitz** grew concerned when he saw mail and newspapers piling up in an elderly patron's mailbox, so he enlisted a neighbor to check on her. The customer was found on her bathroom floor, too weak to move because of pneumonia. She was admitted to the hospital for treatment.

CARRIER ROSE MARTINEZ, WHO was accustomed to a certain customer's coming to greet her as she made her delivery, was worried when she noticed the elderly patron hadn't picked up the previous day's mail. Getting no answer when she rang the doorbell, Martinez peeked through the window and noticed the back door was ajar, which was unusual since it was a cold day. The Turlock, California Branch 1752 member went toward the back of the home and started calling out the patron's name. Martinez soon heard a moan, and found the customer on the floor, cold and dehydrated. She told the woman she would

get help and ran to the police station across the street. A responding fire fighter said the woman, who was taken to the hospital, had fallen and hadn't been able to get up for two days.

WHILE DELIVERING HIS ROUTE, **Clemente Rodriguez Jr.** saw an elderly patron fall while retrieving her mail. She was unable to get up on her own, so he picked her up and helped her back to her house. The Colorado Springs, Colorado Branch 913 member was commended for looking out for his customer's welfare.

CARRIER HENRY GUTIERREZ HAD seen an elderly customer, Chester Bienkowski, at his pickup truck. A short while later, Gutierrez heard a cry for help but did not see Bienkowski, so he began to investigate. Moving around to the other side of the truck, the carrier discovered the man pinned under the driver's side front tire of his full-size pickup truck. With the tire rolled up onto the upper part of the 84-year-old man's body, the Napa, California Branch 627 member carefully got into the vehicle and drove it forward far enough to free Bienkowski. A bystander had called 911, and the carrier stayed with his customer until EMTs arrived. "It gives you a good feeling to be able to help someone like that," Gutierrez said. "I was in the right place at the right time and did what needed to be done." ☒

Sour smell points to thieves

Walking past a house on his regular route, carrier **Joseph Desiderio** smelled gas coming from adjoining houses. Concerned, he ran to the police department to notify them of the danger—and also to let them know both homes were vacant.

It turns out that industrious but foolhardy copper thieves had cut the gas lines in the basement of the houses, causing them to fill with explosive fumes.

After notifying authorities, the Lansdowne, Pennsylvania Branch 1929 member continued on his route.

Fire Chief Bill Redheffer praised the 15-year carrier's efforts and said he believes Desiderio saved both houses from major

damage. "It's so easy to turn your back and take no action," Redhffer told the *Delaware County Sunday Times*. "It's just a matter of honor and duty. I think it's great. He went over and beyond."

At auto accident scene, two carriers better than one

Traveling to work one day, carriers **Asa Graves** and **Randy Yates** came upon an accident that had set an SUV on fire. Yates signaled his co-worker to call for help while he rushed to the vehicle. He pulled the driver out through the window of the jammed door. The woman's family expressed their gratitude to the Belpre, Ohio Branch 4343 members for their heroic actions. ☒



Jose-Luis Rojas of Palatine, Illinois Branch 4268

Jose-Luis Rojas was delivering mail on a park-and-loop route in Palatine, Illinois, when he caught the sharp odor of smoke as he approached his next delivery. Looking up, he saw thick smoke escaping from a house's chimney and became increasingly

concerned. Putting his hand on the front door, he felt intense heat and began knocking on the door. Hearing no answer, the TE carrier ran to a neighbor's house to ask them to call 911. Rojas returned to the house to make sure no residents were inside and waited until the fire department arrived. No one was at home, but two cats were saved before the house was destroyed by the blaze. "Branch 4268 is proud to have Jose-Luis as a member," Palatine Branch Scribe Mario Flores wrote.

Lyn den, Washington Branch 4132 member **Patrick Jones** knows downtown like the back of his hand, so when a business owner asked him if

the third floor of the building across the street "always looks like that," the carrier immediately knew something was wrong. Seeing thick, black smoke beginning to seep from an upper row of windows, Jones went into action. He sprinted across the street and went from business to business to warn tenants they needed to evacuate right away. Within a few minutes, flames exploded from the upper windows and the entire building filled with smoke. The carrier stayed with the building occupants until fire crews arrived to attack what became a three-alarm fire. After fulfilling his duty as a neighborhood fire watchman, the carrier continued on with his route. In the end, the building, one of the largest in Lynden, was completely destroyed, but Jones was credited with helping to stop the fire from becoming a much greater tragedy.

Arriving at a relay point, Tidewater Virginia Branch 247 member **Lisa White** noticed a strong smoke smell, but couldn't determine where it originated. As she was making deliveries, she heard a smoke detector alarm and spotted smoke pouring out of a nearby residence. She banged on the door until an elderly handicapped resident answered. Informing him of the situation, she asked whether anyone was

FIRE & RESCUE

inside, found out the man was alone, and urged him to come outside. She then entered the smoky house and found burning food on the stove. She removed the food, turned off the stove and opened the front and back doors to ventilate the house. The carrier called the fire department and then waited outside with her patron, calming him until emergency personnel arrived and family members could be contacted. White, who had only been on the job two months at the time, resumed her route once she was positive the situation was under control.

Delivering mail on his route, carrier **Chris Casey** noticed a large amount of smoke coming from the vent of a house. He went to a neighbor's house to call the fire department, which arrived as the home filled with smoke due to a furnace malfunction. Fire officials credited the Boston, Massachusetts Branch 34 member with preventing a major house fire, as well as saving the family's cat. ☒

HELP on the Way

Filling in on another carrier's route, **Tricia Park** was alarmed to see a large group of people surrounding a man lying on the sidewalk. When she saw he was blue, she immediately ran over to him. Finding no pulse, the carrier began performing CPR as she had been trained to do—although she had never performed it on a person before. After choking a bit, the man started breathing just before police and an ambulance crew arrived. Postmaster Matt Johnson called Park an “unsung hero” for her actions. “It’s kind of cool to save a life,” the Worcester, Massachusetts Branch 12 member told the *Sentinel and Enterprise*. “It doesn’t happen every day.”

Carrier **Lois Pennington** was eating lunch at a local restaurant when she noticed a woman seated at a table near her, choking. The woman’s companion firmly patted the woman on the back, to no avail, then raced to the front of the restaurant urgently calling out, “Does anyone know the Heimlich maneuver?” Pennington immediately stepped in and, after a few attempts, successfully dislodged the food blocking the woman’s airway. Once she knew the woman was all right, the Houston, Texas Branch 283 member left to continue her route.

Delivering mail along his route, **Bob Kozinski** came across a patron whose daughter had fallen on the sidewalk and was bleeding from a head injury. Kozinski, an Arizona Merged Branch 1902 member, immediately called 911. The patron’s daughter was transported to the hospital to be evaluated. Later, the customer called Kozinski’s office to compliment the carrier on his decisive response to the situation.

Moberly, Missouri Branch 335 member **Marla Rasmussen** was delivering mail when she found a man lying unconscious in a yard. After unsuccessful attempts to rouse him, she called for help. Authorities arrived to find the man in desperate need of medical attention because of low blood sugar and hypothermia and whisked him off to the hospital. Doctors credited Rasmussen with helping to save the man’s life.

Seeing that mail and newspapers had not been picked up at a home on her route, **Glenda Hillyer** became worried and called the police department. When officers arrived at the residence, they got no response to their knocks. Fearing the worst,

they broke into the house and discovered the patron wedged between her bed and dresser. She had been there for three days and was badly dehydrated. Responding paramedics were able to revive her. The Ottawa, Illinois Branch 316 member was commended for looking after the welfare of her customers.

As carrier **Marcus Ross** arrived at a home to deliver the mail, he heard screams inside. He knocked on the door, which was answered by a 4-year-old child. Peering inside, Ross could see the grandmother at the backyard swimming pool, pulling her unresponsive 8-month-old grandchild out of the water. The Ontario, California Branch 1439 member called 911 and administered CPR on the child until paramedics and police arrived. The responding medical team said Ross had saved the child’s life and he later received a citizenship award from the city of Ontario.

Accumulating mail at one home caught carrier **Terry Hogan’s** attention as he was delivering his route. He notified authorities, who went to check on the patron. They discovered that the elderly man had been lying in his house for days and was in need of medical attention. Since the man had no close relatives nearby or anyone who checked on him regularly, authorities said the Decatur, Indiana Branch 1060 member probably saved his customer’s life.

Every day, **Laurie Wilgenkamp** checks on one of her customers who has a rare degenerative muscle disease. When he didn’t appear at the door one day as usual, the carrier worried. The Long Island Merged, New York Branch 6000 member finished delivering to the rest of the building, then returned to check again. After calling out and ringing the doorbell without getting a response, Wilgenkamp went across the courtyard to a neighbor who had a key. When they returned, they discovered the customer had been on a handicap toilet seat when its leg broke, sending him sprawling onto his back in the tub, unable to move. The carrier called 911 and waited with her patron. On an earlier occasion when the customer had fallen, Wilgenkamp urged him to get a medical alert necklace. He obtained one soon after, but, in this instance, had removed it because he planned to take a bath. When the carrier checked in with him the next day, he thanked her for her help.

When **Darlene Leonard** saw one of her customers fall while walking her dog, she jumped into action. The Mifflintown, Pennsylvania Branch 6338 member carried the woman back to her home and sought help for her patron.

Carrier **Candy Aeschbacher** was alarmed when she observed a man trying to jump inside a car that was rolling away. He came up short, slipping and falling under the car, and got his leg caught under the front wheel. Aeschbacher ran to the car, jumped in to put it in neutral and, along with another bystander, was able to push the car off the man’s leg. The Uniontown, Pennsylvania Branch 520 member was credited with helping to minimize the injuries suffered by her customer.

Hearing someone cry out while he delivered the mail, **William Scott** went to investigate. The South Jersey Branch 908 member found the customer on the floor of his home after falling. Scott tried to assist, but soon realized he needed to call 911 for help. He waited with the man until an emergency team arrived.

When **Christopher Woltman** noticed that a patron’s mail hadn’t been collected, he grew concerned. Even though he knew the woman’s health was not great, she still emptied her mailbox daily. He contacted a neighbor who had a key to the customer’s apartment. When they entered, they found the resident on her kitchen floor after suffering a stroke. The Colorado Springs, Colorado Branch 204 member called authorities to get medical attention for the woman.

Finding a customer unconscious, West Coast Florida Branch 1477 member **Shelley Brown** went into action. After calling 911, Brown stayed with the patron until paramedics arrived. The customer was revived and the carrier was credited with saving a life.

Hutchinson, Kansas Branch 485 member **Randy Dalke** was making a delivery when he heard someone yelling for help. He investigated where the cries were coming from and found a customer who had fallen behind her house and suffered a serious head injury. Dalke called 911 and stayed to comfort the woman until emergency services arrived. ✉