



OF THE  
**YEAR**  
**AWARDS**

National Association of Letter Carriers  
Washington, DC

Thursday, May 11, 2023

# Honoring

## **Special Carrier Alert Award:**

2020: Matthew King of Champaign, IL Branch 671

2021: Michelle DeCosta of New York, NY Branch 36

2022: Christopher Lippy of Harrisburg, PA Branch 500

## **Unit Citation Award:**

2020: Eric Beu and Mark Simone of Oklahoma City, OK Branch 458

2021: Kevin Bystrak and Jody Kotowski of Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3

2022: Eric Beu, Casey Ritchie, Meagan Sperling and Jeremiah Grant of Oklahoma City, OK Branch 458

## **Humanitarian of the Year:**

2020: Jerry Giesting of Cincinnati, OH Branch 43

2021: Kyle West of Cincinnati, OH Branch 43

2022: Anthony Picariello of Philadelphia, PA Branch 157

## **Western Region Hero:**

2020: Chyanne Fauntleroy of Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100

2021: Ray Hacker of North Bend, OR Branch 2342

2022: Darin Chew of Sun City, AZ Branch 6156

## **Central Region Hero:**

2020: Gerald Soileau of Lafayette, LA Branch 1760

2021: Dixie Manns of Michigan City, IN Branch 455

2022: Sherri Baker of Little Rock, AR Branch 35

## **Eastern Region Hero:**

2020: Sydney Rodgers of Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3

2021: Erin Pennington of Pittsburgh, PA Branch 84

2022: Eric Smith of Charleston, WV Branch 531

## **National Hero of the Year:**

2020: Pedro Mendoza of Grand Junction, CO Branch 913

2021: Ramique Hill of Rochester, NY Branch 210

2022: Christine Cambizaca of Connecticut Merged Branch 20

Due to the impact of the pandemic as well as the passage of time, several of the 2020 and 2021 Heroes are unable to attend the awards ceremony or no longer are postal employees or NALC members. In those circumstances, the categories will be represented at the ceremony by other letter carriers who performed heroic actions.

# Program

## **Opening Remarks**

Prayer

Welcome

Importance of Heroes of the Year Awards

## **Presentations**

Special Carrier Alert Award

Unit Citation Award

National Humanitarian of the Year

Regional Heroes

National Hero of the Year

## **Closing Remarks**

## **This year's judges**

### **Christopher Godfrey**

Director of the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs  
U.S. Department of Labor

### **Erkeisha Terry**

Director of Labor Engagement  
United Way Worldwide

### **Warren Broughton**

Lieutenant/Assistant Fire Marshal  
Prince William County, VA

**O**n a daily basis, letter carriers assist people who need help, and each year NALC highlights the special acts of courage and compassion performed by letter carriers who improve—or save—lives along their routes by choosing some of them as NALC's Heroes of the Year.

The 2020 Heroes of the Year honorees were selected from more than 100 nominees, whose stories of heroism and community service were published over the course of a year in *The Postal Record*, as has been done since 1974.

A panel of independent judges reviewed the stories about heroic and humanitarian acts published in The Postal Record between June 2019 and June 2020 and gathered in a virtual meeting to determine the winners.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the traditional in-person event was not held in 2020 to recognize the 2020 Heroes of the Year. Now that it is safe to hold the in-person event, those heroes will receive special recognition at the 2023 Heroes of the Year event.

2020



# OF THE YEAR AWARDS



# Chyanne Fauntleroy

Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100

**C**hyanne Fauntleroy was on her route on April 19, 2019, when she saw police and volunteers passing out a bulletin for a 15-year-old girl named Abbey, who had been missing for 21 hours. Abbey has autism and functions at the level of a 12-year-old.

The Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100 member asked for a flyer so that she could keep an eye out for Abbey while delivering mail. Fauntleroy then continued driving her route. While driving, she spotted “a girl matching the description with no shoes on” walking down the street, she said. It was about two blocks away from where the girl had last been seen.

The city carrier assistant immediately pulled over next to the girl and

began talking to her to put her at ease. “I used to work with kids with disabilities,” Fauntleroy said. “As she’s talking to me, I’m calling police.”

To build their connection, Fauntleroy told Abbey that she herself was missing and needed help. Abbey said she would help her and told her not to worry or cry.

The carrier kept police on the phone as she asked Abbey random questions to keep her talking. She said that police told her, “You’re doing great; ask her these questions.”

The carrier noticed that Abbey had a drawing in her hand and asked the girl to make a drawing for her, which she did, as Fauntleroy kept her talking and kept asking the questions police



suggested, such as when she had last eaten. When Fauntleroy thought she was losing the girl’s attention, she threw in questions like, “What’s your favorite color?”

“I just kept switching the story up,” she said.

Fauntleroy kept the girl distracted until undercover police arrived.

Medics determined that Abbey was dehydrated but otherwise was all right, and soon reunited her with her family. More than 80 volunteers with the sheriff’s department had been out looking for the girl.

Then, a few weeks later, in early May, Fauntleroy was on her route when she came across a 3-year-old girl who was by herself.

“Where’s Mama?” she asked the crying girl when she ran up to her. She appeared not to speak English, so the carrier called 911 and waited with her for about 10 minutes. Before police arrived, the child’s mother came, and Fauntleroy was able to reunite them.

In selecting Fauntleroy as the 2020 Western Region Hero of the Year, the judges noted that the girls’ lives “were in pretty serious danger,” adding that it was important that the carrier “knew how to keep [both girls] safe and engaged during that time.”

The second-year letter carrier received praise in local and national media for watching out for her patrons. “I don’t think I’m a hero,” Fauntleroy said. “I was just doing the right thing that anyone else would do.” **PR**





# Gerald Soileau

Lafayette, LA Branch 1760

**“I thought it was thunder, it was so loud,” Gerald Soileau** recalled about hearing what sounded like an explosion outside the post office on Saturday, Dec. 28, 2019. He and fellow Lafayette, LA Branch 1760 members were busy casing their routes that morning when the sound echoed through the post office.

He was one of the first carriers to exit the building to see what was going on—and when he opened the door,

he saw a scene from a nightmare. “Everything was on fire,” Soileau said. A mid-sized plane had crashed into their parking lot, hitting several vehicles and setting most of the area ablaze.

Soileau reacted quickly; realizing that the main gate was blocked by the fire, he rushed around to the other gate, which was padlocked shut due to construction. As Soileau described it: “God allowed me to hit the gate, and the chains fell off.” The carrier then was able to sprint through to the parking lot. “The fuselage [of the plane] was scattered everywhere, and the whole area was covered in black smoke,” he said. “I felt like I was running in slow motion.”

After the plane crash-landed and broke into pieces, a large part of it had landed in a field next to the post office. “It left a trail of smoke and fire,” Soileau said. The carrier ran over to that part of the plane and helped rescue the only surviving passenger, who had severe

burns all over his body. The other five passengers on the plane had been killed in the crash.

Once Soileau had pulled the injured man to safety, he ran over to another victim of the crash: a carrier’s spouse, Danielle Britt, who had driven to the office to surprise the carriers with donuts. The plane had collided with her car, ejecting her from the vehicle.

Soileau and a holiday clerk carried Britt away from the area, which was still in flames. She was badly burned and had to undergo numerous surgeries after her hospitalization. Soileau also was taken to the hospital, where he was treated for smoke inhalation and stress.

The 22-year carrier described the experience as surreal. “It seemed like I was having an out-of-body experience,” he explained. “I wasn’t scared that I was going to die—I just knew when I heard them crying for help that I had to help.”

The Heroes of the Year judges were impressed by Soileau’s actions, commenting that they “had never heard anything like it before.” Soileau had “probably saved lives,” they added.

Having spent 10 years in the Air Force, Soileau thinks his military training helped him keep calm in the extraordinary situation. “I was just trying to do what I could,” he said.

As for his recognition as the 2020 Central Region Hero of the Year, the carrier expressed gratitude for the award, but was hesitant about the label. “I really didn’t see myself as a hero,” Soileau said. “I reacted and did what we all should do—help our brothers and sisters.” **PR**



# Sydney Rodgers

## Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3



2020 EASTERN REGION  
HERO OF THE YEAR

**A**s Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 member **Sydney Rodgers** began to drive away from a house on her route that she had just delivered to on Feb. 12, a car pulled into the house's driveway.

As the carrier watched, a man got out of the car, dragged his female passenger out of the car, and engaged in an altercation with her, Rodgers said.

The carrier called the police, and then ran to the woman's aid. "I told the guy to get off of her, and then he started coming at me," Rodgers said.

The carrier's interference gave the woman time to flee inside, but it didn't stop the attacker for long. Once more, he began to move in intimidating fashion toward Rodgers.

"He was yelling at me and coming at me," she said. She went back to her truck, and once she called 911, the man fled the scene.

Buffalo police received the call from Rodgers at 11:30 a.m. and responded to the scene. The carrier provided police with the license plate number of his car. "We carry pens with us, so I was able to write it down as he was driving away," she said.

She also briefed her postal supervisors on the incident, and postal inspectors discussed the matter at a meeting with the station's letter carriers the next day.

Rodgers, a former four-year letter carrier who left the Postal Service earlier this year, said that she felt she had made a difference with her intervention, adding: "I stepped in and did what anyone should."

The judges agreed with Rodgers' assessment. "She was observant enough and diligent enough to notice what was going on," they said, and as a result was able to make a "big difference."

The carrier said she was grateful to be named the 2020 Eastern Region Hero of the Year. **PR**







2020 SPECIAL CARRIER ALERT  
AWARD HERO OF THE YEAR

# Matthew King

Champaign, IL Branch 671

**“I was parked for my 10-minute break, and I looked to my left,”** Champaign, IL Branch 671 member **Matthew King** recalled. It was March 12, 2019, and King was on his route.

“I [originally] thought that someone was grilling,” he said, “but then I knew that there was too much fire.”

One of the houses in the neighborhood had caught fire—a stray cigarette butt had set the porch ablaze. “I ran over and banged on the door [to alert anyone inside],” the three-year carrier said. As it turned out, an entire family, including three children, was still inside the home, unaware that the house was in flames.

After helping everyone outside, King called 911 and went into the home to find buckets. He subsequently organized a chain of water buckets with help from neighbors, and then managed to keep the fire contained

until firefighters arrived. Thanks to King’s timely intervention and quick thinking, “we were able to save the house,” he said, and nobody was injured.

The story was covered at the time by the local NBC affiliate, WAND-TV, and King was recognized in an award ceremony at the fire station for his act of bravery. But King, an Army veteran, shrugged off the praise and ceremonies. “I don’t really feel like I had a choice in the matter,” he said. “When there’s something that needs to be done,” such as extinguishing a burning building, “you just have to do it.”

The judges praised King’s impulse to act quickly, saving the lives of a family and saving their home from serious damage, and recognized him with NALC’s 2020 Special Carrier Alert Award. “He was taking care of the neighborhood,” they said. **PR**



The residents of the home Matthew King saved thanked him.

# Eric Beu & Mark Simone

Oklahoma City, OK Branch 458

**A**fter attending Branch Officers Training for the day in Minneapolis, **Eric Beu** and **Mark Simone**, members of Oklahoma City, OK Branch 458, decided to take a train to the Mall of America in the late afternoon of Sept. 17, 2018.

While on the way, a young blind man got off at the same stop as the two carriers. After noticing that the man was about to step onto the open tracks, Beu asked if he needed help. The man, Abraham, told the carrier that he was looking for the Mega Bus stop. Beu googled the location and discovered that the man was at the opposite end of town.

Simone and Beu wanted to help Abraham, so they assisted him in making his way across town. On the way, the two carriers got to know the man, who was in Minneapolis to check out a school for the blind. Abraham's friend had driven him from Chicago and, on the way to Minnesota, they had gotten into an argument; his friend then left him and drove back to Chicago.

"It was just a bad deal for him," Simone said.

Abraham asked if they could help him get back home to Chicago. Simone and Beu agreed that they couldn't leave him stranded in Minneapolis.

Beu bought the man a bus ticket back to Chicago. Because Abraham hadn't eaten since breakfast, and the bus wasn't scheduled to leave for about three hours, they found a restaurant that was still open. After Simone treated Abraham to dinner, the carriers walked him to the bus stop, put him on the correct bus, and made sure he had cab fare to get from the bus station to his home in Chicago.

Abraham called Beu the next morning to let them know that he had made it home and thanked them for the help.

Both carriers dismissed any accolades for their actions.

"We just did what any other normal human being would do," Simone, a 21-year carrier and a Marine Corps

veteran, said.

Beu, in his sixth year of carrying mail, said that, as letter carriers, "We keep our heads on a swivel for all sorts of things."

Simone added, "Your customers notice everything you do, whether you see them every day or not."

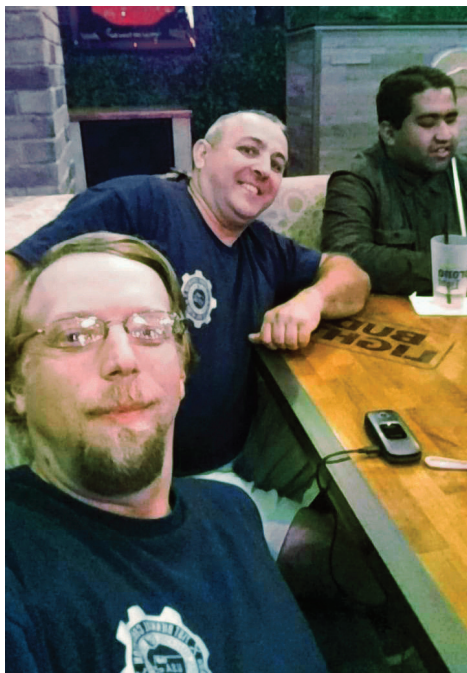
Although their co-workers have taken to singing "Wing Beneath My Wings" to them at the post office, Beu said that while they were "very humbled and honored," to receive the award, they hadn't acted to gain recognition—they simply "saw someone in need."

Simone echoed that sentiment.

"We're not heroes," he said. "You're just at the right place at the right time. It's just chance."

The judges saw heroism and compassion in their actions, though, and were impressed by the pair's ability to stay calm and handle the situation. In bestowing NALC's 2020 Unit Citation Award on Beu and Simone, the judges said, "They went above and beyond the call of duty to help a stranger who needed assistance."

Beu said their actions are all part of the profession. "Our job requires [that] we are observant; this carries over to our life outside the USPS," he said. "When you see someone in trouble, you help without hesitation." **PR**



Eric Beu (l) and Mark Simone helped a blind man named Abraham (r) get food and safely home.



# Jerry Giesting

Cincinnati, OH Branch 43

**Jerry Giesting did more than** mourn after his son, Brad Giesting, died in 2016 after a long struggle with liposarcoma, a rare form of brain cancer. Giesting, an Army veteran like his son and a member of Cincinnati, OH Branch 43, founded a charity group, Brad's Blessings, to give back to the community.

"We didn't want his memory to die," Giesting said.

Brad served in Iraq as part of the 101st Airborne from 2005 to 2006.

While in Iraq, he was exposed to burn pits, used for garbage disposal, in which hazardous waste often was burned. Some veterans and health professionals suspect that the exposure to burn pits has led to health problems, including the type of cancer that took Brad's life.

After returning from Iraq in 2006, Brad married his high school sweetheart

and had two daughters. He was diagnosed with cancer in May of 2013, and despite 70 rounds of chemotherapy, 30 radiation treatments, six surgeries and a last-hope clinical trial, Brad succumbed to the cancer on Oct. 22, 2016.

Despite his enormous health problems, Brad managed to maintain a positive outlook. "He kept the family laughing throughout his ordeal," Giesting said. "He had a huge sense of humor and tried to keep people on a high note, even when he was struggling."

To honor Brad's memory, his family promotes a "Random Acts of Kindness Day" each year on Oct. 22, the anniversary of his death, to urge people to spread love. On that day, Brad's Blessings distributes care packages for people facing health challenges who

are nominated by friends or family. This year, the group received about 75 requests for "sunshine boxes" to spread cheer to ailing people of all ages.

"We started the foundation to help other people who are going through cancer. We tried to find, in particular, families of veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan who were exposed to the burn pits," Giesting said.

Brad's Blessings' activities include scholarships and gifts of supplies for students at both grade school and high school levels. Meanwhile, the Bradley M. Giesting Kindness Scholarship is awarded to a student from a veteran's household with financial need. The first scholarship helped a student pay tuition to attend Archbishop McNicholas High School in Cincinnati, which Brad attended. Also, three graduates of McNicholas who are headed for military careers after graduation received gifts to help them as they moved to a new chapter in life. The foundation awards one high school and one grade school student a scholarship each year.

True to its name, Brad's Blessings has allowed his family to turn a tragedy into service to others with similar challenges.

"It's a terrible thing to have happened," Giesting said, "but we know there are a lot of people out there like him suffering—that's why we want to keep his memory alive and try to help those who have served."

"I'm very surprised, shocked and pleased," at being named NALC's 2020 Humanitarian of the Year, Giesting, a 35-year letter carrier, added.

The judges were impressed at the way Brad's Blessings multiplies its impact to encourage others to join in bringing help and good cheer to those in need. The effort "spreads exponentially to help others," they said. "It grows and grows beyond the one deed." **PR**



Brad Giesting (c) with his father, Jerry (r), who went on to create a charity group in Brad's honor.

# Pedro Mendoza

Grand Junction, CO Branch 913

**T**he scene of a man yelling at a woman caught the attention of Grand Junction, CO Branch 913 member **Pedro Mendoza** while he was on his route on Jan. 13. “I thought it was a domestic disturbance at first,” he said, and moved quickly to intervene. As he got closer, however, he heard the woman screaming at the man to get away from her and her baby. “I heard him telling her, ‘I’ll kill you,’ and I thought, ‘Oh no, you’re not. Not on my watch,’” the 20-year carrier said.

As Mendoza moved forward, another man also stepped in from across the street. The neighbor, Carlos Garcia, yelled at the suspect to get away from the woman, and “[the man] turned around to go for him,” Mendoza recalled. To keep the man from attacking Garcia, Mendoza asked him what his problem was, and the man turned around to face the carrier. At that point Garcia’s two daughters walked up the street, and Mendoza told Garcia to go protect them: “I said, ‘I can handle this.’”

This comment appeared to infuriate the man further; as he approached the carrier, screaming vicious insults, the man pulled out a knife. “He came toward me, swinging the knife,” the carrier said. “I took off my postal coat and wrapped it around my right arm. Then I waited for the right moment to punch him or take him down.”

Finally, Mendoza saw his chance. “He swung the knife a few times, and then he stumbled,” the carrier said. “And the second the knife was [pointing] down, I rushed him.” He tackled the man to the ground and placed him in a chokehold. “I slammed him to the ground until I heard the knife drop,” he added.

Garcia then came over and grabbed the knife, and they waited for the police to arrive. The man struggled to free himself, but Mendoza kept him pinned, telling him, “I’m not going to let you hurt any of my customers.”

When police arrived, the suspect attempted to escape, but Mendoza helped officers recapture and handcuff him.



“Then I picked up my scanner and went to deliver the mail,” the carrier said.

Mendoza’s actions later were covered by several local news outlets, and the elementary school along his route put up a large sign thanking him for his bravery. The maintenance workers at the post office decorated his postal vehicle with stickers praising him and comparing him to Captain America, the superhero. “I say, I’m not a hero; I just did what I had to do,” Mendoza said.

The judges were deeply impressed with Mendoza’s actions and named him the 2020 National Hero of the Year. “He didn’t know if he’d be killed—the unpredictability of what he was getting into” elevates his heroism, they said. “He put his life in danger.”

Mendoza stated that the most important thing to him was protecting his customers. “People come up to me and say, ‘I don’t know if I would have done what you did for just anyone,’” he added. “But it’s not just anyone. It’s the people on my route.” **PR**



# 2021

**L**etter carriers are in the communities they serve every day and often are the first to notice when something is wrong. They smell smoke, hear someone calling for help or notice something that just doesn't seem right. Often, they are the first to respond and lend a helping hand.

The 2021 Heroes of the Year honorees were selected from more than 100 nominees, whose stories of heroism and community service were published over the course of a year in this magazine, as has been done since 1974.

A panel of independent judges reviewed the stories about heroic and humanitarian acts published in *The Postal Record* between July 2020 and June 2021 and gathered in a virtual meeting to determine the winners.

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# Michelle DeCosta

New York Branch 36



2021 SPECIAL CARRIER ALERT  
AWARD HERO OF THE YEAR

**O**n a summer day in the city, it's not unusual to smell the smoke of a barbecue from somewhere nearby. But on one block on Aug. 21, in New York City, residents didn't recognize the smell and alert authorities, at least not until Branch 36 letter carrier **Michelle DeCosta** came along on her route.

The six-year letter carrier saw white smoke hanging over the block and "thought some customers might be having a cookout," she said. "It wasn't until I got closer to the house, with my knowledge of fire from being in summer camp, when I saw the smoke go from white 'happy smoke' to gray, that I realized the house was on fire and that the fire was spreading."

Having been on the route for three years, she used her knowledge to quickly react. "[The residents] have two little girls," she remembers thinking. DeCosta knew that the girls were being homeschooled during the COVID-19 pandemic and were usually home every day. She immediately rushed to the house and "started trying to break down the door," she said. "I was choking on smoke and screaming [to alert people]."

As she was doing this, she was also on her cell phone with her friend and fellow Branch 36 carrier **Janina Browne**. Browne called 911 and alerted authorities to the fire while DeCosta banged on the door.

Unable to get through the door, DeCosta called 911 herself, afraid that

the family might be unconscious from smoke inhalation. She also moved on to look after her other patrons who were in harm's way. "The neighbors are elderly," she explained, so she ran next door to warn them about the fire, as they might have needed more time to escape than some of the others.

Once the next-door neighbors were safely evacuated, DeCosta continued down the street, warning residents of the danger.

"The houses are so close together," she said. "If one catches, they all might go."

Firefighters arrived and "started bashing down the door [of the burning house]," the carrier said. Once inside, firefighters found no one at home—the girls were visiting with a half-brother who was in town that day—but rescued several trapped dogs and cats. They put out the electrical fire, which had been slow burning for nearly two hours. Firefighters kept the house from burning down and the fire from spreading to the neighboring houses.

Once the firefighters arrived, DeCosta continued on her route. She returned later to check on her customers. The homeowners of the burning house told her that everyone on the block was saying, "It was the mail lady [who told us to evacuate]—if it wasn't for her, it could have been really bad."

After the fire, DeCosta didn't tell anyone at her station and didn't seek recognition. "I honestly felt like I was there at the right time and I was the person who needed to be there," she said. "I just did

the right thing." But when her station coworkers and managers found out, they told her she was a "she-ro."

The Heroes judges cited DeCosta's awareness of her surroundings and remarkable mindfulness of her patrons—knowing who lived in the burning house and which neighbors it was most critical to notify about the approaching danger. These qualities are why so many letter carriers are the first to notice dangers in the communities they serve and why they know when something is wrong with their customers or residences. Because of that, the judges named DeCosta NALC's Special Carrier Alert Hero of the Year.

DeCosta wasn't thinking of awards or accolades, though. "I was scared thinking that the little girls were inside the house," she said, and added, "I was just doing what I thought was right—and I had to do what I had to do." **PR**



# Ray Hacker

North Bend, OR Branch 2342



Ray Hacker (l) and Marci McIntyre



2021 WESTERN REGION  
HERO OF THE YEAR

**S**ome letter carriers are heroes because they run into a burning building. Some are heroes because they pick up on the clues that tell them a patron is in trouble. **Ray Hacker** is a hero because he gave of himself.

In February 2020, the North Bend, OR Branch 2342 president and local shop steward found out that his former schoolmate Marci McIntyre needed a kidney. McIntyre was born with reflux nephritis, a condition in which kidneys are damaged by the backward flow of urine. She received a kidney transplant at 20 from her younger brother, but after 25 years—an exceptional track record for a donated kidney—it was starting to fail, and she needed a new one.

“She’s the nicest person in the world,” Hacker said of his high school acquaintance. “She’d do anything for anyone [and] deserved to have somebody step up.”

The Navy veteran was in good health and physically fit, and over his 27 years with the Postal Service—19 as a letter carrier—he had built up a collection of sick leave. Once he received the support of his wife, he volunteered to donate a kidney to McIntyre.

McIntyre had been down this road before; prior to Hacker’s involvement, eight other people had volunteered to donate but hadn’t followed through.

“I knew that anybody who reached out to me was going to be a long shot,” McIntyre told *The (OR) World*. “A lot of people have good intentions. Once

they find out the logistics of it, and the recovery and everything you go through—you have to be committed. You have to be all-in.”

There are blood tests, tissue type tests (which match the number of antigens—toxins or other foreign substances that induce an immune response in the body, especially the production of antibodies—that the donor and recipient share), and tests for various diseases. There also are health requirements that donors have to meet, as well as a psychological evaluation to make sure that donors know what to expect. Hacker passed all the tests.

“I was the perfect candidate,” he said. And he wasn’t backing off. “The risk did not outweigh the reward for me.”

Although most people have two kidneys, the National Kidney Foundation says that people with just one kidney can live normal, healthy lives. And live donations, as opposed to organs from deceased donors, have been shown to last longer in transplant recipients.

The COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of complications to the process. “COVID got in the way and they shut down the program,” delaying the spring procedure, Hacker said. The summer of 2020 was a lot of “hurry up and wait,” he said.

Hacker and McIntyre eventually got on the schedule for October. They both went in for the operation on the same day, which is common for live organ transplants. Hacker’s surgery began at

6:30 a.m. and lasted until noon. Surgeons make incisions above and below the belly button, and then go past the stomach and intestines and extract the kidney. “They pull it right [through] your belly button, basically,” he said.

McIntyre went in immediately afterward for her operation, which lasted six hours.

After a couple of days of recovery in the hospital, Hacker was discharged. He knew he could take advantage of the Postal Service’s program that allows up to 14 days of administrative leave to recover; he then used his sick leave to recuperate further at home afterward. “My fellow carriers gave me their full support, along with the other employees in other crafts,” he said. “We have a small office, so everyone knows everyone.”

“You’re sore for a while, especially in the abdomen area,” he said. The worst part of his recovery was “my first sneeze. Oh, my goodness, that hurt so bad.” He added, “I have to drink a lot of water now.”

After five weeks, he returned to work and has been telling people about his experience ever since. “If you can give a donation and keep them alive, you are affecting their entire family,” Hacker said. “Why wouldn’t you do that if you’re able?”

The carrier has a history of organ donation in his family—his wife’s niece has had kidney and liver transplants; his uncle has had a liver transplant; and his aunt, who had lupus and other medical issues, donated her body to a

# Dixie Manns

Michigan City, IN Br. 455

university for testing following her death.

After a short stay in the hospital, McIntyre returned home to recover. She has had a lot of post-transplant testing, and took anti-rejection medications to help her transplant take hold. That imposed a financial burden. Hacker and other members of their high school class set up a GoFundMe page for McIntyre, which raised more than \$11,000, and then put together an online auction that raised nearly \$10,000 more. The money went to help pay McIntyre's medical bills and medication not covered by insurance or Medicare. Hacker helped by asking local businesses for donated items. "We had a great class of '89 in high school. We're close and know everybody," he said of the endeavor.

Hacker has checked up on her monthly since the transplant and said, "It's a true blessing to see her enjoying her life again and not having to go to dialysis three times per week."

The judges were impressed with the letter carrier's decision and follow-through in donating an organ to someone in need. That he then became an advocate for organ donation demonstrates the way he went above and beyond. The judges declared Hacker NALC's Western Region Hero of the Year.

"I appreciate the honor and recognition of the Hero Award," he said. "It's not something I was seeking."

The media attention that he and McIntyre received in local outlets has helped greatly, Hacker said, in getting the word out about living organ donation. "If I get one person to do it, I have a part in saving another person's life," he said. "Who knows how many people this could affect?" **PR**



**O**n March 12, 2020, Michigan City, IN Branch 455 member **Dixie Manns** arrived at one of her regular delivery stops, a building that housed mostly elderly residents. When she walked in, "I heard the fire alarm going off," the six-year carrier said.

Looking around, she saw an elderly man standing in his doorway. "I asked the guy if he had burned some popcorn, but he said, no, it was a paper towel," Manns recalled. "I was going to put the fire out quickly, [but] when I walked into the apartment it was a grease fire on top of his stove—a fire too big for me to handle."

Knowing how serious the situation was, especially given the limited mobility of the older residents, the carrier knew that they did not have time to waste. "I told him to go outside, [but] he didn't walk too well, so I picked him up and put him by the door," she said.

Once that man was out of immediate danger, Manns started thinking about evacuation plans for her other vulnerable customers. The carrier knew that the woman living across the hall was on oxygen, so she rushed over to warn her about the fire.

While dialing 911, she started banging on residents' doors and telling everyone to leave the building. "By the time I got upstairs," she said, "it was pitch black [from the smoke]." Still, she continued along the upper level, knocking on every door she passed.

After making her way back to the main floor, Manns noticed that the elderly man she had carried had not exited with the other residents. Worried that he would be trampled in the chaos, the carrier picked him up again and carried him outside.

Manns then went back into the building, determined to make sure that all those inside had evacuated.

Eventually, the smoke conditions made it too dangerous for her to continue. "There's three sections of this one apartment building," the carrier explained. "I couldn't breathe [enough] to go into the third [section]." However, by the time police and firefighters arrived on the scene, she had managed to alert and evacuate the other two sections. All in all, Manns may have saved 40 people with her warnings.

For her bravery and dedication to her community, the judges named her NALC's Central Region Hero of the Year.

While Manns said that receiving the Central Hero award "feels really good," she added that she didn't think of her actions in a heroic context. "I don't feel like I was a hero," the carrier said. "I just feel like I did what needed to be done."

"I knew those people would be in trouble if I didn't help," Manns elaborated. "I was just doing what I felt anyone should do." **PR**

# Erin Pennington

Pittsburgh, PA Branch 84



2021 EASTERN REGION  
HERO OF THE YEAR

**P**ittsburgh, PA Branch 84 member **Erin Pennington** was delivering packages in a neighborhood on her route on July 6, 2020, when she noticed an unusual odor in the air. “It smelled like wires burning,” she recalled.

“I thought it was my truck at first,” the two-year carrier said. She parked and then checked her vehicle, but she couldn’t find anything wrong with it. Pennington glanced around, but she didn’t see any smoke coming from the nearby row houses either. She decided to continue with her route.

As Pennington went on with her deliveries, she turned down an alleyway that ran behind the houses. It was at that point that she saw the source of the smell. “It was the back corner of a vacant house—about three feet of [the house] was on fire,” she said.

The carrier immediately leaped into action. She spotted a neighbor coming out of a nearby house, and Pennington asked him to call 911. Then, she raced up to the front to evacuate the other houses. “They’re row houses, so there’s only about a foot between the houses,” Pennington explained. She was terrified that the whole neighborhood might go up in flames.

At the house next door to the fire, the carrier could hear dogs barking, but the homeowner was slow to respond. “She was asleep upstairs,” Pennington said. “I was screaming, hitting the doorbell—I was getting ready to kick the door in and grab the dogs and see if anyone was inside.”

Finally, the carrier heard a woman’s

voice through the door. “She asked who it was, and I told her it was the mail lady—that there was a fire, and she needed to evacuate.

“She grabbed her dogs and their leashes and ran out of the house,” the carrier said. Once that resident was safe, Pennington rushed across the street and began knocking on their doors. “I evacuated four houses, and I got them to move their vehicles” away from the fire, she said.

The fire quickly spread through the houses, including into the bedroom of the woman who had evacuated just in time. “The flames were so hot [that they] were melting the siding on the houses across the street,” Pennington recalled.

The fire department arrived within 10 minutes, but the damage already was severe—three houses were engulfed in flames. In total, seven houses were damaged; however, due in large part to Pennington’s warnings, nobody was injured.

For her bravery and knowledge of her route, Pennington was selected as NALC’s Eastern Region Hero of the Year.

Despite the acclaim, the carrier was modest about her role in the situation. “I don’t really see myself as a hero,” she said. “I just did what anyone should, and I’m glad that a woman is alive because of those actions.”

Pennington added that she thought these kinds of actions were necessary in a community. “We have to protect each other, look out for each other,” she said. “I don’t know why anyone would have a second thought.” **PR**



# Kevin Bystrak & Jody Kotowski

Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3

**O**n a hot summer day in 2020, Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 carrier **Kevin Bystrak** was on his route when he came upon an elderly man standing outside his home. "Something told me to stop" and speak to the man, he said. "He seemed in an ill state."

The elderly man, whom Bystrak knew as Mr. Queeno, was wearing a Korean War veteran's hat. He told the carrier that the heat wave gripping the area was getting to him. Queeno was out of breath and said he was feeling dizzy. Bystrak offered to give him some water, but then Queeno's daughter, who has special needs, came outside and gave him a glass of ice water. Bystrak took his lunch break and ate as he sat with Queeno to keep an eye on him. When Bystrak asked the patron to go inside and stay in the air conditioning until he felt better, he learned that the home Queeno shared with his daughter had no air conditioning.

"I felt a deep concern for them," Bystrak said. He also felt the urge to watch out for a fellow veteran—Bystrak served in the Navy Reserves and was deployed to Kuwait during the Iraq War.

"So, knowing how well carriers work together to help each other, I took to Facebook to ask for assistance for Queeno, looking for an air conditioner." He posted the appeal to Branch 3's Facebook page that day.

Seeing the post, fellow Branch 3 member **Jody Kotowski** came to the rescue with her husband, Frank, the next day. The couple, who also had a daughter with special needs, went to buy an air conditioning unit for Queeno. In the middle of the heat wave, however, every store they tried was sold out. That didn't stop the Kotowskis, though—they had an extra window unit in their home, so they took that one and installed it at Queeno's home.

Kevin Bystrak (l) and Jody Kotowski (r)



"I knew we had a really good unit," Jody Kotowski told *The Postal Record* last year, "and if he needed it, I knew I couldn't see it sitting there." They also learned that Queeno's home had a bug infestation, so the Kotowskis contacted a local non-profit that serves veterans, which donated funds to clean his home and clear the infestation.

Because Bystrak and Kotowski worked quickly as a team to make the life of a vulnerable man safe and comfortable, the judges awarded both carriers with the NALC Unit Citation award.

"I just did what anyone would do," Bystrak said. "I'm no hero." Bystrak credits the Kotowskis for their heroic efforts.

Sadly, Jody Kotowski later contracted COVID-19 and passed away in December of 2020, so her selection for the award was made posthumously. She was 56 and is survived by her husband and her daughter, Francesca.

"Jody is a prime example of a one-of-a-kind person, mail carrier and friend," Bystrak said. "God bless her family as she rests in heaven." **PR**



# Kyle West

Cincinnati, OH Branch 43



2021 HUMANITARIAN  
HERO OF THE YEAR

If You Are At Risk & Need Help  
Getting Essential Items, Let Me  
Know.

I Will Do What I Can To Help.



Sincerely,  
Mailman Kyle

A copy of the letter West gave to his patrons

**L**etter carriers have always known that their jobs are essential, but the pandemic made them more important than ever. When the COVID-19 pandemic reached Colerain Township in suburban Cincinnati, OH, in the spring of 2020, three-year carrier **Kyle West** went above and beyond to serve his community.

West, a member of Cincinnati Branch 43, knew that many of his customers were elderly and sheltering at home, depending on carriers like him to bring them supplies. But when a customer asked for help finding toilet paper, which was in short supply at the time, he knew that others also must have been struggling.

"I take pride in giving my customers great service every day, and a big part is getting to know them," West said. But the pandemic had affected his communication with them, as social distancing became the norm. "I went from talking to hundreds of people a day to not seeing more than five people a day," West said.

Worried that his customers needed help but might not be able to seek assistance, West asked his mother to print letters to the postal patrons on his route who he suspected might need extra assistance with supplies. West then distributed the letter to about 400 customers. "If you are at risk and need help getting essential items, let me know," the letter read. "I will do what I can to help." He signed the letter with the name his customers know him by: "Mailman Kyle."

West had more than supplies in mind. "I knew some people needed

help," he said, "but I also knew some people were lonely, so I wanted them to know I was still coming every day."

About 30 customers responded with requests for help. What West didn't expect was that other customers would respond by donating their own supplies for West to give to others. His customers left essentials like toilet paper, cleaning supplies and hand sanitizer at their doors for West. When local media outlets picked up his story, people in the community began bringing supplies and gift cards to his post office as well. West never had to buy any supplies—everything was donated.

West's actions even earned him a trip to the White House in May of 2020. He received a message from White House staff, he said, "and the next day, I was in DC. It was wild." President Donald Trump introduced and praised West at a media event. "Customers often tell us during difficult times that seeing us out every day gives them a sense of normalcy in their lives," the letter carrier said at the White House event. "The gratitude we are receiving from our customers is greatly inspiring."

In recognition of his efforts, the judges named West the NALC Humanitarian of the Year.

West was humble about the award. "I never thought this would be recognized, because we all do these things," he said. "I'm very grateful to be able to represent all of my fellow carriers who provide great service to the American people every day." **PR**



# Ramique Hill

Rochester, NY Branch 210



**R**ochester, NY Branch 210 member Ramique Hill already had noticed the police officer's car parked across the street during one of his deliveries on Oct. 4, 2019, but "I didn't really think anything of it," he said. A few minutes later, however, his attention was caught by some unusual sounds coming from the house.

"I heard a tussle, and it sounded like someone fell," the three-year carrier, who was a city carrier assistant at the time, recalled. Then, suddenly, "I heard a gunshot go off," Hill said.

The carrier quickly called 911 and reported what he had heard. At this point, a resident ran out of the house, shouting, "He's trying to kill the officer!" When Hill relayed this information to the emergency operator, the carrier was asked to check on the situation if he felt comfortable approaching the house.

Hill went up to the house; when he reached the porch, "I saw a lot of blood," he said. At that moment, another shot went off inside, and Hill entered the residence.

He was met by a frightening scene. The police officer, Denny Wright, was lying on top of the assailant, Keith Williams, who was scrambling under the couch with his hands. Hill found out later that Williams had been trying to locate his knife. Hill also would learn that Wright had been doing a routine welfare check when Williams, who had not been taking his medication for a mental health issue, attacked him.

Wright was the source of the blood that now covered the entryway; he

had been stabbed multiple times, including in the eye. "[He was] crying that he couldn't see," Hill recalled. The officer had fired the shots that had attracted Hill's attention, but he had not hit Williams. Now, he was using his waning strength to try to prevent Williams from reaching the knife.

Hill rushed over and dragged the assailant's arms away from the couch before helping Wright pin him to the floor. Another neighbor, who had followed Hill into the house, restrained Williams's legs.

However, Wright was too seriously injured to keep fighting with his assailant. He released his grip on Williams's midsection and collapsed. The other neighbor let go of the attacker's legs to help the officer, and Hill was the only one left to prevent Williams from going back on the attack.

Despite his precarious position, the carrier continued to shout encouragement to Wright. "I was telling him, 'I'm on the phone [with 911], backup's coming,'" Hill said. While the neighbor held Wright in his arms, Hill fought to keep Williams restrained.

After a few minutes, another police officer rushed into the house. Together, he and Hill worked to get Williams under control. "I got [Williams's] arms out, and then the officer cuffed him," Hill said.

More officers arrived a short while later, and Williams was taken into custody. He has since been indicted on several charges of attempted murder.

Wright was transported to the hospital and eventually recovered, though he ended up

losing his sight in both eyes. At a ceremony to honor Hill's heroism, Wright said, "I owe a debt of gratitude that I can't begin to figure out how to repay."

The incident received extensive coverage in the Rochester news media; Hill and two other individuals were praised for their role in helping the officer. Hill also was recognized by the Rochester Police Department and the city of Rochester, and received the Postmaster General Hero Award in 2020 in recognition of his bravery.

The carrier was modest about the attention. "I just did at that moment what I thought was the right thing to do," he said.

That selflessness in the face of extreme danger was why the judges named Hill as NALC's National Hero of the Year.

For Hill, he said that more important to him than any praise was helping save the officer's life. "[Wright's] a great person," he said. "I'm glad I was able to allow him to still be here with his family." **PR**

Hill (r) with Officer Denny Wright







2022 SPECIAL CARRIER ALERT  
AWARD HERO OF THE YEAR

# Christopher Lippy

Harrisburg, PA Branch 500

**A**lmost all heroic letter carriers will tell you that the key to what they accomplished was being alert. Sometimes that means smelling smoke at a house fire or noticing that yesterday's mail hasn't been collected from an elderly resident's mailbox. For Harrisburg, PA Branch 500 member **Christopher Lippy**, it was getting a second change of address (COA) form.

"It was early December," he said, when he received the COA for the wife of a married couple on his route. "[I got one] for her first, and I thought maybe [it was for] Christmas," the 33-year carrier said. "Maybe she did it so Christmas presents would go somewhere else."

When Lippy got a second COA, this time for the husband, he took action.

Lippy went up to the door and "tipped them off" about the temporary requests. Both customers said they hadn't placed the requests. The carrier explained that he also had noticed a significant drop-off in the amount of mail he was delivering to them and suggested that they may have been the victims of mail fraud.

"We figured out [that the COAs] were phony," he said.

After an investigation, Lippy's hunch was proven correct—someone had placed the requests through an online form and had been collecting their forwarded mail.

The customers reached out to the post office, thanking the carrier for his attentiveness, saying, "We are grateful Chris picked up on it early, or even more damage would have been done."

For that attentiveness and compassion, the judges declared Lippy NALC's 2022 Special Carrier Alert Hero of the Year.

"He put two and two together," the judges said. "He was very close to what was going on with the married couple and laser-focused on his customers."

"I'm happy about it," Lippy said about being named the winner. "It's nice to be recognized."



Christopher Lippy



# Casey Ritchie, Meagan Sperling, Eric Beu and Jeremiah Grant

Oklahoma City, OK Branch 458



**R**eturning to Chicago's McCormick Place Convention Center following lunch on Aug. 10, four Oklahoma City Branch 458 delegates to the 2022 NALC national convention saw two cars driving erratically in front of the convention center.

"We heard a commotion between two vehicles," carrier **Eric Beu** said. The cars were honking at each other and driving recklessly.

"It looked like road rage," added Branch 458 member **Casey Ritchie**.

They watched as the driver of one car abandoned it, still running, in the middle of the street and hopped into the other car, which made a U-turn and sped away. The carriers surmised that it was a stolen car that had been ditched.

**Another Branch 458 member, Meagan Sperling**, approached the remaining car to investigate—and spotted something shocking.

"There's a baby inside!" she yelled. A 1-year-old boy was strapped into a car seat in the back of the vehicle.

The fourth member in the group, **Jeremiah Grant**, already had begun to call 911, but the finding of the child made the call more urgent. With Ritchie relaying their location to Grant to tell the police dispatcher, Sperling looked after the child. Beu reached in and turned on the car's hazard lights, while Sperling, concerned about the child's safety, took the toddler out of the car and held him.

Chicago police already had been searching for the car with the child inside, and officers arrived quickly with the boy's father. Sperling handed the boy over to the father and, after the four carriers gave their statements to police, they went back to the convention center floor.

Beu previously had been recognized as a 2020 NALC Hero in the same category after he and another carrier from the same branch had helped a lost, hungry man who was blind find his way home.

The judges were impressed by how the four carriers quickly jumped into action and did all the right things to respond to the situation, each taking a different role.

"Not only did they identify the situation, but they sprang into action to call dispatch, to stay on the line, and also triage to make sure one person was with the child and the others helped with the situation itself," the judges said in bestowing NALC's 2022 Unit Citation Award on the group. "It was just really good teamwork."

"I don't think any of us would consider ourselves heroes," Beu said of the award. "Just a couple of good Samaritans striving to put right what once went wrong."



Casey Ritchie, Eric Beu, Meagan Sperling and Jeremiah Grant



# Darin Chew

Sun City, AZ Branch 6156

**“**I was coming up the other side of the street for curbside delivery, when I heard someone talking on the other side of the street,” Sun City, AZ Branch 6156 member **Darin Chew** recalled about his route on Dec. 26, 2020, when “I heard [Patti Clark] say, ‘He fell and hit his head, and he’s not getting up.’”

The 25-year carrier continued on his route, listening intently, until he heard her say, “He’s not breathing.” At those chilling words, the Marine Corps veteran leaped into action.

Clark’s husband, Lee, had been pumping air into his tires when his wife went inside to get something. When Patti came back outside, her husband was lying on the pavement underneath the car, unconscious. Patti quickly called 911, which was the phone call that Chew had overheard.

“I heard her say, ‘The mailman’s running over,’” the carrier recounted. Lee’s body was partially under the car—Chew figured that he must have rolled after falling to the ground, but Lee’s position made it difficult to determine the extent of his injuries. “I reached under [the car] and felt for a pulse, but I got nothing,” Chew said. He managed to pull the man out from under the car. “Then I tipped his head back and started doing chest compressions,” the carrier said.

Chew hadn’t performed CPR since his military training, but he was determined to keep Lee alive until paramedics arrived.

“I felt like I could just give him a fighting chance until someone with medical training could come save his life,” he said.

He continued doing chest compressions until EMTs reached the scene and took over. Lee was defibrillated three times before his pulse was restored. Paramedics credited Chew’s medical attention with saving Lee from possible brain damage, due to the length of time he was without a pulse. Lee was placed in a medically induced coma at the hospital and later underwent heart surgery, but has since completely recovered.

Chew didn’t tell anyone and didn’t want anyone to know about his heroism until Lee came out of the coma and could talk to his wife. That was complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as Patti was not able to go to the hospital and instead spoke with Lee over the computer and phone.



**Darin Chew and Lee Clark**

Lee was extremely grateful to Chew for helping save his life. “He put [the story] in the newspaper here,” Chew said. “He wants everyone to know.” Patti also called the post office to thank Chew for his actions, calling him “a miracle from God.”

For going above and beyond, the judges named Chew NALC’s 2022 Western Region Hero of the Year.

“His action had a very clear impact on the person that had become injured,” the judges said. “In a situation like that, he could have said, ‘I don’t want to pull this person because I could inflict further damage to an arm or leg.’ But he just immediately jumped into action and pulled the person out, saving their life. He didn’t think twice about that.”

The carrier, however, was modest about his recognition, saying that he was more grateful that Lee ended up being OK than about receiving an award. He said that he still sees the couple often and that every year on Dec. 26 since then they have dinner together to commemorate the day.

“I don’t feel like I saved him. I feel like I just kept him alive long enough for the paramedics to do it,” he said. Chew hoped that if anything good comes from this recognition it’s that when people see someone in need, they’ll respond. “Don’t do nothing,” he added.



# Sherri Baker

## Little Rock, AR Branch 35

**“I heard someone yelling, ‘Look out!’ ” Little Rock, AR Branch 35 member **Sherri Baker** said.**

On April 8, 2021, the 24-year carrier had been helping deliver mail to an apartment complex on another route after finishing her own in the late afternoon. She was walking across the crowded courtyard outside the apartment building.

“There were about 30 people out there, including kids [at a playground],” Baker said—when she noticed a young man walking slightly ahead of her. “I could see the guy walking about 15 to 20 feet away from me,” she recalled.

A man jumped out of the passenger side of a vehicle that had pulled up in front of the building and began yelling at the man. As Baker watched, “they shot him twice in the back,” she said.

The victim, 24-year-old Deshon Stokes, fell to the ground and rolled over.

Despite the chaos that immediately broke out, Baker rushed to help. “I started yelling and running after the man shooting, telling him to stop,” the carrier said. “He turned and looked at me but continued to shoot the young man.”

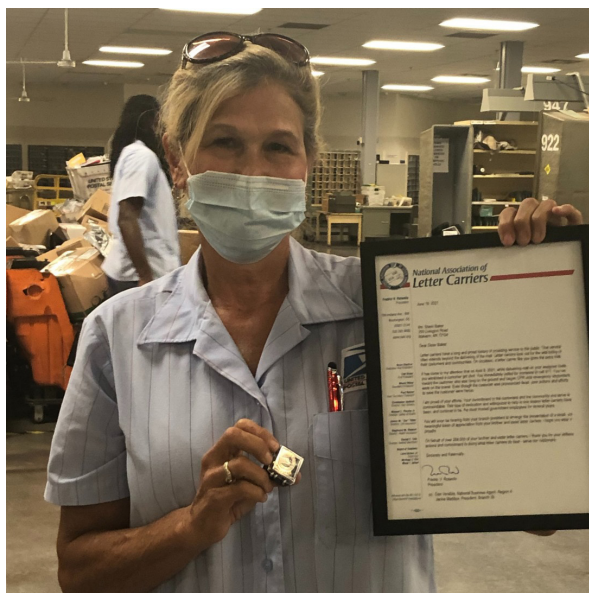
Stokes was shot several times again, this time in the legs, arm and chest. The shooter ran back to the car and jumped in, and the vehicle took off as Baker called 911.

It was a frightening situation, Baker notes. “They shot him eight times in front of me,” she said.

Then two men ran up to Stokes, pulling at his pants and robbing him. “I was physically fighting with them to stop,” the carrier said.

The carrier followed the 911 operator’s instructions, who advised her to let the robbers have what they wanted and focus on her victim.

“I did CPR and everything I could,” which she said she



**Sherri Baker shows off a pin and letter she received from NALC for her heroic actions.**



was trained to do through her previous restaurant career. “It’s something everyone should learn.”

Police arrived shortly afterward and told her to stop CPR, as the young man was gone. Paramedics soon pronounced Stokes dead at the scene, with the fatal shot being to his lung.

“I knew he was gone because I couldn’t get any breath. I was doing my best to get breaths in him, but his eyes had already locked on mine,” she said. “When you’re doing CPR and somebody has blood coming up, you know.” But the training is, she added, that you keep going until someone relieves you.

“I can say with all my heart I tried my best that day. I wish it was a good story; I wish it would have been a good outcome,” she continued. “I am thankful I was there for him, and that he didn’t die alone. I’ll never forget him, I know that. He will always be with me.”

Baker has a son who’s just slightly younger than Stokes. “I would hope and pray that if something happened to him, that somebody would be there for him,” she said.

The carrier, along with other witnesses, was later interviewed by police—but even two years later, the killer had yet to be apprehended.

The story, including Baker’s actions, was covered by many media outlets, such as the local Fox and ABC TV affiliates, and Stokes’s brother thanked Baker for her help. The carrier, however, rebuffed any praise for her role.

“I’m not a hero, I’ll tell you that,” she said. “I just feel like God put me where he wanted me to be for this young man. I did something that I felt, in my heart, that anybody with compassion would do for somebody.”

In naming Baker NALC’s 2022 Central Region Hero, the judges cited the carrier’s bravery. “She put herself not only in harm’s way physically, but also emotionally and mentally,” they said. “To see something that traumatic and to still have the fortitude and the heroism to put herself in harm’s way—[when the shooters] coming back was a distinct possibility, and dealing with someone else who’s bleeding and still doing CPR—all of that is just very, very dangerous.”

Baker concluded simply: “We have to look out for everyone on our route,” she said. “We’re not just carrying mail; we’re looking out for everyone.”



# Eric Smith

Charleston, WV Branch 531

**A** vehicle sitting idle in the road with flashers on caught the attention of Charleston, WV Branch 531 member **Eric Smith** as he was driving to work on March 20, 2021.

“I drove past it at first, and then I saw the flames” and he felt the heat through his car, Smith recalled. “I turned around after realizing no rescue vehicles were on the scene.”

The flames were coming from the house nearest to the parked vehicle, and when the 10-year carrier investigated further, he saw that the driver of the idled car was approaching the residence.

Smith recognized him as a customer from his route, and he recognized the house, too—he knew that three people lived there. The man yelled, “There [are] people in the house!” so they both ran up.

While another passerby called 911, Smith, the first passerby and a neighbor were able to gain entry to the house and decided to brave the smoke and flames to try to rescue the residents: Linda Harris and her two uncles.

“I got the front door open,” Smith said, “and there were two people lying [unconscious] behind the door.”

Harris and one uncle, Richard, had made it to the front hallway before collapsing from the thick smoke.

“I pulled the lady out, and she was unconscious,” the carrier recalled. “You could only go in as long as you could hold your breath. We could only stay in for 30 seconds to a minute at a time. Visibility was extremely low also.”

While Smith carried Harris a safe distance from the fire, another person went into the house to pull out Richard, who also was unconscious. “By that time, the whole house was engulfed,” Smith said.

The neighbor was unable to pull out the man by himself, due to the heat and thick smoke, so Smith went back into the house. “I went in and managed to get hold of him, and I pulled him closer to the door until I had to catch a breath,” he said. “By this time, the house was coming down around us.”

Eventually, through a group effort, the four men were able to drag Richard out of the house to a safe distance and begin administering CPR on him until EMTs arrived.

Emergency services airlifted Harris to the hospital. She was the only survivor of the fire and spent 13 days on a ventilator. Richard did not survive, and Harris’s other uncle, who had been trapped upstairs, also died.

Harris later spoke to local media about the role of Smith and the three other men. “[They were] complete strangers, except for my neighbor,” she told local WSAZ-TV. “I thank them every day; I’m grateful every day for my heroes—my angels.”

“Everything happened so fast,” Smith said, reflecting on his role in saving his customer. “I just did whatever it took to try and get everyone out. It was instincts—just try to save them,” he added.

In naming Smith NALC’s 2022 Eastern Region Hero, judges said that “the ability to experience the extreme temperatures and the extreme dangers that you do when you run into a burning building—and to go in a second time to pull someone out when you see that the environment has deteriorated even more—is a true act of heroism and so selfless of him to risk his life to do that.”

Though Smith called the award an honor he appreciates, he insisted, “I don’t necessarily think that I deserve it over anybody else. I just did what anybody else would do.”



**Eric Smith**



# Anthony Picariello

Philadelphia, PA Branch 157

**A**nthony Picariello does his part to ensure that children enjoy what are probably the two favorite holidays among young folks: Halloween and Christmas.

Branch 157 carriers in Philadelphia, PA, where he has delivered the mail for 26 years, know Picariello as “Stitch.” He got the nickname as a young child when he had open-heart surgery, and then earned a reputation

as an accident-prone boy. Years later, his own newborn daughter had surgery at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), followed by 24 days of recovery time in the neonatal intensive-care unit.

After that experience, he teamed up with another carrier to collect Halloween costumes for children in the oncology unit of the hospital. The daughter of the other carrier, who has since left the Postal Service, had died of cancer at CHOP on Halloween, her favorite holiday, a few years ago. Since that carrier left the job, Picariello has carried on the work of bringing Halloween to the kids at CHOP.

“At the hospital, they set up a makeshift store,” he said. “A lot of the cancer patients, the kids can’t leave and their families pretty much live there.”

The in-house costume store allows the children to choose their costumes without parents having to worry about logistics. “The kids get to pick out their costume and trick-or-treat at the hospital,” Picariello said.

Picariello set up a box in the Bustleton Post Office, where he works, to collect donated costumes from postal employees and the community, and he also gathered cash donations to buy more. For Halloween 2022, the effort yielded 337 costumes of all kinds and sizes; many more were bought with the cash donations.

Once Halloween is over, many children’s thoughts soon turn to Christmas. For the past two years,



Anthony Picariello



Picariello, who has two young children of his own, set up a special mailbox in the post office lobby for letters to Santa, and answered each one.

At a table next to the box, he offered children little gifts such as stickers and candy, and included templates and pens to make writing to Santa easy. He personalized each response from Santa to match the child's wishes—though he was careful never to promise that a child would get the gifts requested. He fancied up the letters from Santa with a special North Pole wax seal and sent them by mail.

When word got out about the mailbox, he was swamped with letters—151 last Christmas, for example. But that didn't slow Picariello down. "I was up until 2 or 3 in the morning almost every night writing back to them," he said.

The judges were impressed by Picariello's efforts, naming him NALC's 2022 Humanitarian of the Year.

"To continuously give to our youth is a special action and it takes a special heart to do that. To continuously give speaks volumes for a person's character. Not only did he go out of his way to have 337 Halloween costumes for the children at the hospital when they can't go out and get costumes themselves or trick-or-treat, he had the time and the heart to think about the same kids during Christmastime. He took time to respond to each one of those letters," the judges said.

"Just the act of continuously giving and continuously thinking of others and our youth is a very special thing," they added.

Picariello said he was "honored to be recognized," but he doesn't feel like a hero. He just likes helping youngsters. In addition to his holiday volunteer activities, he coaches softball, a sport his children enjoy. "All my free time is helping my kids and other kids," he said. "It's one of my passions."

**The special Christmas mailbox and display Picariello sets up at his Post office**





# Christine Cambizaca

Connecticut Merged Branch 20

**A** barefoot woman—crying, afraid and struggling to speak—approached city carrier assistant **Christine Cambizaca** while she was delivering the mail in her truck in Torrington, CT, in August of 2022.

“She had blood on her nose and bruises on her face,” Cambizaca said.

“Are you OK?” Cambizaca asked her. “Are you being followed?”

The woman nodded.

Cambizaca, a member of Connecticut Merged Branch 20 who had started on the job only a month earlier, called her supervisor, who told her to call 911, which she did.

The carrier then spotted a man who seemed to be looking for the woman, so she let the victim wait inside her mail truck while she stood outside. The man approached the truck and yelled at her and the woman inside, demanding to be let in, but Cambizaca refused, despite the danger.

“I got scared because I saw a knife in his pocket,” she said.

Cambizaca tried to get into the truck through the back door, but the man noticed and also tried to enter the truck that way, so she shut the door again to protect the woman inside. A neighbor heard the commotion and came outside, distracting the man and allowing Cambizaca to get in the vehicle.

From the truck, she saw the man throw the knife at the neighbor, who was not injured. The neighbor picked up the knife and continued to distract the man until police arrived. They arrested the man, and an ambulance took the woman to the hospital. After telling officers what happened, Cambizaca continued on her route.

“I was calm,” she said of the incident, “but I was scared.”

The suspect is facing six charges, including assault, strangulation and threatening.

For her courage and cleverness in the face of great personal danger, the judges declared Cambizaca the NALC’s 2022 National Hero of the Year.

“The young lady risked her life by locking a woman in her truck to protect her from someone who had proven he would assault someone,” the judges said. “She put her own life in danger—she didn’t know what the situation could have developed into. But she thought quickly, on her feet.”

“I am excited that I was chosen Hero of the Year,” Cambizaca said, but she added that she simply did what needed to be done. The victim, she said, “could have been anybody’s daughter or sister. No matter who it was, we should always look after each other.”



Christine Cambizaca



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