

# A smile that lit up America



Philip  
Dine

**K**elly Mathaw had us from the get-go.

The ebullient yet modest Detroit letter carrier captured the moment with her depiction of what it means to be a letter carrier in these times—the challenges, but also the added meaning of the job, her pride in “being out there each and every day” for her customers, the sense of reassurance they derive from the presence of carriers, the gratitude she and her co-workers get in turn from those residents.

She conveyed all that in 30 seconds while delivering her route, before tossing her head back in a hearty laugh. The program was then tossed back to a television host unable to suppress a big smile.

I figured that millions of Americans were reacting the same way, because—let’s not mince words—Kelly lit up the TV screen.

Not just any TV screen—this was the “Macy’s 4th of July Fireworks Spectacular” from New York City, broadcast by NBC in prime time on the nation’s 244th birthday. The two-hour show annually draws triple the audience of any other program that night; this year was no exception, with about 5 million people watching.

Kelly, a 26-year postal veteran, was featured in one of the program’s vignettes of inspiring Americans sprinkled between the musical performances. This was the second time in less than three months that she’d dazzled the nation, following her appearance on “Kelly & Ryan” on ABC, the most-watched morning entertainment show.

After the July 4 program, an NBC vice president emailed me: “She did a great job!” Kelly has since been greeted affectionately as “superstar” from proud customers on her route of 16 years.

Funny thing is, the last person to regard Kelly as a star is, well, Kelly.

If she’s willing to endure the natural nervousness of being on a show (or two) reaching millions of people, willing to take time from roles that include shop steward, safety captain and CCA facilitator, it’s because she’s motivated by something beyond herself: her love for her job and her customers, and her desire to try to help preserve the U.S. Postal Service—for the benefit of those customers, her co-workers and our country.

**This month marks a decade at this job. Over that span, I have watched in awe as you’ve accepted the union’s communications challenge and run with it, aggressively and creatively, but in a disciplined and positive fashion. You have changed the national conversation about postal issues by getting the facts out and dispelling the misleading**

conventional wisdom.

It’s easy to regard as routine what you’ve accomplished, because your efforts have been so consistent and steady; just as it is easy to forget how little most Americans—including reporters covering postal issues—knew just a few years ago.

Having walked in their shoes, I have no qualms about calling out journalists, but sometimes you can only shake your head. I remember calling a reporter at a leading newspaper years ago, to chastise him for misrepresenting postal finances by leaving out pre-funding’s impact. I patiently explained that if USPS hadn’t had to pre-fund future retiree health benefits, it would have had a profit of several hundred million dollars the previous year. He immediately shot back in a triumphant tone: “Yeah, Phil, and if my old college in Virginia didn’t have to play the first half in their last basketball game, they would have won.”

Whaddya do?

Well, one thing you do is rely on the grassroots efforts of letter carriers around the country who’ve written thousands of letters to the editor or commentaries for their local newspapers, given interviews on radio or TV, engaged with reporters or alerted us when we should step in to set the record straight.

In so doing, you have educated the media, informed the public by your words and by fostering more accurate reporting, and influenced the politicians directly (they consume the news) and indirectly (as motivated constituents reach out to their representatives).

Now, during the pandemic, you are delivering another message—less about policy and more about the valor of carriers and the essential nature of your job. You’re doing that not only by your work on the route, but also by getting the word out through the media.

**Whether it’s Kelly’s compelling TV appearances or an eloquent letter to the editor in *The Ellsworth American*, a Maine weekly, by John Curtis, a retired letter carrier (and, fittingly, NALC’s 2015 Heroes of the Year Education Award winner, past editor of his branch’s *Maine Letter Carrier* and former state scribe), each of your actions is an integral part of a communications effort more vital now than ever.**

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