

OFF THE CLOCK

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed much about the way letter carriers do their job, including how they prepare for work, interact at the office, maintain a social distance on the route and clean up after work to return home. But the changes also have had a significant effect on their lives off the job.

While letter carriers all have the same job, what they do off the clock makes them unique. Some letter carriers have families, large or small. Some have hobbies or play sports. Some are young or new to the job, some are experienced letter carriers, some are enjoying retirement.

We asked carriers to share stories about how their lives off the route have been affected by COVID-19, and here are examples of what they had to say.

Nancy Farrell Luster has previously been named “Elk of the Year” by her local Elks club, but this year, she’s been unable to engage in one of her favorite activities with the social club: fundraising.

The Portland, OR Branch 82 member has been a letter carrier for 32 years and a member of the Milwaukie-Portland Elks 142 for the last seven years. She heads up the social club’s Holiday Baskets group, which provides 500 turkeys as well as canned food and toys to members of the community at Christmastime.

“I was taught as a child that we must give back to our communities,” Farrell Luster said. “There is always someone less fortunate than you.”

She’s also active in the Elks’ veterans group. Just recently, she learned that the city had built a 22-unit apartment complex for homeless veterans, so she convinced the group to provide “welcome home kits” for all of the

units. The kits included blenders, first-aid supplies, hangers, storage containers and other useful household items.

“The smile on those vets’ faces when they got [the kits was] priceless,” she said.

Farrell Luster also misses many of the other social activities at the club, such as playing corn hole and bingo. But she has found other ways to make the best of the changes, such as socializing with her neighbors on the other side of the fence around her yard.

“We have fires in our yards and talk, pull chairs up to the fence and laugh,” the carrier said. The neighbors have planted gardens to share, taken walks while social distancing and “even got the sidewalk chalk and bubbles out and play,” she said.

“This is a stressful time, but I am lucky. I have great friends, neighbors, family and co-workers,” she said. But mostly, “I look forward to having fundraisers at the Elks again.”

“Since the outbreak, I have had to become my kids’ teacher,” **Jenny Wilson** said. Her children were first- and fourth-graders when the outbreak occurred. “Every night, after working eight hours plus, I had to learn lessons, review homework, read for 20 minutes, etc.”

The Snohomish County, WA Branch 791 member has been a carrier for 14 years and a makeshift teacher in recent months. She said that school time for her would begin after dinner, when she would check both kids’ assignments and help them complete what they hadn’t finished that day. After putting them to bed, she would plan the lessons and assignments for the next day.

Her husband, who has his own full-time job, helped with the math homework and with the iReady assignments, an online tool that some schools use for distance learning. The children’s

CARRIERS SHARE THE STORIES OF HOW THEIR LIVES HAVE CHANGED BECAUSE OF COVID-19



Nancy Farrell Luster



Jenny Wilson and her family

grandparents live with Wilson and look after them during the day.

Of course, things changed again when the school year ended and there weren't any more school assignments. But they got workbooks for the children to help them prepare for school in the fall, which might continue to be through distance learning.

"Now that summer has begun, it's harder to keep the kids inside," she said. "We are planning day trips to faraway locations so we don't run into people." The summer plans had included camps for the kids and playing soccer in a local league for Wilson and her husband. Now they drive up to the nearby mountains and hike the trails instead.

"It gets a little stressful when the kids just want to be outside with friends," she said. To keep them all busy, the family has started several home projects.

"It's been hard working full time and being a full-time mother and teacher, but we are making it happen," she said. "I wish we had a better program at work that will allow us to get the time we need with the kids in this pandemic without worrying about money, but we are in the front line, so we will make the best of the current situation."

For **Cie Siyavash Sharp**, the pandemic has made it harder for her to care for her mother. "Two weeks after the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in America, my mother became ill" from an unrelated cause, the Long Island Merged, NY Branch 6000 member said, adding that "in one day, she forgot most of what happened in the past 20 years."

Long Island was home to one of the first and worst outbreaks of COVID-19 in the country, which made it difficult

for the second-year carrier to get the help she needed.

"I could not find her a decent neurologist in a timely fashion because [most] outpatient doctors' appointments were canceled because I live and work in a COVID hot spot," Siyavash Sharp said. "My mother cannot stay alone anymore and needs a home health care aide. The provider and agencies told me they don't have anyone to be my mother's aide because of COVID-19."

Siyavash Sharp was able to use leave through the Family and Medical Leave Act, but only for 10 days.

"I am riddled with anxiety because I cannot simultaneously retain my job and be with my mother since the system failed her," she said. "I have contemplated resigning, but of course for now that would be financial suicide."

"This is an ongoing problem that has no end in sight."

Several carriers who responded to our question on social media about how the pandemic has affected their lives off the job left short but illustrative responses:

- "I have a niece and a best friend's daughter who have compromised immune systems. I have not been able to visit with anyone from either of their households since before any of this happened."—**Andrew Love** of Cincinnati, OH Branch 43
- "I want to be around my kids more. My two oldest daughters live out of state. I'm looking to relocate closer to them soon. Hopefully!"—**Shronda Young** of Ann Arbor, MI Branch 434
- "What personal life? It's nonexistent when you're a CCA. All you do is deliver mail eight to 10 hours a day. When you're lucky enough to get a day off, your body is so

tired.”—**Vanessa Allen** of Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100

- “When [my husband and I] are tired of being in the house, we go to the store with masks and sanitizer. But one goes in first and then the other one, because the one who stays in the car is watching my daughter. I don’t want her going inside the store for any reason.”—**Melissa Garay** of Tampa, FL Branch 599
- “Other than bars not open...nothing has changed.”—**Jeff Adamson** of Baltimore, MD Branch 176

For letter carriers **Justin** and **Tia Hill**, life during the COVID-19 pandemic has brought many changes, but they’ve tried to find a way to stay positive through them. Justin, a member of Emerald Coast, FL Branch 4559, and Tia, a member of Pensacola, FL Branch 321, have three children. Their oldest child, Landon, 8, has health issues, which meant that the family needed to take extra precautions.

Along with a 2-year-old sister and a 3-year-old brother, Landon could no longer go to school or day care. But the Hills found a solution that not only worked for them, but helped a member of their community, too.

At the day care facility the children attended, one of the teachers was having her hours cut back and needed a way to make money. The Hills hired her to work for them.

“She treated our kids like family and basically has become family,” Justin said. “So, when her hours continued to get cut, we decided and she agreed we would hire her full time for us, instead of using day care. It was a positive for both of us.”

“Day care is one of the easiest ways for a child to get illnesses, so this has

helped and has turned into the new normal,” he said. “We also are now considering homeschooling for this next school year.”

Knowing that money is tight for many, Tia, who has a hobby business of grooming dogs, is setting up with animal shelters to groom dogs for free.

“A co-worker mentioned [shelters] to us as potential clients,” Justin said. “But Tia refuses to accept payment.”

The family orders from local restaurants to help them stay in business. “We are beyond blessed with having a great career, due to the hard work of the NALC, so whatever we can do for the community is important to us,” he said.

When asked about his family’s positive outlook during these trying times, Hill said, “Well, it’s definitely hard. Everyone is on the edge. I truly believe for myself it’s with integrity...it’s important to stay real and be myself.”

There’s a saying that you don’t know what someone else is going through until you walk in their shoes. Now is a time when people need greater understanding and kindness, because everyone is struggling in one way or another—often in ways that aren’t noticeable at work.

“Even though letter carriers wear the same uniform and perform the same job, we’re all different,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said. “We truly represent the diversity of our country. That is one of our many strengths, and that strength is needed now more than ever. Please look out for one another.” **PR**



Above: Justin and Tia Hill

Below: Tia Hill’s hobby business of grooming dogs has been affected by the pandemic, but the Branch 321 carrier is looking into grooming at shelters as a way of giving back to her community.

