

# A season for caring



**E**very December, letter carriers work hard to ensure that families across the country experience the joy of the season by delivering special messages and packages. But they don't stop there. After their shifts end, they deliver care beyond the last mile.

Carriers bring extra joy to their communities in many forms. Some supply gifts to families in need. Others donate the vital gift of blood. And many participate in holiday parades or make the holidays special with a letter from Santa.

In this special holiday issue of *The Postal Record*, we bring you stories about

letter carriers who go above and beyond to make sure that everyone shares in the delight of the holiday season. Their extra effort reminds us all that the spirit of the season is about spreading joy to others.

We know that for every story in this issue, there are many more, because NALC members and branches help those in their communities year-round in a variety of ways. If you have a story to share with us, please contact *The Postal Record* by phone at 202-662-2851, by email at [postalrecord@nalc.org](mailto:postalrecord@nalc.org) or by letter at 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001.

## Lifting his community with gifts and art



**M**atthew Ross Sr. always looks for ways he can help out in his community. As a letter carrier, he sees more than most the needs of the people he serves. As an artist, he helps his community to see in new ways.

Contributing to the community has long been a commitment for the Syracuse, NY Branch 134 member. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, he helped raise funds for the local community center on his former route in Westcott for a new van to transport seniors.

Last year, when he delivered mail and noticed that some report cards from the local middle school were going to a hotel, he decided to find

out more. Knowing that child poverty in the area was a real concern, Ross checked in with the school counselor to see what he could do.

"I told them that if they needed me to help out somewhere in a specific spot, to let me know," he said. The counselor suggested some students who might benefit from holiday help and reached out to the parents, giving them Ross's phone number.

Ross said he felt for the kids, some of whom were constantly moving. "They're growing up in a place that's not so nice, and they don't really have any options, and they're just going from house to house, always getting evicted," he said. "It was important





for me to be able to help out these people.”

The seven-year carrier soon fund-raised every cent he could from the community to buy some local middle-school students Christmas gifts. “I was able to help out three different families,” he said, providing items such as a Christmas tree, toys, video games, winter clothes, craft supplies and art—the latter a newfound hobby of Ross’s.

Ross picked up abstract acrylic painting in 2021 and created Mattropolis Art Gallery. He uses social media to show artwork in what he calls a “nice, safe little area of the internet.” It wasn’t long before Ross figured out a way he could use his pastime to help in the community as well.

When he visited the school, Ross met one youngster in particular who was having behavioral issues. “He was breaking pencils and being rather violent,” the carrier said, and added, “He started to pick up painting as, like, a way to not get angry anymore. And I got a couple of his little paintings here in my art gallery that I put up on the back of my stream sometimes.”

In addition to donating paintings to raise money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association, he has proposed to the local Young Women’s Christian Association on one of his routes the idea of making a group painting on a 36-inch by 48-inch canvas sometime in December to be displayed in the YWCA building’s foyer afterward.

“Unfortunately, one of our letter carriers died this past year, and I’m using all the paint that he had bought and left behind,” Ross said. “I’m going to take all of these young girls and the coordinators and everyone there and we can make a painting.”

Walking around the city every day, “I find it very depressing,” Ross said. “I walk through a lot of trash and filth and garbage. I try and let people know that art’s a way of escaping from what you’re dealing with at a certain time and place, and that can alleviate some stresses in your life.”

Ross uses his “imagination and dedication” to try to be a good role model for others, but he never expected recognition for any of his good deeds. He’s been featured on local TV and newspapers in the Syracuse area over the years, sometimes getting honked at by parents on the street, indicating that they want their kids to be like him.

“It was very self-gratifying, because I had planned on doing this without being on TV,” he said of his efforts, adding, “Because this happened, I know that these people look up to me and they know that I can, you know, do the right thing. You can do things to impact your community at a local level.”

Delivering mail makes doing good that much easier, too. If any carriers want to make a difference on their route, it’s easily doable, says Ross.

“Chances are, they already know with their gut intuition who actually needs the help. [They need] to just follow through on their own intuition and use their own creativity. It doesn’t have to be elaborate,” he added. “As letter carriers, we have access to a lot of involved people, places, things—and if you just put all that together, you can make good things happen.” **PR**



**Matthew Ross Sr. (l) and some of the items he donated for gifts (below)**





# An inaugural holiday parade



**D**el Rio, a small city in southwest Texas about 150 miles west of San Antonio, holds a Christmas parade down Main Street on the first Friday evening of December. While the parades have been held for several years, the one in December 2023 featured a new float—one by volunteers from the Postal Service who also collected letters to Santa from children along the parade route.

It almost didn't happen. But some of the clerks decided to put together the float and asked Branch 2511 Secretary-Treasurer **Lino Hernandez**, "Hey, you think the carriers would be willing to do it?" Hernandez said that even if it was only him, he would do it, but that he'd see if he could get other letter carriers to participate, too.

After he talked to the carriers in his station, about 10 of the more than 40 city letter carriers in Del Rio joined him.

Hernandez, who has been involved in the annual Stamp Out Hunger Food

Drive, went on the radio stations that announce the food drive and told listeners that the postal workers would be in the parade and would be collecting the letters for Santa. It doesn't hurt that his son works at one of the stations and got Hernandez a meeting with the station manager. The clerks also posted about it on social media to help spread the word.

"We would tell the kids, 'Hey, bring your letters to Santa,' and they'd say, 'Oh, no, no, no.' And I'd tell them, 'Man, how are you going to get your Christmas gifts if you don't write letters to Santa?' You know, we made it a fun time," Hernandez said.

During the parade, the letter carriers would walk along with the float and collect the letters from children along the parade route while also handing out candy. They'd then hand the letters to the clerks on top of the float, who would stick them in a barrel.

"They did a marvelous job on decorating the float and everything," Hernandez said. "Then we had a couple of guys. One dressed up as [the Grinch] and then another one dressed up as Santa Claus."

The parade route is a mile or two, ending in a park where Santa meets the kids and hands out more candy.

Despite retiring from USPS in April, Hernandez is still involved in the branch and was preparing for this year's parade.

"We're going to get some more people involved this year," Hernandez said. **PR**



**Above and below: The Del Rio postal workers who participated in the parade last year**





# The gift of blood

**S**ome branches measure the success of their community service in dollars, food, clothing or toys. Flushing, NY Branch 294 measures its progress in blood.

After two decades, the branch's blood donation efforts have reached a milestone—1,500 pints of blood donated. Since each donor gives about a pint, that represents 1,500 times a letter carrier or other donor sat down and gave their life-saving gift over the years.

The tradition began in 2001, when then-Vice President **Brian Keelen**, who served in Vietnam as a combat medic, organized the branch's first blood drive as a service to the community. The branch made it an annual tradition, then began holding them twice a year. Now they hold three every year—in winter, spring and summer. When Keelen retired, he handed the reins to current blood drive coordinator **Andrew Fontanetta**, who organizes the events with the help of Branch President **Tony Paolillo**.

The local Knights of Columbus Hall hosts each blood drive after a regular branch meeting. To remind branch members of the role their donations play in saving lives, the branch votes to dedicate each blood drive to a deceased branch member. The branch also holds a "hero's night" before the blood drive to recognize a heroic member who has come to the aid of someone while out on their route or who has gone out of their way to serve the community, Paolillo said.

To reach the milestone, the branch must first coordinate with the New York Blood Center, a not-for-profit blood bank that sends medical personnel to collect and store the blood.

The branch's main job is to bring people out to donate—the more people

giving blood, the more blood they can collect, of course

"In theory, to donate, we get anywhere from 30 to 50 people" for each drive, Paolillo said. But sometimes would-be donors find that they are ineligible for medical reasons—anything from high blood pressure to low iron to having a recent tattoo could disqualify a donor, either to protect the health of the donor or recipient.

Even if carriers know they can't donate blood, he added, they can still help. "We always encourage the members, even if you yourself can't donate blood," he said. "We tell them, 'Perhaps you could bring a family member, a neighbor, a friend who is eligible to donate.'"

The branch attracts donors by sending flyers to each of its 21 postal stations, while the New York Blood Center mails reminders to previous donors. But with three events happening each year, carriers are usually aware that the next one is approaching. And the branch makes each blood drive a fun event, too.

"Anybody who donates or attempts to donate," Paolillo said, "we have their name, and we raffle off a bunch of prizes for them during the meeting. We have a lot of prizes, a lot of gifts that are donated to our branch from the members. That's nice. Plus, on top of that, we have the catered food."

"It's just a great feeling knowing that you made a difference, knowing that one donation can save up to three lives," he added, because a donated pint might be used in more than one transfusion. "There's always an emergency blood shortage going around. It's something that I'm very proud of our branch [for] that we've been able to host this on a regular basis." **PR**



Members of Branch 294 have helped collect 1,500 pints of blood.





# Christmas cheer for kids



**A** simple conversation can sometimes be the impetus to put kind thoughts into action. Last fall, **April Lee** was chatting with fellow Freehold, NJ Branch 924 member **Tom Caizza** in their Atlantic

**The group from Atlantic Highlands, NJ, led donations to give gifts to some needy kids.**

Highlands post office about wanting to make a difference in their area during the holidays.

“We used to do a turkey giveaway at Thanksgiving, and it’s kind of just subsidized,” Lee, a 24-year carrier, said. “Now we said, ‘We should probably start something up.’ No reason, just something nice to do.”

They began talking to other carriers, and Lee put up a sign in the station, asking if people would be willing to donate \$20 to help some children from the local elementary school for Christmas. “Everybody kind of hopped on board, surprisingly easy,” Lee said, adding that co-workers including carriers, clerks and managers participated in droves, some for more than double the suggested amount, to help.

In all, Lee estimated that there were nearly 20 people

from their offices across crafts and management who chipped in for the effort in 2023.

Soon after, Caizza went to the elementary school to speak with the nurse, who suggested two (unrelated) children in particular, and specific items that were on their holiday wish lists.

Once Lee collected the money in the office, branch representatives, including Caizza, went shopping for the boy and girl. They bought the boy a pair of “fancy sneakers” he wanted and a remote-control car, Lee said, and the girl got a dollhouse she wished for as well as a jacket and remote-control car. Since there was some money left over, the carriers got movie tickets and gift cards for a local pizza restaurant for the kids to enjoy with their families.

“[The school] asked us if we wanted to present it to them, or have it be a secret,” Lee said. “So we said, ‘No, have it be from Santa.’ And that was it.”

Because of the success, the group is planning a Round 2 this year. After Thanksgiving, the group was set to start a word-of-mouth effort to collect funds, check in with the school, and go shopping.

“Let’s promote some Christmas cheer” is the general consensus for the office in wanting to put this effort together, Lee said. “I feel like it makes us feel good about ourselves, and then also the kids, of course, will feel good about themselves. And you know, I think it’s easy to say to your co-workers, ‘Hey, you want to donate a couple bucks?’ ”

“We’ll do it again, definitely,” Lee added. “If you could help others, why not?” **PR**





# Supporting their neighbor

**I**n the Tacony neighborhood in northeast Philadelphia, the Branch 157 letter carriers at the local post office give back to the community they serve, by raising funds for charitable organizations.

For about 20 years, they had collected annual donations for the Knights of Columbus and delivered them during the holiday season. Knights of Columbus is a national fraternal organization that provides children in need with Christmas gifts such as bikes, gift cards for food and toys, along with other charitable outreach throughout the year.

But three years ago, the Tacony post office employees decided to instead give to the Jack Costello Boxing Gym.

The boxing club holds community programs for kids, such as “Down with Boxing,” a program for kids with Down syndrome, during which the kids would come in and get a taste of boxing. “Costello Boxing Club ended up moving right next to us, right next door,” **John Hoban**, who organized the donations for many years, said. “So that’s when we decided, ‘Hey, listen, maybe instead of giving to the Knights, we give right back to our next-door neighbors.’”

The primary way in which they raise money is through 50/50 raffles, when



the names of those who donate money go into a pot. Whoever’s name is called for the raffle receives 50 percent of the raffle money and the rest goes to the charity. They hold the raffle once a week throughout the year.

The gym wasn’t the only organization the postal employees gave to over the past year; they also donated to The Block Gives Back, an organization that provides food for people in need in the neighborhood, as well as for veterans.

Last year, they raised \$1,000 in donations solely for the Costello Boxing Gym at Hoban’s request, as it was his last year before he retired in January. **PR**

**The Tacony Post Office makes a donation to their neighbor, the Costello Boxing Club.**



# Delivering a magical message

**L**afayette, IN Branch 466 has been involved in the city’s Christmas parade for a long time. Branch Vice President **Jeremy Swift**, who joined the Postal Service in 2017, said that the branch had been doing it for decades before he arrived.

The parade’s theme is lights, so it is held at night and each float or vehicle

has to be decorated with lights. None of the floats can have anyone dressed up as Santa, as the parade has a single Santa for the whole event.

The letter carriers decorate one of the postal vehicles—this year an E-Transit—and some of the walkers carry the branch’s banner. There’s usually a clerk who joins in the festivities

and sometimes rural carriers.

It can be difficult to get letter carriers to volunteer because the parade is held on an early evening in December, when many letter carriers are still hard at work. “But those who can make it, they go out,” Swift said.

Most of the carriers wear postal uniforms with satchels to collect letters



Members of Lafayette, IN Branch 466 go all out for the Christmas parade through their city.



and to hold the candy they hand out. Some friends and family will join in and wear seasonal costumes, including one that is in the shape of a collection box.

The branch usually has about 10 walkers who collect Santa letters from anyone who has brought them. Sometimes a walker will fall behind to make sure the letters have a return address so the kids can get a response through the mail.

Some of the letters—whether collected through the parade or on their routes—are addressed to 123 Elf Road, North Pole, 88888, which is the official USPS address for letters to Santa Claus in its Operation Santa program. The letter carriers make sure those letters have the proper postage and send them on to the Postal Service’s official program. But for letters and envelopes that are addressed to “Santa” with no address, the branch collects them and will make sure the kids get a response.

At the December meeting, the branch will open them up, draft a short response and mail them back to the children as though they came from Santa. The Postal Service will cover the return postage, or the branch will pay for it, or some combination.

“It’s a fun way to read the letters, to kind of break up some of the long days and get a little bit of joy,” Swift said. He said they receive all kinds of letters.

“We’ve had letters from newborns that a parent wrote in, just talking about how the child’s been a good boy or girl, just kind of letting us know how they’ve been.

“Sometimes we’ll get a big envelope from a teacher from one of the schools.

We’ve encouraged the schools to participate. And then we just send a big envelope back.

“We’ve received letters from kids that are pretty heartbreaking that just talk about their current situation and how they just want their parents to get a new job or to not have to struggle or not be sad.

“We’ve received letters from parents who are struggling and asking for help. They don’t know how they’re going to provide a Christmas for their children.

“So, yeah, I mean, it is a big mix of emotions as you’re reading through those letters, for sure.”

Sometimes, individual branch members will see one of those sad letters and sponsor a family or a child to buy gifts or provide help to make their holidays better.

And for many families and children, the letter itself makes the holidays better.

“I have three [kids] of my own, who over the years received a letter back from Santa. Seeing the joy in their eyes is pretty cool,” Swift said. “So, to know that that’s happening out in the community is very special.” **PR**

**NALC President Brian L. Renfro** commended all NALC members who work to improve the lives of those around them. “The holiday season gives us such a rewarding opportunity to give back in different ways to the communities we serve,” he said.

