

Prose and paint



**Philip
Dine**

Along with the typical materials they get at monthly branch meetings, Pittsburgh Branch 84 letter carriers have been receiving something else recently—stories from the route coupled with tips for the route, written by Penn Hills carrier Jonathan Belvin.

“Receiving” might be too nondescript a word; Branch 84 Executive Vice President Patrick Rothwell describes what’s been happening in the union hall on the fourth Thursday of each month: “We put them in the back along with whatever documents we’re passing out to the membership. People scarf them up. We put down 50 to 60 and they’re all gone.”

What strikes Patrick about the youngish carrier’s essays is “the way he interweaves the daily duties of a letter carrier with scenarios he creates, the way he puts it together,” whether he’s unexpectedly stepping into “a lagoon-sized puddle,” or having his soul do “a touchdown dance” when certain things go right vis-à-vis management.

“As a longtime carrier,” Patrick said, “it brought me back to the multiple times I’ve experienced whatever he’s writing about. It’s just spot-on. I can relate to it. I think that’s what most people get from it.”

Indeed, Jonathan deploys well-crafted, unique prose to deliver tales that are invariably entertaining and sometimes laugh-out-loud hilarious.

Wondering where this springs from, I went to the source. As it turns out, Jonathan’s been carrying mail for three years in Pittsburgh, following five years in his native New Jersey, but the spark goes back two decades.

“I could probably trace it back to school,” he said, recalling one day when students were tasked with writing about what was going on in the classroom at that moment.

The next day, his teacher told him his essay was “amazing,” prompting him to think, “Well, maybe I’m good at this.”

Five years ago, he and a friend established an independent publishing company to produce his paperback novels. They set up booths at conventions in the Pittsburgh area and sell the books.

That’s mostly for fun, Jonathan says, as are the stories he now provides to co-workers. “I just do it to boost the morale and to help them out with little tips I’ve picked up along the way,” he said.

“It’s funny, the guys come up to me after the story, want to know more, but it’s kind of like my thing to leave cliffhangers.”

Three weeks ago as I write this, Atlantic City Branch 370 retiree Gunn Lee donated a painting to the Longport Historical Society Museum, next door to city hall, in a ceremony with this New Jersey coastal town’s mayor.

Gunn’s captivating work of art has some history behind it. Thirty years ago, inspired by the dedication of a fellow postal worker who, on his final day at work, lowered the American flag outside the local post office so his replacement could raise it the next morning, Gunn titled his depiction “His Last Job on his Last Day.”

He submitted it to a USPS contest for the agency’s 1995 calendar—his first time entering an art contest—and he was astonished when his painting was among the dozen winners (one for each month) from entries submitted nationwide.

That post office was demolished earlier this year, and the historical society wanted to preserve its memory. Jeff Fusco, the branch’s director of retirees, arranged for his former co-worker—the pair had shared Longport’s two routes for many years—to donate his painting, taking care of all the logistics.

Painting has long been a source of pleasure for Gunn, who graduated from art college in South Korea before immigrating to the United States in 1982, seeking greater opportunity.

“Good thing I did,” Gunn said. “I worked in the post office 33 years. This is a good, decent job. I made a good decision living in this country. I’m a happy camper.”

He learned about his new land through his postal route: “You work outside, meet all different people, and no boss behind me. This is the best job you can have to learn about American people’s life. You talk to different people every day, in every situation. They talk to me. Really, I enjoyed every single day.”

Branch 370 President Gregg Kilar—who alerted me to this story—left his native Poland in 1992, during Eastern Europe’s challenging transition from communism. He eventually succeeded Jeff on a Longport route, and got to know Gunn well.

“Gregg, he’s a Polish guy. I like him,” Gunn said. “Before I retired, he worked next to me, for more than 10 years. He’s like a little brother to me.”

In this small town, for this tale, the *United States Postal Service* takes on, perhaps, an even broader significance.

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