

Reflections on recent events in the nation's capital



**Philip
Dine**

NALC's annual Heroes of the Year awards ceremony on March 20 preceded by five days the National Press Club's wide-ranging panel discussion on postal issues.

Though different in nature, each of those events—occurring less than a mile apart in Washington, DC—highlighted a key strength of our union: the dedication letter carriers show daily on the route as they serve their communities in multiple ways, or our union's ability to communicate to the media, public and policymakers the value of America's postal network and those who make it work.

Meanwhile, a third event occurred in between those two—the postmaster general's abrupt departure.

Every Heroes ceremony is unique.

What struck me this time was the depth of the roster. Often, several awardees' heroics stand out. Here, it was as if we had five all-stars on the court and six more on the bench, in two ways: the bravery their actions reflected, and the obstacles they surmounted to accomplish the mission.

In saving a motorist who'd veered off a highway into a barrier, for example, Tesfaye Deyasso couldn't call for help extricating the unconscious driver, given rush hour traffic. The barrier blocked the driver's door, the car emitted flames, the smoke disoriented Tesfaye—yet he helped rescue the man seconds before fire engulfed the car. Rungphet Bodnar rescued a little girl from a ferocious dog, repeatedly spraying the dog and hoping it would desist before a depleted can would make her the target. She saved the girl's arm and perhaps her life. Jerry Loney aided a customer who had attempted suicide, then helped turn the man's life around, all while coping with his own PTSD. (For full coverage, see page 18.)

Postmaster General Louis DeJoy's enthusiastic remarks about letter carriers who "spring into action and help people in distress," making us "trusted friends in every community," gave no hint that just four days later—on Monday, March 24—he would resign.

The PMG news, plus escalating rhetoric about dismantling the Postal Service, heightened anticipation for the National Press Club Headliners event the next morning, two blocks from the White House.

The press club was my old stomping grounds, but much has since changed, including safety measures stemming from threats apparently now facing reporters—such as security codes to enter. So, I gratefully hitched an elevator ride to the 13th floor with a man named Ed Kelley, president of the National Press Club's Journalism Institute. We talked briefly about the craft and about Ed's father, who'd delivered mail in northern Oklahoma.

Over the years, I'd been to many press club events, some entertaining, others informative, but to be honest I wasn't sure about this one. NALC had scant time to prepare—just two days earlier, on Sunday, March 23, our union had held hundreds of "Fight Like Hell!" rallies nationwide, requiring much advance planning.

Yet, in every respect, the panel discussion—featuring President Renfroe plus his counterparts from the APWU and the rural carriers—was extraordinary. Our president's message stood out as pitch perfect in content and tone.

Indeed, the Associated Press, which reaches thousands of print and broadcast outlets nationwide, quoted him more than any other panelist or postal stakeholder about the existential risks here for all Americans.

Writing this, I reached out for an evaluation of the Headliners panel to Ed, who was dean of the University of Oklahoma's college of journalism and mass communications following decades as a reporter, Washington bureau chief, managing editor and top editor at various newspapers, and an NBC stint.

"I thought they made their case," he said in old-school language reflecting the neutrality that once dominated the profession, with journalists hesitant to express their own views. "It seemed to me that the three presidents were making the case to a Washington audience that, in their opinion, the Postal Service remains an essential part of American life ... and that they were going to try to make sure that their representatives in Congress were reminded of that fact."

Translation: *They got their message out, effectively, to a key audience.*

Equally interesting was what Ed related about his father's 37-and-a-half-year postal career in small Perry, OK, from 1948 to 1985 in various crafts, sandwiched around Korean War-era Marine Corps service.

"My dad was the youngest son of a single mom during the Great Depression," Ed said. "He felt really fortunate that he was raised by the guys in that Post Office, some of whom were WWI veterans. These long-term postal employees told him 'This is what we do.' That's a large part of where he got a very strong work ethic, by emulating those men. He became the breadwinner in our family. I'm very proud of him."

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