

NATIONAL HEROES OF THE YEAR

The Heroes of the Year honorees are selected from more than 100 nominees, whose stories of heroism and community service were published over the course of a year in this magazine, as has been done since 1974.

A panel of independent judges reviewed the stories about heroic and humanitarian acts published in *The Postal Record* between July and June and gathered in a meeting to determine the winners.

2019 HEROES OF THE YEAR

Hero of the Year—Austin Rentz

An unusual sound at the home of an elderly patron alerted Waterloo, IA Branch 512 member Austin Rentz while he was on his route on March 13, 2018. He heard a beeping noise through the walls, and thought that it might be a home security alarm.

Knowing that it was the house of the postmaster's mother, the carrier called Branch 512 President Thomas Kinn and asked him to alert the postmaster, just in case. He then continued on his route.

"As I was coming back on my swing, [the noise] got louder," Rentz said, adding that something just didn't seem right. He said that he told himself, "You should go do something."

He went up close to the woman's house. "I saw the front door open and saw this black smoke coming out," the carrier said. He realized that the beeping sound had been from a smoke detector.

His instincts kicked in. "I went inside to help the lady get safely out of her house," he said. The homeowner had started to cook something on the stove, but had walked to another room and forgotten about it.

Rentz then went back inside the home to try to let the smoke vent. "The smoke was so thick, I had to cover my mouth going in," he said. "I was opening windows as best I could."

Afterward, he rejoined the woman outside and stayed with her until the postmaster arrived; shortly thereafter, firefighters arrived to put out the fire.

The postmaster later told Rentz how grateful he was and how he now had an

even better idea of the ways in which carriers sometimes have to go above and beyond on their routes.

In naming Rentz the 2019 National Hero of the Year, judges noted how compelling this event was. "He placed himself in very grave danger to save a life and protect property," they said.

While the six-year letter carrier said he was "very honored" to receive this award, he insisted that he doesn't see himself as a hero.

"I just did something that anyone would do," Rentz told the crowd at the Heroes of the Year ceremony about his actions. "I'm thankful for my job, the union and the great customers I have."

Humanitarian of the Year—Mitchell Rivas

Mitchell Rivas is a man of contrasts—contrasts that have propelled him on a journey that helps medically fragile children and their families while imbuing a community with a sense of service to others.

Rivas, a member of Cleveland Branch 40, is a tough-looking former Marine with a big heart. A letter carrier with 1,000 houses on his route who's engaged in his branch yet finds the energy to run a large organization. A father who's overcome personal tragedy to help others.

"We've been through a lot, but we've taken our tragedy and turned it into triumph," Rivas said.

Maryssa's Mission Foundation, which he founded on Dec. 2, 2015, provides cheer, love and toys to hundreds of hospitalized children in Ohio, especially during the holidays. It began as Rivas's way to deal with the loss of his daughter Maryssa from congenital heart failure, and has taken on a life of its own.

"We have helped more than 2,000 individuals, provided hundreds of meals and kept displaced families who were far from home in safe lodging for more than 400 nights," he said. "Our goal is to bring food, love and lodging to in-need families so we can be the blessing we prayed to receive."

Rivas, who joined the Postal Service in 2006 after five years in the Marine Corps, is an assistant steward and delivers mail in the Cleveland suburb of Berea, where his foundation is based.

Maryssa, a twin who died at 28 months of age on Nov. 13, 2015, spent half her life in hospitals, getting most of her care at Cincinnati Children's Hospital. While there, Rivas met Nelson Soto, who is the provost and vice president of academic affairs at nearby Union Institute & University, through a church connection. After the two families grew close through Soto's daily visits to bring food to Rivas at the hospital, Soto moved to a house large enough to accommodate Mitchell and his wife, Mindy.

Having exhausted his postal leave, Rivas entered a leave-without-pay status as he remained with his daughter. He used the G.I. Bill, getting tuition and a stipend to earn his master's degree in organizational leadership at Union, then used it to establish the foundation in Maryssa's memory.

"I'm just impressed with what Mitchell did during that time," Soto said. "He took his education studies seriously and did something to benefit his daughter and others."

As an example, when Lisa Drew's nephew went to the hospital for emergency surgery after a liver transplant, Mitchell and Mindy, who learned of the situation through mutual acquaintances, met with Drew just before she left to join her family. They provided the family with funds for accommodations and food.

"They also gave us a bag of goodies and blankets," Drew said. "You could really feel the love in that donation. You can tell this is where his heart is. It really touched me."

"They went through such a huge loss, and they're giving back. Their hearts are so big."

Drew's family reciprocated, taking part in a fundraiser last summer at a minor league baseball stadium that raised money for the foundation. "You saw a number of families at that event who've been helped by Maryssa's Mission Foundation and who came together to help," Drew said.

His community has rallied behind the effort.

Local police set aside an entire weekend in December when, as volunteers,

they escorted Rivas and Mindy—along with Santa—from hospital to hospital, bringing toys as well as food for the families. Additionally, the police engaged in a month-long toy collection campaign for the foundation.

“He’s an inspiration,” Berea Police Chief Joe Grecol said.

“He and his wife have put together a great effort to reach these families when they’re going through one of the toughest times of their lives, to try to make it just a little bit easier for them,” Grecol said. “His life is one of service, whether it’s delivering mail to people or allowing parents to spend the time concentrating on their kids while he takes care of some of their day-to-day needs.”

In naming Rivas the 2019 Humanitarian of the Year, the judges were highly impressed by the dedication and spirit of service he demonstrated. “He turned personal tragedy into triumph,” they said. “He has overcome challenges with losing a child and turned his experience into a way to help others.”

Rivas called his customers his favorite part of his job and thanked them for their support. “After losing my 2-year-old daughter, I returned to my route that was decorated in pink ribbons, everywhere, hanging from mailboxes, trees and telephone poles,” he said. “I definitely feel their love.”

Rivas described receiving the award as “amazing.” He praised his community and colleagues for their vital role in supporting the foundation’s efforts.

“We’ve not only united our community, the public and private sector, in a spirit of volunteerism, but the Post Office is on board,” he said. “My brothers and sisters in the letter carrier field are supporters and come out and volunteer.”

While accepting his award, Rivas noted that, after the death of their child, “We knew we had to do something to make a difference.”

Mentioning that they were about to reach the four-year “angel-versary” of losing their daughter, Rivas said that “life is fragile, life is fluid,” adding, “I encourage each and every one of you to live life to its fullest. There’s nothing that is worth stressing out about—noth-

ing. I encourage you to love one another, to unite and to serve.”

Special Carrier Alert Hero of the Year— Ivan Crisostomo

“Behind this tree, there was this young lady, crying,” Sacramento, CA Branch 133 member Ivan Crisostomo recalled about delivering mail on June 8, 2018.

The carrier stopped to check on the girl, 16-year-old Crystal Allen. He asked her if he could be of help, but she didn’t want to talk. The carrier made sure that the young woman knew it was safe to speak to him, and she finally did.

“She started to point to her arm, saying: ‘They were putting things in me. They were putting things in me. They are coming to get me,’ ” Crisostomo later recounted to the local Fox TV news affiliate.

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “Nobody is going to get you. I’m here for you.”

He helped Allen call her mother, Stacy Ohman, who in turn called 911.

“I couldn’t even understand her, she was so upset,” Ohman told the local ABC-TV affiliate. “She gave the phone to Ivan, and he instantly kicked into gear and told me that he would save my daughter.”

Crisostomo stayed there with Allen until emergency responders arrived and helped to barricade the girl from view.

“There were very gruesome people driving around, looking and kind of slowing down,” he said.

Fox reported that Allen allegedly had been “drugged, tortured and abused” for three months before she escaped. Ohman told KOVR-TV, the local CBS affiliate, that her daughter had met a “friend” who lured her into a world of drugs and sex trafficking. “I was kidnapped and held captive and abused,” Allen told KOVR.

Authorities eventually pieced together more details of the events that the teen had shared with the carrier, including her account of fleeing from the vehicle of her captors, who were looking for her when Crisostomo came to her aid. She had managed to grab a cell phone on her way out.

“I just cried all the time and prayed

that I’d get to see my mom again,” Allen told Fox. “They told me that they were taking me somewhere to hurt me and I kind of just thought I’d grow the balls and jump out of the car.”

Allen was taken to a local hospital and was soon reunited with family at home.

“He stepped up where a lot of people would have continued driving down the road, and he made a huge, positive impact in this young girl’s life,” Sacramento County Sheriff’s Deputy David Cuneo told the CBS affiliate.

Crisostomo told the station that he was happy Allen was safe. “The way I see her, she has a wonderful future ahead,” he said. “She’s doing so well. I’m happy. I’m really happy.”

Allen and Ohman later thanked Crisostomo in person at a Postal Service event where he was honored for his heroism. “Ivan himself is a hero for saving me,” Allen told Fox, “even though he doesn’t think it.”

“I was very happy to see her,” the carrier said. “The mother and father were very grateful.” He’s also remained in touch with Ohman, to keep up with Allen’s progress.

Crisostomo’s heroics received media attention worldwide, appearing in outlets such as the New York Post and CNN; The Independent and The Mirror in the United Kingdom; and El Comercio and Andina news agency in Peru. He said that the media coverage was far beyond his expectations.

He advises fellow carriers to be aware of what is going on around them and to not hesitate to provide assistance to others.

The Heroes of the Year judges were impressed with Crisostomo’s keen situational awareness. “He could have kept walking,” they said. “He took so many definitive actions, and his caring for the victim made a huge difference immediately and certainly long term.”

Because of this, they named him the 2019 Special Carrier Alert winner.

Of his own actions, the 21-year letter carrier said he had just wanted to help Allen. “I don’t see myself as a hero,” Crisostomo said. “One thing was for sure: I was not going to abandon her in

that situation.”

He told the crowd while accepting his award, “It’s hard to express the pain that she expressed with her crying. It’s something that you cannot forget.”

Crisostomo also extolled the virtues of letter carriers. “We love what we do. We do it with love,” he said.

Eastern Region Hero of the Year—Theresa Jo Belkota

It was the evening of June 1, 2018, and Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 member Theresa Jo Belkota was home preparing dinner when she heard screams of “Call 911!” coming from her cousin’s neighboring yard.

The carrier ran out the door to a terrible scene. Her cousin’s 10-year-old son, Gavin, had been run over by a riding lawn mower, which had severely injured his foot. The boy’s father, Jason, had been mowing and avoided his other two children in front of him, but hadn’t seen Gavin as he began backing up. “It was a horrific, horrific accident,” Belkota said. “No one was to blame.”

The boy was lying on the ground, and his parents were in a panic. Gavin’s mother, Jackie, also yelled for Belkota to call 911.

The carrier asked Jackie to call 911 instead, since Belkota knew what she needed to do to stop the bleeding. She took off her shirt to wrap the boy’s leg and used it to apply pressure to the femoral artery at the top of the leg to limit blood loss until medical assistance arrived. “There was tissue just hanging there,” she said. “He had no big toe.”

The carrier instructed Jason to search the yard for the rest of the foot. Additionally, Belkota told the other children to get ice and a blanket for their brother. She was worried that “[Gavin] might get cold,” she said. “I was afraid he’d go into shock.” She told Gavin to recite the Lord’s Prayer repeatedly, trying to distract him while his parents stayed on the line with the 911 operator.

A medevac helicopter and a police officer with an ambulance arrived a short time later. The officer had a tourniquet and assisted Belkota as she applied it to the injured leg. To ensure that pressure was continuously applied, the carrier firmly supported both sides of the

boy’s leg.

Belkota, who has no professional medical training, attributed her quick thinking to watching an episode of the TV show “Law and Order: SVU,” in which a child bled out of his femoral artery in less than a minute. “I never thought I’d have it in me to do something like that,” she said of her actions. “It was a miracle I was even there.”

The helicopter had landed on a golf course nearby, so once Belkota and the medical personnel had Gavin stabilized, they put him in the ambulance for transport to the medevac. Gavin was in the hospital for a few weeks and had his foot amputated three inches above the ankle, but his leg healed well; he also was fitted for a prosthetic foot and underwent occupational therapy.

The carrier’s quick actions and decisiveness have been credited for saving the boy’s leg and possibly his life. While selecting her to receive the 2019 Eastern Region Hero award, the judges noted the criticalness of her role. “It was a very traumatic situation, but she handled it with real poise,” they said. “She probably saved the young man’s life.”

The boy’s family gave Belkota a shirt that reads, “Superhero neighbor,” but the carrier said it’s strange to be called a hero. The 25-year postal veteran said she attributes “all of this to divine intervention and divine providence. I’m just a mailman.”

While accepting her award, the carrier added, “It’s been a beautiful thing to watch [the family] grow and thrive, and out of everything that’s happened, that’s what makes me the happiest—to know that Gavin is going to grow and have a full life.”

Central Region Hero of the Year—Mark Schuh

Evansville, IN Branch 377 member Mark Schuh likes dogs—so when he first spotted the “gentleman walking a beagle” while delivering his route on March 4, he wasn’t nervous.

Another dog, however, did raise some concerns. On the opposite side of the street, a man was trying to put a leash on his pit bull. “[The owner and the pit bull] were going in opposite directions,” the carrier said.

Schuh passed both dogs, but soon heard a commotion behind him; he headed back to the scene, where he found the pit bull attacking the smaller beagle and its owner.

The aggressive dog’s owner was attempting to get control of his dog, and Schuh stepped in to help. “Every time we’d get him away, he’d go after the dog again,” he said, adding that this happened at least twice more. “I helped the pit bull owner pull off his dog, but it continued to attack.”

The carrier pulled out his dog repellent spray from his satchel and used it on the pit bull until it retreated. “I sprayed almost a can,” Schuh said. “The pit bull would have killed the dog. He was determined.”

The smaller dog used the opportunity to get away. The beagle was later found nearby on a porch, shaking, and spent three days at the vet getting its wounds tended.

The pit bull and his owner began walking home, and Schuh checked in with the beagle owner, an elderly man who had been injured during the attack. “He was bleeding from his hip and arm from the bites,” Schuh said. The carrier drove over to tell the customer’s wife so that she could take him to the hospital.

“What a wild day,” Schuh said, adding that adrenaline had kicked in and he had reacted instinctively.

The beagle’s owner had to receive stitches for his wounds, but both owner and pet fully recovered after some time. The injured man later visited the post office to thank the 39-year letter carrier for his actions.

In selecting Schuh as the 2019 Central Region Hero of the Year, the judges noted that “he took immediate action and put himself in danger.” They added, “His bravery really stands out.”

Schuh doesn’t believe he’s a hero and was surprised by the media attention he received for his courageous deed. “I’m a quiet person and I don’t like a lot of attention,” he said. “Any of my co-workers would have done it. If I was in trouble, I’d hope someone would help me.”

Asked for his advice to other carriers, his words were simple but sincere:

“Treat and serve your customers the way you would want to be treated.”

In accepting his award, he told the crowd, “I’ve been on the same route for 30 years; I’ve seen a lot of people, good people, and they’ve really been good to me as a carrier. They’ve treated me really great, and I’m just happy I was able to be there for this gentleman on my route and help him.”

Western Region Hero of the Year—Michael Musick

On Feb. 14, 2018, Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100 member Michael Musick was having lunch with fellow Branch 1100 carriers Areli Ramirez and Noemy Martinez on the curbside in front of Ramirez’s LLV.

“All of a sudden, this car started swerving,” Musick said. “I noticed it out of the corner of my eye.” The carrier quickly jumped to the side and yelled for the his co-workers to watch out as the car barreled toward them.

He immediately grabbed Ramirez, who was closest to him, and attempted to pull her away. Musick almost got her out of the path of the car, but she sustained a crushed ankle.

“It just scraped me,” he said of his own injury. “I was really lucky.”

Martinez, who was out of reach, was not as fortunate. “I noticed her leg was gone,” Musick said. “I was trying to keep her calm.”

Musick thought quickly and applied his belt as a tourniquet to keep Martinez from bleeding out.

After hitting the two carriers, the careening car then struck the LLV head-on, sending it into a light pole, which finally brought both vehicles to a halt. Three children were in the back seat of the out-of-control car, but none was hurt.

Police and paramedics soon arrived. Martinez’s leg was amputated at the scene, and the injured carriers were taken to the hospital. Martinez is now learning to walk with a prosthetic leg.

Ramirez had nothing but kind words to say about her co-worker.

“While I panicked and feared for my life, he sprung into action and took care of Noemy and comforted her while paramedics were on their way,” she said. “He paid us many visits at the hospital

and even drove me to visit Noemy when I was able to get around. He really cared for us and for that I’ll always be grateful.”

The judges praised Musick for his calm actions despite the sudden, terrifying experience, and lauded the way he saved two fellow carriers. “There’s no greater action than saving someone’s life,” they said, “but there’s no greater love than saving two of your own.” They named Musick the 2019 Western Region Hero.

Musick told the Heroes of the Year crowd that he didn’t expect to be recognized as a hero. “I was just there taking care of my friends,” the 12-year letter carrier said. But he said that being vigilant is important: “Be aware of your surroundings, and always keep watch.”

2020 HEROES OF THE YEAR

Hero of the Year—Pedro Mendoza

The scene of a man yelling at a woman caught the attention of Grand Junction, CO Branch 913 member Pedro Mendoza while he was on his route on Jan. 13. “I thought it was a domestic disturbance at first,” he said, and moved quickly to intervene. As he got closer, however, he heard the woman screaming at the man to get away from her and her baby. “I heard him telling her, ‘I’ll kill you,’ and I thought, ‘Oh no, you’re not. Not on my watch,’” the 20-year carrier said.

As Mendoza moved forward, another man also stepped in from across the street. The neighbor, Carlos Garcia, yelled at the suspect to get away from the woman, and “[the man] turned around to go for him,” Mendoza recalled. To keep the man from attacking Garcia, Mendoza asked him what his problem was, and the man turned around to face the carrier. At that point Garcia’s two daughters walked up the street, and Mendoza told Garcia to go protect them: “I said, ‘I can handle this.’”

This comment appeared to infuriate the man further; as he approached the carrier, screaming vicious insults, the man pulled out a knife. “He came toward me, swinging the knife,” the carrier said. “I took off my postal coat and wrapped it around my right arm. Then, I waited for the right moment to punch him or take him down.”

Finally, Mendoza saw his chance. “He swung the knife a few times, and then he stumbled,” the carrier said. “And the second the knife was [pointing] down, I rushed him.” He tackled the man to the ground and placed him in a chokehold. “I slammed him to the ground until I heard the knife drop,” he added.

Garcia then came over and grabbed the knife, and they waited for the police to arrive. The man struggled to free himself, but Mendoza kept him pinned, telling him, “I’m not going to let you hurt any of my customers.”

When police arrived, the suspect attempted to escape, but Mendoza helped officers recapture and handcuff him. “Then I picked up my scanner and went to deliver the mail,” the carrier said.

Mendoza’s actions later were covered by several local news outlets, and the elementary school along his route put up a large sign thanking him for his bravery. The maintenance workers at the post office decorated his postal vehicle with stickers praising him and comparing him to Captain America, the superhero. “I say, I’m not a hero; I just did what I had to do,” Mendoza said.

The judges were deeply impressed with Mendoza’s actions and named him the 2020 National Hero of the Year. “He didn’t know if he’d be killed—the unpredictability of what he was getting into” elevates his heroism, they said. “He put his life in danger.”

Mendoza stated that the most important thing to him was protecting his customers. “People come up to me and say, ‘I don’t know if I would have done what you did for just anyone,’” he added. “But it’s not just anyone. It’s the people on my route.”

Western Region Hero of the Year—Chyanne Fauntleroy

Chyanne Fauntleroy was on her route on April 19, 2019, when she saw police and volunteers passing out a bulletin for a 15-year-old girl named Abbey, who had been missing for 21 hours. Abbey has autism and functions at the level of a 12-year-old.

The Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100 member asked for a flyer so that she could keep an eye out for Abbey while delivering mail. Fauntleroy then continued driv-

ing her route. While driving, she spotted “a girl matching the description with no shoes on” walking down the street, she said. It was about two blocks away from where the girl had last been seen.

The city carrier assistant immediately pulled over next to the girl and began talking to her to put her at ease. “I used to work with kids with disabilities,” Fauntleroy said. “As she’s talking to me, I’m calling police.”

To build their connection, Fauntleroy told Abbey that she herself was missing and needed help. Abbey said she would help her and told her not to worry or cry.

The carrier kept police on the phone as she asked Abbey random questions to keep her talking. She said that police told her, “You’re doing great; ask her these questions.”

The carrier noticed that Abbey had a drawing in her hand and asked the girl to make a drawing for her, which she did, as Fauntleroy kept her talking and kept asking the questions police suggested, such as when she had last eaten. When Fauntleroy thought she was losing the girl’s attention, she threw in questions like, “What’s your favorite color?”

“I just kept switching the story up,” she said.

Fauntleroy kept the girl distracted until undercover police arrived.

Medics determined that Abbey was dehydrated but otherwise was all right, and soon reunited her with her family. More than 80 volunteers with the sheriff’s department had been out looking for the girl.

Then, a few weeks later, in early May, Fauntleroy was on her route when she came across a 3-year-old girl who was by herself.

“Where’s Mama?” she asked the crying girl when she ran up to her. She appeared not to speak English, so the carrier called 911 and waited with her for about 10 minutes. Before police arrived, the child’s mother came, and Fauntleroy was able to reunite them.

In selecting Fauntleroy as the 2020 Western Region Hero of the Year, the judges noted that the girls’ lives “were in pretty serious danger,” adding that it was important that the carrier “knew how to keep [both girls] safe and engaged during that time.”

The second-year letter carrier received praise in local and national media for watching out for her patrons. “I don’t think I’m a hero,” Fauntleroy said. “I was just doing the right thing that anyone else would do.”

Central Hero Hero of the Year—Gerald Soileau

“I thought it was thunder, it was so loud,” Gerald Soileau recalled about hearing what sounded like an explosion outside the post office on Saturday, Dec. 28, 2019. He and fellow Lafayette, LA Branch 1760 members were busy casing their routes that morning when the sound echoed through the post office.

He was one of the first carriers to exit the building to see what was going on—and when he opened the door, he saw a scene from a nightmare. “Everything was on fire,” Soileau said. A mid-sized plane had crashed into their parking lot, hitting several vehicles and setting most of the area ablaze.

Soileau reacted quickly; realizing that the main gate was blocked by the fire, he rushed around to the other gate, which was padlocked shut due to construction. As Soileau described it: “God allowed me to hit the gate, and the chains fell off.” The carrier then was able to sprint through to the parking lot. “The fuselage [of the plane] was scattered everywhere, and the whole area was covered in black smoke,” he said. “I felt like I was running in slow motion.”

After the plane crash-landed and broke into pieces, a large part of it had landed in a field next to the post office. “It left a trail of smoke and fire,” Soileau said. The carrier ran over to that part of the plane and helped rescue the only surviving passenger, who had severe burns all over his body. The other five passengers on the plane had been killed in the crash.

Once Soileau had pulled the injured man to safety, he ran over to another victim of the crash: a carrier’s spouse, Danielle Britt, who had driven to the office to surprise the carriers with donuts. The plane had collided with her car, ejecting her from the vehicle.

Soileau and a holiday clerk carried Britt away from the area, which was still in flames. She was badly burned and had to undergo numerous surgeries after her

hospitalization. Soileau also was taken to the hospital, where he was treated for smoke inhalation and stress.

The 22-year carrier described the experience as surreal. “It seemed like I was having an out-of-body experience,” he explained. “I wasn’t scared that I was going to die—I just knew when I heard them crying for help that I had to help.”

The Heroes of the Year judges were impressed by Soileau’s actions, commenting that they “had never heard anything like it before.” Soileau had “probably saved lives,” they added.

Having spent 10 years in the Air Force, Soileau thinks his military training helped him keep calm in the extraordinary situation. “I was just trying to do what I could,” he said.

As for his recognition as the 2020 Central Region Hero of the Year, the carrier expressed gratitude for the award, but was hesitant about the label. “I really didn’t see myself as a hero,” Soileau said. “I reacted and did what we all should do—help our brothers and sisters.”

Eastern Hero Hero of the Year—Sydney Rodgers

As Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3 member Sydney Rodgers began to drive away from a house on her route that she had just delivered to on Feb. 12, a car pulled into the house’s driveway.

As the carrier watched, a man got out of the car, dragged his female passenger out of the car, and engaged in an altercation with her, Rodgers said.

The carrier called the police, and then ran to the woman’s aid. “I told the guy to get off of her, and then he started coming at me,” Rodgers said.

The carrier’s interference gave the woman time to flee inside, but it didn’t stop the attacker for long. Once more, he began to move in intimidating fashion toward Rodgers.

“He was yelling at me and coming at me,” she said. She went back to her truck, and once she called 911, the man fled the scene.

Buffalo police received the call from Rodgers at 11:30 a.m. and responded to the scene. Rodgers provided police with the license plate number of his car. “We carry pens with us, so I was able to write it down as he was driving away,” she said.

She also briefed her postal supervisors on the incident, and postal inspectors discussed the matter at a meeting with the station's letter carriers the next day.

Rodgers, a former four-year letter carrier who left the post office earlier this year, said that she felt she had made a difference with her intervention, adding: "I stepped in and did what anyone should."

Carrier Alert Hero—Matthew King, Champaign, IL Branch 671

"I was parked for my 10-minute break, and I looked to my left," Champaign, IL Branch 671 member Matthew King recalled. It was March 12, 2019, and King was on his route.

"I [originally] thought that someone was grilling," he said, "but then I knew that there was too much fire."

One of the houses in the neighborhood had caught fire—a stray cigarette butt had set the porch ablaze. "I ran over and banged on the door [to alert anyone inside]," the three-year carrier said. As it turned out, an entire family, including three children, was still inside the home, unaware that the house was in flames.

After helping everyone outside, King called 911 and went into the home to find buckets. He subsequently organized a chain of water buckets with help from neighbors, and then managed to keep the fire contained until firefighters arrived. Thanks to King's timely intervention and quick thinking, "we were able to save the house," he said, and nobody was injured.

The story was covered at the time by the local NBC affiliate, WAND-TV, and King was recognized in an award ceremony at the fire station for his act of bravery. But King, an Army veteran, shrugged off the praise and ceremonies. "I don't really feel like I had a choice in the matter," he said. "When there's something that needs to be done," such as extinguishing a burning building, "you just have to do it."

The judges praised King's impulse to act quickly, saving the lives of a family and saving their home from serious damage, and recognized him with NALC's 2020 special Carrier Alert Award. "He was taking care of the neighborhood," they said.

Unit Citation—Eric Beu and Mark Simone

After attending Branch Officers Training

for the day in Minneapolis, Eric Beu and Mark Simone, members of Oklahoma City, OK Branch 458, decided to take a train to the Mall of America in the late afternoon of Sept. 17, 2018.

While on the way, a young blind man got off at the same stop as the two carriers. After noticing that the man was about to step onto the open tracks, Beu asked if he needed help. The man, Abraham, told the carrier that he was looking for the Mega Bus stop. Beu googled the location and discovered that the man was at the opposite end of town.

Simone and Beu wanted to help Abraham, so they assisted him in making his way across town. On the way, the two carriers got to know the man, who was in Minneapolis to check out a school for the blind. Abraham's friend had driven him from Chicago and, on the way to Minnesota, they had gotten into an argument; his friend then left him and drove back to Chicago. "It was just a bad deal for him," Simone said.

Abraham asked if they could help him get back home to Chicago. Simone and Beu agreed that they couldn't leave him stranded in Minneapolis.

Beu bought the man a bus ticket back to Chicago. Because Abraham hadn't eaten since breakfast, and the bus wasn't scheduled to leave for about three hours, they found a restaurant that was still open. After Simone treated Abraham to dinner, the carriers walked him to the bus stop, put him on the correct bus, and made sure he had cab fare to get from the bus station to his home in Chicago.

Abraham called Beu the next morning to let them know that he had made it home and thanked them for the help. Both carriers dismissed any accolades for their actions.

"We just did what any other normal human being would do," Simone, a 21-year carrier and a Marine Corps veteran, said.

Beu, in his sixth year of carrying mail, said that, as letter carriers, "We keep our heads on a swivel for all sorts of things."

Simone added, "Your customers notice everything you do, whether you see them every day or not."

Although their co-workers have taken to singing "Wing Beneath My Wings" to them

at the post office, Beu said that while they were "very humbled and honored," to receive the award, they hadn't acted to gain recognition—they simply "saw someone in need."

Simone echoed that sentiment. "We're not heroes," he said. "You're just at the right place at the right time. It's just chance."

The judges saw heroism and compassion in their actions, though, and were impressed by the pair's ability to stay calm and handle the situation. In bestowing NALC's 2020 Unit Citation Award on Beu and Simone, the judges said, "They went above and beyond the call of duty to help a stranger who needed assistance."

Beu said their actions are all part of the profession. "Our job requires [that] we are observant; this carries over to our life outside the USPS," he said. "When you see someone in trouble, you help without hesitation."

Humanitarian of the Year—Jerry Giesting, Cincinnati Branch 43

Jerry Giesting did more than mourn after his son, Brad Giesting, died in 2016 after a long struggle with liposarcoma, a rare form of brain cancer. Giesting, an Army veteran like his son and a member of Cincinnati, OH Branch 43, founded a charity group, Brad's Blessings, to give back to the community.

"We didn't want his memory to die," Giesting said. Brad served in Iraq as part of the 101st Airborne from 2005 to 2006. While in Iraq, he was exposed to burn pits, used for garbage disposal, in which hazardous waste often was burned. Some veterans and health professionals suspect that the exposure to burn pits has led to health problems, including the type of cancer that took Brad's life.

After returning from Iraq in 2006, Brad married his high school sweetheart and had two daughters. He was diagnosed with cancer in May of 2013, and despite 70 rounds of chemotherapy, 30 radiation treatments, six surgeries and a last-hope clinical trial, Brad succumbed to the cancer on Oct. 22, 2016.

Despite his enormous health problems, Brad managed to maintain a positive outlook. "He kept the family laughing

throughout his ordeal,” Giesting said. “He had a huge sense of humor and tried to keep people on a high note, even when he was struggling.”

To honor Brad’s memory, his family promotes a “Random Acts of Kindness Day” each year on Oct. 22, the anniversary of his death, to urge people to spread love. On that day, Brad’s Blessings distributes care packages for people facing health challenges who are nominated by friends or family. This year, the group received about 75 requests for “sunshine boxes” to spread cheer to ailing people of all ages.

“We started the foundation to help other people who are going through cancer. We tried to find, in particular, families of veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan who were exposed to

the burn pits,” Giesting said.

Brad’s Blessings’ activities include scholarships and gifts of supplies for students at both grade school and high school levels. Meanwhile, the Bradley M. Giesting Kindness Scholarship is awarded to a student from a veteran’s household with financial need. The first scholarship helped a student pay tuition to attend Archbishop McNicholas High School in Cincinnati, which Brad attended. Also, three graduates of McNicholas who are headed for military careers after graduation received gifts to help them as they moved to a new chapter in life. The foundation awards one high school and one grade school student a scholarship each year.

True to its name, Brad’s Blessings has allowed his family to turn a tragedy

into service to others with similar challenges.

“It’s a terrible thing to have happened,” Giesting said, “but we know there are a lot of people out there like him suffering—that’s why we want to keep his memory alive and try to help those who have served.

“I’m very surprised, shocked and pleased,” at being named NALC’s 2020 Humanitarian of the Year, Giesting, a 35-year letter carrier, added.

The judges were impressed at the way Brad’s Blessings multiplies its impact to encourage others to join in bringing help and good cheer to those in need. The effort “spreads exponentially to help others,” they said. “It grows and grows beyond the one deed.”

