

# 2019



# OF THE YEAR AWARDS

National Association of Letter Carriers  
Washington, DC

Wednesday, October 30, 2019

# Honoring

## **Western Region Hero:**

**Michael Musick of Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100**

## **Central Region Hero:**

**Mark Schuh of Evansville, IN Branch 377**

## **Eastern Region Hero:**

**Theresa Jo Belkota of Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3**

## **Special Carrier Alert Award:**

**Ivan Crisostomo of Sacramento, CA Branch 133**

## **Humanitarian of the Year:**

**Mitchell Rivas of Cleveland, OH Branch 40**

## **National Hero of the Year:**

**Austin Rentz of Waterloo, IA Branch 512**

# Program

## **Opening Remarks**

Prayer

Welcome

Greetings from distinguished guests

Importance of Heroes of the Year Awards

## **Presentations**

Regional Heroes

Special Carrier Alert Award

National Humanitarian of the Year

National Hero of the Year

## **Closing Remarks**

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## **This year's judges**

### **Richard Bowers**

Fire Chief

Ocean City Fire Department

Ocean City, MD

### **Christine Miller**

Manager, Labor Engagement

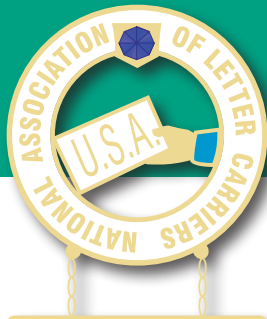
United Way Worldwide

### **Christopher Godfrey**

Chief Judge and Chairman

Employees' Compensation Appeals Board

U.S. Department of Labor



2019 WESTERN REGION  
HERO OF THE YEAR

# Michael Musick

Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100

**O**n 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.

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 said he didn't expect to be recognized as a hero. "I was looking out for my friends," the 12-year letter carrier said. But he said other carriers could learn from his experience: "Be aware of your surroundings, and always keep watch."



# Mark Schuh

Evansville, IN Branch 377



**E**vansville, 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.”





# Theresa Jo Belkota

Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3

**I**t 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.

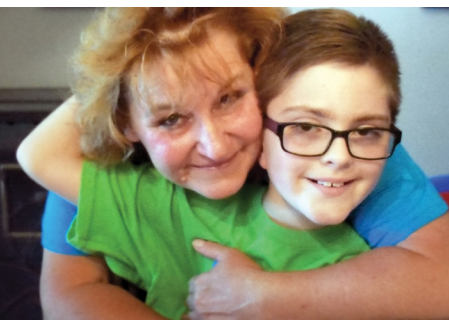
A medevac helicopter and a police officer with an ambulance arrived a short time later. The officer had a tourniquet and assisted Belkota as she applied it to the injured leg. To ensure that pressure was continuously applied, the carrier firmly supported both sides of the boy’s leg.

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.”



Theresa Jo Belkota with Gavin



# Ivan Crisostomo

Sacramento, CA Branch 133

**“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.

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.”

**Crystal Allen  
thanks Ivan  
Crisostomo for  
helping her get  
home safely.**



# Mitchell Rivas

Cleveland, OH Branch 40

**M**itchell 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.

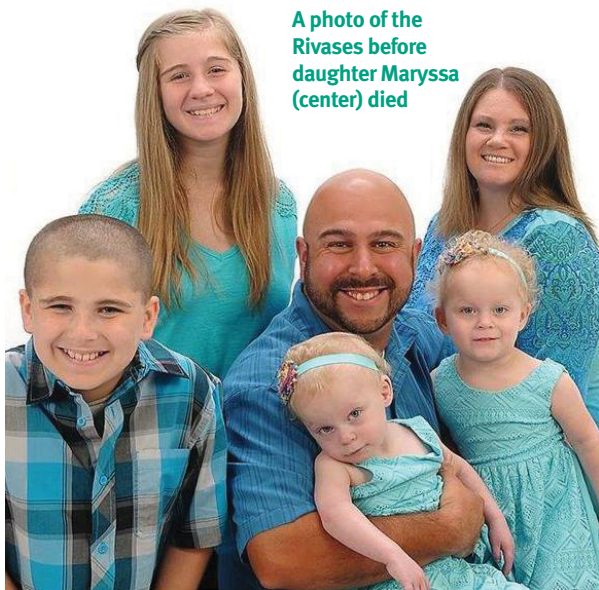
"We have helped more than 2,000 individuals, provided hundreds of meals and kept displaced families who were far from home in safe lodging for more than 400 nights," he said. "Our goal is to bring food, love and lodging to in-need families so we can be the blessing we prayed to receive."

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 Mitch did during that time,"



**A photo of the Rivases before daughter Maryssa (center) died**

**Rivas helped the family of a 3-year-old with cancer attend a Cavaliers game.**



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 two-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 said of receiving the award, “it’s 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.”

**The Berea Police Department has made Rivas’s foundation one of its major charities.**



# Austin Rentz

Waterloo, IA Branch 512



**A**n 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 feel it's something anyone would do," Rentz said of his actions.



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