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A season for giving

While letter carriers give of themselves year-round, there's something about the holiday season that brings out the better angels of their nature. In this issue of *The Postal Record*, we bring you some of the special moments this time of the year delivers—and some of the ways letter carriers keep the joy alive. However they spread happiness, letter carriers give of themselves—and receive rewards even greater than what they give.

Carrier answers Santa letter asking for help from bullying

Brittany Giles was leaving work one day in December last year when she saw her manager doing something different. “My boss was making these super cute envelopes and stuffing them with a bunch of stuff,” the Port St. Lucie, FL, letter carrier said. They were responses from kids’ letters to Santa. “There were really cute letters she typed up, acknowledging that these kids wrote to Santa, and she put in colored pencils, crayons, coloring books, candy canes, whatever.”

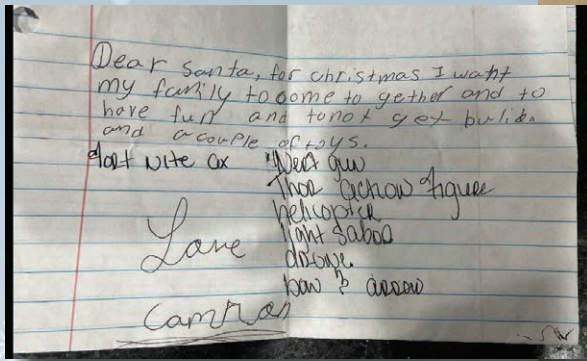
Giles, a six-year letter carrier with West Palm Beach Branch 1690, immediately asked her

manager if there were more. “I saw the bag and I started reading them, and a lot of them broke my heart. There were a lot of super-sad letters,” she said. But one stood out.

Camron King, then 10 years old, asked Santa for some toys and to have his family “come together and to have fun and to not get bullied.”

Giles knew she had to get involved.

“When I read that, you know, I’m a mom. I have two little kids. I’m super big on family. I have always taught my children to be as nice as possible to everyone, especially the struggling children at school that are being picked



on. Those are the ones that you want to go make friends with, right?" she said. "This was almost a year ago now, and I can still tell you exactly what the letter said because it stuck with me so much, because his letter was about how he wanted his family. He didn't want to be bullied. I mean, it broke my heart."

Giles left her post office that evening and went to the return address on the Santa letter—the residence of Camron's grandparents, who looked at this uniformed letter carrier like she was strange. After explaining that she had received Camron's letter and wanted to know what toys he would like (he hadn't included anything specific on his letter), the grandfather began crying.

"You have no idea how much this means to me," he told her. He also called Camron's mother, Amy, who brought the boy to meet Giles.

"He normally goes to Grandma and Grandpa's house after school, and then he had his cousin help him write the letter," Amy King told WPTV, the West Palm Beach NBC affiliate. Camron was born without his left hand and has a muscle nerve disorder. "It's called [Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease], so that affects his nerves and muscles in his legs and arms, so as he gets older it kind of deteriorates.

"They said he wouldn't be able to walk, but he's walking, running, playing soccer. I'm very proud of him. I always say, he's my little miracle baby," King added.

When Giles—a cancer survivor who was told (incorrectly) that she would never have children—met Camron, she told him, "I work for Santa and I read your letter, but you didn't say what type of toys you want. So, he sent me down here to get a list and bring it back to him."

The boy's face lit up and he gave her a list of gifts for him and his family. Giles wrote down his ideas, but she left with a few more that hadn't made it onto the list.

She reached out to St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office Deputies Ethan Kirk and Rebecca Ireland. They all pooled their own money to buy the gifts on the list. And Deputy Kirk told

WPTV that he "asked [Camron] if there's anything I can do for him, whether it's go to his school, talk with his school resource deputy and just try to figure out a plan and try to get this stopped." The police ultimately held an anti-bullying assembly at Camron's school and spoke to every kid there.

After local news covered the story, it began to take on a life of its own. The national organization Bikers Against Bullying contacted Giles and wanted to do something. They rented out a Chuck E. Cheese restaurant and arcade and hosted a party for Camron and his family. Just as he had asked in his letter, he got to come together with his family and have some fun.

"It was a great thing to see how many people truly cared and wanted to get involved and be a part of this," Giles said.

She encourages everyone to help in their community. "I'm sure every community or city has a mayor, and if you don't have anything that your office is a part of, you can always go through that way and try and get involved with your city. But, especially after COVID, things are rough for a lot of people right now," she said.

As for Camron, the carrier still is a part of his life, seeing him and his family regularly. "This is my extended family at this point," she said. "Community is everything. Family is everything. And it doesn't have to be by blood."

"Camron is not going to live a long life," Giles explained. "As he gets older, his body will start shutting down. He does not retain information. He does not remember a lot of things. But the fact that I could give that kid a merry Christmas, even if it only lasted in his mind for a few moments, it was worth it." **PR**

Top l: Camron's Santa letter

Top: Brittany Giles gives Camron a hug.

Above: The party at Chuck E. Cheese for his family and new friends





Michigan branch adopts two schools for the holidays

For Jackson, MI Branch 232, after a long spell of letting holiday giving go by the wayside, the branch ended up giving gifts last year to not only one entire school, but two.



Santa arrives on a motorcycle in Jackson, MI

The family that the branch adopted for the holidays in 2021

Though the branch had been involved in charitable endeavors in past holiday seasons—such as in 2007 when it put a new roof on the house of a father serving abroad in the military—changes in management complicated things. “We have had a revolving door of postmasters, and they didn’t want us doing stuff like this,” Branch 232 President **Deborah Marriott** said. “Only CFC.”

But with a new postmaster more accepting of it, the branch decided to get back to giving in 2021. The branch members brought it up at a union meeting and felt the time was right,

“especially after Covid and so many people lost their jobs,” Marriott said. “Jackson has a lot of families at the poverty level and below.”

When the decision to do something for a family was made by the branch, one of the members said that on their route they had a family with eight foster children who had just moved into the area. The branch voted and decided to adopt the family for the holidays.

“We raised over \$5,000,” Marriott said. “We got them all toys, clothes, brand-new pillows, bedding, blankets. We got them pajamas to put on for New Year’s Eve and toothbrushes.” Everything was themed for the child, “so if they like basketball, they got basketball bedding.”

Carrier **Mark Raczkowski** dressed up as Santa Claus and he received a ride on the back of the local APWU president’s motorcycle with a police escort. “Just seeing the kids light up as we’re bringing in bags and bags and bags and bags of gifts and stuff [was heartwarming],” Marriott said. “They were jumping up and down and screaming.”

It was such a success that for 2022, the branch decided that if helping eight kids felt that good, what if they helped a whole school full of them? “When the president of the local APWU heard what we were doing, he was like, ‘Hey, let’s band together and let’s do two!’” she said.

The schools were two separate elementary schools in underprivileged areas with 900 children in total. “We contacted both the principals to make sure they were down with it,” Marriott said. They were told, “‘Yeah, most of the kids here, they’re on the free lunch program. They come to school in the same clothes every day. They have very little.’ And we were like, ‘We’re on it,’” she said.

The branch started raising money in September, doing 50/50 raffles twice a week. It also set up a “pumpkin” mail hamper for toy donations. And both NALC and APWU members donated money.

Then it was time to do the shopping.

The APWU members did the shopping with



The two schools that the branch and the APWU local adopted for the holidays in 2022: Cascade Elementary (top) and Hunt Elementary (bottom)

the money they raised, while Marriott went to JCPenney and Kohl's department stores as well as ordering from Amazon with her branch's donations. "I would come home from work and there would be a wall in front of my back door with boxes from Amazon," Marriott said. "For over a month, my house, from one end to the other, almost to the ceiling, was nothing but boxes. As it came in, I had to categorize what I had, the age group, boy, girl, so we had everyone covered."

Marriott admitted that she had nightmares leading up to the event: "We're not going to have enough gifts!"

When the time arrived, the postmaster donated a 2-ton truck and NALC and APWU members separated all the toys so that they had enough for both schools, delivering to one a week after the other.

After work on the night before the first school event, they set the toys up on a U-shape of tables and covered them with tablecloths. The next day, Raczkowski dressed up as Santa Claus again while one of the clerks dressed up as an elf to help the kids celebrate. As the kids saw Santa and got to pick a gift, they also received a cocoa packet and a candy cane donated by the branch and a coloring book and crayons donated by the postmaster. Some of the rural letter carriers from the office joined in on their day off for the celebration, too.

"We had so many basketballs, the clerk actually pushed a pumpkin of basketballs out and started throwing it into the bleachers and the kids were just roaring," she said.

Not only did they have enough, "we actually ended up having more than enough gifts. So not only did we do the two schools, we also donated boxes of toys to our homeless shelter and also to a woman called Miss Wanda, who donates to the underprivileged all year round," Marriott said.

The kids at both schools thanked the letter carriers and clerks, and afterward they received thank-you cards. "It was just so heart-wrenching," she said, quoting the messages. "I



got exactly what I wanted," one said. "Santa, thank you so much," another said.

This year, the branch has decided to go back to adopting a single family. "We want to buy, of course, toys and clothes for all the kids and we want to get food for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day," she said. "And we're hoping to raise enough money to get a money order for Consumers Power and help that family with their electric bill for that month, too."

Marriott encourages other branches that want to give back to start local. "Ask people in your branch," she said. "Hey, does anyone on their route have a family that really needs help? That's how we got the one family, because we see it every day. We see them in the summertime, or we see them getting home from school wearing the same clothes all the time, with not many toys. And that's who we want to touch."

"I look at it this way," she said. "Every child that we touched at that elementary school is going to remember that. And hopefully one day they're in a position to pay it forward and help." **PR**





Carrier battles cancer while rocking for Christmas cheer

Music has always been a part of Harry Bittner's life. He grew up listening to Motown records around the house that his parents played, and then got exposed to rock 'n' roll music through neighborhood kids.

He picked up a bass guitar when he was 15 and has loved playing ever since. "I got started just because a friend of mine was kind of dabbling with the guitar," he said. "His older brother was in a band, and we would sneak down and play their instruments when they weren't around."

Fast-forward to 2019, when the Camden, NJ Merged Branch 540 member joined a five-member cover band called uNGLuED. They practice once a week, usually perform two shows a month at bars or other events like festivals, and the bandmates work together to choose songs to cover.

"They jokingly call me 'Heavy Metal Harry' because my background before doing

this cover band was doing heavy metal stuff, so I like harder stuff," Bittner said, and added that his biggest musical inspiration is Iron Maiden bass player Steve Harris. "But we tend to try and pick songs that we know will go over with the crowd," he said. "We're more inclined to do Michael Jackson and Prince. We don't do Metallica and Megadeth, you know what I mean?"

The carrier was enjoying playing regular gigs with the band when uNGLuED's singer, Wally, approached them in the fall of 2020 and told them about his longtime desire to do a traveling Christmas show by driving around a truck to a few locations, and the band would then play some Christmas carols on the back to

spread some cheer. "I immediately said, 'Yeah, I'm in,'" Bittner said.

However, that winter of 2020, COVID-19 was spreading, and events were shutting down. They began to fear that they'd get in trouble for gathering, so Bittner suggested that maybe they raise some money to help out people who need it while they play, in case they were questioned by police.

Then, fortuitously, an acquaintance of the carrier heard about their plans and asked if she could put them in touch with a friend of hers who is a retired prosecutor, who works with a charity and who could help the band find families who could be helped through the money collected.

"And boy, did she ever," Bittner said. "I mean, you hear these nightmare, horrible stories about everything from people that had lost their jobs and just were hurting for money with little kids to a woman that was a victim of domestic violence and kind of out on her own."

Plans soon came together, and the band began scouting locations and practicing songs. Wally spent a few weeks preparing the 20-foot utility trailer, and attaching the drum set to it so they can travel with it.

"We would tow this huge trailer decked out in lights and with a tree on it to a couple of different neighborhoods where we knew it wouldn't be an issue," Bittner said. "And then we went to a school that was closed at night [so] we'd have this big, giant open lot. We went to another community down the road where there was a VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars]."

The first year they played four stops. Bittner's friend, Joe Popow, whom he called "the most authentic Santa you've ever seen in your life" accompanied them. He also recruited his youngest of two daughters, Alyssa, who dressed as an elf and handed out candy canes to children and walked around with a bucket to collect money from concertgoers.

People in the local communities, including some of his co-workers, "bring their kids, kids go see Santa," Bittner said. "They listen to us, give us a couple of bucks, and we would get it to the right people when all this was over."





uNGLuED perform on the back of its mobile stage.

Within a week or so, the band and Santa visited the houses of the selected families and dispersed gift cards and presents. “It kind of grew into this thing where we’d be able to get information on the families, like how many kids, what are their ages, what are their sizes,” he said, adding that the bandmates’ spouses shop for the kids’ clothes and toys, and then they’d all wrap the items.

“It was a huge success,” Bittner said of the 2020 endeavor—so much so “that we had every intention of doing it every year.”

They had just set out preparing for the 2021 show that October when Bittner went in for routine blood work. “Next thing you know, I’m casing mail in the morning. I get a phone call from the nurse, and she says, ‘Your liver enzymes are through the roof, and we’ve got to figure out why,’” the 29-year letter carrier said. “And that just kind of set off this chain of events where I had to get all these different tests.

“It was an ultrasound and then an MRI, and I find out I have this tumor, and they thought I had bile duct cancer initially, and it’s like a death sentence,” he continued, adding that after undergoing a colonoscopy he was eventually correctly diagnosed with Stage IV colorectal cancer. “I’m reading, and I’m thinking, ‘Oh my God, how did I go from perfectly healthy a month ago to, man, I might have three or five years?’ You know, that starts all setting in.”

His eldest daughter, Haley, was getting married that December, and Bittner was convinced by a friend to get his minister’s license to officiate the ceremony, so he did. “She’ll always have this to remember—that her dad married her,” he said.

“Around the same time, we’re doing Year 2 of the Christmas gig. And it’s just under this shroud of uncertainty and fear and what’s going to happen next. I know that chemo is coming, and I just kept thinking, ‘Boy, I hope it doesn’t start un-

til after the Christmas gig,’” he added. “I didn’t want to let my bandmates down. I didn’t want to let the people down that were going to be on the receiving end of these gifts.”

Fortunately, he was able to fully participate in the annual festivities. “It was even a bigger success than the first year. More people turned out, more money was raised, more families were helped,” Bittner said. They started to mix up the format, adding in some regular rock music, too.

They continued to collect cash, sometimes gift cards, and also PayPal donations at each stop. After receiving help from the retired prosecutor the first year with selecting families, the band was able to start finding them on their own. “People started hearing we were doing this, and we’d have people come to [us and] say, ‘Hey, man, I know this family, and they just had a house fire and lost everything. Can you help them out?’” he said. “We’ll check into it and be, like, ‘OK, this is legit. Let’s help these people out.’”

One of his favorite memories from the endeavor was when he and the band was playing a gig in the fall, and he saw a man he recognized but couldn’t place. In between sets, the man approached the band and said they had helped him and his family out the first year when they were in a tough spot. He had then gotten a new job and was doing better, so he wanted to offer a donation for another family in need. “That was really cool, because that was like, we’ve made a difference in these people’s lives, and now they’re appreciative, and they’re here to support us as a band—but more importantly, they’re here to pay it forward and give it to somebody else who’s now down on their luck.”

Bittner began chemotherapy in January 2022 and tried working his postal job through his treatment to keep a sense of normalcy, but he ended up taking some time off here and there





for treatments, which included eight chemo infusions, followed by five radiation treatments, and then a major surgery in which surgeons removed 60 percent of his liver and a section of his colon. In addition, “I had my gallbladder removed, hernia repaired, and I ended up with an ileostomy bag for nine weeks,” he said.

“They sent me [for] a scan in December of last year, and they found a tiny little piece of cancer in my common bile duct,” he continued. “And there again, the first thing I’m thinking is, ‘I don’t know when surgery is going to be, but I hope I can get this Christmas gig in,’ and I find out the surgery is going to be February. We did Christmas show No. 3 last December. And again—bigger, better, more money, more families.”

Being involved with music is both fun and rewarding, Bittner said. “Playing in the band has been so invaluable to me during my cancer journey, because every minute I spend learning a song, playing a song, playing out, it’s another minute that I’m not thinking about cancer,” he said, adding, “And that was really crucial, I think, for me to maintain a good attitude [and] press forward.”

As this issue of *The Postal Record* was going to press, the carrier and his bandmates were winding down the last of their regular gigs for the year and gearing up for the fourth annual

charity show on Dec. 9. “I’m sure it’ll be bigger and better than it’s been the last couple of years. It just keeps growing,” he said. “I think as long as the five of us are together as a band, that we’ll continue to do it.”

Bittner said of their fundraising, “You just do it because it’s the right thing to do. While it’s been a rough two years for my family, there’s people out there that have it worse.” This year they planned to help multiple people yet again, including a family they’ve met who lost everything in a house fire, even their dogs.

“When you’re in a cover band, you’re not looking to be famous or anything,” he said. “At the end of the day, you’re just doing it because it’s fun, and it’s a cool night out. You hope that people dig it, and in our case, with uNGLuED, you hope that you’re building up this fan base that will also contribute to the Christmas thing at the end of the year, and they do. The reason why we’ve collected \$13,000 in three years is because we have people that come see us at those other shows.”

As for himself, “things are looking up. There’s no sign of cancer right now,” Bittner said, and he added, “I’m one of the lucky ones. It’s not lost on me that so many people don’t come out the other side from this. I feel very blessed.”

Haley, whose wedding Bittner presided over, is expecting a baby girl in January, and the carrier and his wife, Joan, are looking forward to being grandparents.

Indeed, he’s thought of his legacy. “I want my kids, and my grandkids eventually, to have something to remember—that even when I was as low as low could be in the worst possible shape anybody could be in, I still was committed to getting out and doing this Christmas gig,” he said.

“And I want people to go, ‘Hey, you know what? This dude, he wasn’t feeling great and he looked like hell, but he bundled up and put hand warmers in his pocket and jumped on a trailer to play Christmas carols to help out other people that weren’t doing so good,’” he added. “That’s what it’s about for me. That’s why I do it.” **PR**

For more information, visit facebook.com/ungluedband.

uNGLuED with Santa and elf (Bittner’s daughter Alyssa)



The better angels keep giving back in New York

New York, NY Branch 36 carrier **Earnest Twomley's** chance encounter with a child on his route a decade ago led him to organize toy drives for needy children every Christmas.

Seeing a mother he knew from his route emerging from a taxi with her three children, he noticed that one of the children, a little girl, was in distress.

"She's screaming in the middle of the street," he recalled. "I went over there to see what the issue was because I have three kids myself."

He offered to help by delivering the little girl to her home.

"I said, 'Have you ever been delivered to your apartment by a mailman?' And she just looked at me and started laughing. So, I picked her up, carried a couple of flights of stairs, put her on a couch, and that was it."

But then a neighbor who saw what he did told him the significance of his kind act.

"One of the neighbors said, 'That was a real nice thing you did.' I said, 'What? Stop a little girl from crying?'" The neighbor told Twomley that the little girl had a brain tumor and was returning from New York's Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center after a round of treatment.

Wanting to do something more for the family, the next time he saw the mother while out on his route, he asked her for letters to Santa Claus from the children. He then asked some fellow carriers to help fulfill the wish list, and everyone pitched in.

"So, picture a grown man going into the American Girl doll store and picking out the stuff that she wanted!" Twomley said.

Twomley and some other carriers invited the family to get the presents under the Christmas tree in the lobby of his station in Manhattan. Somehow a local TV news station heard about it, and when the story aired an idea was born.

"The newscaster called us 'the Better Angels.'" That inspired Twomley and fellow



Branch 36 members **David Correa** and **Heriberto Rodriguez** along with postal employee Don Daggett to form a nonprofit group called the Better Angels of Human Nature to bring the spirit of that first generous toy drive to many more children.

Postal employees at several stations in New York donate toys each year for the effort, each filling up a postal container with toys.

Of course, Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without Santa Claus. A few years ago, after spotting fellow Branch 36 carrier **Daniel Weber** growing a beard, Twomley hatched a plan, asking Weber to let it grow out until Christmas. "So he's our official Santa Claus" each year, Twomley said.

The group's outreach has expanded far beyond that first family by serving children with disabilities in schools and needy children in women's shelters. Last Christmas, the Better Angels provided gifts for 290 children at the New Hope Transitional Housing family shelter in the Bronx and for 153 kids at PS 186X Walter

Earnest Twomley and some of the toys he and the Better Angels collect for the holidays



Damrosch School, a Bronx special education school.

This year they are busy collecting even more toys for PS 186X. “We have 800 kids with disabilities in the school where we’re going to fill the gymnasium up with toys and everything else for them,” he said. “What we usually do is get the toys and put them in a room. The kids come in, they pick whatever they want.”

Despite serving so many children, the Better Angels always seem to have extra gifts for others who reach out for help, because they lean on the community to donate along with postal employees.



Santa delivers to the Reyes family, the first of many families Twomley has given gifts to for the holidays.

“Right now, I have about 300 toys in my secret toy closet in the post office,” Twomley said. “The carriers ask some of these high-rise buildings—we’re in Midtown—to put out a toy box. The whole neighborhood knows us already. So we put the collection boxes in there.”

The Better Angels piggyback on the postal network to retrieve the toys. “We have relay drivers. They have to bring relays out there. So, every time they go to the building, they check

the box to see if it’s full and they bring them back. That’s how simple it is.” Several other stations in the area now help to collect toys from donation boxes.

“And management is 100 percent behind me with this,” he added. “Even our area manager is getting involved with me as well because he has a friend in the New York Police Department—and we just made an announcement that we’re going to be joining forces with them as well.”

Like the system itself, Twomley’s slogan for the operation is simple: “Everyone gets a toy.”

Twomley said the satisfaction of seeing the joy his work brings children is its own reward. He still remembers a mother who called and pleaded with him to keep a toy giveaway at a shelter open late one day, because she was late bringing her daughter.

“She comes running in, and she’s out of breath,” he said. The woman was parked in the street because she couldn’t find parking, so someone went to watch her car and others brought her daughter, Mia, who used a wheelchair, inside.

“Her face lit up because we left all the toys that we were going to leave for them anyway in that room. And I said, ‘Mia, just pick anything that you want. It’s yours,’ ” he said.

“Her mother started crying, and for everybody in that room, there was not a dry eye in the place. And she picked up her toys, and we made her day. And for that moment, that moment is exactly why we do that.”

Twomley and the other Better Angels want to grow the project even more by getting more stations in New York City involved in collecting toys.

After 37 years on the job, Twomley is thinking about retiring soon, but he doesn’t plan to stop delivering joy: “I actually ripped out my garage and put an office together, and it’s just about done. So, when I retire, that’s going to be our main headquarters, and then I’m going to concentrate every year going around to all the post offices.” **PR**