

Gray Shorts - a Seat of Community

My columns highlight people and their actions that teach us lessons about the meaning of community, the hearts and minds of children and how public policies and private behavior reflect our personal, cultural and national values. I never expected I'd be writing one of these articles about the United States Postal Service. Until I met Lori McMillion of Tampa, Florida.

A twenty year veteran mail carrier, Lori has spent all but her first 18 months of service in Tampa. Over the years, she has worked in many of our neighborhoods, seen lots of everyday blessings and also, sadly, more than a few lonely hearts, undiscovered hardship and even a few felonies in action. I met Lori at one of a series of "Community Dialogues" that the Children's Board of Hillsborough County is currently holding with concerned citizens all across this large and diverse county.

Hillsborough is larger than a couple of States of the Union. It is home to city dwellers and farmers, rich and poor, citizens whose families settled in the region generations ago as well as residents who emigrated here recently. Nearly every religion, race, political party and social group actively celebrates its heritage and practices its traditions here, enriching our region with an abundance of ways to think, believe and create.

Each weekly evening dialogue encourages neighbors to invite one another to a local meeting place (already we've been in homes, churches, family resource centers, offices and community centers) where we listen as folks tell one another about the latest concerns, joys, dreams and obstacles to the healthy development of the children in the neighborhood. Invariably, individuals suggest solutions to current problems and are joined by neighbors who volunteer to help start new initiatives that could serve the unmet needs of kids in the area.

At one recent Community Dialogue in the Seminole Heights community of Tampa, I listened to Lori McMillion as she told us some of what she has observed on her mail routes. In the most humble voice, she recounted remarkable stories few of us had ever experienced ourselves. Lori's job entails delivering mail to over 600 businesses, apartments and homes (she used to have hundreds more until the postal service divided her load between two carriers).

Starting at 7:30 in the morning (including many days off when she is called into work to help with the rising tide of mail), Lori goes to her post office station to pick up and help sort the mail on her route. She loads up her truck and sets out on her deliveries by 10 AM. Even as she races to complete her deliveries within the 8-hour work day, Lori manages to keep her eyes out for people and places that, together with her envelopes, create the story of the life and times of the community she serves. She gave me a few examples.

Lori loves to learn and remember the names of the people who receive the mail she delivers, especially the children and senior citizens. It doesn't take Lori any extra time to greet a resident by name as she hands her the mail. Yet the smile of recognition signals that the young child or retiree feels known, matters to someone, maybe even matters to everyone. Or how about John, the cookie man? John lives in an assisted living home on Lori's route. Moderately mentally handicapped, one morning's "Hello! How you doin'?" from Lori triggered a sigh of despair about his family whom John no longer hears from. He misses the correspondence his brother used to send him from wherever he was stationed with the armed services. Every once in a while, a letter from his brother would be packaged together with a delicious chocolate chip or peanut butter cookie. That night, Lori mentioned John's loneliness to her 13 year old daughter who immediately went to the kitchen pantry for supplies. The next day, along with the mail, Lori personally delivered a plate full of John's favorites. Speechless and beaming with joy, John felt the simple power of kindness that can transform a street into a caring community and turn strangers into neighbors.

A couple of years ago, a local florist had some unsold blossoms left over from the day before. When Lori came with the mail, the shopkeeper presented her with an aromatic gift of colorful flowers. Knowing they would die in the hot truck, Lori added the sweetest anonymous touch to a few mail boxes on her route. Who knows to this day if anyone realizes who brightened their day. This week, Lori is handing out candy to every child she meets along her way. None of these acts of

grace demand any extra time from her professional duties. All of them add significantly to the healing possibility of human love and connectedness.

Earlier in this piece, I mentioned that Ms. McMillion has witnessed darker sides to the lives of residents of our contemporary communities. When mail piles up in a mailbox for days or weeks, Lori goes the extra step to inquire after the recipient's health and wellness. On occasion, she was the first to identify someone with a medical condition in urgent need of treatment. Then there was the time Lori saw some individuals she didn't recognize as residents of the neighborhood hanging around a side entrance to a house on her route. When they noticed Lori, the intruders ran to their car and sped away. Lori followed in hot pursuit, trying to read their license number while phoning in the suspicious scene to the police.

For the past two years, Ms. McMillion has coordinated her local postal station's annual collection of food, part of a national commitment of the U.S. Postal Service, in conjunction with corporate co-sponsors, to supply homeless shelters and food banks to help eliminate food insecurity in this wealthiest of nations. This May, post offices throughout the U.S.A. collected over 7 million pounds of food donated by citizens through their mail carriers. The Tampa station itself collected over a million pounds, the fifth highest total from any branch in the country.

Lori now plans to use days off this year to visit homeless shelters and food banks in order to witness firsthand the grim realities that assault the dignity and threaten the health of fellow human beings in our county, inspiring Lori and her colleagues to eclipse their record food collection next year.

So next time you go to your mailbox, don't just delight in getting mail from loved ones while cursing the endless bills that come without fail. Think also about the messengers. In addition to validating our existence (by delivering mail that has our name on it), these professional neighbors foster our trust, safeguard our homes, promote our health and weave a caring fabric that creates a healthier community.