Local Mailman

On her wedding day, Dave Van Aken's wife looked out at the people gathered at their small Queens parish. She saw about 20 unfamiliar faces among the guests and asked her new husband who they were.

Those 20 assembled were stay-at-home moms, retired couples and non-working families along Van Aken's route as a letter carrier for the United States Postal Service. Although his customers knew he was getting married, he hadn't told them the specifics, like which church the ceremony was going to be at. However, that didn't stop them from wanting to celebrate this new chapter in their mailman's life.

"They become your friends," said Van Aken, who was just as surprised to see them as his wife. "It becomes very difficult to separate them from people in your regular life."

Van Aken has been a letter carrier for over two decades, spending the last several years in Sunnyside, Queens. In that time, he has seen children grow from babies to go on to college. Some of the people on his route have given him baby clothes for his own son. On his route, he usually delivers the mail first to businesses and then to homes. That way the businesses can get started earlier in the day and operate more efficiently. A couple times a year he smokes cigars with a lawyer from his old route he met and befriended.

In the spring of 2013, the Postmaster General in Washington, D.C. announced plans to cut Saturday letter delivery starting in August of that year to save $2 billion annually, according to the U.S. Postal Service. There was debate about whether this move would, in fact, save money for the department, and whether it was even legal for the Postmaster General to cut services without asking for permission from Congress first.

Regardless, many like Van Aken, who is also the New York Branch President of the National Association of Letter Carriers, worried about the individuals who would be affected by the cut. He worried about small businesses that operate on Saturdays and would no longer be able to send or receive mail through the Post Office, which is free aside from postage. The elderly would be perhaps the most vulnerable to cuts in letter delivery service. Van Aken had noticed that health insurance companies wait until the last possible moment to send residents their cholesterol medication. Their medication, if it were a 30-day supply, for example, would come in a vial the size of a flash drive. Something this small would come in a small envelope, not in a package. Because letters wouldn't be delivered on Saturdays, these people would have to wait longer to get their medication. Eventually, though, the government decided to continue Saturday service.

Van Aken knows the people on his route well. He knows whether they have moved to another apartment or another city, whether they are on vacation, or whether something is wrong. For example, he'll know if a normally active elderly resident stops picking up her mail for a few days. If this happens, he'll put in a carrier alert to check in on him or her. This is helpful for people who don't live near family and friends. Sometimes the letter carriers are the ones looking out for these vulnerable residents when no one else is. Van Aken considers his job to be not only the physical activity of delivering mail, but also the social responsibility that comes with the job.

For Van Aken, the job is more than just successfully bringing a letter from the post office to someone's mailbox. He sees it as serving the community. If he ran into a customer who asked if his or her check came in, he used to be able to reach into the bag of 300 letters and pick out the check for that individual person. That's because letter carriers used to sort the mail by hand in the office before going out. They used to know each and every piece of mail in their bags. Now, with an automated system that sorts the mail, the system makes mistakes since it doesn't know right away who has moved.

When Van Aken started in the 1980s, letter carriers tried not to bring a single letter back to the post office at the end of the day. If they delivered each piece of mail and came back empty-handed, that meant they knew their route intimately, separating pieces of mail for those who moved or were on vacation before going out.

"You used to make fun of people who brought back 10 letters. You made ten mistakes today?" he said, laughing.

As for the uniforms, they haven't changed much over the years. Letter carriers get a few hundred dollars each year to spend on their uniforms, from boots and jackets for winter, to shorts and T-shirts. If one letter carrier buys himself a new jacket or gloves, he might give his old ones to a newer co-worker so that the co-worker doesn't have to spend all his or her money on new gear.

Van Aken started his career as a letter carrier when he was 18 years old. He had planned to spend a year at the job with the post office, and then go back to school to study radio engineering. But living at home and making around $20,000 in 1986 was just too attractive to give up. Then, halfway into his first year, he joined the letter carriers' union as a shop steward and was responsible for negotiating with managers on behalf of members. He felt a new source of purpose and pride in this new role, especially since he was a young man negotiating with managers much older.

"Once I started doing it, I didn't feel powerful, but it was empowering," he said about his involvement in the union. He noticed that managers liked using their power more than union members were trying to abuse theirs. "I felt like I was stopping the bullying. It was satisfying."

Much of the post office is short-staffed, so the letter carriers often work overtime. Van Aken said he and the others in Queens typically work about two hours of overtime each day. As people retire and others quit, the post office has not filled many of those open positions.

And yet, Van Aken still loves his job.

"My wife looks at me and says, 'Why are you so happy to go to work every day?'" he said. "I just like the work."