

NALC'S LEADERS REFLECT ON WOMEN'S PROGRESS IN THE UNION



March is Women's History Month, focusing on the contributions by women in all walks of life and honoring women who paved the way for greater equality. At the National Association of Letter Carriers, female letter carriers have been making inroads for decades and have risen to leadership positions in many branches, state associations and regions—and on the NALC Executive Council.

The five women serving on the 28-person council—Secretary-Treasurer Jane Broendel, Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Nicole Rhine, Director of Life Insurance Myra Warren, Region 9 NBA Judy Wiloughby and Region 10 NBA Kathy Baldwin—traveled different roads to become the leaders they are today.

Most started carrying mail in the 1980s, a time when they had to endure occasional discrimination and harassment at the hands of management and co-workers. Among the issues they faced:

- Getting different treatment in the workplace, including attempted restriction of

access to some benefits

- Enduring sexist comments by management, co-workers, and customers
- Not being taken seriously as union officials by management
- Being ignored by union representatives, even when they had a grievance
- Needing to be more assertive to survive in a male-dominated work environment

Today, there are more women letter carriers than ever before. About 30 percent of the NALC's members are female, which translates to more than 50,000 members. This is a far cry from 1956, when there were only 92 female letter carriers across the country. Indeed, early female letter carriers had to relinquish their positions once men returned home from the armed forces in World Wars I and II. It was not until the 1960s that women started gaining more numbers in the rank and file, partly because the women's rights movement was working to create a more conducive environment for women everywhere.

Now, women are at every level of union leadership. "As I visit stations,

Myra Warren



branch functions and state functions, I'm impressed with the growing number of women who are arbitration advocates, presidents, vice presidents as well as Step B Team members," Broendel said. "To me, this says the union is making progress, possibly slow, but steady and going the right way."

Over the years there have been instances of unfair treatment over health issues, especially before the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993.

Region 9 NBA Judy Willoughby knows firsthand about such treatment. A member of Tallahassee, FL Branch 1172, she was the first female shop steward in West Coast Florida Branch 1477, the first female vice president and president of Branch 1172, the first female executive board member for the Florida State Association District 5 and the first female regional administrative assistant in Region 9. She also holds the distinction of becoming the NALC's first female NBA in April 2004, when President William Young appointed her to the position to fill a vacancy.

Shortly after she began carrying mail, Willoughby had a health issue that caused her to leave work one day after reporting for duty. After a few more absences, she decided to see a doctor, and found out she was pregnant. When she returned to her station, the station manager gave her a letter of warning and a restrictive sick leave letter. Even though Willoughby had a doctor's note, the station manager insisted that she sign the letters.

"Welcome to the world of women letter carriers," she said of the experience.

Following a union and Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) investigation, she discovered that she had been singled out; other male employees had up to 10 times the number of sick leave incidents, and yet were not disciplined.

Shortly thereafter, she was assigned to another station. But the problems didn't end there. On May 4, 1982, Willoughby's nurse notified the letter carrier's supervisor that Willoughby was in labor and would not be back to work for some time. To this, the supervisor replied, "Can't she just come in and case?"

"That was a joke for many months in the office, but it was not limited to me," Willoughby said. "It was a regular remark the supervisors would ask all carriers when they called in sick."

One of the first problems Broendel encountered when she started carrying mail involved sexist comments. Broendel remembered a non-postal acquaintance saying of her, "Doesn't she know she's taking a job away from a man?"

The comments did not always end at the doors of the post office. Female letter carriers were sometimes subjected to crude comments from customers on their routes. For Broendel, this included catcalls such as, "You can carry my mail any time."

Broendel, a member of Davenport, IA Branch 506, is acutely aware of the problems female letter carriers had in getting their foot in the door, as she has broken barriers throughout her career. She served on the National Board of Trustees from 1995 to 1998, which gave her the distinction of being the first woman to sit on the NALC Executive Council. She became NALC's first female resident national officer when she was elected assistant secretary-treasurer by acclamation at the 1998 Las Vegas Convention. She had served three years as assistant secretary-treasurer

when NALC President Vincent Sombrotto appointed her secretary-treasurer in February 2002 to fill a vacancy. She has been re-elected to that position ever since.

Rhine remembers some of the more senior carriers at her station in Lincoln, NE, telling her similar stories of what it was like when they first started. "It wasn't uncommon for a customer—or even a co-worker—to tell them that they should be at home taking care of the kids or even berating them for taking 'a man's job,'" she said.

Rhine, a member of Branch 8, was appointed assistant secretary-treasurer of the NALC in 2009 to fill a vacancy, and was re-elected to the post by acclamation by the 67th Biennial Convention in 2010. She is still surprised when she looks back on her career. "I think the thing that surprises me the most when I think about the path I've been down is that I was the first woman president of my branch, the first woman state president in Nebraska and the first woman regional administrative assistant for Region 5—and all this happened beginning in 2001, not that long ago."

Unfortunately, some male union leaders shared the sentiment that women didn't belong. When Broendel nickered

Jane Broendel



Jane Broendel



a car with her postal vehicle while she was still a part-time flexible employee, managers said that they were going to take action against her. When she called her union representative, he wouldn't come to the phone, and he never called her back. She ultimately had to get her branch vice president involved, and the matter was resolved following some words to her supervisors.

From that day forward, Broendel decided that she was going to know her rights so that she could help others as well.

"Sometimes management makes the best union stewards," she said. "They treat someone unfairly and that someone, like me, learns the contract and other manuals, goes to training, then beats management every time it treats a letter carrier unjustly."

The problems didn't end once these women became union leaders. Rhine remembers that some supervisors didn't take her authority seriously.

"I recall one instance when a grievance had to be filed on an Article 8 violation," Rhine said. "This really was a rarity because management would consult with the union prior to making the assignments in order to avoid a grievance. When the supervisor was asked why he didn't discuss it with the union, his reply was that there weren't any union officers at work. The reality? The two male union officers were off work—the two female officers were not."

This kind of treatment caused some female letter carriers to become more assertive. When Myra Warren began as a letter carrier, she felt that she needed to do this to survive in a predominantly male work environment. Also, many women had to form their own support mechanisms in order to succeed. Warren believes that these still are needed today for women to continue to get ahead.

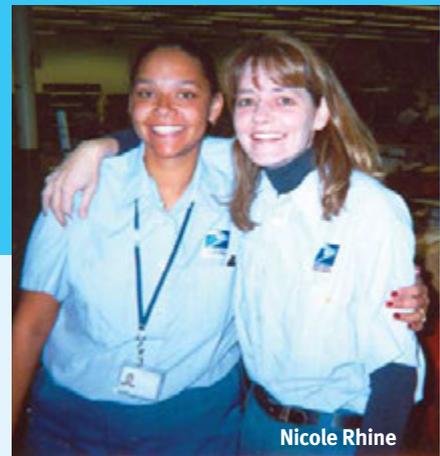
"While men have a male network that has been established for many years, women must expand our network and mentor other women in leadership and the union," Warren said.

Warren has seen a great deal of all this change in the 33 years since she started as a carrier in Dallas Branch 132. She served as the first female regional administrative assistant for Dallas Region 10, which covers Texas and New Mexico, from 1996 until her appointment by President Vincent Sombrotto in March 2002 to the vacant assistant secretary-treasurer's position. She was appointed director of life insurance by President William Young in January 2005 to fill a vacancy and was elected to that position by acclamation at the 2006 Las Vegas Convention and the 2010 Anaheim Convention. She was the first African-American woman to become a national officer.

Region 10 NBA Kathy Baldwin sees a bright future for postal women. She was appointed as an NBA in 2009 to fill a vacancy, and was elected to that post by acclamation at the 2010 Anaheim Convention, making her the second female NBA. She also holds the distinction of being the first female president of Beaumont, TX Branch 842.

As a steward and branch president, Baldwin saw many women moving into jobs such as vehicle operations-maintenance assistant, management and other positions in the Postal Service that hitherto had been held only by men.

"I believe the future of women in the Postal Service and the NALC is very bright if we can get the right legislation passed and maintain Saturday delivery," Baldwin said. "Women's History Month is a good time for us to start educating and forming alliances with women's groups to help us preserve the nation's Postal Service."



Nicole Rhine

The contributions made by these five leaders have inspired many female members of the NALC.

"When Jane Broendel was appointed as national trustee of the NALC, I believed that women were finally going to be a part of the NALC's future leaders," said St. Paul Branch 28 member Geneva Kubal, who came to Headquarters in 2010 and works in the Contract Administration Unit. "Some time after, Myra Warren was selected. This confirmed that women were here to stay. Each woman has a place in the NALC; find your place and get involved, just like they did."

"Many women have come to me and expressed their appreciation for my breaking the barriers, being the first woman on the executive council," Broendel said. "This gives me a feeling of contributing not only to those women, but to the NALC, as this union needs all its members united in order to meet the challenges that lie before us. Women letter carriers have come a long way in the past 30 years, but we still have a distance to go. When women can participate in this union and be judged on their merits, not on their gender, it benefits the NALC as a whole."

That gratitude to those who came before is shared by many NALC members.

When Rhine started carrying in the 1990s, many of the barriers to women in the workplace already had been broken by the more senior carriers at the station.

"I don't regard myself as a kind of pioneer," she said. "It was the women who came before me who deserve the credit. They made my current role possible." **PR**