# KEEPING WATCH

## Delivery workers are often rescuers

**By Jeb Phillips THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH**

It was cold on Jan. 4 when Angie Martin delivered the mail to a house in the Marion County village of Morral.

And when she pulled into the driveway to turn around, she saw a man lying facedown. Alvin Merritt, 80, didn't have winter clothes on; it looked like he might have walked outside to pick up his letters and slipped.

He was conscious but unable to get up. Martin called her postmaster and started to help the man.

A couple of minutes went by before the man's wife peeked outside to check on him. She brought out a walker, and Martin helped the man to his feet.

"I am so grateful for her," said Judy Prater, 57, Merritt's daughter. "I didn't know that people had the time to do that anymore."

But U.S. Postal Service letter carriers perform small acts of heroism all of the time. So do newspaper delivery people and packagedelivery drivers.

They often know the neighborhoods they work better than police or firefighters. When something goes wrong, delivery people are often the ones who discover it.

As a group, they function almost as an unofficial neighborhood watch.

"That's exactly what they are," said Battalion Chief David Whiting of the Columbus Division of Fire. "These people know every house, every pothole ... and they know when something is out of the ordinary."

The most dramatic examples make the news.

Letter carrier Mike Herron found an abandoned newborn in a garbage bag on an East Side porch in June. Early on Jan. 6, Dispatch deliverers Andrew Blakely and Benjamin Cox awakened a South Side family just as a fire was spreading to their house.

Most of what delivery people do, though, gets little attention. Many involve helping elderly people who can't help themselves.

Nearly two years ago, letter carrier Harry "Pete" Watkins noticed that a woman on his Minerva Park route hadn't picked up her mail for a few days, which wasn't like her. When he looked in a window, he saw her dog had gone to the bathroom on the floor.

He called the police, who couldn't get an answer at the door or on the phone. They broke down the door and discovered that the woman had suffered a stroke. She lived, and now Watkins keeps one of her relatives' phone numbers in his wallet, just in case.

"I have some older people on my route, and I've told them, if you don't get your mail, I am going to go up and knock on your door," he said.

Brent Cox, a UPS driver in Chillicothe, saw the shoe and ankle of 91-year-old Mildred Neff in his mirror as he backed into her driveway in the summer of 2007.

She had fallen and shattered her hip. He knew several family members lived nearby and ran to find cousins a few houses up the road.

Neff never recovered and died a few months later. But her family always appreciated the help Cox gave her that day.

"He has become a friend," said Carole Neff, Mildred's daughter-in-law.

Twice during the weeks before Christmas, Yolanda Rex, 88, fell inside her apartment on the Northwest Side in the middle of the night. Both times, the first people who heard her cries for help were Dispatch deliverers.

Josh Smith, 19, was substituting on his father's route the first time; his father, Robert Smith, was there the second time.

Rex is still in rehabilitation from her second fall, said her sister Rita Blateri, 74. But she is reassured to know that there are some nice people out there, willing to help a person they don't know.

"They could have gone right on by and let someone else handle it," Blateri said.

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