

**AFC 2021/010: Rural Free Delivery: Mail Carriers in Central Appalachia / Emily Hilliard
Interview with Jeremy Presar – 2/20/22**

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Jeremy Presar

Where: WVU Upshur County Extension Office

Date: February 20, 2022

Location: Buckhannon, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

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Jeremy Presar (b. 1969 Buckhannon, West Virginia) has been a rural mail carrier out of French Creek, West Virginia for 6 years. He delivered Route 1 for 2 years and is on his fourth year of Route 2, which is a 70 mile route with approximately 600 boxes. Presar, who is bi-racial, spoke about racism and bigotry from some customers, how work with the Postal Service compares to his previous work in logistics and deliveries for private companies, encounters with wildlife, including bears, while on the route, and the importance of the Postal Service in rural communities.

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February 20, 2022
Buckhannon, West Virginia

JP: Jeremy Presar
EH: Emily Hilliard

00:00

EH: Okay. It's February 20th, 2022. I'm in Buckhannon, West Virginia. Why don't you introduce yourself and tell me your name, where you're from, and the year you were born.

JP: Alright. My name's Jeremy Presar and I'm from Buckhannon, West Virginia and I was born in 1969.

EH: How did you first get interested in being a rural mail carrier?

JP: Well it was kind of funny. When I came back from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, I had one of my good friends, his uncle was postmaster and he said, "You looking for a job?" And I go "Yes!" and so he talked with me about 3 hours in his garage and we just kinda chatted for a while about life and then he said, "Well, why don't you come apply." And I did and you have to score a certain level, the high three and then get interviewed and then continue the process that way. And so I was successful that way and entered the Postal Service that way.

EH: What had you done before that?

JP: So I guess this is actually my third driving position as my life progressed. When I was in Pittsburgh, I delivered for a point-to-point delivery service that would pick up and deliver and there was no other middleman. And then when I moved to Dayton, Ohio in '95-'96 I also worked for a company called Airborne Express which is very similar to FedEx--the same kind of that system they have. You get 150 things off a conveyor belt and then go deliver zip codes and its up to you to get done. So I had a little already previous experience with how to do that and so picking up the consistent same route over and over and delivering to all the same customers was an easy transfer, so.

EH: Nice. So you delivered out of the Buckhannon Post Office from the beginning?

JP: No, no. French Creek. French Creek, West Virginia, yes ma'am.

EH: Where the groundhog [French Creek Freddie] is.

JP: (laughs) Yes! That is where the groundhog is. Yes.

EH: You deliver to French Creek Freddie?

JP: The DNR where they do that? Yes, I have.

EH: Wow.

JP: Yes ma'am. Mhm.

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EH: So why don't you walk me through your day to when you get in in the morning to when you get home at the end of the day.

JP: Oh, interesting. Really, it's you just come in and the clerk will already have the majority of your mail ready for you. That's what they do early in the morning. And then you sort your mail. You organize it in your case. There's a case that you stand in front of. And then the same with the packages and once you're done with everything that is allotted for you, you tear down and you load up your vehicle and you go. It's really just keeping things organized and working efficiently and you'll be able to be very successful if you stay consistent. It's up to me to get it done every day and that's what they require of me, to have the integrity to respect the mail and get 'er done. So I will travel the same route, the same 70 miles and deliver to all the rural homes that have mail delivery. Some of them don't have mail delivery that I pass and have interactions with those that I see, or try not to if it's a bear! (laughs)

EH: (laughs) Yeah, we'll get to some animal encounters later.

JP: So, yeah (laughs). And back to when we're done with all the deliveries and all of the things that we're given that day, then we'll head back to the office and unload all of our equipment and we'll clock out for the day.

04:03

EH: And the French Creek Post Office--how many hours is that open a day and how many rural routes are out of there?

JP: There's only 2 rural routes out of that office--it's a small office. They're open, well I guess 7:30 to, well I guess 6 hours a day they're open. Monday through Friday and then Saturday they're open 4 hours. So.

EH: Is that a reduction from what it used to be? A recent reduction of hours?

JP: It's not recently, it's been about 5 years since they've done the change that used to be a full-time 8 hour day office and Saturdays would be open 'til like 2 or 3. And so they did a change and when they were consolidating and trying to, 'cause I'm in a cluster, used to be stand-alone offices and now they've clustered it together with 6 other offices and one postmaster is over all of those offices and so they did a little re-, they downsized all the postmasters.

EH: Right.

JP: Yeah.

EH: I've heard a little bit about that.

JP: Yeah.

EH: Why don't you tell me about the community that you serve and what kind of people, what they do, what French Creek is like.

JP: Huh!

EH: (laughs)

JP: (laughs) Ah, really, so we have, since it's rural West Virginia, there is still a lot of coal miners and a lot of oil and gas. People who work for those. But there are still a lot of doctors or nurses that live out there in the country--they do like that. And so we have a lot of hunters, we have a lot of fishermen, we have a lot of outdoorsy elements. So it wouldn't be anything to pass a 4-wheeler or a dirt bike or a side-by-side, child or--there are a lot of retired folk that like to travel in those and enjoy the outside. And so. Most of my customers are very friendly. We do have the element of, there are some bigotry people that live out there obviously but the percentage of those are less than, well, I guess it's about consistent to when I was a kid but I guess I've gotten used to how that element is part of my life also, 'cause there are those that do that.

EH: Yeah.

JP: Yeah. Believe that.

06:46

EH: Do you ever have concerns over your own safety out there?

JP: Um, I really haven't had concerns over my safety in my safety that I deliver. I knew of a contractor that was working in the county one county south of us and that was a county that has more of a reputation and so I kinda worried about him but he said he had an okay time. He didn't have very many confrontations of that kind of thing. I mean I do have the occasional confrontation from customers or dislikes and you can see that as soon as it happens and you just kind of be as polite as you can and do the job you need to do, whatever it may be, and then move on and go about your day because you can't let those people bother you.

EH: Yeah.

JP: Yeah.

EH: Well let's talk about some of the customers that you've gotten to know and developed a relationship or friendship with over the years.

JP: Oh, um, we have, there's a lady that was very friendly--had horses and every time you came and delivered to her house, she was very friendly and very kind and you know, you reciprocated because that's how you go through the day is just politely, you know, "Here's your mail and how are you." And she would always bring us candy, all the time, every season, whatever it is, so about once a month she'd be walking in with a big old thing of candy for the whole office and just appreciative of what we do for them. And a lot of my customers were very happy that the efficiency that I have with my mail. Consistency. They had previous people that weren't as consistent, I suppose and they are very thankful. They voice that often and so that's always nice to hear that they notice a difference and don't want you to leave. I started on Route 1 and moved to Route 2 and the people on Route 1 keep asking me, when are you coming back to our route? And I'm like, I'm not coming back to your route! (laughs) But, so there's a lot of that going on, so.

EH: So how long have you been doing Route 2 and how long did you do Route 1 for?

JP: I'm in my oh probably working on my 4th year of Route 2 and I did Route 1 2 years. So 2 and a half, somewhere around that range, 3 and a half. Something like that.

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EH: So you're about 6 years into the job?

JP: I am 6 years in, yes ma'am. Mmhm.

09:23

EH: Do customers leave things in their mailbox for you?

JP: At times there are some people that will leave a soda pop or a bottle of water. I've gotten bottled waters when it's really, really hot. And said, "Please take this!" And I'm like, okay. Thank you very much. There, I haven't had anybody leave anything silly. The Route 1 carrier has had people leave plastic snakes in her, as a joke, because they're very friendly with her. She actually grew up in French Creek and so she has a lot of friends that she's known her whole life and they do little pranks like that. It's just all in good fun to enjoy the day. Now I've had birds fly out on me and things like that, so.

EH: Uh-huh. They build a nest.

JP: They build a nest and fly in your vehicle and bang against the back window trying to get out.

EH: Whoa.

JP: Yeah. I've had a few of those happen. (laughs)

EH: Yeah, what about, let's talk about other animal encounters, wild or domesticated.

JP: Um, the customers, there's a couple that have like 10 cats and I'm very allergic to cats and so I kind of do my best to avoid them. But I also have come across I guess about 5 bear now in my days. 2 of them were very close to the road. One was walking right in front of my vehicle, basically, within 15 feet and it was a large, large bear. And you kinda just stop and I rolled the window up a little bit and was like, okay, just go about your day! And let them wander on. But those are always fascinating when you actually see them up close. I haven't been in any danger with a bear even though that I could walk around a person's house and there might be one, so I try to identify myself as often as I can blaring the horn or what have you. So I've seen, I like to see one--I see fox, those are random and rare. But the rest of them are normal--squirrels and deer. You see deer every day, so.

EH: What about dogs?

11:29

PR: Oh yeah! There's a lot of dogs. There's a lot of dogs. Dogs that will bite is a very low percentage in my experience. I'm very animal-friendly though. A lot of dogs don't, I'm okay, I guess my scent is okay with them where some people's scent is not okay with them? I guess, I don't know if that equates to fear of a dog versus not fear of a dog. I've been around a lot of dogs. But there are, there's been a lot of bites lately this last quarter. They have reported on a lot of people getting bit and being hospitalized because they got bit and so there is always that worry and that caution and another reason why you would let yourself known that you're there. Any animal that is going to be hostile toward you would come running and show that they are not happy you're there. And that's been a couple places that I have that we put stickers on that say don't get out at here because these dogs will bite you or attack. But that's out of the

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600 boxes I would say that's maybe 5 so it's very, a low, low number to me. But they're always interesting!

12:43

EH: Yeah.

JP: Always! (laughs)

EH: Could you describe the scenery along your route and what the terrain is like maybe for someone who's never been to rural West Virginia?

JP: Really my route has a probably, approximately 30 miles of just back road, dirt road, rock road, back and forth between that and a lot of beautiful, wooded areas. And I do touch a couple ridges where I could see miles. On a very clear day I've probably been able to see 15 miles or more. So you have some good sky views but also have very intricate valleys with rivers and creeks and some small waterfalls and things of that nature. Go across little, small bridges that when the water is up have rapids and when it's down is very calm, very still water. A lot of trout fishermens, a lot of, so there's a lot of that element that happens out there. But very beautiful day--beautiful day, peaceful day! I much prefer that than the city. When I was in Dayton, Ohio I drove in the city all day and this is a much calmer, peaceful time. Yes ma'am.

13:54

EH: Do you listen to the radio or books on tape or podcasts or anything while you...

JP: A little bit of all of that! It's random. My music taste is very eclectic--I listen to everything from classical to not quite (sighs) heavy metal but there is rock and so there's a lot of difference there. And that is very good. Sometimes I do listen to some podcasts, not as often. There are about 2 hours of my day that I just don't have any service whatsoever to stream and so I have about 2,500 songs on my phone that I randomly listen to throughout the day, or sometimes I don't even have anything on, just depends on the day. But there are definitely to keep my day going I do have that element going on.

EH: What about your vehicle? What kind of vehicle do you use and have you always used the same one?

JP: No! (laughs) Presently I'm back in my original vehicle which was a Dodge Dakota and it has a crew cab and I sit sideways in the middle and then reach out and deliver that way. And I think from 5 years of sitting this-a-way, I did a little damage to my spine. I herniated a disc and so when I bought my right-hand Jeep and started sitting normal, my back was like what are you doing? We sit sideways, we don't sit normal! And so, but I have those 2 vehicles--a right-hand side Jeep and I also still have the Dakota. I'm presently out of the Dakota because I'm waiting for a transmission to be put in my Jeep and then when that's finished, I'll go back to my Jeep. Welcome it back. Because it's a much easier on your back day when you're driving on the right side versus the left. So yeah.

EH: And you can fit all the mail in the crew cab fine?

JP: Oh well I have a Tonneau cover and if I need to put anything in the back I can and it's secure in the back. But most of the time I can fit it all in my crew cab, so. Full back seat, 4-doors, so. Yeah, yeah.

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EH: What do you make sure to bring in the car with you for weather, or you know, jumper cables, stuff like that?

JP: Oh yeah, of course! Of course. (laughs) Oil and you know, if anything my hose might go or anything like that, if you needed to keep refilling your reservoirs you always have some kind of try to keep that on hand. Especially older models like mine, my Dodge burns oil so I put a quart in about every 2 weeks or so, maybe 3, depends on how much I use it. But yeah, you have jumper cables, you have all the tools that you may need to do to change a flat if you come across that but I run 10 ply and try not to, which is also-- that's a yearly expense. We change tires out once a year. We use that many. They say 40,000 miles? They get about 22 [thousand]. You don't really get a lot of out of 'em. No. Especially when you're driving that much back road, rock road, and the Route 1 goes through a creek every day, so I have some deliveries that I go through creeks just to get to the people's homes, so there's that element. You also have people who haul a lot of different types of things, either construction workers or metal, people taking metal and things fall off of those trailers and you never know what you're gonna run over, especially from the back, you know, back road bumps, easy to get a nail of any kind. Some of them have been really old too. You pull them out and you're like, that is a square nail! And those aren't used anymore! So yeah. So very old barns and things like that. But yes, we have, you do that to help, I've saved other people. You have chains that pull people out of ditches if they're in ditches or vice versa or things of that nature. I always stop and if somebody's sitting somewhere I ask them to make sure they're okay before I continue on my day. Because people get stranded, lost, or what have you. Tourists, they're like, "Well we got turned around and we don't know where we're at. I've a few times had to help people get back to where they needed to go because they were up there looking around and then didn't know where they were."

EH: And where do the tourists--are they headed towards a state park or where are they usually going?

JP: Some of them are, I guess what we used to call when I was a kid, called "pick a road." I think some of 'em are. But I do believe some of 'em I've seen on their way to like Helvetia or something of that nature. They see well this road looks like it'll cut across and they'll try it and then there's a turn that's not on the map, or GPS, and then they'll end up either in a dead end or on the other side of the county where they didn't want to go and then you gotta get 'em back which has happened a few times. The GPS has even taken semis where they shouldn't go up in that area.

EH: Oh yeah!

JP: And you're like, "What are you doing on this road? You should not be on this road!" It happens a lot actually, so.

19:22

EH: Yeah, what about times when you helped a customer? Have you ever encountered someone who needed help?

JP: More than just directions, I have not had that experience of emergency help. I've called 911 because of a fire. A trailer was on fire, I called 911 to help get the fire truck there. A couple times I've knocked on doors because some elderly women hadn't taken their mail for a couple days and they just were sick and didn't feel like getting it. I haven't had any encounters of somebody had fallen in their house and needed somebody to knock on the door--I haven't had that happen to me but I've had stories of that happening to people. So I do try to keep an eye on my customers in that regard. Notify a landlord, "Hey what's going on with this person--they haven't picked up their mail," they go check, unfortunately that person may have

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passed away or this and that which has happened a couple times. That's the sad part about it. But that is a fact of life unfortunately. We all have to go through that. But yeah!

20:34

EH: What about when, has a customer ever helped you? You know if you had to get towed or something?

JP: Oh yeah! The ice on a hillside, downward slope, sometimes you will slide into ditches that you can't get out of yourself. That's one of the good things about the rural delivery is that there's always somebody going to be coming by that always has a chain or always has a truck available or ability to help get you out of something. And I've never really had to wait that long for somebody to drive by if it was something that wasn't serious. You know, like when my transmission went out, I had to wait for a tow obviously but at that moment the guy that I was at, I was actually at the furthest point of my day when it happened, the transmission decided not to go in reverse or drive after I got to a turnaround spot. The first house I went to, I was like, "You got a phone?" He's like "No! I call through Wi-fi but that's it." I'm like "Oh! That's interesting." He's like "Yeah!" So he goes, "But you can take my Jeep to the top of the hill and see if you can get out!" So he let me take his Jeep, you know, a mile up to the top of the hill and see if I could get my phone to work. It didn't work. So I came back down and started knocking on doors to get a landline and then that was like 8 calls to different tow companies before I found one that wasn't busy that day, 'cause they were all busy that day. It was a snowy day, it was an icy day and they're always busy when that happens. And so I finally got that and about an hour and 15 minutes and then I was able to, he came and show up, so that's about how far out I go.

22:16

EH: Mmhm. What about other weather? Do those creeks you have to go through flood?

JP: Oh yeah. (laughs). Yes, they do. They always warn don't go through high water. We also, I have like 2 places where they actually have the markers, the foot markers of how high the water is. And so you can tell. And so it'll say this is where the road is and if it's 1 foot, 2 foot or 4 foot and so there are 2 places that I have that on my route. And I've had to multiple times turn around. The one time I turned around, I was like okay, let me make this cut street which was basically a one-lane road, hills on both sides and nothing but wooded. And then they have the wire fence you know, because you know, their cowfields or whatever, and then you get halfway up there and there's a tree across the road that hasn't been taken care of because of the storm. And you're like well! I can't go this way and so you figure out how to turn around in that area. Sometimes you can't, you gotta back out which we're not supposed to do but we have to in that regard. So that's happened a few times, trying to make detours because of a flood. But those areas we already know that regularly flood, they're lowland areas. Wash out on the roads and sometimes coming down off the hill you have to be careful there's some places that water will go right down the middle of the road, so. Your own little rapids down the road (laughs)

EH: Sounds dangerous!

JP: They wash out all the time. They come and fill it and pack it back in and then the water slowly erodes it back out. It's a process.

23:55

EH: Do you, yeah, what do you wear on the job? Do you bring galoshes or extra layers?

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JP: I wear boots, solid toe boots. I wear hiking shoes, things for terrain like if you would go for a park walk. I normally wear shorts. If I can wear shorts, I wear shorts. I do have a rain jacket if I need it or another kind of jacket if I do. A lot of times I just wear a hoodie, most of the time because if it's chilly you just put the hood up and the wind doesn't go in your ear and give you a sore throat. So but that's mostly what I wear. I don't really wear anything overly heavy. If I'm sitting in the middle like the Dakota, I move around a lot and so you don't want things that are constrictive if you're constantly moving. Even if I'm in the Jeep I'm moving around a lot, so people are like, "You just sit in the seat!" No! I'm in and out of my vehicle 20 times a day. No! At least 20 times a day. So it's a busy day.

EH: For packages.

JP: All that. Oh my.

EH: Yeah, how has...

JP: That's increasing these days.

EH: Yeah, that's what I was going to ask about.

JP: Yeah. The mail volume is slowing down a little bit but not a lot, but there's an increase in package delivery. Amazon delivery and etcetera. A lot of people are now especially from COVID, have been ordering online everything from dog food, toilet paper, to dish soap, you name it they're ordering it now, so, and still even now. So.

EH: Do you know how many steps you get in your day from your work?

JP: I actually don't have one of those. I should probably put one on to see exactly how far I do walk. I don't walk near as far as the city carriers do, but I do my fair share for rural delivery. Yeah.

25:49

EH: Let's see what else. Let's talk about the union and your role in the union and what it does for you?

JP: It helps you when you have a conflict with a coworker or conflict with or something of that nature. It will back you on your side to make sure things are done properly through the contract that we have with the Postal Service. And that's the reason why I'm a member is so that when those instances arise especially because I'm bi-racial, I may have a conflict with a customer that I need to have the security in my job and not have somebody try to take my job from me because they're unhappy that I have it and that somebody else should have it, which there is that element out there, unfortunately. But I also, being able to be actively a part of the voting process to changes to our contract is vital, I think. Knowing what's going on and being able to try to help make things better for change is another reason. I once went down to the state convention which I really enjoyed that aspect of it, and since COVID we haven't had that but hopefully in the future we'll be able to do that again. So I made some good contacts through that and it's led me actually to you so that's actually how that happened!

EH: That's right!

JP: That's right! Which are all good things, so.

27:33

EH: Yeah, do you feel like you're a part of a community of rural carriers?

JP: Sure! Sure, sure, sure, sure. Everybody tries to be helpful and stay on the, you know, not let things happen that shouldn't happen. There's a lot of that going on. Your union, your own union steward, we have one for our cluster and he tries to make sure that you know, things are still being done properly on the up and up, which is good! And most of the times they are--there's not really any deep issues but when they do arise, there's you know, "Hey, we can't have this" and we have conversations. And normally it's just a conversation and we're good to go. Don't really have to go through any kind of mediation or things like that or file a grievance. Some people file grievances, I don't file them as often, so yeah. I try to just like, hey we have this little conflict and we find a common ground and move forward in our office and go from there.

28:33

EH: Yeah, I mean are you friends with your coworkers or feel kind of...

JP: Um, the majority, majority. There are a little bit--every office you work in there's gonna be one or two people that their personalities don't clash, or they do clash and you just kind of work professionally around them and do what you need to do and move on. You don't try to let it bother your day. It's not necessary. But there, for the most part I get along with everybody. Yes ma'am.

EH: What are the stories that rural mail carriers tell to each other when you get together? (laughs)

JP: (laughs) How you slid in a ditch, how a person tried to hit you, animals, weird accountable mail situations, experiences, when I had a person threaten to pull me out of my vehicle because I asked him for his ID 'cause I needed to see his ID to give him a registered letter that I needed his signature for. So you're just like, well that's weird! You know? Why are you getting all hostile at me because I'm trying to make sure I'm handing the piece of paper that I need to get to you, the right person. And so stories like that, you know, just the randomness of life. People's reactions to things, it's pretty comical at times. Nothing that you can let bother you at all. But (laughs) it's pretty funny! Like dude, really? I don't know what I did, why, but okay! Kinda roll your window up to where you can just hear through it and when he's done with his little rant you say, "Well it'll be at the Post Office, bring this slip with you and we'll get it there." And so, and that's what I did! And so. He has since apologized to me, but it took like 2 years for him to do that, so.

EH: Yeah, with that, something like that, do you let your postmaster know that there's...

JP: Oh yeah, definitely, definitely.

EH: Yeah.

JP: He wrote him a letter and he said you can't threaten the employee, you just can't do that. You send him an official letter and this and that, but it still took him a little while to acknowledge that he was in the wrong and not me. So. And I'm honest, I forgave him, you know, but I'm still not, I'm still cautious around him, you know, because you showed a hostility side of you that I don't really want to be around and so when I need to be around you, I do as little as possible and move on! But still be professional about it. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, that's part of it. (laughs)

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EH: What about are there any jokes or specific language or terminology that mail carriers use or tell to each other about your work that a layperson wouldn't know?

JP: Oh, I'm sure there's acronyms that we use for scanner information or types of mail. Sure! Off the top of my head, I'm not really recalling any at this moment. I'm, I wasn't expecting that question, that's...
(laughs)

EH: Yeah, that's the occupational lore, you know.

JP: Yeah, you're just--scanner information.

EH: Yeah. I went to a Kentucky NRLCA meeting and they were talking about the new RRECS system and all of that so I did get to learn some of the acronyms and all of that.

JP: Oh, well that's pretty cool!

EH: Yeah. Very detailed.

JP: Yeah, yeah.

EH: What are the stories that you tell your family when they ask you about your work or any kind of unusual days on the job?

JP: Like when you call 911 for a trailer fire that when you drive by it you can feel the heat.

EH: Wow.

JP: The bear, you know, because that's random and you take pictures of it if you can. The guy threatening to pull you out because you know, you wanted to see a license. Those are the kinds of things that are out of the norm, normally if there's just a, mmm...there's not a lot I say to "How was your day?" "It was a good day!" I had no drama, which is always a good thing. There are some days it's cumbersome because you have obstacles and that's either traffic is obstacles or animals are obstacles or, and it just compounds itself, you know. It's really weird. The day that there are obstacles, there are always obstacles the rest of the day, from one to another, and then the days that there aren't, it's just smooth sailing all day long and you're just like, "Wait, what happened?" You know because it's either traffic or side-by-side or whatever. But for the most part, it's a much more peaceful atmosphere for me. I used to work in an office and sit behind a computer with 2 monitors and 4 programs and for 8 hours a day and that is a chaos that I'm very happy to be away from because of this. It's peaceful, I'm in the office a couple hours and then I'm on my own and it's my work integrity to get it done in a timely fashion. Once I do that every day, there's not really much more that I need to do, which is very peaceful. That was the goal basically.

34:16

EH: Is that what you like the most about your job?

JP: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Yeah. The least amount of chaos I can have or create to have in my life, the better, and that's where I'm headed. Yeah, yeah.

EH: What do you wish the general public knew about the work of rural mail carrying? Are there misconceptions?

JP: Yeah, people think that when you work for the Post Office, either you're not very smart or it's a very simple job, neither which of those are true. There's a lot of things to get correct while you're delivering mail. The privacy of the mail is paramount and then it's not basic or simple. You're constantly doing something. There's a lot of things that are moving at the same time that you have to make sure that are done correctly and it's constant. It's a constant day. I've had many people that we have trained or I have trained and once they get out on their own, they're like, "Wow! I didn't realize it was like this!" And you're like "Yeah! You've got to be organized and efficient and move! You've got to get it done." Not saying speed or anything like that, you don't have to do that, but you have to keep moving. You have to keep your day flowing and it's up to you to do it. And some people don't have that internal talk that says you've got to keep going. Sometimes they like the 2 hours and you get a 15 minute break and 2 hours you get another break and have lunch and blah blah. There's not that. You take your break when you can and then you move through the day as quickly and as efficiently as possible, so. But so yeah.

36:00

EH: When you train people, what do you make sure to tell them? Are there little tips?

JP: Goodness gracious! Breathe! Don't panic! (laughs) Keep moving! Apart from how to read mail, learning how to read mail quickly is a good thing that helps you become more efficient. You just can't go by the address all the time. It doesn't work that way. And like this week I'll be going to Clarksburg to teach driver training and teach people how to drive in a right-hand drive vehicle. And so teaching them how to be safe, secure, and the different geometry for driving on the right side of the vehicle versus the left side of the vehicle--takes a little time to get used to. The left turn isn't normally how the left turn is and when you're sitting on the left side of the vehicle versus the right and vice versa. So safety at all times, right away, those are pretty much the basics of what I give them. I always give right away if there's somebody coming. Always. They're the ones that are, I'm actually doing a job that's in order and so the person probably knows my pattern already and where I'm going next and so I let them go because they're not stopping every 100 feet like I am.

EH: Yeah, right.

JP: Yeah, so. Those kind of things.

EH: Yeah.

JP: Yeah, yeah.

37:32

EH: Has your job changed at all since, in the 6 years you've done it?

JP: Uh, yeah! Actually. They've just, we've just now started clocking in on our scanners where we never, it was just on a piece of paper beforehand and so there's some minor adjustments to that. When I first started, I was part-time so I was going, I worked at the plant in Clarksburg and I worked out of Buckhannon and delivered mail. I worked out of Weston and delivered mail and so now that I'm full-time, you're consistently at the same, you're a regular carrier and you've been given a route that's yours, so you take ownership of that and that fine tuning of knowing the route and knowing all the people and being able to know where I put everything makes you more efficient. Like there are many times I just put it in a

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vehicle or a shed that's away from the dog, or you know, that kind of thing. I put packages there, and so. The change is security, in that regard, from part-time to full-time. So yeah, yeah.

EH: Having worked for a private delivery company, what is different?

JP: You mean between Airborne Express and...

EH: Yeah, and like working for the Postal Service.

JP: Oh, those jobs were, let's start with the one in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was called Courier Express. And it was a company-owned vehicle and you would pick up, a lot of times it was legal documents from one lawyer office to another lawyer office. Or a couple times it was an actual organ that I picked up at one hospital and taken to another hospital. And one of the days was Pittsburgh to Philadelphia and back. So that's a 6 hour drive just one way, and so that was my whole day was to pick up that I don't remember, I can't tell you the organ.

EH: A liver?

JP: Maybe a liver or something, and drove it to the other hospital and then turned around and came home and that was my whole day. And so. That was random! You didn't know where you were going from day-to-day, you'd drive from one city maybe to 40 miles away to another city, pick out, and then you say, "Okay, I'm empty here." And they tell you, "Well we've got one 3 miles away, pick that up and bring it." And you'd ping-pong all over the place for your day. Where this is you come to a set place, the mail is brought to you from a courier and dispatch, we call that dispatch, and sorted, you sort the same area. You control the same mail and the same zip codes and then you follow the same route and deliver what you have for those people, which is very consistent. And so it's not as hectic but it can be as hectic just depending on how much volume of mail that you have.

EH: Yeah.

JP: Yeah, yeah.

40:50

EH: What's the strangest thing you've ever delivered, or most unusual thing with the Post Office? I mean a liver, an organ sounds pretty strange, but (laughs)

JP: That is pretty strange, that is pretty strange. I don't know strange...

EH: Yeah, maybe not strange but...

JP: I mean you deliver axels for vehicles, you deliver I guess a prosthetic for a human, there, they actually send chickens through and ducks through the mail, that's get delivered and sometimes if the person doesn't have a phone number, you listen to the chickens all day until you deliver them, wherever that may be. And there's a lot of that going on. See, that's also seasonal too, it's like they seem to come at the same time period of the year when people order the animals. Snakes, really, a box of mice.

EH: Snakes?

JP: A box of mice I think I had, which is also kind of weird. I was like okay, that's interesting.

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41:52

EH: You really had to deliver a snake?

JP: Uh, I don't think that was the Post Office. But I think so, yeah. Yeah.

EH: Wow. That's pretty serious.

JP: I don't think that was the Post Office, but they're kind of collaging together.

EH: (laughs)

JP: There's a lot of weird stuff. I had a package open that was an adult thing for a lady before. We've had that happen. And you're just like, "Well okay, that's interesting!"

EH: (laughs) You probably learn a lot about people!

JP: "I never want to know that information about you at all. That was, you could have kept that all to yourself!" No, other than that, I can't really think of anything really out of the ordinary that people get all the time. You know, car parts and house parts and chairs and tables and fishing poles. I did deliver a solid piece of wood that he was gonna make a musket gun out of and it was one long piece of wood and that's how it came with the label on the wood. There was no other packaging, it was just the big old piece of wood, and you're like "Oh!" That's really random.

EH: Yeah, I didn't know you could do that.

JP: Yeah, and so I asked him, he's like "Oh no, they're gonna make me a musket and it's a solid piece. They're not gonna, and they're gonna bore into it and so it's not gonna be..." And I was like, "Oh that's really cool!" So, yeah! Yeah. I guess that's how they made them back in the day, was out of all one solid piece and then you didn't have any breaks.

EH: Was he like a reenactor or historical...

JP: He liked a lot of guns so. I don't know him that well to know if that's what he was doing with it but I think he just wanted it either to go hunting or have as a hobby.

EH: Like a [unintelligible].

JP: Yeah.

43:39

EH: What do you think the importance of rural mail is for the community that you serve?

JP: Extremely! Very important. I, that is the lifeline of America. All over. A lot of those places don't have good internet service. That's how they pay their bills to this day is the mail. They don't, like my mother will not pay a bill on the computer. And even if they had a computer that actually worked at a high speed, in some parts of the country, they would still not want to do it that way. And I think that's still gonna be happening for a while. And the more that they try to steer away from that, the need is there. The absolute

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need for home delivery the way that the Postal Service does it is vital. So, I hope the conglomerates don't win. That's what my fear is.

EH: Like the private delivery services? Yeah.

JP: (Nods) The privatization of it that they're trying to push these last 10 years. But it's been failing and I hope it consistently still fails to make it through Congress, the change, the rules. I'm very hopeful for that. [sound of printer/fax in other room]

EH: Fax?

JP: I suppose! That the only thing I could think of! I was like, there's not supposed to be anybody here!

EH: (laughs)

JP: Yeah! I think if they try to lessen or do away with the way that it's done now, it would be a travesty. Yeah.

EH: Yeah, are you concerned about the future of the Postal Service or rural delivery at all?

45:30

JP: A percentage of me is. But I have faith that it won't, you know, not in my lifetime, as well. As far and as hard as they are pushing at times, I still don't believe that they'll get a majority vote to be able to change the system that we have in place at this time. Now I can't say that that's not gonna happen after my time period, in 100 years or 2[00 years]. Who knows how the technology will change that need. But once the service is available for every far-reaching location in Alaska or Wyoming, Montana, West Virginia, you will have to meet that need before you can do away with it. And so I think technology when it gets to that point, it'll happen, but I don't think the speed of which the technology is happening now, it will happen in my foreseeable future. Or more retirement future even, so. But you need to pay, it is something you should pay attention to and watch and monitor but I don't stress over it. Like, I'm going to lose my job! No. No. I don't think that's gonna happen. It'll adjust my job a little bit but I don't think I'm gonna lose my job, so. I feel secure in it, still at this point. Yes, ma'am.

EH: Yeah, are you, well I'm sure the benefits were an attraction to the job.

JP: Oh of course, of course.

EH: Maybe the union, union representation, was that a plus?

JP: That's a plus. I've not really had that in honestly my time previous, I really didn't have a lot of healthcare. I didn't buy it, you know. I didn't have, the couple jobs that I had it and that was it, but before 35? Before 32? I didn't really have health insurance. I wasn't one of those millions of people in America was like "Okay, it's how much a month?" Well I guess I'm not gonna get that. I guess I'll roll the dice." And was lucky enough not to have anything catastrophic happen to me, which a lot of people don't, aren't, but I happened to be one of the lucky ones, so as I got older, in my 40s, then yes, it was, that is an attraction to finally have that security. Mmhm.

EH: Well, I think those are all my questions. Is there anything else we didn't talk about that we, that you'd like to or, that you'd like to share?

48:22

JP: Oh, well, let's see here. Uh, basically I guess if you're looking for less of a chaotic place or less of a chaotic work environment but still be able to secure a decent living, I would recommend trying it out because we need a lot of people, and we don't have a lot of consistent people that have stayed. It is difficult to get into the Postal Service as full time. Everybody starts as part-time and you have to weather that part-time somehow. When I was part-time, I was helping lay brick driveways, mowing yards, I tarred a roof, I re-asphalted a driveway, you know, you name it, odds and ends to make things meet. So when I first, first started I was still doing dispatch work through the cable company and I'd do that Monday through Friday and then deliver on the weekends and if I was needed in the week I would just call off on that job and work this one because it was double the pay, even at part-time. And we have a lot of that element still happening because you know, the minimum isn't changing where it needs to be to accommodate the cost of living that we have. And so if you're able to weather that storm and get into, the ability to get the, it's worth it, in my opinion. It's a peaceful day and it's up to you to get your day done, and so that's a plus in my book. That's a plus. Less chaos, no email. I have no email (laughs) No email. You cannot get a hold of me via email for work! And so that's a plus. I'm sure, I know how, I see how my siblings--they have a lot of email stuff going on even when they're home. And when I was in dispatch and doing logistic-type work, they would, I would, they would be able to contact me via that way, or phone. So now it's phone, it's even closer to you than the computer. It is the computer that everybody lives with. So, I don't know, it's fun! Yeah, yeah.

EH: Is there a most challenging part of your job, or maybe a part you don't like?

51:03

JP: The Confederate flag-wavers.

EH: Yeah.

JP: That's probably the most challenging tolerance that is forced upon me. A lot of people say, "Just don't let it bother you!" Well you know, you gotta keep an eye on it. You can't not, you know, because at any moment, you don't know what that human's going through. You don't know what his wife said to him or his kid or his job just fired him or what have you and you might be the catalyst that, the last straw that came through and provided an unforeseeable conflict that you didn't think was a big deal, but he did. And so when I'm around those humans, there is an extra chaos, not really chaos, an extra awareness that I must pay attention to and not everybody has to deal with that. If you're not a person of color, then you probably don't even notice it and then that's part of society on a whole in America and all over the planet to be honest with you, I mean that's just the element we live in, and so being able to I guess leave that where it needs to be prospective-wise is part of it that I wish I didn't have to deal with.

EH: Yeah, totally.

JP: So that is, I guess that that would be one of the negatives of rural delivery is that there is that element for people who are not Caucasian.

EH: Yeah.

JP: But the gentleman that I, the few people that I know and that are in the same boat as me, living life the same way, we've spoken about it and the maneuverability is the same, it's the same for all of us and how

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we deal with that. So we're always aware, you know. Sometimes people are like, not aware of a...and walk into situations that they normally probably shouldn't walk into whereas I would be a little bit more cautious to walk in that same situation without paying attention, turn around a corner and be like "Oh!" and I won't go around that corner. That kind of thing.

EH: Yeah.

JP: Arms distance kind of thing, if you understand what I'm saying.

EH: Oh totally.

JP: Okay.

EH: I mean, I think, go ahead, I don't want to interrupt you.

JP: Oh no, your fine, go ahead and ask your question.

EH: Well, I just think that that's really important to talk about because everyone I've interviewed so far is white and it's something I was wondering about first of all the demographics of the region--it's a very white place.

JP: It is, you're correct.

EH: But also, I was thinking about people self-selecting or not selecting the job because of concerns of people safety, like people of color maybe not choosing to do that work because of what you're talking about.

JP: I don't, can't really speak on how if somebody said no because of that, I can't answer that. I said yes. The postmaster that hired me was biracial also, and he had a lot of conflicts. I do know that there have been threats made on my life because of conflicts, and also his. Like they wanted to bury him under the Post Office, you know. That kind of threat that came through the grapevine to me that somebody said to another--one human said to another human and thought that they were of like mind and they weren't and that other human was like "You need to know this about this person, so that you're safe." And that person told me and I was like, "Well thank you for letting me know." And when I'm around that person in the future I was very vigilant to pay attention or stand away, you know, because, and it's an unfortunate hostile moment that happens when you're informed that a person didn't like the fact that you were asking for equity or standing up for what you know is right and the rights that you're allowed to have by just being a human! (laughs) And so I guess that could be, but that's everywhere so in order for us to maneuver life, we always have to deal with that element. And I hate to say that, but that's true. And so (sighs) that being a reason not to, I would say no, in my opinion. They may not want to do it because they don't like the job, more than that, but the maneuvering around a bigot, it's just part of it. It's just part of it.

EH: Right, yeah. You have to do it with everything.

JP: Yeah, everything. And that's the whole point is that it's not like I'm 22 and now all of a sudden, I gotta wake up to the reality of that. I was 5, okay? So alright, you're first grade. You are like, "Oh! Okay!" So that's what that is. And so from 1st grade on, once you get into the situation of full society, it will wake you up. You know, the first time somebody pulled my afro, I was like, "Oh, okay, so that's like that." And then the teacher's response versus the principal's response in how things were handled, versus if you parallel that with something else, the very similar things were different and so you learn at an early age

and so that's why people should learn at an early age because it'll help you with a broader perspective of reality. And I believe that that's going to slowly change, but I thought it would happen quicker than it has in our society to this point. You know. When I was 20, I was like, "Oh, by the time I'm 50 we'll be, so X amount further down the road than we are." And we've actually have only go what I assumed would be only 5 years in 35. So um, but I could see how somebody would say that maybe they didn't want to be in the country that far, but there are plenty of non-Caucasians delivering mail and being successful at it, and a lot of 'em are doing rural delivery. The gentleman that came up from Texas that delivered out into the country, country further than I did, he was successful and had people help him when he knocked on doors when he needed them. And he didn't have any violence happen. And so even though that's an area that was known for more violence, you know, like the place when I was growing up was the teacher's like "Don't go here," kind of place. And to have your schoolteacher tell you that at 16 years old, "Oh, you're driving now, you probably don't want to drive down this area." you know, "What?" So that's another part is that you're already aware and you're already made aware of how that is, so, I think I answered your question.

EH: Well I mean, have you had, since you no longer have a postmaster, well your postmaster now is white?

JP: Yes?

EH: Have you had issues with management maybe not understanding?

JP: I think there's a little bit of that, not realizing the depth of some chaos, some conflict that is happening, I think that's part of it. But for the most part, I get along with my postmasters and have been able to be successful with that, yeah. But I do think that's true in every aspect of our life, is that there are people that really don't understand, don't put the shoes on. They don't. They don't get it, they don't see it, they think it's not true and think it just is the same as their experience of having a similar conflict when the extra element might be there that they don't have.

59:31

EH: Yeah, like a real personal safety issue.

JP: Right.

EH: Mhm. The other thing I was reading is that the NRLCA was the most--I think this was in the 70s during the postal strike, but the NRLCA was the most conservative union at least at one point and according to a historian I talked to, was discriminatory towards African-Americans joining the union and I don't know all the details of that history, but...

JP: Neither do I!

EH: Yeah!

JP: Okay! That's...

EH: Is that anything that you've heard about?

JP: I've not had that conversation come up and I didn't have any trouble with my joining and it was...

EH: Yeah, I think maybe that has changed, but apparently was the case.

JP: Hey, if that's what it is, that's what it is and that--I can understand that I mean, you know, there was a time that it was who you know a lot more with the Postal Service instead of what you know and I certainly was who I knew to get where I'm at also. I had that element of help but I still had to pass the test and still had to go through the hiring process and be successful on my own merit in that regard. And so I've earned it and some people think that I was given it, you know, you're just, you're not just given something like that you know. And so I've had that insinuated toward me from some of the people that I thought were friends that I've had to then since not be a part of my life anymore because of that misunderstanding. And so, which is unfortunate, you know, but that is part of that element is they think that you don't deserve to be where you're at.

EH: Right.

JP: So.

EH: Well, thank you for sharing that. Is there anything else about that or otherwise you'd like to talk about?

1:01:47

JP: I think I've given my opinion of it. Unfortunate opinion but it is what it is. But no, no. I'm good. Yeah.

EH: Great! Thank you so much. (laughs)

JP: (laughs) A little more technical than I thought it might be, but.

EH: Oh really? Like detailed?

JP: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

EH: I mean I've talked to 20 people so now I just gotta get into the nitty gritty! (laughs)

JP: Right, right. You already have gotten everything else.

EH: I got the overview out, I want the deep dive, you know?

JP: Right, yeah. That's a deep dive. So unfortunately, a negative part of the deep dive, but it is a part of it. There's good and bad--I get plenty of customers that love me and plenty of customers are very happy that I'm their mail carrier and plenty of Christmas cards and plenty of Christmas cheer and so, which is good, you know, and it's reciprocated and there's plenty of laughter and plenty of just normal conversations--"Hi, how are you and hope you're doing well and how's the kids and how's your wife" kind of conversations that happen on a regular basis and so, it's a very peaceful part of it and so the small element of that is not paramount in my day at all, you know. I'm okay. I could drive by those and you know the people when you wave and they turn their back on you, you know what,

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you already know, so it's not, it's not an occupying thing of my day that is always there. While it's always in the background, it's not always in the forefront of your day and there's many weeks that I don't even think about it, it doesn't even come across because it's just an element that you're, it's like, okay, you know, there's a curve there. That's it. It's that basic and so um, yeah.

EH: Awesome. Thanks so much!

JP: You're very welcome. I hope that worked.

EH: It was great! Yeah.

JP: For what you need.

EH: It was great.

JP: And yeah, so.

1:04:05

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END OF INTERVIEW