

Behind The Scenes: Campus Mailman

By Sharon Olmstead

Photo by Sharon Olmstead



"He's the kind of guy everybody wants for a dad," says Wayne Mills, mail/delivery and postal worker at Penn State Harrisburg.

"He's the best!" he adds enthusiastically about his fellow-worker, Jack Benfer, part-time mail clerk.

Benfer has been delivering a smile and the mail to everyone on campus now for almost three years after retiring from the US Postal Service as a mail carrier in Lower Paxtang. "He brightens up your day," says Diane Burkett, secretary to Provost Ruth Leventhal.

Benfer has a reputation for being a gentle, caring person. He spent about \$20 a week on dog biscuits for the dogs on his mail route in Paxtang. "I had the happiest dogs in the whole area," Benfer says. "When I went down one side of the street, dogs were barking on the other side of the street waiting for me." He even put biscuits through the letter slots for his canine friends.

He has three dogs of his own--Buffy, a yellow lab, Katie, a golden retriever, both strays, and Sheeba, a mixed setter, a neighbor's dog that decided to live with the Benfers. He built carpeted rooms with night lights for each dog in his basement beside their family room.

After retiring, Benfer worked as a volunteer bus tour guide for the Dauphin County Area Agency on Aging, taking senior citizens on bus tours in the Harrisburg area.

"I can't see turning into a vegetable," he says. Now that

he works on campus from 12 to 4pm every day, in his spare time he does photography and research for a slide show for people who can't go on the bus tour.

"I have less free time now than when I worked full-time," he says. "There's just not enough time to do everything." When he relaxes, he likes to go out to dinner, to exhibitions, and

to antique shows with his wife, the former Ruth Dougherty from Middletown. She retired from the Pennsylvania State American Legion, and now babysits part-time.

Benfer says that when you get older you enjoy things more, like just getting up in the morning and being able to come to work." He likes history,

Louis L'Amour westerns, big band music of the 40's, and hot, spicy food, especially chili.

Benfer says his best day on campus was when his only daughter, Patti, graduated from Capital College, then known as Capitol Campus, in 1977. "She sat on the stage with all the dignitaries because she graduated summa cum laude," he says with tears in his eyes.

Robert Hamill, manager of personnel and business services, said "When I interviewed him for the job, Jack stood out above the others." "He's the kind of guy you want on your team." Hamill also said Benfer's job is important because the mail delivery is a service to everyone on campus, and "it's important we give good, courteous service."

Next to his buddies in the Army during World War II and the Korean War, when his life depended on the man next to him, Benfer says he appreciates all the people on campus--employees, faculty, staff, and students. "I feel like they're my own brood."

His mood brightens when he talks about his experiences in WWII when he remembers his duty as security personnel for Winston Churchill

during the Marrakech conference in Casablanca, a seaport city in north Africa. "You've seen the movie 'Casablanca' probably, but there really is no Rick's Cafe there," he laughs.

Churchill had erratic hours, he says. "It wasn't unusual for him to come out a 2 or 3 in the afternoon fully-dressed with a silk dressing gown,

a light, ten-gallon Stetson hat, smoking one of his famous cigars--at least a foot long," Benfer says.

Benfer was also impressed with General Charles DeGaulle's height. "With that pillbox hat of his, he was a least a foot taller than I was," he says.

On VE Day (Victory Europe) Benfer says he was lucky to be in Paris. It was the first time the lights were turned on in Paris since the war started. "It was an experience I'll never forget," he says. He would like to forget his Korean War experience, however. His only regret in his life, he says, is signing up for the inactive reserves after WWII, because they were the first to be called for Korea.

Benfer loves his job and wants to work five more years when he will reach mandatory retirement age. There are only two changes he would make in his job to remove stress from it: to come to work earlier and to have another service elevator in the Olmsted building. He says it is very stressful and physically difficult to do his job when the present elevator breaks down. Also, it would help maintain the schedule to mail delivery if there were two elevators--a freight elevator as well as a personnel elevator, according to Benfer.

Whatever he does, you know Jack Benfer will be happy and busy. "It's great to be alive," he says, and you know he means it when you see him coming down the hall in Olmsted with the mail and a smile on his face.

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