

Your Postal Podcast 47th Edition Transcript – April 2012

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Richard Watkins: Welcome to Your Postal Podcast. This is Richard Watkins of the U.S. Postal Service Corporate Communications. In this April 2012 edition, you'll hear from a *Washington Post* writer about the President of the United States' letter reading and writing habits. And by popular demand, you'll also hear more from the actor who portrays "Al the Letter Carrier" in the Postal Service's popular series of TV commercials. The show concludes with our regular look at the latest postal headlines.

Presidential documents usually end up getting displayed in museums and libraries. But some Americans who decided to write a letter to our current U.S. President have found a personal response from the chief executive in their own mailboxes. Peter Hass spoke with the author of a recent book chronicling some of these communications.

'Ten Letters'

Peter Hass: Eli Saslow's new book "Ten Letters: The Stories Americans Tell Their President," follows what happened to ten people whose letters to Barack Obama were answered personally by the President, and explores why they wrote the letters and how Obama's responses impacted their lives.

Saslow, who covered Obama's election campaign in 2008, continued covering the President after he took office, and says he was inspired to tell the story of the letters shortly thereafter.

Eli Saslow: It was actually his second morning in office, I think sort of feeling like the world was kind of closing in on him; he sent a note to his correspondence office saying that "every day in the afternoon, I want to see ten samples of the mail that we get." So, I heard about that because he mentioned sometimes in these speeches some of the letters he reads at night. So, I kind of started kind of digging into figuring out what these letters were and had the chance to spend a year sort of reading through this mail and going out to write about some of these people's letters and stories.

The president says now that these letters are his most direct connection to the people that he governs. So, I've always been interested in mail – I like writing my letters myself. The fact that a president now feels like the mail can be his main connection to people made it seem like that was something that was really worth exploring – in terms of what compels people to write, what they write about, and how these letters sometimes impact the president.

The White House mail office – they get about 20,000 pieces of correspondence every day. I would say about 60 percent of that is emails, and 40 percent of that is handwritten or typed letters that have been sent through you guys (USPS) across the country to the White House. He gets – it's actually a purple folder that contains ten of these things. In there, I would say about 70 percent of those are letters, and not emails. I think that's just because, the people who are reading these to decide which ten get to the President – a letter sticks with people in some ways that an email doesn't. I know the President, when we talked about it, he said that one of the things he likes most about letters is they're also sort of tactile. You know, it's ink and it's sometimes crumpled paper and misspelled

words. There's something that just feels really intimate and real about that, that an email sometimes can't really convey.

He usually likes to write back by hand to one or two of those letters. He'll take out, usually it's sort of like a felt-tipped black pen and he writes on these embossed white note cards that have the presidential seal there on the top. Sometimes he'll write a quick sentence or two, other times he'll fill the front and back side of a note card and send it back in the mail. People write a note to the President I think sometimes not really expecting a reply. They're just writing because they want somebody to listen. And then, when they receive these notes back, sometimes people don't think that they're real until the White House calls to say, "Hey, did you get the President's letter." So, they catch people by surprise... but they're very clearly handwritten.

Hass: Saslow, in keeping with the theme of the ten letters the President reads each day, met with ten of the letter writers who received personal responses from Obama.

Saslow: I wanted to write a book that showcased sort of how transformative these letters could be, not only for the President, sometimes for policy, but almost always for these people who'd written to him and then had heard back in return. One of the letters in the book is from a cleaning woman in Ohio who had given up her health insurance because she said she couldn't afford to pay it anymore. About two weeks after giving up her health insurance, she was diagnosed with leukemia -- given a 35 percent chance to live. Natoma, the woman who had written, she's a Republican, but they sort of became allies in some ways. So for me, the joy of the book was getting to go spend time with these people as they were dealing with these issues that they had written to the President about.

Hass: By the way, Saslow said he's taken up correspondence -- via the mail -- with several of the people he wrote about in the book. "Ten Letters" is available now, in bookstores nationwide.

'Al the Letter Carrier,' Part 2

Watkins: Mike Bradecich is the actor better known as Letter Carrier "Al" in a series of popular USPS commercials, including new ones promoting Every Door Direct Mail. Reaction from listeners to last month's feature about Bradecich was so positive, we've brought Meiko Patton back to share some more of her recent conversation with the actor.

Meiko Patton: During our meeting on the set during filming for the most recent of his 19 TV commercials for the U.S. Postal Service, Mike Bradecich said he gets a special feeling, even now, when they appear on television.

Mike Bradecich: So it's still really exciting three years later every time one of them comes on just to see that it's still there. And, it's always, you know, it can be a surprise which one it is. Usually I expect it to be the most recent one that we've made, and sometimes it's one that we made two years ago. So it's always fun to kind of be reminded of those. It's always exciting.

Patton: Mike believes he shares some important characteristics with the hard-working men and women of the Postal Service he represents.

Bradecich: I would like to think that there are several characteristics and qualities that I share with postal employees and letter carriers. Mostly, when I try to think about how I relate to them I think I do so as a parent just because the responsibilities that they have – you know, the weight that they carry is sometimes literally very heavy – but it’s a great responsibility you know, it’s just that long tradition of the USPS. It’s just that kind of job that like being a parent, it’s something that absolutely has to be done, and I hope that I share that ability to sort of be present and able to complete the task at hand no matter what the obstacles may be. I have a ton of respect for employees of the Postal Service, and I *hope* that I share characteristics with them. I like to think so; I *strive* to.

Patton: Bradecich is not only the face of the Postal Service -- he's also a customer who values the importance of letter writing -- something he has introduced to the next generation in his family.

Bradecich: I was a big letter writer when I was a kid. I used to write a ton of letters and actually it’s something that we still do in our house. Right now, the mantel has been taken up by my oldest daughter, who is 6, and she got a birthday card from her great-grandmother and was so excited to get a piece of mail with her name on it. It was when she was 4, or maybe turning 5 and she was really just starting to read, and so you know seeing her name written on an envelope that had come in the mail was just the most exciting thing that she could imagine. So, she of course, immediately wanted to send a letter right back to her granny. So it turned into this little pen pal relationship between the two of them from us here in California to my wife’s grandmother in Iowa, which has been really fun to watch. Where an email you can send the same person 20 emails in a single day, but with a letter you sit down, you’re writing it longhand so you’re really carefully considering your words, and it’s a little more of an art form and one that I know we definitely try to maintain around here.

Patton: Our thanks to Mike Bradecich for taking time from his busy schedule to talk with *Your Postal Podcast*. Three new commercials featuring “Al” and Every Door Direct Mail are airing now on nationally-broadcast news and sports programs.

News Roundup

Watkins: And now, here's a roundup of recent Postal Service news:
On May 12, postal employees will again demonstrate their generosity by supporting the National Association of Letter Carriers' (NALC) National “Stamp Out Hunger” Food Drive. Postal employees and their customers have contributed more than one billion pounds of non-perishable food since the program began 20 years ago. And in marking the 20th anniversary, the NALC Food Drive has become the nation's largest one-day campaign to collect food for distribution to needy families.

Click-N-Ship has been redesigned, making it easier and faster for customers to manage and ship their domestic and international packages. Customers will now see a cleaner and more streamlined look and feel that reflects the features of the redesigned usps.com. The redesign includes a streamlined shipping experience and new features in “Shipping History.” Every page of the process is new, including “Fast Paths” that reduce by 50 percent the number of clicks needed to create a shipment.

Thanks for listening to *Your Postal Podcast*. Now, we'd like to hear from you. Please click the "Comments" link on the YourPostalPodcast-dot-com webpage, or email us at YourPostalPodcast at usps dot com with feedback or story ideas for future shows. And special thanks again to Meiko Patton for her contributions to this month's program.

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