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Neighbors had empathy for troubled mailman



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Boston University Metropolitan College

By Debra Filcman
GHS

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Brookline — Alan Gagne, a slight, disheveled man, bearded and bespectacled, would groan as he lifted hefty bags of mail up the front steps of homes on his route.

"I used to give him hot drinks," said his former Tabor Place neighbor, Deborah van Rooyen. "He'd come absolutely exhausted to the door. He was a broken man."

A Vermont native, Gagne, 54, worked as a Brookline mail carrier for 20 years, most recently delivering in his own neighborhood around Linden Street, where most people described him "quiet" and "quirky." He was found dead last week in his Brookline

Village apartment, where authorities also found stacks of undelivered mail, some dating back two decades.

"He was very taciturn about his job," said his former landlord, Chris Westphal. "It's not a job a social extrovert would drift toward."

Gagne would, with a slight stutter, complain to neighbors when the weather got too hot, or too cold, Westphal said, making mundane conversation.

"But not unhappy," she said. "He seemed satisfied, if not happy."

Just three weeks ago, van Rooyen suggested he use a push cart to tote the mail, which he quickly dismissed as a provision for disabled or female employees, she said.

"I jokingly told him to just dump the junk mail instead," van Rooyen said. "But he took his job very seriously and said, 'No, no, you can't do that, it's the law.'"

Former Tabor Street neighbor Mary Shea said you could hear his groans from across the street, and many residents aided him with a glass of water.

His supervisor at the Coolidge Corner Post Office was unaware of any physical ailment, but when Gagne didn't return to the branch after his route last Friday, the supervisor and another employee went to his apartment to look for him. A neighbor, who knew where Gagne hid a spare key, let him in.

"He was just lifeless and kind of blue," Postal Service spokesman Robert Cannon said.

Gagne died in his apartment several hours earlier of an apparent heart attack, Brookline Police Capt. John O'Leary said.

But while postal workers and neighbors alike weren't just surprised by his death, they were stunned to find he'd committed a federal offense: stacks of undelivered mail sat in his apartment, some dating back to the 1980s, according to Cannon.

It was a "substantial" amount of mail found throughout his Linden Street home, predominantly third-class advertisements, Cannon said. Tons of magazines and some first-class items such as greeting cards were also in his possession.

"You name it, it was there," Cannon said. "Was he hoarding? Was he doing it to save time on the route? It's a mystery."

Agents from the Postal Service's Office of Inspector General are still sorting through the recovered mail, Cannon said. But much of it, he guessed, belongs to residents who have long since moved away from Brookline.

"He didn't even open the greeting cards," Cannon said. "He didn't open anything."

But van Rooyen said she believes it was an act of desperation.

"I think he was probably scared to tell his boss he couldn't carry it and didn't know how to ask for help," she said.

Cannon said push carts are, in fact, generally used only by the disabled, but a capacity to lift up to 35 pounds is a job requirement.

Shea said when his landlord asked him to leave the Tabor Place apartment two years ago, after about 10 years of residence, he moved an unusually large amount of "junk," which was, in part, the reason for his move to Linden Street.

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His housekeeping skills, or lack thereof, presented health and safety issues, according to Westphal; scattered old newspapers, boxes of 1970s TV Guides, and collections of take-out coffee cups plagued the apartment, she said.

"But we never saw a big box labeled 'U.S. Postal Service'," she said.

Westphal said in the entire decade he lived in the building, she never knew him to receive a guest, except for an annual visit from elderly parents; his mother passed away this year, and he's survived only by a 93-year-old father in Vermont.

"What happens to his benefits?" van Rooyen said. "Who will bury him?"

That's been a hot topic making the rounds on e-mail, with many neighbors wondering how to pay their respects to Gagne, whom they considered a great mailman and neighbor, or as van Rooyen put it, "a part of the scene that you depended on."

"It was absolutely surprising to me because I never missed a piece of mail," Hurd Road resident Barbara Simkowski said. "Maybe he was just shielding us from junk mail."

Cannon said there was no increase in customer complaints on Gagne's route, but former St. Paul Street resident Liane Cassavoy said NetFlix eventually stopped delivering to her home because there had been so many complaints about her address.

Cassavoy, who was surprised to learn that Gagne was only 54 years old, said he looked older and worn, and she often saw him struggling with the mail.

"I feel terrible about it, but it was really frustrating," she said.

But Simkowski said when Gagne was first put on her delivery route, friends who used to be on his route lamented the loss of a great mailman.

"When I went through a divorce, he was incredibly circumspect about it," she said. "He would ask whether to leave my husband's mail there or send it elsewhere."

She and her son, who grew up on the Hurd Road home, called him "You Can Call Me Al," a reference to a Paul Simon song. "That was his name - You Can Call Me Al," she said.

Staff Writer Jessica Scarpati contributed to this report.

Neighbors mourn loss of mailman

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