http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/010313/mailSM.png**After years of walking the most demanding route in Port, a humble postman who inspired co-workers with his tireless work ethic retires from his job of four decades**

For more than 40 years, Joe Ulrich slogged through rain and sleet and snow on his appointed rounds, carrying mail to businesses and homes in downtown Port Washington and on the city's west side.

But with the new year, Ulrich will be able to relax at home instead of facing the weather head-on. He retired from his job at the U.S. Postal Service after his shift on Saturday, Dec. 29.

For decades, Ulrich has been a fixture along his route, head down as he walks briskly and with purpose, his glasses perched near the tip of his nose, arms filled with mail "out to there," said Terri Olroyd, holding her arms far from her body. His satchel, she said, carries as much as 35 pounds of mail.

Olroyd, the officer in charge of the Port Post Office, called Ulrich a role model for his co-workers.

"He goes out there every day and does the best job he can. He never complains. It doesn't matter how cold, how hot, how snowy or rainy it is. This is a very hard job. It's a physically demanding job. In the summer, I'll see Joe come in here with his shirt sopping wet. He's just really focused. I never worry about him," Olroyd said.

"He's got a genuine concern for everybody. He's just really a beloved person. He's always there to help anybody, no matter what they need."

If you ask his co-workers about him, they use the same phrases to describe Ulrich — modest, caring, disciplined, Christian, honest, hard working, optimistic, humble.

So humble, it seems, that he politely refused to be interviewed for this story. His co-workers, however, were eager to fete the man they fondly call Little Joe — a nickname he said he received because at one point there were three men named Joe working at the post office.

He's the poster man for the postal service, they said, and one of the best human beings they know.

“He never says anything bad about anyone,” said Cindi Stein “That’s the truth. And he’s one of the sweetest guys around.”

“He’s the only guy who never shows anger,” added Katie Large.

Debbie Zinkel talked about the time Ulrich fixed her boots, taking them home and rebuilding the heels and sole after they cracked.

“He’s a good man to have around,” she said.

Stein added, “When your truck doors freeze, he’ll be right there to help you pound and get them open.”

At age 65, Ulrich is in remarkable physical condition, testament to the countless miles he has walked on the job and his personal fitness routine.

“Even on his days off, he works on a treadmill, covering the same number of miles he does on his route,” Stein said. “He doesn’t want to get out of shape.”

Ulrich has had numerous chances to switch from his current route, which is considered a walking route, to one that would allow him to drive half the time. But he refused, choosing instead to stay on the same route he’s had since 1988 — one that takes him up and down many of the city’s seven hills.

“He’s got one of the physically most demanding routes,” Zinkel said. “When I started here, for the first three months my whole body hurt when I did parts of his route. I don’t know how he does it.”

“He doesn’t stop moving ever,” Kevin Karrels said. “He was built for this job. He can adapt to anything. He’s just amazing. He’s the hardest worker you’ll ever meet.

“He’s a perfectionist.”

Ulrich, an Ohio native, joined the Postal Service after serving with the U.S. Army in Vietnam, Karrels said.

He spent his entire career at the Port Post Office, starting on Feb. 2, 1974, as a clerk and later becoming a carrier, Olroyd said.

Throughout his career, he’s seen many changes, she noted. For example, when Ulrich started, all the mail for the post office was delivered unsorted. Each carrier started his day sorting the mail and arranging it so it was easy to grab the proper letters and parcels for each home. Now, it arrives in Port each morning sorted for the carriers.

While the post office will forward mail for 18 months, Ulrich saved the information for people along his route for much longer and went out of his way to get the mail delivered to them.

“Early in the morning he’d flip through them (the forwarding cards) like it was bothering him ... ‘Where does this mail go?’” Large said. “I don’t know if he’s ever taken a sick day. He’s always here.”

Diane Heimerl said that when people on his route received mail with postage due, Ulrich usually paid the money for them, especially if the mail went to a church.

Ulrich knows everyone on his route, Rich Sanders said, and has developed a good relationship with them.

“A lot of the customers talk about how he was their mail carrier when they were children, and now they’re adults and he’s their mail carrier,” Zinkel said. “They love him.”

“If we had a party for Joe, we’d have to have it somewhere else because everyone would want to come,” Sanders said.

But Ulrich didn’t want a retirement party, Olroyd said. He bought sub sandwiches for his fellow workers on Friday, and Olroyd snuck a cake into the post office to provide him with a proper send-off.

Ulrich may be retired, but that doesn’t mean his co-workers are ready to say goodbye.

“I have Joe on my route, so I’ll be checking up on him,” Large said. “We still are in awe of him.”

Image Information: AFTER FOUR DECADES walking Port Washington’s streets to deliver the mail, Joe Ulrich retired from the U.S. Postal Service Saturday. Ulrich, who has worked in Port Washington throughout his career, was described as a model employee who insisted on a walking route that included downtown and the city’s west side. Photo by Sam Arendt