

Trials and Rewards of a Winter Paper Route

Mike came in the front door, talking fast, “Now don’t get mad at me, Jon. Just hear me out. I got these four paper routes for you and me. You got a small car, gets good mileage, so...”

“Mike, Slow down. You signed us both up for...?”

“Sure. You said you wanted to make some money. Before you get mad, just...”

“Mike. I’m not going to get mad. I might give delivering papers a try if you slow down enough so we can figure out what’s happening.”

When he slowed down enough to listen, I said I’d help Mike get started, and we’d see what happened. I did need to make some money, but mainly, I didn’t want to leave Mike stranded, without transportation.

It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve delivered papers. When I was 13, I wanted to earn money. My neighbor said, “We’d like to get a paper. There isn’t any delivery out here. You could start a route.”

I called the local newspaper office, found out what to do, then sold 75 subscriptions.

With gravel roads in our neighborhood, western Oregon heavy winter rain, and dogs who savagely threatened anyone on a bicycle, delivering papers became an adventure.

I learned to keep my bicycle between me and a growling dog. With the cooperation of their owners, we got most of the dogs trained to let me deliver papers in peace. I learned to ride with a heavy load of papers over my front wheel trying to pull the wheel from the path I planned through loose gravel, a strenuous workout that threatened disaster if I failed to keep the front wheel going exactly where it should go.

I learned that a few people wouldn’t pay for their papers, but the people who added a dollar or two to their payment for the paper because they appreciated the job I was doing more than made up my losses.

After two years of delivering papers, I learned other work paid better. A friend took over the route, and I went to work setting pins in a bowling alley.

Now, I have the opportunity to renew my acquaintance with delivering papers.

By the time the circulation manager got the routes mapped out and instructions written for Mike the next day, it was an hour and a half until dark. I drove and Mike got in and out of the car and delivered the papers.

I said, "Mike, I know you're excited about the new job and distracted by trying to figure out where to deliver the papers, but if you keep slamming the door, it's going to break something. Everything we earn will go into fixing it."

"Sorry. I'm used to my pickup. You have to lift up on the door and slam it hard." He got out to deliver the next paper and slammed the door. I started reaching over and catching the door to keep it from slamming.

Mike had been over the routes only once with the manager, and it took time to figure out where the papers went. Darkness descended on us in the old part of town where street lamps shone dimly, far apart. Large trees blocked what light there was.

I said, "I have to go pick up Amanda at work. She can ride with us for the rest of the route, or I can take her home and then come back."

"Take her home. I can do this part on foot better anyway. If you can't get back, I can walk home."

Mike stuffed papers in a canvas bag. Cold rain drizzled down. He slipped the bag over his head, so he had papers hanging front and back. He stepped away from the car, into darkness and rain. He said, "Good thing it isn't raining."

I took Amanda home, drove back, and found Mike walking up the middle of Hunter street, wet and forlorn. He said, "It's too dark. You can't see the house numbers. Some of the houses don't have numbers."

"Get in. I called the circulation manager when I took Amanda home. I'll take you to the office, and he'll take you around the rest of the route. He'll take you around the next two days, so you'll actually know the routes. I told him you're a hero, but even a hero can't learn four routes in one day."

Three days later, Mike and I played a game of chess. He won in about five minutes. He said, "You need to practice more."

I said, "I do need to make money, Mike, but not at three dollars an hour for me and my car. You can fix your pickup and pay for the extra gas it uses with what you'd have to pay me and you'll have money left over."

“I know. I fixed my pickup. I wanted to give you a chance to make some money, but I wouldn’t want to work with you. You’re too picky, ‘Don’t slam the door. Don’t slam the door.’ That’s all I hear from you the whole time we’re delivering.” He gathered up his chess set. “But thanks for helping me get started, and thanks for putting in a good word with the manager for me. Now he thinks I’m a hero, getting these routes out of his hair.” Mike headed toward the afternoon’s papers.

I turned on my computer. I needed to try to make some money. Delivering papers definitely wouldn’t work out for me. I thought I should try to write something and sell it, maybe an essay about delivering papers.