

## **Uptown Normal mailman whistles while he works**

Written by Jacob Lambert, Daily Vidette Senior Staff  
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If you listen closely, the echoes of timeless tunes from The Beatles and The Beach Boys to the classic Broadway musicals “Oklahoma” and “Fiddler on the Roof” can be heard ringing throughout Uptown Normal six days a week thanks to one man and his extraordinary will to whistle.

Known among many locals and ISU students as the “whistling mail man,” 64-year-old Gridley, Ill. native Ken Kemp has over 30 years experience as a mail carrier for the United States Postal Service, a career that began in 1973 after his return from a four-year stint in the Navy.

While in the Navy, Kemp underwent two tours in Vietnam aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise, the world’s first nuclear powered vessel and the oldest aircraft carrier still in service.

“Boy, was that a treat. I was right out of the cornfields and I was on a ship six thousand miles away from everything,” Kemp said.

After marrying in 1974 and moving to California to start a family and begin a new business endeavor selling and installing car phones, Kemp made his way back to Illinois and was reinstated as a mail carrier in Bloomington-Normal in 1995.

While delivering, Kemp likes to partake in a pastime that he has been perfecting since his childhood — whistling.

“My dad was a whistler ... he taught me how to whistle and it just kind of came natural,” Kemp said. “He died when I was 11 years old ... when I whistle I have pleasant memories of my dad and how I used to watch him down in the shop building things,” he added.

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Without formal training, Kemp's nearly pitch perfect melodies can be heard blocks away as he makes his rounds through Uptown Normal and the surrounding apartment complexes.



"I don't know a 'C' note from an 'E' note ... I'm not musically inclined," Kemp said. "If I like a melody, I'll whistle it, but I'm no Beethoven, that's for sure."

In addition to music from his parents' generation — the likes of Nat King Cole and Perry Como — he also enjoys whistling songs from his own generation and some tunes from today's popular music.

While modest about his skill and popularity among students, Kemp said he hopes others continue to take joy in his passion.

"If it puts people in a better mood, that's great. It's a nice pastime that I've become accustomed to, and if it makes someone else feel good, great," he said.

Having spent the last seven years delivering mail in Normal, Kemp has watched as the community has transformed with construction aimed at revitalizing the small community and

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turning it into what Kemp calls an “urban hub.”

“All the stuff that’s happened in the last five years is just unreal,” Kemp said. “The town [of Normal] was due for a facelift and this was probably the best approach; it’s still remained a little community and I still know a lot of people,” he added.

The opportunity to interact with people on a daily basis and create lasting friendships while providing newcomers with a warm welcome is what Kemp said makes his job worthwhile.

“I’ve been fortunate. In the course of my career in San Diego and out here, I have walked through people’s lives,” Kemp said. “I’ve seen how people move on; how their families grow ... it’s just a neat thing to see how life evolves and how sometimes you can change people’s lives.”

Throughout his many mail routes, Kemp has developed unique connections with those he delivers to, learning about them through the mail they receive. He said these connections are often the greatest, yet at times the most challenging aspect of his work.

“I remember one time in California ... I knew the family and I had seen the kids grow up. The daughter took off for college and the son joined the Marine Corps and he was killed in combat,” Kemp said. “I had seen this kid grow up and write home from the places he’d been, and the next thing I know we’re getting his belongings shipped to the house ... that was really tough,” Kemp said.

Over the past 30 years, Kemp has covered a lot of ground delivering mail and whistling all the way.

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“I walk about 12 miles a day, six days a week, 52 weeks a year,” Kemp said. “If my calculations are correct, I’ve walked around the world two and one-third times in mileage.”

He added that he looks forward to making it around the world for a third time doing the job he sincerely enjoys, taking pride in knowing that others can depend on him day after day.

“You have to have some sense of urgency. You want to get this [mail] out, you want to get it delivered, and you want to get back in,” Kemp said. “I enjoy it, and that’s half the battle.”