

# Lacey mail carrier lobbies for kilt equality

By Erik Lacitis, *Seattle Times* staff reporter

LACEY, Thurston County —



Until last week, Dean Peterson was just a relatively anonymous.

Then he went to Boston and nervously introduced a resolution to include kilts as an official uniform option for male Postal Service carriers.

And even though his pitch to the National Association of Letter Carriers convention failed, Peterson now has gone worldwide.

While Peterson and his wife, Joni, were in Boston, their two teenage sons back home were fielding phone calls. Peterson was all over the media, in print, on TV and the Internet in North America, Great Britain, India — pretty much anywhere that has some cultural knowledge of that Gaelic tradition.

"American postmen get dressed to kilt," headlined The Times of London.

Now Peterson has returned to Lacey and was nervous about showing up for work today at the Olympia postal branch, from which he delivers mail to 945 customers.

"I'm like, is my job still waiting?" he says.

## **"Like a breeze blowing through the house"**

Of course, how Peterson came to be passionate about kilts — of all things — has to have an unusual history.

Peterson spent 22 years and three months in the Air Force and retired as a master sergeant. Five years ago, he got the job as a mail carrier.

So he's familiar with government bureaucracies and knows that bureaucracies aren't much for things out of the ordinary.

He's a guy with a Norwegian/Finn ancestry. And until a couple of years ago, he hadn't much thought about kilts one way or another.

It all began, really, because of his wife.

Joni Peterson has been a longtime fan of Scottish actor Gerard Butler. He played the well-buffed King Leonidas in the recent film "300."

She's such a fan, in fact, that a couple of years ago Joni went to Scotland on a trip organized by a Web site for Butler fans.

Joni returned with a traditional tartan kilt as a present for her husband.

He had never worn a kilt before.

He tried it on.

He liked it.

Peterson is a big, muscular guy who is 6 feet tall and weighs in at 250 pounds.

With pants, he says, "Because I have big thighs, the skin rubs, and you get that scarring, you know, where little bits of skin protrude?"

But a kilt, he says, "It's like a breeze blowing through the house."

### **Reaction from public**

In the summer of 2006, Peterson decided to go public with his kilt. He and his wife went to his postal union local's annual picnic.

"I knew I was going to drink beer, so I wouldn't care what people were thinking," he remembers.

"People gave me looks, joked around a little, asked why I was wearing a skirt," Peterson says.

Sometimes, he says, people do ask him "if I'm going 'commando' under that kilt."

Of course, going commando means not wearing any underwear.

He does.

Now Peterson owns 15 kilts in various colors and fabrics.

He goes to Fred Meyer in a kilt. He takes his wife out to restaurants in a kilt. He does yardwork in a kilt. He goes in a kilt to watch his 15-year-old son, Dante, play in the high-school band.

Perhaps it's because one might think twice about making fun of a big guy like Peterson. But Peterson says that mostly what he gets are stares.

Dante says, "It's pretty cool that my dad fights for what he thinks he should do. My buddies have no problem with it. "

Soon enough, Peterson began envisioning a time when he could wear kilts to work. Right now, male carriers wear pants, either long or short. Female carriers can wear skirts.

Any changes in Postal Service uniforms are complicated.

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Peterson barged ahead.

Last summer, the state convention of the letter carriers' union adopted Peterson's resolution for Male Unbifurcated Garments, or MUGs.

Then came last week's national convention.

Peterson spent all \$1,800 his family had received from the government's economic-stimulus tax rebate to mail off 1,000 letters to every postal-union branch in the country. He included a photo of himself in a mock-up Postal Service kilt.



He explained that kilts "don't confine the legs or cramp the male genitals the way that trousers or shorts do."

He even got support from the Oregon letter-carriers union, which passed the same resolution.

Says Brooks Bennett, executive board member of the letter-carriers union in Washington state, "In Washington and Oregon, I guess we like to see ourselves as being progressive. Things get a hearing here that might not in other places."

But at the national convention, reception was frosty from the decision-makers. At one point, Peterson was so nervous that he mistakenly said "UPS" when he meant "USPS," for United States Postal Service. That got him roundly booed.

The committee in charge of the resolution nixed the kilts, saying there wasn't much demand for them.

Peterson says it was the older members — "the fuddy-daddies," he calls them — who didn't like the kilts. He says he could see them staring at him as he wore a kilt on the convention floor.

"All you could see was dirty looks."

He vows to return with his resolution at the next national convention in 2010.

Peterson was wearing a kilt as he was promising that.

He looked quite comfortable.

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