

Confessions of an Olympic Torch Shuttle Host 3

Whatever you do never throw out old clothes

Staging a massive event like this twice in our country in less than three decades creates some interesting fashion dynamics. In 1988, 8,000 Canadians ran with the torch bringing it across the country to the Games in Calgary. Lots of those Torch Bearers must have stored their now dated uniforms away in a closet somewhere waiting for just the right occasion to pull them out again. And our torch relay is just that. A chance to grab those old retro bright red and white SunIce brand uniforms out of the closet and relive the memories of a flame that burned 22 years ago. I see a few of them everyday; whether it is someone wearing one at a Celebration Site, standing on the side of the road demonstrating their support, or it may be a friend or family member wearing one while dropping off a Torch Bearer at one of my collection points. Yesterday a mother brought her 16 year-old daughter to our meeting place wearing the Calgary Torch jacket that she had on when she carried the flame in 88. It was a poignant *rights of passage* moment as her daughter changed into our new white Torch Bearers uniform and they took a picture side by side.



I know we will continue to see them down the road and probably with more frequency as we hit Calgary. Like red dots scattered across the nation they show up from time-to-time to remind us that the flame has passed through here before.

Lugging our Luggage West

It hit me the other day just how big our Torch Relay team was when I went to pick up my luggage in one of the hotels we were staying at. We travel with a giant contingent of between 250 to 300 people to support the relay.

Every morning all of our bags need to be taken from the Hotel that we just stayed at and dropped off at the new hotel where we arrive at the end of the day. Because we are traveling to a new location each night we can't carry our own personal luggage with us, but instead have a couple of trucks transport it from town to town. At the end of the day the strong burly VANOC staff from the trucks lug the huge cache of suitcases and duffel bags into a central area where they are reunited with their owners. I recently went to one of the giant function rooms of our hotel, to get my luggage and saw a sea of 300 large black bags. I felt like I was in the arrivals terminal of the Toronto Airport.

The size of our group presents logistical challenges onto itself. Last week we stayed overnight in Port Hawkesbury, Nova Scotia. It was a very small town, with no hotels large enough to accommodate us so we had to divide and conquer and split our group up into three different hotels. Just getting the right person into the right hotel with his or her luggage was a challenge onto itself. Especially in the dark after a long hard day on the road.

When we get to larger cities like Halifax there is room enough at the inn for all of us; but then our size presents another challenge for the armada of vehicles that we travel with. Try finding downtown parking in the middle of any medium to large sized Canadian city for a 106 cars, trucks, vans and buses. In these instances a satellite parking lot is set up usually five to ten kilometers from the hotel to store our vehicles, and a shuttle bus transports the VANOC crew back and forth as required. Now I know how the guys on the road with giant touring acts like the Rolling Stones feel, with their huge convoys. Only the Rolling Stones never play Port Hawkesbury.

Eves-dropping

It is interesting to listen to the Torch Bearers talk to one another while they are on my shuttle. The average group size is usually about a dozen. An ideal size that is very conducive to good conversations. Much like the size of a large dinner party. Sometimes we will park in our bus for half an hour, stationed at the point where I will let the first Torch Bearer out and I will ask everyone on the bus to introduce themselves and tell us their Olympic story and how they got here. After breaking the ice they all usually start chatting naturally in and amongst themselves and some really interesting conversations sometimes take place.

Three tidbits overheard in Nova Scotia:

- 1) A man from Calgary that had been to several Olympic Games explained to those seated around him that the spirit, camaraderie and energy on the bus, combined with the anticipation of about to be carrying the torch made him feel like he was at the Olympics Games themselves. He said "This feeling, the feeling we are all experiencing right now is just what it feels like being at the five Olympic Games that I have been at. The Olympic Spirit is right here on this bus. You can really feel it now"
- 2) Torches that have been burned leave a soot deposit around the top where the flame burns. The black dust like soot can easily be wiped off. I overheard a man and women on the bus discussing whether they would leave the Olympic soot on or wipe the Olympic soot off of their torches, after they ran. They had opposing views and a debate ensued over the merits of each position.

3) Two women discussing the length of their hair and their concerns that with the breeze outside they hoped that their hair didn't get blown into the flame of the torch and set on fire. I have never seen this happen.

You Were From Here Then but not Now

The shuttle bus is most often a nice combination of locals and people from far away. Although most of the Torchbearers are placed close to where they live that is not always the case. And it is interesting to note how people's circumstances change from the time they were chosen to run to when they actually run. Two days ago we ran out of a CFB Base in Greenwood, Nova Scotia. One of the men on my bus obviously new the area well and was enlisted in the forces. When I asked him what is like living on the local base, he told me he lives in Winnipeg. He said when he was invited to participate in the summer he lived here and had since been transferred to a base outside of Winnipeg. He said to me "I wasn't going to come out all this way just to run the flame because it was so expensive for the flight, but then my parents talked me into it, they said that I would be crazy not to run".

Yesterday afternoon running the flame out of Kensington, PEI I had an RCMP officer on the bus who again seemed like a local. Well he was at the time he was selected to run and given the spot in his hometown. He had since then been transferred to Edmonton. He used the opportunity to come to PEI with his wife and daughter to have a little mini vacation in this spectacularly beautiful province.

Please Sign Our Guest Book

We keep a guest book on our shuttle bus and after we pick up the Torch Bearers I encourage them to write down a comment or two.

*Name: Heather Cora
Date: November 2nd
Torch Bearer: 104*

I sometimes wondered how did I get to carry this flame? But when I got off the bus and saw all the people who have supported me waiting there, I knew.

*Name: Rachel Johns
Date: November 2nd
Torch Bearer: 103*

That was the closest to being a rock star that I will ever get. Overcome with pride. I found myself hooting and hollering "Go Canada". Thank you to everyone for the privilege.

Name: Shannon Vering Moody

Date: November 2
Torch Bearer: 110

I did it for the Moms of the world! Go Moms. Go Canada. Here's to peace and goodness.

Name: Jodi Pinset
Date: November 15
Torch Bearer: 21

My heart is beating outside my body and I have permasmile. Life is great!

Name: Dan Simpson
Date: November 18
Torch Bearer: 162

Time of my life; absolutely the best experience that anyone could ever have!