

Confessions of an Olympic Torch Shuttle Host 4

Driver, can I get a receipt please?

So there is this guy who is a Torch Bearer living in the Toronto area that is scheduled to run in Bathurst, New Brunswick on Saturday November 28th. He decides to fly in the night before because his team meeting, which is what the Shuttle Host leads, is at 6 am on Saturday. He is scheduled to run shortly after 7:00 that morning. Because of some really strong winds that we experienced blowing out the occasional torch in the Bathurst area that day, his plane can't land and is forced to turn back and it ends up landing in Montreal instead. Unfortunately it lands so late at night that he has no options to fly back to Bathurst, or anywhere in the Maritimes nearby for that matter. So what's he do? He walks out onto the street in front of the Montreal airport, hails a cab, and when the cabby says "where do you want to go to sir?" he says "Bathurst, New Brunswick". He was so determined to carry the Olympic torch that on top of his airline ticket he spent another \$1,000 on a cab ride from Montreal to Bathurst. But wait it gets better. The cab driver who must have been near the end of his shift when he was flagged down can't muster the energy to stay awake and keep on driving on the long trip through Quebec and into New Brunswick. So this guy steps in and drives the cab himself in order to ensure that he is not late for his appointment with destiny; his appointment to carry the Olympic Flame.



Who was he? Wilson Chau, or how he showed up on our roster, Torch Bearer 030 – 13. He was one heck of a determined Torch Bearer that wasn't going to miss out on the opportunity to carry the flame in the longest domestic Torch Relay in the history of the Olympic Games. Something he could appreciate after taking one of the longest cab rides out of the Montreal Airport.

The story has a happy ending with Wilson showing up five minutes early for his Saturday morning meeting with the rest of the Torch Bearers. His determination captured their imagination and some of the other Torch Bearers on the bus offered to drive him back to the Bathurst airport after he ran; or to the nearest cab stand, which ever he preferred.

Hunting for Orange Stickers

Please note I am going to upload a few close up shots of stickers on poles to you

They are about the size of a dinner plate, and are bright orange with black numbers on them; and they are round like dinner plates too. They are mainly stuck on the sides of wooden telephone poles, but sometimes you will find them on trees or fences or lamp poles. They are temporarily applied with a staple gun or with glue. To anyone passing by our route marking stickers they would probably go unnoticed, or you might think they are part of a local ordinance survey. But to a Shuttle Host like me they are the lifeblood of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games Torch Relay. And finding them is half of my job.

How they got there, how years was spent planning the Torch Relay route and deciding precisely where to put each one of the 12,000 of them from coast to coast to coast is another story onto itself. My job is simply to get each one of the Torch Bears on my bus to them on time. Simply may not be the right word to use.

You have to remember that me and my Shuttle Bus driver, who have to find these sometimes shy stickers, are not from the local area where the stickers are placed. No matter where we go we are always from out of town. So every night as we prepare for the next day of delivering dozens and dozens of Torch Bearers to the side of the road at their spot to participate in the relay we are given a thick manifest style document, called the Daybook, which lists where every single sticker for that day is located. Each numbered sticker on the road corresponds to a number given to a Torch Bearer earlier this year that determines where I drop them off. And it is so so important to get that spot right at the right time. It's the exact spot that that excited, dedicated and incredibly pumped Torch Bearer needs to be to receive the flame from the Torch Bearer before them at a specific time nailed down to the exact minute. But depending on where we are overnighing on the evening before when we get the Daybook, often the stickers that we need to locate are 200 kilometers up the road in the next community that we are going through. So it is not as if I can go look for them the night before to prepare. Sometimes I wish I could to lessen the anxiety and uncertainty. The sticker locations are just street names and other landmark co-ordinates on a long list to us. Just words. They are listed like, Route 11 near Otho Road, or Church Street close to the Centennial Bridge. The all-important Daybook is an accurate document that thousands of man-hours of work have gone into. But in the end the sticker spot where I have to go to is always a big mystery. It's not as if when I get my day book and look where my first sticker is and a light goes off in my head and I think "Oh I know where that is". The job of being a Shuttle Host on the Olympic Torch Relay is a lot like a 106-day scavenger hunt or car rally.

Sometimes we will be the first shuttle of the day out. There are 9 shuttles altogether and we rotate our schedules. If the first Torch Bearer is running at 7:00 am that means that they are told to report to a collection point near where their sticker is at 6:00 am. We organize the Torch Bearers into groups of 10 to 20 runners that are told to go to different collection points on the day they run at a specific time. Continuing with my example, if the meeting time for the Torch Bearers collection point meeting is at 6:00 that means that I need to be there at 5:30 to prepare for their arrival. The collection points for Torch Bearers are easier to find than the

stickers, because they are usually at a community center, school or a McDonald's restaurant parking lot. So if I need to be there at 5:30 am with our Shuttle bus and driver to prepare to meet with my Torch Bearers that morning, I also really need to be there knowing exactly where all the stickers are for the people that we are picking up and will soon be dropping off at their appointment with destiny. I need to find their insertion point, which is what we call the spot where the sticker is, before our meeting. So it is not an uncommon site to see me and my driver out in the middle of no-where with a flashlight at 4:30 in the morning looking for a bright orange dinner plate sized sticker. It is kind of fun. So far we haven't missed a beat, the Torch Bearers arrive and when they board the bus we have a plan as to exactly where we will drop them off. I address them in my briefing with all the confidence of a local who has lived in the region his entire life and knows precisely when and where they need to be in order to play their important part in carrying the Olympic flame across Canada. In reality I was scrambling through some farmers field in the middle of no-where, ankle deep in cold mud just a half hour before with my flashlight hoping like heck to find that orange sticker in the dark on the side of a nondescript telephone pole.

With Glowing Hearts We See Thee Rise the True North Strong and Free

On November 29th in Fredericton, New Brunswick the 17 Torchbearers on my bus broke out into a patriotic, totally from the heart, rendition of Oh Canada. I couldn't help but join in. It was just after they had each run their 300 meters of the Olympic Torch Relay and we collected the last one of them back onto the bus. It's a song I have almost exclusively sung before hockey games and at school assemblies; certainly never on a bus. But at that moment in time, as the sun was setting over the Saint John River and we were driving the Torch Bearers back to where we picked them up at the City Hall to reunite them with their family and friends, it just seemed like the perfect moment to sing our national anthem and by doing so put a meaningful exclamation mark on what was an emotional and moving experience for each and everyone of them. The acoustics on the bus were great, but it was awkward for me not to be able to stand up as I sang.

Chosen on the spot

Very very rarely a Torch Bearer doesn't show up. Most of them were selected months ago and have been given reminders and updates since then. As a final assurance we call each one the week before to confirm details. When we have an empty spot for whatever reason, and find out at the collection point minutes before the bus is leaving to drop the Torch Bearers off, we can do one of two things: Number one, ask the Torch Bearer that is running before the "no show" to run the extra 300 meters to fill-in; or two, appoint a new Torch Bearer out of the crowd to carry the flame on the spot. Talk about being given supreme like fatalistic powers to anoint a mere mortal stranger in the crowd and elevate them to mythical Olympic standards. The act gives new meaning to the phrase "making someone's day".

What I just described happened on Thursday Nov 28 in S. John New Brunswick to 14 year old Andrew Johnson who woke up that morning went to go to the local McDonald's with his Mom and little brother to drop his Dad off who was scheduled to meet 16 other Torch Bearers that morning and board my shuttle bus.

When my colleague Sylvie Gilbert asked him if he "was up to" carrying the Torch he reacted like he was experiencing every Christmas and every last day of school rolled into one. He was shaking with excitement and hooting and hollering with joy.

He tried to explain to his little brother how cool and important this was. The six year old seated next to him didn't really understand the significance of it all. Then he tried to describe to his little brother how rare an opportunity he had just been given. He stuck his fingers together real close to create a tiny gap between his thumb and for-finger and said the "The chances of being chosen today and getting to do this is so teeny teeny-weeny. Like it just never happens!"

Later when he got on the bus and calmed down a bit he told me how he couldn't wait to get to school later that day in his uniform to show it off to all his classmates. Unlike his little brother, I knew exactly what he meant when he told me "I'll have bragging rights for the rest of my life with this".

Overheard on my Shuttle this week

A few days after Sydney Crosby stole the show in Nova Scotia, I was listening to a number of torchbearers on my bus comment on his participation. One woman said, "I think it is so cool how ordinary people like us get to run, look around no-one here on this bus is famous like Sydney Crosby."