

Confessions of a Torch Relay Shuttle Host 5

The Afterglow

When people leave our shuttle bus after carrying the torch I used to wonder what they did. They have this glow around them and a perma-grin on their faces that lasts for hours or maybe even days. We encourage them to leave their white uniforms on and to go take in the lunchtime or evening Vancouver 2010



Torch Celebrations that are happening in or near the communities where they carried the torch that day. And sure enough at all the celebrations that I have been to, the crowd is dotted with people who have just run, are dressed in white, and are visiting us from “cloud 9”. And after the celebrations they still leave them on. Some people who ran in the morning say they plan to wear the uniform into work later that day

But aside from being entertained and showing off their nylon outfits to co-workers, I know that a lot of the Torch Bearers participate in more worthwhile and noteworthy pursuits while still donning the bright white uniform with the distinctive and colorful green and blue left sleeve. Some of the young people on my bus have told me that they plan to wear their uniforms to a school assembly the next day where they will be addressing the entire student body and delivering a speech on what it was like to carry the Olympic Flame, and what the Olympic ideals mean to them. Other Torch Bearers have told me that they plan to visit an Old Folks home that evening and wear the outfit at the same time that they bring the torch along with them and to pass it around to some less fortunate shut-ins.

Whatever way the message and the spirit is spread it’s a good thing.

It’s all on the Street Where you Live

Often the flame goes through just plain old Canadian residential districts. Everyday ordinary streets, in ordinary neighborhoods, lined with typical houses. Off the well traveled path of busy streets and intersections. In the early morning we see the residents of those houses sometimes coming out onto their front porches in their housecoats, clinging onto their morning coffee mugs, wondering what all the fuss is about. If by chance they are unaware of the Relay, upon spotting a stranger in the dark with a torch in his or her hand on their property, perhaps their thoughts turn to calling the police. But we usually beat them to it as a police escort turns up complete with flashing lights within a minute of the errant torch bearing trespasser being dropped off.

Recently on just such a quiet street, I dropped a Torch Bearer off on some ladies front lawn very early in the morning, in the dark. As the Torch Bearer quietly stood there waiting for the flame to arrive, she ran up to me and asked me if it was OK for her to run back inside and get her camera to take a picture. She was excited and confused, as she scurried back to her home in her slippers.

I gave her permission and she returned to take the shot. Afterward, it struck me as funny that she would ask me to take a picture on her own front lawn.

The Chosen Frozen

I heard someone on the crew use the term the “chosen frozen” the other day and didn’t have a clue what they were talking about. It seemed like such a peculiar term, so I asked what it meant. Here’s the explanation.....We travel with a crew of about 300 people altogether. For those of you that have read my Confessions series you understand the complexity and magnitude of our task and why so many people are required to stage the Torch Relay. However when the flame went on its eleven-day trek up North, I mean way up North, we required less people because the communities were so small and it traveled mainly by air as opposed to by road. We sent a smaller contingent of only 60 staff to accompany the flame up North - The Chosen Frozen.

Roadside Fan Clubs

When I individually unload a busload full of Torchbearers at their designated running spot, otherwise known as the orange stickers on the side of the road, I never know what to expect when I get to that drop off spot. On one end of the spectrum, you may have a high school student running from their school where the Principal gave permission to their entire class to meet them there and cheer them on. It is not unusual for the doors of the bus to swing open and for there to be a crowded unruly throng of 35 screaming teenagers, complete with colorful signs and loud horns waiting for the runner. However most often a group of five or six family members and or friends enthusiastically await the Torch Bearer. Sometimes just one person is there. If it is just one person it is most often the person’s husband or wife. I like to watch the spouse’s reaction as their mate proudly descends down the three steps of the shuttle bus. But sometimes, sadly enough, no one awaits. Every once in a while a Torch Bearer comes in from a far away town to fill the running spot; and I suppose for whatever reason they travel alone.

When we pull up to a spot and no one is there on the side of the road to greet the Torch Bearer, I usually offer a warm hug or a sincere handshake of encouragement. At the same time if I can I try and spend a few more minutes with them on the cold roadside before we depart in the bus to drop off the rest of the Torch Bearers on board. Hugging strangers was never in the job description when I signed up to be a Torch Relay Shuttle Host. Some jobs just come with pleasant surprises I suppose.

With Military Precision

Most of you are used to seeing the torch being carried by one person and then passed off to another individual. And for the most part that is the way the flame travels across Canada. But we have introduced something new to the world of Olympic Torch Relays – the team of Torch Bearers. On most days, in addition to the 100 plus individual runners that we light up, we will run just one special team of 20 Torch Bearers for one kilometer. As they run they pass an individual torch to one another every 50 meters. It is a symbolic gesture of the importance of teamwork. Part of my job is to organize them, and rehearse the act of running in unison with them. There are a few key things that have to happen while they run. They need to form two lines, and follow a sequence in both of those lines in the same order of the predetermined Torch Bearer numbers they have been assigned (confused?). Then as we run I keep up with them and yell out “switch” every 50 meters. At the end of the kilometer team section, on the side of the road, a new Torch Bearer will be waiting to have his or her flame lit at specifically measured point. When I yell out “switch” if they pass the flame too late it creates a problem because it means that when we get to the end of the kilometer we may have torch Bearers in the group that haven’t run, because some of the team exceeded their 50 meters. Also while they run a bunch of other semi-complicated things hard to explain on paper have to happen, involving passing the flame to the left, rotating through the two lines in a clockwise manner and keeping the numbers of runners in both lines even at all times. It’s not like choreographing the Chorus line of a Broadway Musical, but it needs ten to fifteen minutes of rehearsal in a parking lot before we do it, if it is going to look half decent. Bare in mind that wherever we run the torch, that the local TV cameras tape everything we do, and a bunch of people fumbling the torch and tripping over one another can look pretty un-Olympic.

I’ve done four of these team torch runs so far; all of them in Quebec. The first was a Speed Skating Club in Riviere du Loup. I figured that being speed skaters that they would be used to moving in circles and in good shape. They did a good job. Then there was a fundraising group called the Quebec Breakfast Club. Their 20 members from the Saguenay region walked the route. And there was a team of grade 11 and 12 high school students from a community called Thetford Mines. What they lacked in accuracy they made up for in enthusiasm.

It will come as no surprise, that the group that performed the task the best so far was from a Canadian Military base about 20 kilometers outside of Quebec City, called Valcartier. They were good - go figure, they march and do drills for a living. So as we rehearsed in this gigantic indoor gymnasium on the base, I thought to myself I am not teaching these men and women anything they don’t already know. I’d yell switch and with one-one-hundredth of a second the torch had been handed off with surgical precision to the next person. The formation they ran in was perfectly spaced, the cadence of their foot movement had an even rhythm, and every move they made was purposeful, dignified and in harmony. What a powerful feeling for me to be able to bark out the order “switch” to them and see it flawlessly executed

the very first time. I got to play drill sergeant for fifteen minutes and have all this military talent take me seriously.

We were the first ones to run the torch that day on December 3rd and had a 6:50 am start to carry the flame through one kilometer of the giant base. We got there before 5:00 am to get set up, register the Torch Bearers, and to find our orange location stickers on the route and rehearse. The weather was absolutely dreadful. It was around zero degrees with buckets of rain pouring sideways. As we went into the gym at 5:50 to rehearse a few dozen military personal who had shown up early were sparsely spread across our route. A stark contrast to when we came out at an hour later at 6:40 am and 2,000 troops stood attentively to witness the Olympic Flame traveling through their base. As you would expect the symbol of peace was in good hands and the pseudo drill was pulled off without a hitch. Hard to believe, with me at the helm?

To turn away from my fantasies of being a Drill Sergeant, and on a more serious note, this is a base that has sent many troops to Afghanistan. And very sadly had some not come home. One of the soldiers that I was talking to told me that altogether 23 Canadians from the base had died on the mission in Afghanistan. Halfway through the run the group of 20 Torch Bearers stopped at a monument to the fallen, and stood silently on the side of the road for a minute out of respect. Once again, as I have felt so many times on this assignment, I felt proud to be a Canadian.