

Confessions of a Torch Relay Shuttle Host 6

White Wedding

One of the ladies on the bus said after she ran with the torch that the whole experience reminded her of her wedding day for a couple of reasons. First off she remarked that they were two of the happiest days of her life. The joy, excitement and meaningfulness that she felt on her wedding day was similar to the emotions she went through carrying the flame. Then she recalled that at her wedding, she was a beautiful bride and the center of attention, with everyone jockeying to get a picture of her, and to have a picture taken with her. Of course as an Olympic Flame Torch Bearer she got to relive that same experience with dozens of camera shutters clicking away. Then she paused, laughed and came up with a third reason. With a big smile on her face she added “Hey and on both days I was wearing white”



A Standard Dress Code

The President of Air Canada, Calin Rovinescu was on my shuttle in Hull/Gatineau Quebec, on day 44. Air Canada are a big sponsor of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games. I had previously met him through my job as VANOC's Director of Sponsorship Sales in Montreal shortly after he was appointed in the spring of 2009. I happened to be with our President John Furlong, in Montreal for some sales calls and I accompanied John to meet Mr. Rovinescu. It was his second day on the job at Canada's national airline and as he handed me his brand new business card, he told me “the ink is still wet, I just got these yesterday”

The meeting was in Air Canada's big cushy executive boardroom and it was the first time that John and Mr. Rovinescu had met. I said very little, happy just to sit and listen to two very articulate and influential men address how the faltering economy of the time was effecting the airline industry and the progress the 2010 Olympic Winter Games. After the meeting as I caught my Air Canada flight home out of Pierre Trudeau International airport I felt that I had just gained a unique insight into the challenges the airline faced, and a candid glimpse of the man charged with leading it to a better place. As I watched Mr. Rovinescu speak for some reason I was struck by what an impeccable dresser he was. During the meeting I admired his shoes, cufflinks, tie and suit, and thought how his attire suited his position. He stood out, in a very dignified way; looking, dressing and conducting himself like the President of a big company. That was the blueprint of Mr. Ravinescu that was planted in my head at the time.

Fast-forward six months ahead now and by chance I meet him again, this time in our nation's capital where he is scheduled to run with the flame. By coincidence he just happens to be a Torch Bearer 044-038 on my bus. But this time he is wearing the standard issue 2010 white nylon tracksuit, and blends in with the 19 other Torch Bearers that I am scheduled to drop off that morning. The cool thing is that on the bus, everybody is just somebody else on the bus. Status, influence and income levels fall to the wayside, as the Torch Bearers on the bus are first and foremost all simply Proud Canadians.

Mr. Ravinescu remembered me from the meeting with John, and I got to know him a bit better as I briefed him and everyone else at our Torch Bearer's collection point on what to expect carrying the torch, how to handle it, and the significance of what they were about to do.

As a Shuttle Host part of what I do in trying to relax the Torch Bearers before they run, and to enhance their experience is to have them introduce themselves to one another and to tell a little story of how they were selected to carry the Torch, where they come from and what they do. There were 19 people on the bus that day and when I got to Mr. Rovinescu, and had to prompt him to speak, I was going to jump in and introduce him, along with his title, and then thank Air Canada for their support of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games etc. But for some reason, I decided not to. It was refreshing when his turn came and he simply said, "I am from Montreal and I work for Air Canada", and then he humbly went on to explain how honored he was to be with all the rest of the Torch Bearers on the bus.

He was the last Torch Bearer to get off the bus and later, after everyone else had been dropped off and we were alone, he told me that in his position he is privileged to get a lot of unique and interesting experiences, and how this one ranked amongst one of the top. He then told me how he wanted to experience it all just like everybody else and how pleased he was with the way things played out on the bus. It was a nice comment for me to hear. After he left and we were driving to our next collection point I thought it ironic that Torch Bearer before him will never know that he had just passed the flame to one of Canada's top business executives.

Oh, and finally as far as his dress that day went, he really only had a choice on one item - his shoes. Of course they were brand new, impeccable white jogging runners that perfectly matched his Torch Bearers uniform!

Designed Never to Burn Again

Two very talented and creative people at Bombardier were responsible for conceiving, designing and manufacturing the 2010 Olympic Torches. One of them was Tim Fagan. On day 44 in Ottawa he happened to be a Torch Bearer on my pick up bus. The bus that picks the Torch Bearers up after they have run with the flame.

After he got on, it was clear to me that the experience that he had just had, carrying the same torch that he spent years working on, was clearly a bit different than the average Torch Bearers experience. As we spent the next half an hour picking up more of his fellow Torch Bearers along the path where they had carried the flame, a lot of the attention on the bus and the conversation was focused on Tim and his feelings. He of course was thrilled with torches performance.

After things had quieted down a bit I sat next to Tim to conduct my important job of disabling his Torch. Most Torch Bearers purchase their Torches, or have had their torches purchased for them on behalf of a sponsor. But before I can give them the sacred memento to keep, I need to take the propane canister that fuels the torch out, and using a pair of heavy duty wire clippers cut a copper tube so that the Torch can never be lit again. As I set next to him “neutering” his torch he took particular interest watching me go through the thirty-second procedure. Later we discussed how part of the brief in designing the torch was to make it easy to disable. I asked him if he felt he had achieved that in its design. He looked at me and paused and then said, “I think that you should render the verdict on that”.

The Marvel School of Haircutting

By the time we got to Ottawa on December 12th we had been on the road for six and a half weeks. The hours have been long, the pace hectic and free time to take care of personal things like getting your hair cut has been practically non-existent. Yet despite the grueling schedule we were still an enthusiastic crew of 300 dedicated and committed people. All be it 300 motley looking people in need of just a bit of personal grooming.

Enter the Marvel School of Hairdressing. I am not exactly sure how it happened but a local haircutting school somehow got a hold of us and asked if it would be beneficial to have them come down to our hotel one evening and offer free haircuts to everyone. 60 of our staff, including me, took them up on the offer. One of the downstairs meetings rooms in the Chimo Hotel where we were staying was turned into a salon with six young budding stylists on hand to beautify us.

To thank them for their generous donation of services, our Director of Operations arranged for their School’s Manager to hold the torch for a brief moment. He had a memory to last a life-time, we all had haircuts to last six more weeks, and the convoy moved on down the road to the next stop.

Degrees of Realism

When does it sink in after you have been chosen to carry the flame that you really will be? Most of the torch bearers were chosen months before the date they would be handed the torch, leaving lots of time for “nervous Nelly” type thoughts to enter

their heads. On the bus, just before I am about to drop the Torch Bearers off we swap stories of how each person was selected and then notified that they would be carrying the Olympic Flame; and there is always one re-occurring theme or statement that comes out, which is: "after I got the email that I would be running, I couldn't believe it, I kept thinking is this for real?" Many Torch Bearers go on to tell me that even after getting the nod that they were in, they would continue to question whether or not the notification was legit, or if a follow up email might notify them of a mistake that had been made, revoking the offer. Several Torch Bearers have told me that after getting the Official Torch Bearer uniform delivered to them by Purolator courier, the process and its legitimacy takes a giant step forward in terms of it actually coming to fruition. But for some, the doubt even still lingers, after that. Then on the day they are finally running, when they see our brightly decal'd 2010 Olympic bus sitting in the parking lot of the collection point, waiting for them, it all becomes much more real.

But for many of them it isn't until I actually hand them the Torch and they are holding it tightly in their hands, that all of the speculative feelings, questioning thoughts, and doubtful scenarios completely disappear.

I recently had one Torch Bearer on the bus that was totally honest in sharing her anxiousness with everyone else. She told us all that for months after receiving her confirmation by email that she kept on having this neurotic feeling that something would happen to deny her, her appointment with destiny. After dropping her off at her starting point I accompanied her to the side of the road where her torch would be lit in seconds. As I stood on the side of the road where the Torch Bearer before her was rapidly approaching with the flame, I looked at her and softly said "does it feel real now?"