

Confessions of a Torch Relay Shuttle Host 7

Bad Flame 09 – Good Flame 10

Everyone makes comparisons as we usher out the old year and bring in a new one. That demarcation line between 2009 and 2010 must have been so very very profound, poignant and powerful for Torch Relay runner 64 -29 on the first day of 2010. On December 31st our relay staff were over-nighting in the Northern Ontario community of Kirkland Lake as the relay continued west. The day before that, a fire swept through the small town gutting several town-homes. The people that had occupied those homes, and had been temporarily relocated by an insurance company, along with our Torch Relay crew were coincidentally all staying at the small austere Comfort Inn in that mining community that has spawned so many great NHL stars. Also coincidentally we had a rare open Torch Bearer spot the next day, January 1st that we were looking to fill with a local runner. It didn't take long for one of my VANOC colleagues Ty Lingley, who was staying at the hotel with us, and who was in charge of scheduling runners in Kirkland Lake to help turn the tragedy that a flame brought at the end of one year into the triumph another flame introduced for a new year. Ty heard the story of the fire and asked the person at the front desk for the names of some the people who's homes had burned down. He later went onto select Ken Hulme, who had just lost his personal belongings and his home, to run with the Olympic Torch the next morning.



I met Ken for the first time on the shuttle bus that picked him up and drove him back to the Comfort Inn where he asked me if he could purchase the torch. We sell them for \$400 each. As his wife pulled four one hundred dollar bills from her purse I knew that Christmas, combined with the fire must have taken a serious toll on their savings. I didn't say anything but later thought to myself that it was money well spent. They now had one of their first mementos to place in their future home, wherever that may be, to mark a brand new year that had gotten off to a much better start with a positive flame this time.

Commercial Freezer Cold

Sometimes back at home when grocery shopping at Safeway I buy a big frozen lasagna. You find them in the deep freezer section of the store with other foods that the sub zero temperature turns into rock solid heavy masses. My hand gets uncomfortably cold just momentarily putting it into the freezer unit to grab my bachelor feast. I dislike the sensation. It hurts my hand. They keep those commercial freezer units at around minus thirty. Today in Sudbury Ontario it's minus thirty-two.

I have never in my pampered, tropical and mainly Vancouver based life experienced this kind of cold. It's bone chilling, its dangerous, and it's not the type of climate that I think I could live in. I'm not complaining cause in a strange way it is kind of fun to experience it as long as you know it is just temporary. Next time I watch the national weather forecast on TV I'll have a new appreciation for the term "cold mass of arctic air". Sometimes I wonder if we were meant to live in these cold adverse conditions wouldn't we be covered in thick fur like the moose we see along the roads as we travel through this portion of Canada on the Vancouver 2010 Torch Relay. I am only joking of course, there are some great communities along the way here on Highway 17 with people who have adapted to the cold just fine. Of the whole relay so far this has been one of my favorite areas with the some of the nicest and most interesting people and some of the most stunning scenery in Canada. But it is cold. Too cold.

Believe it or not the extreme Canadian cold doesn't dampen the Torch Bearers enthusiasm - not one bit. Nor does it even have that much of an adverse effect on our day-to-day Torch Relay operations. The main difference that the thirty below temperatures impose upon is that the "military precision timing" that we have been executing for the past two months needs to be even more precise. When our shuttle drops a Torch Bearer off at the side of the road to have them enter the frozen lasagna climate we need to be absolutely certain that the oncoming torch that they are going be lit off of soon, is well in motion being carried by another Torch Bearer less than a minute or two away. In warmer climates we have a margin of five to six minutes to leave the Torch Bearers waiting for the flame to arrive for the hand off. Standing still waiting for the flame in this climate for six minutes could transform our runners into big white frozen popsicles.

Never the less when the Northern Ontario Torch Bearers get off of our shuttle bus for their turn to run with the flame they have the same gusto and spirit as the ones we dropped off in October in warm balmy Victoria, BC. It never ceases to amaze me how our sub zero January Northern Ontario runners cheerfully climb down the stairs of the bus with huge smiles on their faces to brave the bitter deep freezer cold. What would posses anyone to leave the confines of a toasty warm bus? The power of the Olympic flame moves people to do extra-ordinary things.

Red Hot Tips

I suppose that when we get back to Vancouver that all of the shuttle buses that have been leapfrogging across the country in for three and a half months will be sold off as part of VANOC's overall dissolution plan. As with any vehicles that have over 40,000 kilometers on them they will have small scrapes, scratches and imperfections. Unlike other used vehicles however they will have interior ceilings covered in small black charcoal burn marks. You see half of each shuttle buses time is spent dropping off Torch Bearers about to run and the other half of its time is spent picking up Torch Bearers who have just run. It is the ones who have just run that enter the bus with a flame that has usually only just been extinguished 30

seconds prior to our arriving to have them board the bus. As they climb aboard with their red-hot Olympic souvenirs some of them inadvertently scorch the buses brand new grey felt ceiling. I think that the battle scars will make a good conversation piece for the lucky person who buys one of these storied vehicles.

Road Blocks

In 1987 Dave Brown Torch Bearer 64-22 was working for the Ontario Provincial Police out of Kirkland Lake Ontario. Dave was responsible for accident investigations for the region and at the time was training a rookie officer who had secured a spot in the 1988 Calgary Olympic Torch Relay. During a roadblock that Dave was supervising a motorist crashed into him resulting in him being temporarily paralyzed from the waist down. The road to recovery was long taking him years to regain his ability to walk. Near the beginning of Dave's rehabilitation his young Ontario Police Patrol protégé completed his leg of the 88 Olympic Torch Run.

On our bus on day 64 of the Vancouver 2010 Torch Relay Dave shared a story with the rest of the Torch Bearers of how every time this rookie officer came to visit him in the hospital in the late 80s he wore his red and white Calgary Torch uniform to inspire Dave. It must have worked. Four years after the accident Dave had regained his ability to walk. He told us it was during those visits that the dream of carrying the flame himself one day was what helped get him through it all.

That dream became a reality on January 1st 2010 when I dropped Dave off of my bus to carry the torch from his spot in Virginiatown Ontario, just down the road from Kirkland Lake, where his accident took place.

Stand by Me

The different paths that people follow leading them onto our shuttle bus are always intriguing, and sometimes even entertaining. One recent day in Mississauga, Ontario reviewing my roster to learn whom our upcoming Torch Bearers were I discovered I had an entrant on my list from Alabama. That in itself was interesting and later on the bus, before dropping off the group of 20 Torch Bearers that he was part of I found out that he had gained his spot through winning a talent contest sponsored by his employer McDonald's. I couldn't resist probing a bit more. As it turned out he told us, "last summer at a national convention for McDonald's store managers in San Diego I sang a solo rendition of the old classic Benny King hit Stand By Me. The contest's grand prize was a 300 Meter leg in the 2010 Olympic Torch Relay in Canada. I've never been to Canada. That's why I am here with the rest of y'all, that's how I got this seat on the bus".

While listening to his story I was trying to decide if I would be putting him too much on the spot if I requested to hear it. But then another Torch Bearer on board beat me to punch calling out "Let's here you sing it now"

Suddenly he broke into the sweetest version of the song I had ever heard. This jovial African American young man weighed about 300 pounds, with a beautiful big rich voice to match his size. He switched from the low beefy notes to a high falsetto with the ease of a polished 1950's duwop singer. There we all sat on the side of the road in our jam-packed bus with huge smiles on our faces carefully listening to every note that he sang. He really nailed it. Shortly after had he gotten to the part of the song where it goes "No I won't shed a tear as long as you stand by me", it was his turn to leave the bus and carry the flame.

Random Acts of Kindness

I wont use the people's real names in this short story for obvious reasons. In Blind River, Ontario I witnessed a touching unselfish moment of kindness between two strangers who met for the first time aboard a Vancouver 2010 Shuttle Bus. As you know the 2010 Olympic torches are sold for \$400 each only to the Torch Bearers who have carried the flame. About ninety percent of the runners that we meet at collection points have pre-purchased their torches on line months in advance. Of the remaining ten percent whom haven't about half of them (five percent) end up purchasing one off of me on the bus after they have carried it and fell in love with it. For what are probably their personal economic circumstances about five percent of the Torch Bearers opt not to take the three and a half pound plastic and metal flame vessel home with them.

In Blind River every runner but one on my bus had pre-purchased the torch. The man who hadn't, embarrassingly admitted to the rest of the Torch Bearers that he wished he could buy the Torch but that he just couldn't afford to. He went on to relate a sad tale of family sickness combined with him being recently laid off from his job resulting in the torch purchase just not being an option for him at this time. That was when a women on the bus, who you have to keep in mind just met him 30 minutes prior, spoke up and said "I don't want to see you leave the bus without your torch, I'll lend you the money". Eves dropping, I listened to them work out the terms of the loan. He was going to pay her back \$100 per month for the next four months. They exchanged phone numbers and that was it. I watch bonds form all the time between people on the bus who have shared the experience of carrying the torch. This one played itself out in a touching, compassionate and memorable way.

Those First Few Words

When the Torch Bearers get back onto the bus they always say one of three things, and most often a combination of all three:

- 1) "That was – (insert the following verb) really good, fantastic, unbelievable, exhilarating, the best, incredible (or some other equally enthusiastic adjective)"
- 2) "The segment I ran went by way too quickly"
- 3) "The torch was heavier to carry than I thought it would be"

In an effort to capture the feelings they are experiencing at the time I have them sign a guest book for us that we keep on the shuttle. While still in their hyper excited state I hand them the book and a pen and ask them to jot down a quick sentence or two to describe what they just went through. Here are five recent quotes taken from Torch Bearers that I picked up in Toronto and Keswick, Ontario:

Guest Book Comments

*Name: Craig Michaels
Date: December 17th 2009
Torchbearer: 088*

The most exhilarating and memorable distance I have traveled.

*Name: Kristen Cavanaugh
Date: December 17th 2009
Torchbearer: 034*

Loved it!! Cried every step!

*Name: Ben Verboom
Date: December 17th 09
Torchbearer: 241*

An emotionally moving and life changing experience. For a few minutes, each one of us felt connected to all other Canadians.

*Name: Lillian McGregor
Date: December 17th 2009
Torchbearer:*

My Journey is complete, holding the Olympic Flame which has lighted so many trails, for exceptional people. May this flame bring peace and love to the world. We thank you Vancouver.

Signed Lillian 86 years young

Name: David Lin

Date: December 18th 2009

Torchbearer: 136

Thank you !!!! Thank you !!!! Thank you !!!! Thank you !!!! Thank you !!!!

Exhilarating, Spectacular, Memorable, Special, Wonderful, Superb, Meaningful, Life-
Changing, Moving, Defining !!!!!