

Confessions of a Torch Relay Shuttle Host 8

As I complete this, my eighth Confession of a Torch Relay Shuttle Host, we are finally back in tropical BC. But three weeks ago in Northern Ontario I could have used three layers of long John's. I wrote these next two vignettes before we arrived here in pineapple land. Only back then my laptop computers lid had frozen shut from the cold and I've only gotten around to thawing it out now.....



My Nostrils Hurt

It is so cold here. OK - how cold is it?

All the stories I have written from Quebec to the Manitoba/Alberta border need to be put into the context of the cold because it effects the Torch Bearers, the public watching, and it effects us as organizers. Having said that, nothing will stop the Torch Bearers; they are like mailmen resistant to wind, sleet, snow and freezing cold. And the bitter cold makes the huge crowds that come outside to line the streets where we run seem just that much more remarkable.

But I have a tough time explaining to Vancouverites just how cold it really is here by just giving you numbers. Numbers don't convey that much to someone reading this piece of mine on the computer in their warm office or den at home. The other day in Dryden Ontario it was minus 38. One of the guys I work with had a tiny irritation in his eye that day that caused one eye to tear up while he was walking down the street. His eye froze shut in a matter of a few seconds of being outside in Dryden. He needed to use his fingers to separate the bottom and the top half of the eyelid. This is a true story. That's how cold minus 38 is.

The coldest I have experienced on this trip is minus 42 in Winkler, Manitoba. That day as I stepped off the bus to position a Torch Bearer to receive the flame on the side of the road I felt the moisture in my nostrils turn to ice. As soon as I had him in the right spot I sprinted back onto the bus for cover.

Don't get me wrong, I am not complaining. It is actually kind of fun and interesting to feel your body parts cease up and freeze. As long as you know you have a shuttle bus to run back onto you can endure almost any temporary uncomfortable sensation. For me it's all new. And when everything is said and done, most of the hotels we stay in have had warm rooms where we can defrost ourselves overnight.

Can't Wait to Get Back Off the Bus

Continuing along with this cold weather theme..... At a recent Torch Bearer briefing inside a small Royal Bank branch in Massey, Ontario I was in no hurry to wrap up my little talk because I knew the temperature outside was minus 35. When I could no longer prolong my briefing, to keep us from facing the cold, it was time to go outside to get onto the bus. A group of 20 well-wishers had gathered in the parking lot of the bank branch and wanted to take some pictures of the white nylon tracksuit clad runners. Everyone wanted to snap off one last shot and the impromptu outdoor photo shoot went on for about five long minutes. I finally called out in my loudest most authoritative voice "OK everyone I am sorry but we have to go". We didn't really need to leave just then but it was so cold that I didn't want to leave the cooperative and camera friendly five Torch Bearers out there in the freezing cold with the "pretend paparazzi" any longer than I had to.

When I got the Torch Bearers onto the warm preheated bus I noticed that one of them was uncontrollably shivering. He just couldn't stop shaking. So I moved him from where he was seated and put him directly in front of the buses floor mounted heat vent to thaw out for a few minutes before we left. But he still couldn't stop shaking; so then I took my warm bulky coat off and threw it over his shoulders. In a few moments his shivering subsided. As he shook his last shiver he looked up at me gripping his torch in one hand and he smiled. It was then that I knew in actual fact that he couldn't wait to get back off of the bus, and back into the freezing temperatures to carry the torch. When his turn came to leave the bus and carry the flame, I asked him if he was sure he was ready to face the cold again. He reassured me that he was. Hypothermia – Hyposchmermia.

And He Fell to his Knees

At the hundreds of collection points across Canada where I meet the Torch Bearers the first thing that I have to do is to register them. At each rendezvous 15 to 20 white suited and red mitted, excited and sometimes overly anxious people show up. And they show up early. They are sent a letter weeks in advance explaining exactly where they need to meet me and what time to be there. But they always arrive early. Some times an hour or more before we are supposed to meet. My shuttle bus driver and I make a point of being at the collection points at least a half hour or an hour before the appointed meeting time, so that when the Torch Bearers arrive we are there to welcome them. But sure enough there is always a real keener or overly punctual Torch Bearer standing in the parking lot or sitting in their car at the school, municipal hall or civic arena even before we arrive.

Once I get inside to the hall, or arena I set up a table and begin the registration. Each Torch Bearer needs to show me his or her photo ID. Eighty percent of the people bring their drivers licenses with the remainder showing me passports or school ID cards. I take the registration procedure seriously making sure that the pictures on the documents that I am handed actually match the person who handed it to me.

Then I have to find out what number in the relay the person is assigned to and find a corresponding light blue sticker to put onto their white jackets. Anyone who knows me knows that attention to detail when it comes out to filling out forms isn't one of my strong suits. So I really have to concentrate. Also my eyes aren't what they used to be so finding the Torch Bearers names written in small print on the long form of entries is sometimes challenging and always time consuming.

A young man came to my collection point to register recently in North Battleford, Saskatchewan and I couldn't find his name on the list. It was there; I just didn't see it. So I carefully looked the list over for a second time. Concentrating as hard as I could, I didn't say anything to him as I scanned it line by line for maybe two or three minutes. My silence must have been excruciating for the poor young fellow. Then I finally said "oh there's your name, sorry about that"

As I looked up at him, he fell to his knees in relief. Then he emotionally cried out "Thank God, I thought I wasn't going to be able to run"

Roadside Donations

As we travel across Canada, we are not collecting money for anything and that is hard for some people to understand. I guess in this day and age where there are so many campaigns for so many good causes some people automatically assume when they see our convoy of brightly decaled vehicles and the crowds gathering at the side of the road for our arrival into each town, that we need money. Not long ago we were parked safely waiting on the side of a busy road with a bus full of Torch Bearers when a lady came up and started knocking on my shuttles buses front door. When I opened the door she handed me \$20 and said "This is so great to watch, I just want to make a donation and help out".

Thanks to our sponsors Coke and RBC we are a well-funded initiative, and we are not looking for donations from the public. I didn't know what to do or what to say to this generous lady. I told her if she really wanted to help she should send the money to the "Own the Podium" program in support of Canada's athletes. She told me that she didn't want to support the Athletes and she wanted to support the Torch Bearers. I told her "Mam just showing up this morning in the cold, to stand on the road and cheer them on has been support enough". She wasn't satisfied with that answer and said "come on you must need it, just take the money".

Now That's Service

The cold winter roads can get pretty slippery and dangerous to drive on in Northern Saskatchewan in January. And they sure did for runner 014 in Rosetown on day 74 of the relay. I was scheduled to meet 5 Torchbearers at the local hockey rink at 8:30. At 8:45 I began to get a bit concerned knowing that on the day they run, most Torch Bearers are super punctual, many arriving well in advance of the pre scheduled meeting time. A Torch Bearer named Tommy was missing.

At 8:50 still no Tommy and now we were going to be leaving soon to drop the Torch Bearers off at the side of the road to carry the flame.

At every collection point, I am supported by a two-member team from our VANOC Torch Bearer Operations Department that “trouble shoot” along the way. Two colleagues always show up during my briefing in their own Torch Relay vehicle to make sure that everything is OK. Inevitably issues arise that require someone else to assist me, while I am speaking to the group. It is great to have the extra support on hand for things like a Torch Bearer forgetting to bring their uniform, or a piece of their uniform, or requiring special assistance because of a medical condition, or a Torch Bearer being late.

At 8:55 still no Tommy. I have now almost finished my briefing for the other 4 Torch Bearers who were on time and will be leaving in 12 minutes on the bus. Now I am really concerned. The chain of Torch Bearers can't be broken, and I am short one link.

So Ali one of the women who works on the Operations team I just described places a call to Tommy's cell phone. She has a file with every Torch Bearer's contact information. After a few rings he answers and he tells Ali he had just minutes before lost control of his car and it had slid off over the side of the road into a big ditch. It turned out to be a *one piece of bad news and two pieces good news scenario*. The bad news was that his car wasn't going anywhere. Tommy explained how it was buried deep in the ditch with no hope of recovery without a tow truck. The first piece of good news was that no-one was hurt. The second piece of good news was that the ditch he slid into was on the outskirts of Rosedale, not more than three minutes from the hockey rink where we were waiting. Ali jumped into action, hopped into our SUV and went to fetch Tommy from the ditch.

He arrived 9 minutes later a bit shaken but still ready, willing and able to carry the Olympic Flame on his leg. I quickly gave him a crash course (excuse the pun) on how to carry the torch; and get this – Ali even made arrangements for a tow truck to meet him after his run. Now that's service.

If It's a Girl Why Not Call Her Olympia

I have had five pregnant women on my shuttle bus so far since beginning this relay. They have ranged from a women who was expecting in four months to a women who was supposed to have given birth the day before she ran. I suppose from the time you enter to run or are nominated to run in the torch relay, till the time you actually run, a lot can happen. If you know what I mean, nudge nudge, wink, wink.

Some of the women have had bellies that really protrude. It is a good thing that the white nylon uniform jackets fit loosely. So loosely that they can easily double as a maternity track suit.

During the registration procedure they usually point out to me that they are expecting. I tell them it is OK to walk when they carry the flame and that they should just take their time and do whatever feels comfortable. Then I notify the Command Vehicle, that regulates every move of the relay, that we have a Torch Bearer that will be going at slower pace because she has a bun in the oven.

I am sure that each of the expectant mothers has given a great deal of thought to carrying a baby inside of them at the same time they carry the flame. What a story to tell their child once they grow up. A wonderful world class distinction to bestow upon a little unborn person. While they are still in the womb they already get to do something really cool. For the rest of their lives they have bragging rights of having been along for the ride as their Mum carried the flame.

I will admit I was a bit worried with the women who ran the day after her due date. Although I have some of towels and water on the bus, the water is in those little 350 ml Dasani bottles and I have no way of boiling it on the bus.

We have each Torch Bearer sign a guest book on my bus once they have run and gotten back on. Here are a few comments from last week:

Torch Bearer #: 17
Name: Konrad Kiss
Date: January 20th 2010

Un-Freaking-Believable !!!!

Torch Bearer #: 103
Name: Maureen Sutka
Date: January 19th 2010

Truly the experience of a lifetime. I am so honored

Torch Bearer #: #130
Name: Richard Luhning
Date: January 18th 2010

Astonishing is the only way to describe it. Butterflies – almost the same as waiting for my Bride at the alter.

Torch Bearer #: 010

Name: Jan Simonson
Date: January 20th 2010

This was an awesome humbling experience. I would like to thank RBC and Coca-Cola for giving me this wonderful opportunity. Let the Olympic Flame shine on this beautiful earth forever. I am so proud to be Canadian.

Torch Bearer #:
Name: Jim
Date: January 18th 2010
Phone Number: 403 938 2931

Awesome – beats the heck out of any parade I've been in.