CONFESSIONS OF AN OLYMPIC TORCH RELAY SHUTTLE HOST

BY DAVE DOROGHY
Just like flames need oxygen to continue burning, an Olympic Torch Relay needed torchbearers to continually propel it from one end of Canada to the other. Thousands upon thousands of people from every corner of the country, to feed the ever-moving convoy, to feed the machine.
As a shuttle host one of my jobs was to keep the torchbearers’ ride to their drop-off point interesting, fun and meaningful. It was pretty standard for all the shuttle hosts to go around the bus and ask for stories of how people got to this moment in their lives, or for them to share an Olympic moment with the rest of the torchbearers on the bus. It was a team-building exercise as well as a way for them to get to know each other a bit better. After all, in a few minutes they would be passing the torch to one another.

I called the bus in the picture the, “Kleenex Express”. Five people were in tears by the time the exercise ended:

There was a woman who recently lost her mother and was running in her honor.

There was a woman who had survived cancer but was still missing most of her hair. When I greeted her at the collection point at the beginning of the day she told me that she had been waiting her whole life for this moment.

There was an older man who narrowly missed competing in the Olympics 50 years ago. When I let him off the bus at his spot, his eyes welled up with tears as he said to me, “I finally get to take part in the Olympics”.

There was a woman who had a car accident a year ago and only recently regained her ability to walk.

There was fifth person, a woman who began crying, I guess, just from all of these stories.

The Kleenex Express
Lloyd Robertson from CTV news was on my bus, runner number 24 or 25 on the very first day. I picked him up and his presence was a bit of a novelty for me and for everyone else on the shuttle. He was friendly, affable and even took the time to memorize the names of the rest of the torchbearers. He is deeply Canadian. His voice is so low and distinctive that I got a real kick listening to him ask the others on the bus how they felt carrying the flame. There was a real camaraderie between everyone with lots of laughs, tears and great stories.

Once he learned that I was going across Canada with the flame he looked me in the eye and said, “Dave, I bet I have a first for you today that will never be repeated for your entire 106 days on the road”. Immediately before running he had been on the air hosting a national telecast from Victoria and, as I was about to learn, he had not had time to get changed out of his on-air suit before rushing to run his segment of the relay. He smiled, rolled up the sleeves of the standard, extra-large, white nylon torchbearer uniform jacket that he wore over his clothes and said, “Of the 12,000 torchbearers that will be running in this, I’m sure I’ll be the only who will wear cuff links”. The entire bus broke out in laughter as he revealed a pair of beautiful, shiny gold cuff links on the sleeves of his expensive, finely pressed dress shirt.
A man named Frederic Rehayem, who was a quality assurance analyst at Bombardier, rode on our shuttle bus on Vancouver Island for a few days. He had come all the way from Quebec to experience firsthand how the torches his team had put together would hold up on the road. Traveling with him, while I dropped off torchbearers, he let me in on a couple of secrets. One of them involved the people at the Bombardier plant that assembled the torches. Apparently it was quite an honor, privilege and coup to be chosen, or given the right to actually assemble the torches. About a dozen Bombardier staff were assigned to the prestigious task for the two or three months it took to assemble the 12,000 torches. Each of them had such a sense of pride in their jobs that they actually signed the inside panel of each torch after they built it. It’s true: I dismantled dozens of them as part of my shuttle host job and each torch bears the signature of the proud Bombardier employee who made it. Here is where it gets kind of fun: one of the women who works in the Bombardier plant is Celine Dion. It’s her real name and Frederick told me to tell all of the Vancouver 2010 torchbearers who purchased their torches to disassemble them at home and look for the famous autograph. I had to decide if I would tell them it wasn’t the real Celine Dion!
Frederic’s second story involved the quality assurance of the Bombardier torches for cold arctic temperatures. In the early stages of developing the torches he would take them home and put them in his freezer, leave them for a couple of hours and then pull them out to test them. This way he could see how well they lit up after being in minus-forty-degree temperatures. I asked him if, during those clandestine testing sessions at home with the torch ignited, “You took a photograph, with your wife and kids, of the lit torch?”. He claimed he hadn’t and said the testing was strictly scientific. He did admit that the thought had crossed his mind but he felt that it wouldn’t have been professional or appropriate to take advantage of having tested the torch at home. So he resisted the temptation. He seemed like an honest guy and I believed him.

On one occasion Frederic watched the torch being brought into an evening celebration in Campbell River. It was dark and the flame on the particular torch we were watching was large and robust; it was a perfect orange and yellow hue, just the ideal size for being photographed, and very aesthetically dramatic. It struck me that it must have been exactly the kind of flame Bombardier’s staff had in mind when they sat down at the drawing board years ago. I turned to look at Frederic for his reaction; he was crying.
ME AND WHISPER IN SUSSEX NEW BRUNSWICK
WHISKER THE COW

You can imagine my horror on day 26 of the Torch relay when my shuttle bus pulled into Sussex, New Brunswick, the dairy capital of Atlantic Canada and spotted the cow in this picture. There, blatantly standing on the side of the road, as large as life, was an undeniable Olympic brand violation. As VANOC’s Director of Sponsorship Sales I felt obligated to do something, but what? My first thought was to move the cow, who I was later to find out was named Whisper. But all of my coaxing and cajoling had no effect on the stubborn bovine. No matter how many times I told her to “mooooooooove over” she just wouldn’t. It was 11:00 am and a crowd was about to form on the side of the road to cheer on the Torch Bearers that I had just dropped off. If I didn’t act fast hundreds of residents of this small town would be subjected to witnessing a flagrant misuse of the Olympic Rings. I thought to myself what would Dennis Kim, VANOC’s Director of Licensing do? Then I remembered that he is lactose intolerant and probably didn’t have much experience with Dairy Cows.

This was more of a job for Bill Cooper, our Director of Commercial Rights Management. Thankfully someone on the Torch Relay Team had the foresight to distribute a card with a hotline number to report ambush-marketing violations. The instructions folded into a pouch on my lanyard had a telephone number prompting me to be prepared to pass along the date, time, location and nature of the infringement to the person on the other end. But wait a minute with the 4-hour time difference there was no-one on the other end to answer my call. So I had to think on my feet.

Was this an Official Cow? As the Director of Sponsorship Sales I didn’t remember doing any livestock deals. Clearly this cow did not have the right to display the rings. Then I remembered from reading VANOC’s commercial rights handbook that the right to display the rings may in some cases be grandfathered if the rings have been used for more than 8 years. I wondered to myself just how old this cow was. Having no training as a vet I didn’t even know where to begin. Did I check her teeth? Could it be that this cow was 20 years old and she had always had the rings on her body and as such should be given special dispensation? Wait a minute the paint job looked fresh. I wasn’t born yesterday, this cow was out of line and I had to shut her down before the IOC in Switzerland found out. This may be a small out of the way town in rural New Brunswick, but a brand violation is still a brand violation wherever it takes place. This wasn’t going to happen, not on my watch.

Then I remembered a presentation from Evan Hunt of the IOC suggesting that we always carry masking tape on us for just such an incident. I had mine in my pocket but three things came to mind as I reached for it. 1) I don’t have nearly enough tape to cover all five rings. 2) What if the cow doesn’t like me masking its hide and it tries to bite me? 3) What if what I am doing is considered cruel and PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) finds out? I put the tape back in my pocket.

Then suddenly it hit me. I had done the Official Dairy Supplier deal with Saputo, and sold them rights to use the Olympic Rings in association with milk products. If Whisper’s milk ended up going to a dairy co-op that supplied Saputo everything would be OK. A quick check with the farmer in the picture confirmed that Whisper was indeed a compliant cow, out of whose utters only Official Supplier milk flowed.

Everything was OK.

Good thing that an experienced and knowledgeable Director of Sponsorship Sales like me was on the road to solve a situation that could have turned to sour milk. The way I look at it at least the cow was standing in front of the right bank ....
I was at the torchbearers’ collection point at Bowring Park in St. Johns on Day 15 when two 30-something male torchbearers, who seemed to be good buddies, showed up to sign in. They were early and I listened to them kibitz, joke around and pass the time. As I eavesdropped more it became clear to me that they were friends. The time came for me to hand out their pre-assigned stickers, which would determine to whom they’d pass their torch. In the mail they received notification that they were numbers 152 and 153, meaning they would be passing off to one another. As I applied the important sticker to their uniform jackets they started laughing. Then they let me in on the fact that they had actually only met, for the first time in their lives, about 10 minutes ago, on the street when they ran into one another when they were both looking for the collection point in St. Johns. One of them had travelled from Salt Lake City and the other came from Toronto, to carry the torch. They’d recognized each other’s bright white torchbearer uniform on the cold dark street and banded together to collectively seek their destination: my bus. It took 10 minutes for them to find us and in that time they had become friends. By pooling their intellectual resources they had found us: a small bus, parked in a tiny lot thousands of miles from where they both lived. They were absolutely delighted, astounded and joyful that their new-found friendship would culminate in them passing the flame to one another.
CHRIS TREMBLETT IN GAMBO NEWFOUNDLAND WITH A TWOONIE
THE LOONIE AND TWOONIE DRIVE

All torchbearers had the option to purchase the torch they carried. Each torch cost $400, purchased from the shuttle hosts. On Friday November 13th, the day before Grade 10 student Chris Tremblett was to run the Olympic flame through his small hometown of Gambo, Newfoundland he had not made arrangements to purchase the torch. The principal of his school found out and put out a plea to his classmates at Smallwood Academy to each contribute a two-dollar or one-dollar coin that day, to underwrite the cost of Chris’ torch. On the beautiful Saturday afternoon that we traveled through this small community, which was the birthplace of Joey Smallwood, Canada’s last Father of Confederation, the entire school lined the sides of the road. Judging from their cheers and the smile on Chris’ face, I think that they all got their return on investment.
If I was to be asked to identify the one dominant feeling that all torchbearers had just before they ran I would have to say it was nervousness. That emotion would be followed closely by excitement, pride and joy but nervousness was the feeling that percolated to the surface, was outwardly displayed and was common to all of them. During my briefings to the assembled torchbearers I would try to allay their concerns. I could just imagine them thinking, “What if I drop the torch?” or, “What if it goes out while I am running with it?” Several torchbearers told me about enduring sleepless hours in bed the night before, kept awake at the fear of somehow being responsible for breaking the chain of flame across Canada. You know what it’s like facing the fear of something unknown, especially when you focus on it the wee small hours: it can keep you up all night long. Then, when the moment was minutes away, I am not sure if I helped matters much when I reminded them — just prior to dropping them off at their insertion points — of the historical importance and incredible significance to the country of what they were about to do. Just a guess but statements flowing from me, like, “This is about to be one of the most incredible experiences of your entire life,” probably increased anxiety, rather than alleviated it. In actual fact they had nothing at all to worry about as the running procedure was pretty straightforward and almost fool proof. They still worried, though.

Another part of my job, throughout all of my interactions with the torchbearers on my bus, was to calm them down and help them to relax so that they could enjoy the experience. I learned it’s hard to get people excited and calm at the same time.

STOMACHS FULL OF BUTTERFLIES
Staging a massive event like a national torch run, twice in our country in less than three decades, created some interesting fashion dynamics. In 1988, 8,000 Canadians ran with the torch, carrying it across the country to the Olympic Games in Calgary. Lots of those torchbearers must have stored their now-dated uniforms away in a closet somewhere, just waiting for just the right occasion to pull them out again. Our torch relay was just that: a chance to grab those retro, bright red-and-white Sun Ice brand uniforms out of the closet and re-live the memories of a flame that burned 22 years ago. I saw a few of them everyday: whether it was someone wearing one at a celebration site, standing on the side of the road demonstrating their support, or a friend or family member wearing one while dropping off a torchbearer at one of my collection points. One day a mother brought her 16-year-old daughter to our meeting place wearing the Calgary Torch jacket that she had on when she carried the flame in ‘88. It was a poignant, right-of-passage moment as her daughter changed into our new white torchbearer uniform and mother and daughter took a picture, side by side.

Even early in the trip I knew we would continue to see the retro outfits, with more frequency as we neared Calgary. Like red dots scattered across the nation they showed up from time-to-time to remind us that the Olympic flame had passed through once before.

WHATEVER YOU DO NEVER THROW OUT OLD CLOTHES
One day, when I went to pick up my luggage in one of the hotels where we were staying, the mammoth size of our torch relay team hit me. We travelled with a giant contingent of between 250 to 300 people; all played a part in the relay.

Every morning all of our bags needed to be taken from last night’s hotel and dropped off at the new hotel we’d reach at the end of the day. Because we were travelling to a new location each night we couldn’t carry our own personal luggage with us. Instead we had a couple of trucks that transported it from town to town. At the end of the day, the burly VANOC truck staff lugged the huge cache of suitcases and duffel bags into a central area, where they were reunited with their owners.

Once I went to one of the giant function rooms of that night’s hotel, to get my luggage, and saw a sea of 300 large black bags. I felt like I was in the arrivals terminal of the Toronto Airport.

The size of our group presented major logistical challenges. One night we stayed in Port Hawkesbury, Nova Scotia. It was a very small town with no hotels large enough to accommodate us so we had to split our group and move into three different hotels. Just getting the right person into the right hotel with his or her piece of luggage was a challenge unto itself. This was especially challenging in the dark and after a long hard day on the road.

When we got to larger cities, like Halifax, there was room enough at the inn for all of us; but then our size presented another challenge for our armada of vehicles. Try finding downtown parking in the middle of any medium to large-sized Canadian city for a 106 cars, trucks, vans and buses. In these instances a satellite parking lot was set up, usually five to ten kilometres from the hotel, to store our vehicles; a shuttle bus transported the VANOC crew back and forth, as required. That’s how I learned how the guys on the road with giant touring acts like the Rolling Stones feel with their huge convoys. But the Rolling Stones never play Port Hawkesbury.
It was interesting to listen to the torchbearers talk to one another while they were on my shuttle. The average group size was usually about a dozen, much like a large dinner party and just as conducive to good conversation. Sometimes we would park in our bus for half an hour, stationed at the point where I would be letting the first torchbearer out, and I would ask each person on the bus to introduce him or herself, tell us their Olympic story and explain how they got there. After breaking the ice with their responses to those questions they usually started chatting naturally amongst themselves and some really interesting conversations took place.

Three tidbits overheard in Nova Scotia:

1) A man from Calgary who had been to several Olympic Games explained to those seated around him that the spirit, camaraderie and energy on the bus, combined with the anticipation of carrying the torch made him feel like he was at the Olympic Games themselves. He said, “This feeling, the feeling we are all experiencing right now, is just what it feels like being at the five Olympic Games that I have attended. The Olympic spirit is right here on this bus. You can really feel it now.”

2) Torches that had been burned left a sooty deposit around the top of the torch, where the flame had burned. The dusty soot could easily be wiped off. I overheard a man and woman on the bus discussing whether, after they ran, they would leave the Olympic soot on or wipe it off of their torches. They had opposing views and a debate ensued over the merits of each position.

3) Two women discussing the length of their hair and their concerns that the breeze could blow their hair into the flame of the torch and set it on fire. I never saw this happen.
The torchbearers on the shuttle bus were most often a nice combination of locals and people from far away. Although most of the torchbearers were placed close to where they lived, that was not always the case. It was interesting to note how people’s circumstances changed from the time they were chosen to run to when they actually ran. When we ran out of a Canadian Forces Base in Greenwood, Nova Scotia one of the enlisted men on my bus obviously knew the area well. When I asked him what it was like living on the local base, he told me he lived in Winnipeg. He said that he was invited to participate in the run during the summer he lived in Greenwood but had since been transferred to a base outside of Winnipeg. “I wasn’t going to come out all this way just to run the flame,” he said, “because it was so expensive for the flight. But then my parents talked me into it, saying I would be crazy not to run.”

Running the flame out of Kensington, PEI I had an RCMP officer on the bus who seemed like a local. Again, he was a local at the time he was selected to run and given the spot but had since been transferred to Edmonton. He used the opportunity to come to PEI with his wife and daughter, to have a little mini vacation in the spectacularly beautiful province.
When the torchbearers got back onto the bus they always said one of three things or, most often, a combination of the three:

“That was — really good, fantastic, unbelievable, exhilarating, the best, incredible (or some other equally enthusiastic adjective).”

“The segment I ran went by way too quickly.”

“The torch was heavier to carry than I thought it would be.”

In an effort to capture the feelings they were experiencing, I had them sign a guest book that we kept on the shuttle. While they were still in their hyper-excited state, I handed them the book and a pen and asked them to jot down a quick sentence or two to describe what they just went through.
WE KEPT A GUEST BOOK ON OUR SHUTTLE BUS AND AFTER WE PICKED UP THE TORCHBEARERS I ENCOURAGED THEM TO WRITE DOWN A COMMENT OR TWO.

NAME: Heather Cora  
DATE: Nov 2, 2009  |  TORCHBEARER 104  
I sometimes wondered how did I get to carry this flame? But when I got off the bus and saw all the people who have supported me waiting there, I knew.

NAME: Maureen Sutka  
DATE: Jan 19, 2010  |  TORCHBEARER 103  
Truly the experience of a lifetime. I am so honored.

NAME: Konrad Kiss  
DATE: Jan 20, 2010  |  TORCHBEARER 17  
Un-Freaking-Believable !!!

NAME: David Lin  
DATE: Dec 18, 2009  |  TORCHBEARER 136  
Thank you !!! Thank you !!! Thank you !!!
Thank you !!! Thank you !!!
Exhilarating, Spectacular, Memorable, Special, Wonderful, Superb, Meaningful, Life-Changing, Moving, Defining !!!!!!!

NAME: Rachel Johns  
DATE: Nov 2, 2009  |  TORCHBEARER 103  
That was the closest to being a rock star that I will ever get. Overcome with pride. I found myself hooting and hollering “Go Canada”. Thank you to everyone for the privilege.

NAME: Kristen Cavanaugh  
DATE: Dec 17, 2009  |  TORCHBEARER 034  
Loved it!! Cried every step!

NAME: Konrad Kiss  
DATE: Jan 20, 2010  |  TORCHBEARER 17  
Un-Freaking-Believable !!!!
NAME: Jan Simonson  
DATE: Jan 20, 2010 | TORCHBEARER 010  
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.

NAME: Jodi Pinset  
DATE: Nov 15, 2009 | TORCHBEARER 21  
My heart is beating outside my body and I have permasmile. Life is great!

NAME: Shannon Verling Moody  
DATE: Nov 2, 2009 | TORCHBEARER 110  
I did it for the Moms of the world! Go Moms. Go Canada. Here's to peace and goodness.

NAME: Lillian McGregor  
DATE: Nov 17, 2009 | TORCHBEARER 086  
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: Dan Simpson  
DATE: Nov 18, 2009 | TORCHBEARER 162  
Time of my life; absolutely the best experience that anyone could ever have!

NAME: Craig Michaels  
DATE: Dec 17, 2009 | TORCHBEARER 088  
The most exhilarating and memorable distance I have traveled.

NAME: Ben Verboom  
DATE: Dec 17, 2009 | TORCHBEARER 241  
An emotionally moving and life-changing experience. For a few minutes, each one of us felt connected to all other Canadians.

NAME: Jim  
DATE: Jan 18, 2010 | TORCHBEARER 008  
Awesome – beats the heck out of any parade I’ve been in.
So there was this guy who was a torchbearer who lived in the Toronto area and was scheduled to run in Bathurst, New Brunswick on Saturday, November 28. He decided to fly in the night before because his team meeting, led by the shuttle host, was set for 6 am on Saturday. He was scheduled to run shortly after 7 that morning. Because of some really strong winds — which also blew out the occasional torch in the Bathurst area that day — his plane couldn’t land and was forced to turn back. It ended up landing in Montreal instead. Unfortunately, it landed so late at night that he had no options to fly back to Bathurst, or anywhere else in the Maritimes. So what did he do? He walked out onto the street in front of the Montreal airport, hailed a cab, and when the cabby said, “Where do you want to go to sir?” he replied, “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 got better. The cab driver, who must have been near the end of his shift when he was flagged down, couldn’t muster the energy to stay awake and keep driving on the long trip through Quebec and into New Brunswick. So this guy stepped in and drove the cab himself, in order to ensure that he was not late for his appointment with destiny: carrying the Olympic Flame.

Who was he? Wilson Chau, torchbearer 030-13. He was one heck of a determined torchbearer who wasn’t going to miss out on his opportunity to carry the flame in the longest domestic torch relay in the history of the Olympic Games.

The story had a happy ending with Wilson showing up five minutes early for his Saturday morning meeting with the rest of the torchbearers. His determination captured their imagination and some of the other torchbearers offered to drive him back to the Bathurst airport after he ran, or to the nearest cab stand, whichever he preferred.
COULD BE ANYWHERE IN CANADA

HUNTING FOR ORANGE STICKERS

They were about the size and shape of a dinner plate, bright orange and with black numbers on the front. They were mainly stuck on the sides of wooden telephone poles, but sometimes you could have found them on trees or fences or lamp poles. They were temporarily applied with a staple gun or glue. To passersby they probably went unnoticed, or they may have thought of them as part of a local ordinance survey. But to a shuttle host like me those route marking stickers were the lifeblood of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games Torch Relay. Finding them was half of my job.

How they got there, how years were spent planning the torch relay route and deciding precisely where to put each one of the 12,000 markers from coast to coast to coast is another story unto itself. My job was simply to get each one of the torchbearers on my bus and dropped off in front of the bright orange markers on time. Well, simply may not be the right word to use.

You have to remember that my shuttle bus driver and I, who had to find these sometimes shy stickers, were not from the local area where the stickers were placed. No matter where we went we were always from out of town. So every night, as we prepared for the next day of delivering dozens and dozens of torchbearers to the side of the road at their spot to participate in the relay, I was given a thick manifest-style document called the Daybook, which listed where every single sticker for that day was located. Each numbered sticker on the road corresponded to a number each torchbearer received months earlier; that number determined where I was to drop them off. It was crucial to get to the right spot at the correct time. It was the exact spot where each excited, dedicated and incredibly pumped torchbearer needed to be standing at a precise minute, in order to receive the flame from the previous torchbearer. But depending on where we had stayed during the previous evening, when we consulted the Daybook for the next day, we discovered that often the stickers that we needed to locate were 200 kilometers up the road in the next community our torchbearers would be running through. So it wasn’t as if I could go look for the orange plates the night before, to ensure I was prepared.

Sometimes I wished I could to lessen the anxiety and uncertainty. To my driver and I the sticker locations were just street names and other landmark co-ordinates on a long list; just words. They were listed as, for example, “Route 11 near Otho Road”, or “Church Street close to the Centennial Bridge”. The all-important Daybook was an accurate document reflecting thousands of hours of planning and scheduling. But in the end the sticker spot where I had to drop off each torchbearer was a big mystery. Serving as a shuttle host on the Olympic Torch Relay was a lot like participating in a 106-day scavenger hunt or car rally.

Sometimes we were the first shuttle of the day. There were nine shuttles and we rotated our schedules. If the first torchbearers were running around 7 am, they were told to report to a collection point near the first sticker at 6 am. We organized the torchbearers into groups of 10 to 20 runners, who were directed to gather at different collection points at a specific time on their running day. That meant, for example, that if the time for the torchbearers’ collection point meeting was set for 6 am, I needed to be there at 5:30 am, to prepare for their arrival.

The collection points for torchbearers were easier to find than the stickers, because they were usually at a community center, school or a McDonald’s restaurant parking lot. So if I needed to be there at 5:30 am with our shuttle bus and driver, to prepare to meet with my torchbearers that morning, I also really needed to be
there knowing exactly where all the upcoming stickers were for the people that we were picking up and would soon be dropping off at their appointment with destiny. Prior to meeting the gathered torchbearers, I needed to find all of their insertion points, which is what we called the spots where the stickers were placed. So it was not an uncommon sight to see me and my driver out in the middle of nowhere, with a flashlight, at 4:30 in the morning, looking for a bright orange, dinner-plate sized stickers. It was kind of fun. We never missed a beat, the torchbearers arrived and when they boarded the bus we had a plan as to exactly where we would be dropping them off. I addressed them in my briefing with all the confidence of a local who had lived in the region his entire life and knew precisely where the torchbearers needed to be, in order to play their important part in carrying the Olympic flame across Canada. In reality, just a half hour before I may have been scrambling through some farmer’s field in the middle of nowhere, ankle deep in cold mud, waving my flashlight around and hoping like heck to find that orange sticker on the side of a nondescript telephone pole.
On November 29th in Fredericton, New Brunswick, the 17 torchbearers on my bus broke into a patriotic, totally heartfelt rendition of O Canada. I couldn’t help but join in. It was just after they had each run their 300 metres of the Olympic Torch Relay and we had 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, as the sun was setting over the Saint John River and we were driving the torchbearers back to their gathering place at City Hall to reunite them with their family and friends, it just seemed like the perfect moment to sing our national anthem and thereby put a meaningful exclamation mark on what was an emotional and moving experience for each and every one of them. The acoustics on the bus were great, but I felt awkward not to be able to stand up as I sang.

WITH GLOWING HEARTS WE SEE THEE RISE THE TRUE NORTH STRONG AND FREE
Very, very rarely a torchbearer didn’t show up. Most of them were selected months ahead of time and were given reminders and updates leading up to their big day. As a final assurance we called each one the week before their running day, to confirm details. When we discovered we had an empty spot, for whatever reason, at the collection point minutes before the bus was to leave to drop off the torchbearers, we could do one of two things: ask the torchbearer who was running before the “no show” to run the extra 300 metres, to fill-in, or appoint an instant, new torchbearer out of the crowd. Talk about being given supreme, fatalistic powers to anoint a mere mortal stranger in the crowd and elevate them to mythical Olympic status. The act gave new meaning to the phrase, “making someone’s day”.

What I just described happened on Thursday, November 28 in St. John, New Brunswick to 14-year-old Andrew Johnson, who woke up early that morning and went to the local McDonald’s with his Mom and little brother, to drop off his Dad, who was scheduled to meet 16 other torchbearers that morning and board my shuttle bus.

There was a no-show so my colleague Sylvie Gilbert scanned the crowd and then asked Andrew if he “was up to” carrying the torch. Andrew reacted like he was experiencing every Christmas and every last day of school rolled into one. He shook with excitement and hooted and hollered with joy.

Andrew tried to explain to his little brother how cool and important this opportunity was for him but the six-year-old didn’t really understand the significance of it all. Then Andrew tried to describe to his little brother how rare an opportunity he had just been given. He stuck his fingers together really close, to create a tiny gap between his thumb and forefinger and said, “The chance 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, wearing his uniform to show it off to all of 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”.

CHosen on the Spot
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.”
THE AFTERGLOW

When people left our shuttle bus after carrying the torch, I used to wonder what they did next. They had an afterglow around them and a perma-grin on their faces that lasted for hours or maybe even days. We encouraged them to keep wearing their white uniform and to go take in the lunchtime or evening Vancouver 2010 Torch Celebrations happening that day in or near the communities where they carried the torch. Sure enough, at all of the celebrations that I attended, the crowd was dotted with people who had just run, were dressed in white, and were visiting us from Cloud 9. After the celebrations, most torchbearers still wore their uniform. Some people who ran in the morning said they planned to wear the uniform to work later that day.

Aside from enjoying the entertainment and the opportunity to show off their nylon outfits to co-workers, I knew that a lot of the torchbearers participated in more worthwhile and noteworthy pursuits, while still donning the bright white uniform with the distinctive and colorful green-and-blue left sleeve. One day, some of the young people on my bus told me that they planned to wear their uniforms to a school assembly the next day, where they would address the entire student body and deliver a speech on what it was like to carry the Olympic flame and what the Olympic ideals meant to them. Other torchbearers told me that they planned to visit a nursing home that evening, wearing their Olympic outfit, to pass the torch around to some elderly, shut-ins.

Whatever way the message and the spirit was spread, it was a good thing.
Often the flame went 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 saw the residents of those houses coming out onto their front porches in their housecoats, clinging to their morning coffee mugs, wondering what all the fuss was about. If by chance they were unaware of the relay, upon spotting a stranger in the dark, hoisting a club (the torch) in his or her hand, standing at the edge of their property, their thoughts may have turned to calling the police. But we usually beat them to it as a police escort always arrived, complete with flashing lights, within a minute of the errant torch-bearing trespasser being dropped off at his or her appointed spot. Once, on just such a quiet street, I dropped off a torchbearer on some lady’s front lawn, very early in the morning when it was still dark. As the torchbearer quietly stood there waiting for the flame to arrive, the homeowner ran up to me and asked me if it was okay for her to run back inside and get her camera to take a picture. I gave her permission and she was excited and confused as she scurried back into her home in her slippers. She soon returned to take the shot. Later, it struck me as funny that she would ask me for permission to take a picture of something taking place on her own front lawn.
I heard someone on the crew use the term the “chosen frozen” one 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 they gave me: we travel with a crew of about 300 people. When the flame went on its eleven-day trek up north, however, and I mean way up north, we required fewer people on the convoy because the communities were small and the group traveled mainly by air, as opposed to road. Therefore we sent a smaller contingent of only 60 staff to accompany the flame up north: The Chosen Frozen.
Whenever I dropped off a busload of torchbearers at their designated running spots, otherwise known as the orange stickers on the side of the road, I never knew what to expect when I arrived at each drop-off spot. On one end of the spectrum, I may have had a high school student running from his or her school, where the principal had given permission for the student’s entire class to meet them and cheer them on. It was 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. Most often, however, a group of five or six family members and friends enthusiastically awaited the torchbearer’s arrival. Sometimes just one person waited there. If it was just one person, it was most often the torchbearer’s husband or wife. I liked to watch the spouse’s reaction as their mate proudly descended the three steps of the shuttle bus. Sometimes, sadly, there was nobody waiting for the torchbearer. Every once in a while a torchbearer came from a far away town and for whatever reason they travelled alone. When we pulled up to a spot and no one was there on the side of the road to greet the torchbearer, I usually offered them a warm hug or a sincere handshake of encouragement. At the same time, if possible, I tried to spend a few minutes with them on the cold roadside before we departed in our bus to drop off the rest of the torchbearers. Hugging strangers was never in the job description when I signed up to be a torch relay shuttle host but some jobs just come with pleasant surprises.

ROADSIDE FAN CLUBS
Most of you got used to seeing the torch being carried by one person and then passed off to another individual. For the most part that was the way the flame travelled across Canada. But in some communities we introduced something new to the world of Olympic torch relays: a team of torchbearers. On most days, in addition to the 100-plus individual runners that we lit up, we would run one special team of 20 torchbearers for one kilometre. As they ran they passed an individual torch to one another at every 50 meters. It was a symbolic gesture of the importance of teamwork. Part of my job was to organize the team and rehearse them in the act of running in unison.

There were a few key things that had to happen while they ran. They needed to form two lines and follow a sequence in both of those lines, in the same order as the predetermined torchbearer numbers they had been assigned. (Confusing, I know.) Then, as we ran, I kept up with them yelling “Switch!” every 50 metres. At the end of the kilometre team section, an individual torchbearer would be waiting at the side of the road to have his or her flame lit at a specifically measured point. When I yelled out “switch” the team members had to pass the flame immediately; if they were too late it would have created a problem because it would mean that when we reached the end of the kilometre we could have torchbearers in the group who hadn’t carried the torch, because some members of the team exceeded their 50 meters.

While they ran a bunch of other semi-complicated things (that are hard to explain on paper) had 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 wasn’t quite at the level of choreographing the chorus line of a Broadway musical but it did need 10 to 15 minutes of rehearsal in a parking lot before we did it, if it was going to look half decent. Bear in mind that wherever we ran the torch, the local television cameras taped everything we did and a bunch of people fumbling the torch and tripping over one another could look pretty un-Olympic.

I did four of the team torch runs in Quebec. The first was with a speed skating club in Riviere du Loup. I figured that, being speed skaters, they would be fit and used to moving in circles. They did a good job. Then there was a fundraising group from the Saguenay region called the Quebec Breakfast Club; their 20 members walked the route. 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 was from a Canadian military base about 20 kilometres outside of Quebec City, called CFB Valcartier. They were good; go figure, they march and do drills for a living. So as we rehearsed in a gigantic indoor gymnasium on the base, I thought to myself, “I’m not teaching these men and women anything they don’t already know”. I’d yell “Switch!” and within one, one-hundredth of a second the torch would have 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!” and see it flawlessly executed every time. I got to play drill sergeant for 15 minutes and have all this military talent take me seriously.

We were the first ones to run the torch on December 3rd and had a 6:50 am start to carry the flame through one kilometre of the giant base. We arrived
before 5 am to get set up, register the torchbearers, to find our orange location stickers on the route and to rehearse. The weather was absolutely dreadful. It was around zero degrees with buckets of rain blowing down sideways. When we entered the gym at 5:50 to rehearse the process, a few dozen military personal who had shown up early were sparsely spread across our route. It was a stark contrast to just under one hour later as 2,000 troops stood attentively to witness the Olympic flame travelling through their base. As you would expect the symbol of peace was in good hands and the drill was pulled off without a hitch. Hard to believe with me at the helm!

Aside from my fantasies of being a drill sergeant, on a more serious note I was also aware that this was a base that has sent many troops to Afghanistan. Sadly, some have not come home. One of the soldiers told me that, at that point, 23 Canadians from the base had died on the mission in Afghanistan. Halfway through the run the group of 20 torchbearers stopped at a monument to the fallen and stood silently and respectfully on the side of the road for a minute of silence. Once again, as I felt so many times on my assignment, I felt proud to be a Canadian.
A STANDARD DRESS CODE

On Day 44, the President of Air Canada, Calin Rovinescu was on my shuttle in Hull/Gatineau Quebec. Air Canada was a big sponsor of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games. I had previously met him in Montreal, through my job as VANOC’s Director of Sponsorship Sales, shortly after he was appointed as the airline’s president in the spring of 2009. I had happened to be with our president, John Furlong in Montreal for some sales calls and I accompanied John to meet Mr. Rovinescu. It was just his second day on the job at Canada’s national airline and as he handed me his brand new business card, he remarked, “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 affecting the airline industry and the progress of planning for 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 his impeccable attire. 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 image of Mr. Rovinescu that was planted in my head at the time.

Fast-forward six months 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 torchbearer (number 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 torchbearers that I am scheduled to drop off that morning. The cool thing is that, on the bus, everybody is just another torchbearer. Status, influence and income levels fall to the wayside as the torchbearers on the bus are, first and foremost, simply proud Canadians.

Mr. Rovinescu 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 torchbearer’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, I tried to both relax the torchbearers before they ran and enhance their experience. I had them introduce themselves to one another, tell a little story of how they were selected to carry the torch, and mention where they were from and what they did for a living. That day, there were 19 people on the bus and when I got to Mr. Rovinescu I was going to jump in and introduce him, along with his title, and then thank Air Canada for its support of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games. For some reason I decided not to do that and just allowed him to introduce himself. It was refreshing when he simply said, “I am from Montreal and I work for Air Canada”, and then humbly went on
to explain how honored he was to be with all the rest of the torchbearers on the bus.

He was the last torchbearer to get off the bus and as he moved to take his place at his designated running spot he told me that in his position he is privileged to enjoy a lot of unique and interesting experiences. This one, he said, ranked among 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 the torchbearer before him would 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 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 torchbearers’ uniform!
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 torchbearer on my pick-up bus, which collected the torchbearers after they’d run with the flame.

After he got on the bus, it was clear that his experience of carrying the same torch that he spent years creating was a bit different than that of the average torchbearer. Over the next half hour, as we picked up more of his fellow torchbearers along the path where they’d carried the flame, a lot of the attention on the bus focused on Tim and his feelings. He, of course, was thrilled with torch’s performance.

DESIGNED NEVER TO BURN AGAIN

After things had quieted down a bit I sat next to Tim to conduct my important job of disabling his torch. Most torchbearers purchased their torches, or had had their torches purchased for them by a sponsor. Before I could give them the sacred memento to keep, I needed to remove the propane canister that fueled the torch and, using a pair of heavy-duty wire clippers, cut the copper tube so that the torch could never be lit again. As I sat next to Tim neutering his torch he took particular interest in watching the 30-second procedure. Later we discussed how part of their goal 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, paused, and then said, “I think that you should render the verdict on that.”
Marvel School of Hairdressing posing with the Flame
By the time we reached Ottawa on December 12th we had been on the road for six and a half weeks. The hours had been long, the pace hectic and free time to take care of personal things like getting your hair cut had 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 sure exactly how it came about but a local haircutting school somehow got in touch with us and asked if it would be beneficial to have them come down to our hotel one evening and offer free haircuts to everyone. Sixty 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 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 hoist the torch. He had a memory to last a lifetime, we all had haircuts to last six more weeks, and the convoy moved on down the road to the next stop.
When did it sink in, after people had been chosen to carry the flame, that they really would get to enjoy such a rare experience? Most of the torchbearers were chosen months before the date they would run with the torch, leaving lots of time for nervous-Nelly thoughts to enter their heads. On the bus, just before I dropped off the torchbearers, we swapped stories of how each person was selected and notified that they would be carrying the Olympic flame. There was always one re-occurring theme or statement that came out: “After I got the e-mail that I would be running, I couldn’t believe it! I kept thinking, ‘Is this for real?’” Many torchbearers went on to tell me that even after getting the nod they would continue to question whether or not the notification was legitimate, or if a follow-up e-mail might notify them of a mistake that had been made, revoking the offer. Several torchbearers told me that after receiving the official torchbearer uniform by Purolator courier, the process and its legitimacy took a giant step forward. But for some, the doubt still lingered. Then, on the day they were finally running, when they saw our brightly decaled 2010 Olympic bus sitting in the parking lot of their collection point, waiting for them, it all became much more real.

But for many of them it wasn’t until I actually handed them the torch and they were holding it tightly that all of the speculative feelings, questioning thoughts, and doubtful scenarios completely disappeared.

I recall one torchbearer who was totally honest in sharing her anxiousness with everyone else. She told us all that for months after receiving her confirmation by e-mail she kept experiencing a neurotic feeling that something would happen to deny her appointment with destiny. After dropping her off at her starting point I accompanied her to the side of the road where, seconds later, her torch would be lit. As I stood on the side of the road, watching the preceding torchbearer who was rapidly approaching with the flame, I looked at her and asked softly, “Does it feel real now?”
When we usher out an old year and bring in a new one, everyone makes comparisons to past New Year’s events. The demarcation line between 2009 and 2010 must have been so very profound, poignant and powerful for torch relay runner 64-29 on the first day of 2010. On December 31st, as the relay continued west, our relay convoy was over-nighting in the Northern Ontario community of Kirkland Lake, a mining community that has spawned so many great NHL stars. The day before, a fire had swept through the small town, gutting several homes. The people who had occupied those homes had been temporarily relocated by an insurance company into the small, austere Comfort Inn that was housing our torch relay crew for the evening. Coincidentally, we had a rare open torchbearer spot the next day, January 1, 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 one flame brought at the end of one year into the triumph another flame at the start of a new year. After hearing the story of the fire, Ty asked the person at the front desk for the names of some the people whose 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 after his run, when he was on the shuttle bus driving back to the Comfort Inn. He asked me if he could purchase the torch he’d carried. We sold the torches 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.

BAD FLAME 09 — GOOD FLAME 10
COMMERCIAL FREEZER COLD

Sometimes, when I’m grocery shopping at the Safeway near my home, 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, from reaching 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-30. One day in Sudbury, Ontario the mercury dipped to minus-32.

I had never — in my pampered, tropical and mainly Vancouver-based life — experienced that kind of cold. It was bone chilling, dangerous, and completely foreign to the climate that I think I could live in. I didn’t complain about the frigid temperature because in a strange way it was kind of fun to experience it knowing, as I did, that for me it was just a temporary experience. I knew, though, that from then on whenever I watched the national weather forecast on TV I’d have a new appreciation for the term “cold mass of arctic air”. Sometimes I pondered that if we were meant to live in those cold, adverse weather conditions wouldn’t we be covered in thick fur, like the moose we saw along the roads? I’m only joking of course; there were some great communities along Highway 17 with people who adapted to the cold just fine. I really enjoyed taking the relay through Northern Ontario; in fact, it was one of my favorite areas with the nicest and most interesting people living among some of the most stunning scenery in Canada. But it was cold. Too cold.

Believe it or not the extreme Canadian cold didn’t dampen the torchbearers’ enthusiasm — not one bit. Nor did it have that much of an adverse effect on our day-to-day torch relay operations. The main difference the 30-below temperatures imposed upon us was that the “military precision timing” that we had been executing for two months needed to be even more precise. When our shuttle dropped a torchbearer off at the side of the road in the frozen-lasagna climate, we needed to be absolutely certain that the oncoming torch was well in motion and less than a minute or two away. In warmer climates we had a margin of five to six minutes where torchbearers could wait for the flame to arrive for the hand-off. Standing still and waiting for the flame in this climate for six minutes could transform our runners into big white frozen popsicles.

Still, when the Northern Ontario torchbearers got off of our shuttle bus in January for their turn to run with the flame, they had the same gusto and spirit as the ones we dropped off in October in warm, balmy Victoria, BC. It never ceased to amaze me how our sub-zero January Northern Ontario runners cheerfully climbed down the stairs of the bus with huge smiles on their faces to happily brave the bitter, deep-freezer cold. What would possess anyone to leave the confines of a toasty warm bus? The power of the Olympic flame moved people to do extra-ordinary things.
I knew that when we got back to Vancouver, all of the shuttle buses that leap-frogged across the country for three and a half months would be sold off as part of VANOC’s overall dissolution plan. As with any vehicles that have over 40,000 kilometres on them they had small scrapes, scratches and imperfections. Unlike other used vehicles, however, these had interior ceilings covered in small, black, charcoal burn marks. You see, half of each shuttle buses’ time was spent dropping off torchbearers about to run while the other half of its time was spent picking up torchbearers who had just run. It was the ones who had just run that entered the bus with a torch whose flame had just been extinguished 30 seconds prior to our arriving with the bus. As they climbed aboard with their red-hot Olympic souvenirs some of them inadvertently scorched the buses’ brand new, grey felt ceiling. I think that the battle scars could be a good conversation piece for the lucky person who may have acquired one of the storied vehicles.
In 1987, Dave Brown was working for the Ontario Provincial Police out of Kirkland Lake, Ontario. Dave, who was training a rookie officer that day, was responsible for accident investigations for the region. The rookie officer was excited about having 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; it took years for him to regain the 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 Olympic Torch Relay, Dave, torchbearer 64-22, shared his story with the rest of the torchbearers on the bus. He explained how every time the rookie officer visited him in the hospital, he wore his red and white Calgary torchbearer's uniform, to inspire Dave. It must have worked. Four years after the accident Dave regained his ability to walk. He told us that it was during those visits that the dream of carrying the flame himself one day helped him get through his challenges.

That dream became a reality on January 1, 2010 when I dropped off Dave to carry the torch from his spot in Virginiatown, Ontario, just down the road from Kirkland Lake where his accident took place.
The different paths that people followed leading them onto our shuttle bus were always intriguing and, sometimes, entertaining. One day in Mississauga, Ontario as I reviewed my roster to learn a bit about our upcoming torchbearers I discovered I had an entrant one on my list from Alabama. That in itself was interesting and later, on the bus, 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 Ben E. King hit, Stand By Me. The contest’s grand prize was a 300-metre leg in the 2010 Olympic Torch Relay in Canada. I’d 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 asked to hear him sing the song. But then another torchbearer on board beat me to the punch calling out, “Let’s hear you sing it now!”

Suddenly, he broke into the sweetest version of the song that I have ever heard. This jovial, young, African-American man, who weighed about 300 pounds, treated us to his big, beautiful, rich voice. He switched from the low, beefy notes to a high falsetto with the ease of a polished, 1950’s, doo-wop singer. There we all sat on the side of the road in our jam-packed bus, huge smiles on our faces and carefully listening to every note that he sang. He really nailed it. Shortly after got to the part of the song where it goes, “No I won’t, shed a tear, just as long as you stand, stand by me,” it was his turn to leave the bus and carry the flame.
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 Torch Relay shuttle bus. As I’ve mentioned, the 2010 Olympic torches were sold for $400 each, only to the torchbearers who have carried the flame. About ninety percent of the runners that we met at collection points had pre-purchased their torches months in advance. Of the remaining ten percent, about half wound up purchasing one off of me on the bus, after they had carried it and fallen in love with it. For what are probably their personal economic circumstances, about five percent of the torchbearers opted 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 their torch. The man who hadn’t, abashedly admitted to the rest of the torchbearers that he wished he could buy the torch he carried but that he just couldn’t afford it. He went on to relate a sad tale of family sickness combined with him being recently laid off from his job, resulting in such a tight financial situation that buying a torch just wasn’t an option for him. That was when a woman on the bus who, of course, had just met him 30 minutes previously, spoke up saying, “I don’t want to see you leave this bus without your torch; I’ll lend you the money”. Eavesdropping, I listened to them work out the terms of the loan: he would pay her back $100 per month for the next four months. They exchanged phone numbers and that was it. He made a promise and she trusted him. I watched bonds form all the time between people on the bus, who shared the moving experience of carrying the torch. This one played itself out in a touching, compassionate and memorable way.
It was so cold for so much of northern Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba. Okay: how cold?

All of the stories that I wrote from Quebec to the Manitoba/Saskatchewan border need to be put into the context of the cold because it affected the torchbearers, the public gathered to watch, and us as organizers. Having said that, nothing would stop the torchbearers; they were like mailmen resistant to wind, sleet, snow and freezing cold in the pursuit of their task. The bitter cold also made the huge crowds that stood outside lining the streets to see the torchbearers seem just that much more remarkable.

I had a tough time explaining to Vancouverites the depths of such frigid temperatures. Numbers didn’t convey much to someone reading my descriptions while they sat in their warm office or den. One day in Dryden, Ontario it was minus-38 degrees. One of my colleagues had a tiny irritation in his eye that day, causing the eye to tear up while he walked down the street. His eye actually froze shut in a matter of a few seconds of being outside. He needed to use his fingers to separate the bottom and the top halves of his eyelid. That is a true story. That’s just a taste of what minus-38 can do to your body.

The coldest I experienced on the trip was minus-42 in Winkler, Manitoba. That day as I stepped off the bus to position a torchbearer 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 wasn’t complaining. It was actually kind of fun and interesting to feel your body parts seize up and freeze. As long as you knew you had a shuttle bus to run back onto you could endure almost any temporary, uncomfortable sensation. For me it was all new. And when everything was said and done, most of the hotels we stayed in had warm rooms where we could defrost ourselves overnight.
When I got the torchbearers onto the warm, pre-heated bus I noticed that one of them was shivering uncontrollably. He just couldn’t stop shaking. I moved him from where he was seated and put him directly in front of the floor-mounted heat vent, to thaw out for a few minutes before we left. He still couldn’t stop shaking so 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 off of the bus and back into the freezing temperature 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.

CAN’T WAIT TO GET BACK OFF THE BUS

Continuing along with this cold weather theme: At a torchbearer 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 keep us from the cold by prolonging my briefing, we had to leave the building and 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 and most authoritative voice, “Okay everyone I’m 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 five co-operative and camera friendly torchbearers out there in the freezing cold with the “pretend paparazzi” any longer than necessary.
My first job, at the hundreds of collection points across Canada where I met the torchbearers, was to register each runner. At each rendezvous, 15 to 20 white-suited and red-mitted, excited and sometimes overly anxious people showed up. And they showed up early. They had been sent a letter, weeks in advance, explaining exactly where and when they needed to meet me. They always arrived early, sometimes an hour or more before we were supposed to meet. My shuttle bus driver and I made 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 torchbearers arrived we would be there to welcome them. There would always be a real keener or overly punctual torchbearer standing in the parking lot or sitting in his or her car at the school, municipal hall or civic arena even before we arrived.

Once I got inside the hall or arena I set up a table and began the registration process. Each torchbearer needed to show me his or her photo identification. Eighty percent brought their driver’s licenses while the remainder showed me passports or school identification cards. I took the registration procedure seriously, making sure that the picture on the document actually matched the face of the person who handed it to me. Then I had to find the person’s assigned relay number and locate the corresponding light-blue sticker to stick onto their white jacket. Anyone who knows me is aware that attention to detail in filling out forms isn’t one of my strong suits; I really had to concentrate. Also, my eyes aren’t what they used to be and so finding the torchbearer’s name, written in small print on a long form of entries, was sometimes challenging and always time consuming.

One day, in North Battleford, Saskatchewan a young man came to my collection point to register but I couldn’t find his name on the list. I was sure it was there, I just couldn’t see it. 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 the list, line by line, for maybe two or three minutes. My silence must have been excruciating for the poor young fellow because when I finally said, “Oh there’s your name, sorry about that,” he fell to his knees in relief, crying out, “Thank God! I thought I wasn’t going to be able to run!”
As we travelled across Canada, we were not collecting money for anything; apparently, that was 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 that 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. One day we were parked, waiting on the side of a busy road with a bus full of torchbearers, when a lady started knocking on the front door of my shuttle bus. When I opened the door she handed me a $20 bill 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 were a well-funded initiative and were not looking for donations from the public. I didn’t know what to do or what to say to the generous lady. I told her that 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, she wanted to support the torchbearers. I told her, “Honestly, 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”.
The cold winter roads could get pretty slippery and dangerous in Northern Saskatchewan in January. They sure did for runner 014 in Rosetown, Saskatchewan on day 74 of the relay. I was scheduled to meet five torchbearers at the local hockey rink at 8:30 am. At 8:45 I began to get a bit concerned, knowing that on the day they run most torchbearers are super punctual, many arriving well in advance of the pre-scheduled meeting time. A torchbearer named Tommy was missing.

At 8:50 there was still no Tommy and we knew we had to leave soon to drop the torchbearers off at the side of the road to carry the flame.

At every collection point I was supported by a two-member team from our VANOC Torchbearer Operations Department that served as trouble-shooters along the way. Two colleagues always showed up during my briefing, driving their own torch relay vehicle, to make sure that everything was okay. Inevitably issues arose, requiring someone to assist me while I spoke to the group. It was great to have the extra support on hand for things like a torchbearer forgetting to bring his uniform, or a piece of his uniform, a torchbearer with a medical condition requiring special assistance, or a torchbearer who was late.

At 8:55 I had almost finished my briefing for the other four torchbearers; we were scheduled to leave in 12 minutes. Now I was really concerned. The chain of torchbearers could not be broken and at that point I was short by one link.

Ali, one of the women on the VANOC Torchbearer Operations team, placed a call to Tommy’s cell phone, after pulling the number from her file with every torchbearer’s contact information. After a few rings he answered and told Ali what was happening. Just minutes before she called he had lost control of his car and sat helplessly as it slid off the side of the road and down into a big ditch. It turned out to be a bad-news, good-news and better-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 good news was that no-one was hurt. The better news was that the ditch he slid into was on the outskirts of Rosedale, about three minutes from the hockey rink where we were waiting. Ali jumped into action, hopping into our SUV and driving off to fetch Tommy from the ditch.

He arrived nine minutes later, a bit shaken but still ready, willing and able to carry the Olympic Flame on his leg of the relay. I gave him a quick crash course (excuse the pun) on how to carry the torch and off we went. Meanwhile, Ali made arrangements for a tow truck to meet him after his run. Now that’s service.
I had five pregnant women on my shuttle bus, thankfully, not all at once. They ranged from a woman who was expecting in four months, to a woman who was supposed to have given birth the day before she ran. I suppose that from the time they entered to run, or were nominated to run in the torch relay, until they actually ran a lot could happen, if you know what I mean, nudge, nudge, wink, wink.

Some of the women had bellies that really protruded. It was a good thing that the white nylon uniform jackets fit generously, so loosely that they could easily double as a maternity track suit.

During the registration procedure the pregnant women usually pointed out to me that they were expecting. I told them it was okay to walk when they carried the flame and that they should just take their time and do whatever felt comfortable. Then I notified the command vehicle that regulates every move of the relay that we had a torchbearer that would be going at slower pace because she was running for two.

I’m sure that each of the expectant mothers gave a great deal of thought to carrying a baby inside of them at the same time they carried the flame. What a wonderful world-class distinction to bestow upon a little unborn person! What a story to tell their child! While still in the womb they already got to do something really cool. For the rest of their lives they would have bragging rights of having been along for the ride as their Mom carried the flame.

I will admit I was a bit worried about the woman who ran the day after her due date. Although I had some of towels and water on the bus, the water was in those little 350 ml Dasani bottles and I had no way of boiling it on the bus.
I had a unique vantage point on the torch relay because for the five years leading up to the relay I had worked for VANOC in a completely different department. As the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games Director of Sponsorship Sales I was responsible for the acquisition of sponsors for the games. Early in 2005 one of my first jobs was to develop the sponsorship packages that we would use for pitching to corporate Canada. Our research showed that in past Olympic Games the torch relay was considered a separate property and torchbearer positions were negotiated outside of any Olympic sponsorship deals.

We decided early on to take a different approach. Our domestic sponsorship program, which raised over $760 million, had three different levels of participation with a value chain of corresponding benefits. We felt that, although we would reserve promotional rights for torch relay sponsors such as Coke and RBC, we would offer torch relay spots to carry the flame to all companies, as part of their overall 2010 Olympic Games sponsorships. In other words, signing up to become a games sponsor guaranteed companies a certain number of legs in the relay. This was the right approach in that it allowed companies to award torch spots to their best employees or customers. We believed that companies that had paid our significant fees to become a 2010 sponsor should participate in the relay too, as part of their deal. Therefore all official suppliers of the games were given 10 relay spots and all official supporters of the games were given 30 spots. What it meant for me was that I knew dozens of torchbearers in my capacity as the guy who helped to sell them their sponsorships.

For four and a half years, in every presentation leading up to the games we had a section devoted to the torch relay benefits that sponsors would receive. Our Power Point slides showed beautiful shots of past relays and while scrolling through them I would, in my most convincing manner, describe what a great opportunity the relay presented to XYZ company to engage staff and customers from coast to coast to coast. At the time I was making these pitches in the boardrooms of large companies, little did I know that I would be the guy welcoming the actual people that I sold to as they boarded my shuttle bus.

The cool thing was that, as a shuttle host, I received a daily manifest every evening showing me the names of the torchbearers that I would be meeting and bringing onto the bus to run with the torch. Some days there were up to 60 or 70 people so the odds of someone that I knew from my suit-and-tie job climbing onto my bus were pretty good. This was particularly true in Toronto, Montreal or Calgary where a lot of our sponsors were based.

I’d estimate that over the 106 days on my shuttle bus I knew 30 to 40 executives from coast to coast I’d pitched over the years leading up to the games. I wasn’t surprised to see them, because I’d read their names on the daily manifest, but boy were they surprised to see me. The last time they saw me we were all wearing business attire. Now they had on white nylon uniforms and I was in my grey shuttle-host outfit.

In Collingwood, Ontario I picked up Patrick Sullivan who was the president of Workopolis, one of our official suppliers. I worked with him for over a year bringing Workopolis on board as our official on-line recruiter in 2006. When I saw Patrick he had just finished running with the torch and was on the side of the road with some friends and family as my pick-up shuttle bus arrived. I walked up to him and, without missing a beat said, “Patrick, since I sold you that sponsorship I just wanted to make sure that every aspect of it went perfectly, so I came here in person to help get you get back onto the bus”. He was so floored he almost dropped his torch.
In Cambridge, Ontario I had to brief three of the most senior people from Ricoh Canada and Ricoh USA before they ran. One of them was Ricoh President Martin Brodigan, who had flown in from the United States. Three years prior we had been in a Toronto boardroom in heated negotiations over our document processing needs and the one thousand copiers they would be supplying as part of their 2010 sponsorship. Now I was showing them all how to carry the torch, explaining when we would be turning on the valve to activate the propane gas flow, and letting them know how fast they should run. Again, when I walked into the briefing room of the hall where we met I knew all of their names, said good morning to them with a big smile and jokingly told them that the only way to ensure things went flawlessly for each of them that morning was for me to personally attend to their leg of the run. It was a surefire way to get a laugh. At the end of my talk I asked Martin to adjust his hat because the logo wasn’t on straight.

All across the country whenever I ran into a sponsor I had helped to bring on board I played out that same get them by surprise and deliver a cute line scenario. It was fun and set the tone for what turned out to be a great experience for all of them.
The Baker Boys

Rarely, we arrived at a collection point and there wasn’t a torchbearer to fill a spot. It happened at Kersley, British Columbia, which is located about an hour and a half south of Prince George. When I checked my daily manifest of runners in that community we were short one name. A blank showed up next to the runner number 67 for Day 92 of the relay. Usually, because our list is a few days old, this meant that someone from our Torchbearers Operations Department would show up with the name of a person that they had added after my manifest was printed. But in Kersley I received a phone call from my colleague Sarah in the Torchbearers Operations Department advising me that they had no-one to fill the position and wanted me to sort it out. I had two choices: I could have one of the torchbearers run an extra leg, increasing their distance from 300 to 600 metres. Or I could simply find someone else in the community to run. The second option of becoming a dream-maker for someone that morning was, of course, much more appealing. Although my nickname is DORG within it you will find the three letters G-O-D.

The only problem was that Kersley was so small that at 9 am there were not many people around the tiny, austere community hall where I was meeting my torchbearers. The parking lot was empty, and other than the torchbearers that were already on my list very few other people were in the community hall. Further, the torchbearers that were preparing to run that morning in this small community of less than a 1,000 were all my age. I thought it would be great to add a young person to the mix. Obviously I didn’t know anyone in town and I wasn’t about to start knocking on house doors. So I asked one of the assigned torchbearers who lived in Kersley if she could think of a local young person who would be a good candidate to join them. I needed to give her some criteria to answer my question so I said, “Can you think of anyone young who volunteers a lot and is generally a respected good citizen, or someone who would really benefit from the once-in-a-lifetime chance to carry the torch?” She said, “There are the twins, the Baker boys, who both belong to 4-H and are volunteer firefighters and are generally always helping others. They are both great kids. You could ask one of them. Their names are Chris and Kevin.” She said this to me as we stood by the window of the community hall. We talked for a few more minutes and then she said, “Hey Dave, you’re in luck, there they are now”. She pointed to the fire hall down the street where two young men had just emerged from the door and walking towards the community hall to join some other volunteer firefighters arriving in the parking lot. Apparently both Baker boys were volunteering for the Olympic flame event in Kersley that morning and were coming down to the community hall to direct traffic and assist with the festivities. It was serendipity. Shortly after she told me how appropriate either one of them would be to serve as a torchbearer, out of thin air they both showed up. But then I had to decide which one to choose. I was running out of time and had to make a decision soon.

As I left the hall and walked over to both of them standing on the other side of the big parking lot I thought to myself I needed to at least speak to them to verify that one was suitable. I didn’t have time to interview both and I only needed one. This was awkward. What kind of criteria could I use to make my decision? How can this be fair? I thought that maybe I should speak to both of them and then flip a coin to determine who to choose, but then realized that was a dumb idea. As I came to the end of my 75-metre walk and was standing in front of five volunteer firefighters I asked, “Is one of you guys Chris Baker?” I could just as easily have said Kevin but for some reason I said...
Chris. It was complicated enough adding a runner to the relay a few minutes before they were about to run and I didn’t need the added pressure of conducting a contest in the parking lot. So for whatever reason I just chose Chris’s name.

Chris, who was 19, looked at me kind of puzzled and said, “Yes, I’m Chris”. I told him that was with the Olympic Torch Relay and then added, “I’ve heard some good things about you. Can I speak with you in private for a minute?” Then I pulled him aside from the others, which I’m sure seemed a little strange. The poor kid must have been a bit weirded-out that some stranger from the 2010 Olympics would pick him out of a group of his peers and want to question him. I had him tell me about Kersly and what kind of work he did in the community. Bear in mind that he had no idea who I was or what I was up to. To him, I was some stranger who worked for VANOC and was asking him to tell me about himself and his town and not explaining why. I needed to verify that he was legit but I didn’t want to offer him the extra spot until I was comfortable with him as a choice. I couldn’t give a coveted leg in the relay to just anyone.

After a two-minute chat, where he said all the right things and seemed like a fine, outstanding young man, I was satisfied that I could bestow the honor of carrying the Olympic flame upon him. But before I did, I wanted to wait for the people from our Torchbearer Operations Department to show up, because they had all the right forms to sign, along with the white nylon uniform that he would need. Before I awarded it, I wanted to be sure that nothing had changed on their end and that the spot was still empty.

I told Chris it was nice meeting him, thanked him for his work on the relay that morning, and then walked back to the hall as he rejoined his group of volunteer firefighters in the parking lot. Another 10 minutes transpired before my torch colleagues showed up and could confirm that Chris would be a runner that morning.

With everything nailed down I went back to the group of firefighters, who were still standing in the same spot of the parking lot, and asked Chris if I could speak to him in private again. I am sure he must have thought to himself, “Oh no, not this small-talking weirdo again”. Then I told him that it was extremely unusual but that I had an empty spot in the relay that I wanted him to run. The look in his eyes was pure magic: elated, exited and bewildered would be three good words to describe the emotions they conveyed.

After he calmed down and the gravity of the situation took hold, he told me that he had to check with his volunteer fire department boss to make sure that someone could fill in for him on parking-lot duty that morning. The fire chief made the right call and gave him the next hour off. Then the chief made another right call when he came over and told me that the department wanted to buy the torch that Chris would run with, and give it to him as a gift.

Chris represented the town and the fire department very well that morning and ran with a sense of spontaneous pride that I had seldom witnessed on the tour. At the end of it all I went up to Chris and said, “Isn’t life wonderful? You woke up this morning not expecting anything like this to happen. Then the day unfolds and you are a local hero!”

As I got in my bus and headed to Prince George, I thought to myself how smoothly it all went. But I had one nagging thought in the back of my mind: I wondered how his brother Kevin felt about everything that had transpired. It’s not easy being DORG.
THE OLYMPIC CUCUMBER RELAY

When we got to Cache Creek, BC our torchbearer collection point was in a supermarket. To be more specific I was assigned to meet nine runners in the local Buy-Low in the Old Mill Plaza on Main Street. Never one to complain, when I arrived early I made the most of it and carefully scouted out the store’s floor plan, looking for a suitable location to conduct the briefing. The produce section, which was tucked away in a quiet corner, provided the privacy I wanted and was large enough to accommodate the group.

So there I was in this small town with nine white-nylon-suited torchbearers carefully listening to my instructional spiel against a colourful backdrop of brussel sprouts, carrots and potatoes. There was always one point in the briefing where I explained how to hold the torch when the flame is exchanged between two torchbearers. Usually I had two real, unlit torches on hand to demonstrate the procedure. I would hold one torch and my shuttle bus driver would hold the other as we demonstrated the technique torchbearers must use to ensure the flame was transferred properly. For some reason, in the confusion of scouting a suitable briefing location that morning we’d only brought one torch inside the store.

Improvisation is a beautiful thing. I held the torch up high as I told them that the exchange is the most important part of their leg. As I continued, my driver Brenda grabbed a really long English cucumber off the shelf and used it as a prop to illustrate the exchange. The torchbearers all laughed and I got all of our key points across while helping them all to relax a bit.
Torchbearers were randomly assigned to shuttle buses. Obviously we tried to match where people lived to where they ran but many times one busload of torchbearers included people from the region surrounding that leg of the run with one or even two from anywhere in Canada or the world. That’s why I was always so amazed at some of the spontaneous reunions that took place on these buses. From my seat I got to witness them unfolding.

On day 101, I was doing a drop-off in Agassiz, BC where I was meeting nine torchbearers. On my manifest I saw the name of another person I had met through my sponsorship job: Susan Yurkovich, one of the senior people from BC Hydro. She was runner 028, from Vancouver. I briefed the group, got them all onto the bus and then had them introduce themselves to one another. While runner 027 Andrew Richardson was speaking, Susan started to get emotional and interrupted him saying, “Andrew — I can’t believe it’s you, we went to high school together and I had the biggest crush on you! We hung out together for years and I haven’t seen you in at least 20 years. I always wondered whatever happened to you.”

Not only were they on the same bus, they were passing the flame to one another!