

Confessions of a Torch Relay Shuttle Host 9

From the Boardroom to Boarding my Shuttle Bus

I had a unique vantage point on the Torch Relay because I had worked for VANOC for five years before the relay 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 go out and pitch to corporate Canada. Our research showed that in past Olympic Games the Torch Relay was considered a separate property and Torch Bearer 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 like 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 you 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 be a 2010 sponsor, should participate in the relay too as part of their deal. As such all Official Suppliers of the Games were given 10 relay spots and all Official Supporters of the Games were given 30 spots each. What it meant for me was that I knew dozens of Torch Bearers in the capacity as the guy that helped to sell them their sponsorships.



In every presentation that we did for four and a half years leading up to the games we had a section devoted to the Torch Relay benefits that sponsors would receive. Our Power Point slides showed beauty shots of past relays and 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. At the time of doing these pitches in the board rooms of large companies little did I know that I would be the guy welcoming the actual people that I sold to on board my shuttle bus.

The cool thing was that as a shuttle host I received a daily manifest every evening showing me the Torch Bearers that I would be meeting then dropping off and picking up 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 were pretty good. Especially in Toronto, Montreal or Calgary where we a lot of our sponsors were based.

I'd estimate that on my shuttle bus over the 106 days of the relay I knew 30 to 40 executives from coast to coast who I had pitched over the years leading up to the Games. I wasn't surprised to see them because I knew they were joining me from the list I had. But boy were they surprised to see me. The last time they saw me I was in a suit and tie and so were they. 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 run 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 calmly without missing a beat said, "Patrick when 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 back on 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. Their President Martin Brodigan, who had flown in from the States was one of them. Three years prior we were in a boardroom in Toronto in heated negotiations over our document processing needs and the one thousand copiers they would be supplying us as part of the 2010 sponsorship. Now I was showing them all how to carry the torch and explaining when we would be turning on the valve to activate the propane gas flow, and how fast to 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 their leg of the run. It was a sure fire 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 scenerio*. It was fun and set the tone for what turned out to be a great experience for all of them.

The Baker Boys

It rarely happens at a collection point that I don't have a Torch Bearer to fill a spot. When I got to Kersley British Columbia, about an hour and a half south of Prince George my daily manifest of runners in that community was short one name. A blank showed up next to the runner number 67 for day 92 of the relay. Usually in this situation someone from our Torch Bearers Operation Department will show up with a person that they have added after my manifest was printed. Generally our list is a few days old. But in Kersley, I received a phone call from my colleague Sarah in Operations advising me that they had no-one to fill the position and wanted me to sort it out. I had two choices. I could make one of the Torch Bearers run an extra leg, increasing their distance from 300 to 600 meters. 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 there were not many people around at the tiny austere community hall where I was meeting my Torch Bearers at 9:00 am. The parking lot was empty, and other than the Torch Bearers that were already on my list very few other people were in the community hall. The Torch Bearers that were preparing to run that morning in this small community of less than a 1,000 people 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 Torch Bearers that lived in Kersley if she could think of a local young person that 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 a pair of twins, the Baker Boys, who both belong to 4H and are volunteer firemen, and are generally always helping others. They are both great kids. You could ask one of them. Their names are Chris and Kevin”.

While she was saying this to me we were both standing by the window of the community hall looking out of it. We talked for a few minutes more and she said “hey Dave, your in luck there they are now”. And she pointed to the fire hall a half a kilometer down the street where two young men were emerging from the door and walking towards the community hall to join some other volunteer firemen who had just arrived in the parking lot. Apparently both Baker boys were volunteering for the Olympic Flame event in Kersley that morning and they 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, out of thin air they both showed up. But which one do I 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 indeed that one was suitable. But 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 maybe I should speak to them both 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 meter walk in the parking lot and was standing in front of five volunteer fire men I just asked: “is one of you guys Chris Baxter?” I could have just as easily 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 am Chris”. Then I said “ I am with the Torch Relay and have heard some good things about you and can I

speak to you in private for a minute". Then I pulled him aside from the others which was a little strange. The poor kid must have been a bit "wierded" 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. Now you have to bear in mind that he has no idea who I was or what I was up to. To him, I am some total stranger that worked for VANOC asking him to tell me more about himself, and not explaining why. But I needed to verify that he was legit, and didn't want to notify him of the extra spot till I was comfortable with him as a choice. I couldn't just give a coveted leg in the relay to 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 Torch Bearer Operations department to show up, because they had all the right forms to sign, along with the extra white nylon uniform that he would need, and I wanted to be sure that nothing had changed on their end and that the spot was still empty before I awarded it.

I left Chris to rejoin the group of Volunteer firemen in the parking lot and told him it was nice meeting him. I thanked him for his work on the relay that morning and walked back into the hall. Another ten minutes transpired before my Torch Colleagues showed up and I confirmed that Chris would be our runner that morning.

With everything nailed down I went back to the group of firemen who were still standing in the same spot of the parking. I 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 is 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 that they conveyed.

After he calmed down and the gravity of the situation took hold, told me that he had to quickly 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 was running 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 Torch Bearer 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 stores 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 Torch Bearers carefully listening to my instructional spiel with a backdrop of Brussels sprouts, carrots and potatoes. There is one point in the briefing where I explain how to hold the torch when the flame is passed at the exchange between two Torch Bearers. Usually I have two real unlit torches on hand to demonstrate the procedure. I hold one torch and my shuttle bus driver holds the other as we demonstrate the technique to ensure the flame is transferred properly. For some reason in the confusion of scouting a suitable briefing location that morning we only brought one torch inside the store from the box in the bus with us.

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. Then as I continued my driver Brenda grabbed an English cucumber off the shelf, a really long one, and used it as a prop to illustrate the exchange. The Torch Bearers all laughed and I got all of our key point across while helping them all to relax a bit more.

An Old Flame

Torch Bearers are randomly assigned which shuttle bus they will be on. Obviously we try and match where people live to where they run but many times a bus of Torch Bearers can come from the region or from anywhere around the world. That's why I am always so amazed at some of the spontaneous reunions that take place on these buses. And from my seat I witness them unfold.

On day 101 I was doing a drop off in Agassiz BC where I was meeting 9 Torch Bearers. On my manifest I saw the name of one of the senior people from BC Hydro that I had met through my sponsorship job. That was not a spontaneous reunion, as you know if you have read this blog it happened frequently. Her name was Susan Yurkovich, she was runner 028 and she was from Vancouver. I briefed the group, got them all on the bus and then had them introduce themselves to one another. While runner 27 Andrew Richardson is speaking, she gets all emotional and

interrupts him saying, "Andrew - I cant believe it is you, we went to high school together where I had the biggest crush on you. We hung out together for years and I haven't seen you in at least 20 years, and always wondered whatever happened to you"

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