

## OC Transpo 'garage sale' turns up some wacky items

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People leave the strangest things on buses -- false teeth, trumpets and kitchen tables, to name a few. It's not surprising that people walk away without a glove or a book, but without a shoe or a wheelchair?

Every year, 28,000 items arrive at the OC Transpo lost and found. They include the mundane -- tuques, sweaters and sunglasses -- and the unusual -- strollers (without babies, so far), high end watches, and video cameras.

"People are remarkably honest," says volunteer Steve Nance-kivell, who has seen wallets returned with money and credit cards in them.

These unclaimed objects, the ghosts of bus rides past, haunt the rooms of Heartwood House and will be sold tomorrow, from 12:00 to 2:00 p.m.

About 3,700 of the lost items are up for sale.

Twice a year, Heartwood House, a non-profit group that hosts 16 other charities at its 153 Chapel St. location, has a garage sale where thousands of pieces of clothing, hundreds of books, sports equipment, watches and backpacks can be purchased for 25 cents to \$10.

There are also umbrellas -- buckets of them. They include the fold-up kind that Wal-Mart sells for a few dollars to the elegant wood handled ones that cost \$40 in boutiques.

In April and October, Chris and Norm Girard volunteer to prepare the items for sale. Mr. Girard washes hundreds of travel mugs and researches the value of expensive pieces of technology and jewelry, which are then priced higher than other items, but still at a great discount. A watch still in the box from the Bay is tagged at \$75, as is a handheld video camera.

Not everything that comes through lost and found is for sale. Heavy winter clothing, shoes and backpacks are often sent to charities that have special requests. The false teeth were thrown out, along with other personal items such as makeup and prescription drugs.

On a daily basis, the lost and found program is run by several volunteers who categorize found items, answer frantic phone calls from people who have lost things and return items to claimants.



CREDIT: Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen  
From left, Angela Hanes, Amanda Manual and Mike Bee of Heartwood House sort through a slew of objects that have been left behind by OC Transpo users. Each year, 28,000 items arrive at OC Transpo's lost and found.

About 30 per cent of lost items are returned to their owner, says Maureen Maloughney, who directs the Heartwood House volunteers. Last year, the centre returned more than \$13,000 to people who had lost wallets and purses.

Ms. Maloughney recalls a backpack that was brought in five months ago with \$5,000 in it. The bag and money were returned to a relieved owner.

"Most finders want to help the person who's lost the item," she says.

To help people out, Ms. Maloughney developed the Happy Returns identification program, where transit users can purchase a sticker to place on possessions such as bikes and wallets. The stickers instruct finders to call Heartwood House, which has a list of confidential contact information for the owners.

It doesn't take much to get the volunteers swapping war stories from the front lines of lost and found. They remember marijuana pipes, televisions and new clothing items that have come through their door.

And on Sundays, absent-minded church-goers often leave their own special contributions.

"Every Monday we get a big stack of Bibles," says Mrs. Girard.

Keenan Wellar, chairman of the Heartwood board, pulls out a large box of CDs, most of which are homemade copies. Things have changed, he notes, from their first sale, where there was a table full of store-bought CDs and only a handful of copied ones.

Heartwood House has run the lost and found for OC Transpo since December 2001. Before that, OC Transpo operated the program out of Place de Ville. Pat Curran, program manager for the bus service, sees the partnership with Heartwood House as a much better system because it saves the city money on rent and staff and provides income for the charity.

Ms. Maloughney also describes it as a "win-win situation." It gives people who use other services at Heartwood a chance to volunteer and gain valuable career experience. The lost-and-found program also allows Heartwood House to be financially solvent, independent of government funding. Through their partnership with OC Transpo, the ID program and the garage sales, Heartwood House raises about 60 per cent of its \$50,000 annual goal.

A couple days before the garage sale, the staff of Heartwood House were preparing for a visit from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, which gave them a startup grant in 2002. According to foundation member Renee Ouellet, Heartwood House is a "success story."

"Instead of waiting for subsidies to come in, they are looking for ways to bring money into their organizations."

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