

TUESDAY, APRIL 6, 2010

LOST IN TRANSIT



The young Chinese couple had just emigrated to Canada and, distrustful of such institutions as banks, kept all their valuables with them in a knapsack — two wallets containing a total of \$25, a small stack of diapers and, underneath it all, an envelope with \$4,200 in cash.

"It was everything they had in the world," says Maureen Moloughney as she recounts the story of how these new immigrants absentmindedly lost their fortune on the seat of an OC Transpo bus last November, and how it found its way back to them.

Also in that bag, Moloughney recalls, was a receipt from cellular carrier Fido. On it was printed the couple's new cellphone number. "So we were able to call that cellphone and, lo and behold, they had a social worker with them — they were at the police station when we called, and absolutely frantic about what happened to their backpack."

Moloughney is the executive director of Heartwood House, an umbrella organization comprised of 16 charitable member groups, including Capital City Mission, a drop-in centre; LiveWorkPlay Incorporated, which assists people with intellectual disabilities; the adult-literacy organization People, Words and Change; the Aphasia Centre of Ottawa; and Hopewell, Ottawa's only eating disorder support centre.

For the past eight years, Heartwood House has administered OC Transpo's lost and found, and the story of the distraught newcomers to Canada is just one of the tens of thousands of varying dramas that pass from the aisles and seats of Ottawa's buses, transitways and shelters, and through Heartwood's Chapel Street doors each year.

Heartwood House's next OC Transpo lost and found sale will take place from noon to 2 p.m. on Saturday, May 1, at 153 Chapel St. To see if your lost items have been turned in, call 613-563-4011.

"I always ask myself, 'How is it possible you're losing your wallet, your purse, your iPods, et cetera, on the bus?'" Moloughney wonders. "I just think that people are either very stressed and have much to remember when they get on the bus, or life is so fast-paced or you're tired or whatever the situation may be.

"Nonetheless," she adds, "we still receive 30,000 items per year."

Moloughney squeezes off the numbers with practiced ease: 30,000 items are turned in each year, including about 600 bus passes each month. There's a one-in-seven chance that a lost item is an umbrella. On average, they receive eight cellphones a day. During the winter months, there are so many hats and mittens turned in that an endless supply of them is stocked in Heartwood's reception area for anyone who needs them.

Of the 30,000 abandoned objects, about a third find their way back home. Twice a year, though, Heartwood House unloads the rest in a frenzied two-hour sale (the next one takes place from noon to 2 p.m. on Saturday, May 1), with most of the booty going for between a quarter and five dollars per item. Items of greater value, such as cameras and jewelry, are sold by silent auction.

The sale itself doesn't raise all that much money — a little over \$3,000 each time, Moloughney says. More important is that it helps clients of Heartwood's member organizations who volunteer to answer the phones and help reunite people with their missing belongings.

"This initiative is a fantastic partnership, not only for the fact that we get to deliver a very unique courtesy service on behalf of OC Transpo, but because this is a marvelous opportunity for people who are part of our literacy programs, our program for intellectually disabled adults, ESL programs, to be able to come here to lose the doubt that they have about themselves and gain confidence that they can do this work and build skills to use elsewhere and find employment."

Moloughney adds that the lost and found isn't merely a storage service. As each day's items arrive, staff search whatever clues there might be to link objects to owners. Cellphones, for example, often have a "Home" number listed somewhere.

"That's a big part of the fun of the work," she says, "because it's so wonderfully rewarding to have somebody who has taken the time to find you, and people are tremendously grateful for that."

A recent visit found Heartwood's phones ringing almost non-stop. Mondays are by far their busiest day, Moloughney explains, with all the weekend's bounty arriving then and, with it, the attendant calls from owners suffering separation anxiety.

A tour of the collection reveals much of the flotsam one might expect: bus passes, wallets, ID and credit cards, earphones galore, watches and jewelry. Hats. A football. Knapsacks, many containing school lunches. Jackets and sweaters, and books — you have to feel for the person who left a library book on the bus and may now face a hefty fine. On the other hand, is it possible that the Bible left behind was less accidental than providential?

As well, there are always unexpected finds. Laptops turn up now and then, and almost always find

their way back to their rightful owners. In the corner of one room, a guitar gently weeps. On a shelf in another, a basket filled with dozens of small plastic cigar humidors raises more questions than it answers.

"A baby stroller!" Moloughney exclaims. "Who forgets their stroller on a bus? I don't understand that.

"And some young fellow one year lost a trombone — a great big trombone — and I still ask myself to this day, 'How did he possibly leave that on the bus?'"

Additionally, she says, if you were to chronicle the lost and found's holdings over time, you'd notice anthropological shifts, like layered strata in rock. Years ago, stacks of CDs arrived regularly. Of those, the homemade ones were the most interesting, such as the collection of love songs compiled in 2004 by Justine for Ty, or Courtney's Mix #7, titled "Bayshore Delight" and consisting mostly of rap music. Another homemade compilation was more modestly titled "Good Mix," while one marked "Steph's Pictures" chronicled a wedding held in a West Quebec karaoke bar.

However, with the switch to iPods and Apple phones, Moloughney notes, CDs rarely show up anymore.

"We really see the cycle of change. Back in 2002, we had a CD player at the sale, and one of our Heartwood founders was there, standing at the table, and he must have had 100 different CDs around him, and his was one of the most popular places then.

"Today, we're just not getting them."

While Moloughney marvels at the things people leave behind on public transit, she's equally struck by the fact that so many of them are turned in and eventually claimed.

"I really hope that people will come away thinking, 'Goodness, I shouldn't just conclude that I lost my camera and nobody's going to think about me, that nobody's going to turn it in.' Oftentimes it's the opposite, that somebody takes a moment and turns it in.

"Thirty thousand items a year," she adds. "That means there are 30,000 people out there that took a moment to remember that you lost your mitt and maybe you'd like to get that back, or that you lost your backpack that just happened to have \$4,200 in it.

"I think it's pretty awesome that 30,000 people take that time to think about somebody else."

