Terry Fox’s Van: The London, ON Connection:



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Five months after Terry Fox began his Marathon of Hope in Newfoundland, he learned that his cancer had come back and stopped his Marathon of Hope outside of Thunder Bay.

Terry was immediately flown back to Vancouver by private jet. The camper van that was Terry's home during his heroic odyssey remained behind in Ontario.

In the years following his death at age 22 in 1981, more than 100,000 items about Terry's life were collected in the Terry Fox archives. But the Fox family lost track of the 1980 Ford Econoline van, which had travelled with Terry for 143 days and 5,373 kilometres.

They never knew, until recently, that Terry's van was driven for many years in London, Ontario, and later became the touring vehicle for a Vancouver heavy metal rock band.

Some of the relics from the Marathon of Hope were displayed in Douglas Coupland's 2005 book Terry, the author's tribute to the myth of Terry Fox.

There were the treads on his Adidas running shoe. His prosthesis. A worn sock.

In his book, Coupland wrote of the van: "It had air conditioning, a stove, a fridge and a stereo. Technically, the van slept six, but it quickly filled with all the clutter that surrounds most 20-year-olds: food, laundry, papers and so on.

"The van also became notorious among journalists because of its odour -- a combination of sweaty clothing and a chemical toilet."

Coupland's words and the images of memorabilia from Terry's life struck a chord, reminding readers of the young Port Coquitlam man and the era when his epic struggle dominated the news.

And it was Coupland's book which, inadvertently, led to the discovery of the van's whereabouts, said Darrell Fox, Terry's brother and national director of the Terry Fox Foundation.

One day in the fall of 2006 Coupland was attending a house party in North Vancouver.

Someone approached Coupland and told him that he loved the Terry Fox book. The reader then astonished Coupland by telling him that the famous van was owned by a neighbour in east Vancouver.

Coupland and Darrell Fox went on a mission the next day to find the van. Darrell Fox recognized it immediately once they drove down the block where its owner lived.

"It was surreal. My mind flashed back to when I joined Terry in New Brunswick six weeks after he started the run. The memories just flooded back."

Coupland and Fox didn't have the street address of the owner, so they began randomly knocking on doors. They quickly found the owner's wife, who told them that she and her husband knew that it was the Marathon of Hope van.

Darrell Fox went on to learn that the van had been driven from Thunder Bay in the fall of 1980 to London, where it was sold to a new owner who kept it until 1984.

A second London resident owned it and later gave it to his son, who brought it to Vancouver and used it as a touring vehicle for his heavy metal band.

"It's been all over North America," said Darrell Fox. "The owner told me that the van never let them down -- that it had really good karma.

"They could almost feel Terry's presence in the van."

But the vehicle's later incarnation as a heavy-metal van, added Darrell Fox, "doesn't quite fit with Terry, who only listened to country music in the van -- Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton and Hank Williams."

The musician-owner (whose name Darrell Fox declined to provide) kept the vehicle for a while longer but agreed to give it to the Fox Foundation in 2007 for a nominal fee.

"What is so fortunate for us is that the interior of the van is exactly as it was in 1980. They didn't touch a thing."

Unfortunately, the van's body rusted because of exposure to Ontario winters. The Fox Foundation is now facing a philosophical dilemma: if the body is all or mostly replaced, is it still Terry's van?

"The van will give Canadians an opportunity to feel what it was like to be with Terry in 1980 because this van was really his home," said Darrell Fox.

"It was where he slept, perspired and was protected from the madness outside when chaos ruled the day as interest in his story picked up."