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Torchbearers

by BROCK WEIR

It started off as a day almost like any other ? aside from having to put a bit more attention into our outward appearances before we set off.

It was picture day at Newmarket High School and, as is the case with high school students of just about every generation, appearances were probably emphasized more than they should have been.

Even if we had no interest in buying a package of the resulting 8x10s and wallet-size numbers for parents, grandparents, and anyone else our egos might have told us would be interested in receiving a little piece of ourselves, they were images we had to live with for the rest of the year, whether we liked it or not. Our student cards were ubiquitous at the time, so you didn't want to look like you'd been pulled out of the drainpipe and stuck in front of the camera against your will ? so, you persevered.

Getting the look just right seemed important at the time. The previous year, my own ?look? was something of an afterthought. Unbeknownst to me, the rather raggedy blue, buttoned pullover had a paint splatter on the sleeve, the result of trying to corral my dog amid home renovations earlier in the day.

I had to live with that photo for the entire year and, to add insult to injury, the photo was inexplicably repeated twice in that year's yearbook.

I wasn't about to let that happen again, so I made sure everything was just right ? double checking that not a single wrinkle could be found in the olive-green button-up I chose for the day.

I was looking pretty good in terms of a year-over-year comparison, but as important as appearances seemed then, all that was quickly tossed to the side as a triviality.

That year's picture day happened to fall on September 11, 2001, and that Grade 10 picture remains for me a tangible reminder not only of those ?you remember where you were when? moments, but also a reminder of how quickly the state of our world can turn on a dime.

Outside of the wardrobe woes, the day started pretty much unlike any other.

It was clear before too long, however, that something had shifted.

We were about 20 minutes into our homeroom class that morning when another teacher came into the room and pulled ours aside for a huddle. As the whispers started, our teacher's face seemed to turn ashen and the quieter the whispers got, the more intense the conversation seemed to be.

Nobody said anything after the huddle had concluded and the other teacher went back to her own classroom, but it was clear something had happened.

No further information was immediately forthcoming, and with the benefit of hindsight I can only imagine our teachers were waiting for further instructions from their superiors on how to tell us what happened, how to answer any follow-up questions we may have had, and have the proper resources lined up for anyone who may have needed it.

This was long before the vast majority of us had devices in our pockets that can connect us instantly to everyone, anyone around the world. Those of us who were still a year or two away from getting a rudimentary flip phone to call our very own were left with just

two options, both of which were Bell payphones in our school's atrium.

At my first available moment after second period, I dug around in my backpack for a quarter and called my mom at work for any information on why everyone was acting so strangely. Her thorough explanation of what was known up until that point was both enlightening, incomprehensible and, in a word, terrifying.

It was about an hour or so later when teachers finally shared the news with us and televisions where wheeled into the library so we could see, for better or worse, the aftermath of such a terrible and traumatic moment in our collective history unfold in real time.

Memories of the day are still as potent with me as they were in 2001 and watching ceremonies on Friday morning commemorating the 25th anniversary of 9/11 brought up a lot of emotions. Amid those emotions, however, I wondered how potent these ceremonies and observances may have been for those born within the last quarter-century compared to those of us who lived through the aftermath.

Unless they had a family member who lost a loved one that day, was it just a ceremony commemorating just one more in a long line of tragedies that have befallen our world? Was it an anniversary of an event that might seem as remote to them as events related to the Second World War, for instance, may have seemed to our generation? Or did it mean something else entirely to them?

It was an odd realization that my generation ? broadly speaking, of course ? will be the last to have living memories of the day, as well as of how different our world was on September 10 of that year.

We are seeing with increased frequency these days how easy it is to repeat the mistakes of our past when there are few people left to share their memories of what happened when the mistake was made the first time around.

Those of us in this line of work are fortunate enough to meet people every day who trust in us to share their stories. From my perspective, it has always been a particular honour to share the stories our veterans have so generously shared with us.

As our Second World War veterans continue to pass into history one by one, they are to be commended not only for their work serving King and Country but finding the power within themselves to share their experiences, often memories that lost no difficulty in reliving through the passage of time, to ensure that what they fought for ? and against ? is not forgotten.

As their numbers dwindle and we see global affairs unfold as they are, I'm sadly not sure we can say that with confidence anymore.

It's now incumbent upon us to carry their torch and be their legacy keepers.

In some respects, however, we already do that more than we realize.

This Sunday, Terry Fox Runs will take place in countless communities across the country, not only raising money for cancer research, but carrying on the legacy of Terry Fox, whose iconic Marathon of Hope continues to capture the public's imagination more than 46 years before he set off on his mission.

He may not have been able to complete the mission himself, but, collectively, Canadians have completed it several times over in his name, whether they witnessed him run through their communities firsthand all those many years ago, heard these memories second-hand from parents or grandparents, or learned about him through any number of school events that also keep his legacy alive.

His is a legacy we continue to learn from ? and because we make a concerted effort to do so.

Our veterans' legacies have been immortalized for us to learn from.

Some things are too important to let them be forgotten.