

'Subway blitz' opened hearts and pockets

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In December, I always look back over the year, taking stock of experiences and lessons I have learned. One event that sticks out in my mind was an unexpected journey I took - without even leaving the city. In fact, the whole thing took place at just one subway stop.

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Like any memorable journey, it set my mind and emotions into overdrive as I learned things about myself and others.

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Funny thing is, as I headed out the door that day, I certainly didn't think about adventure or self-discovery. Far from it. I was almost dreading what I had committed to participating in a fundraiser for the Fort York Food Bank.

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The event was Fort York's first-ever "subway blitz," which involved soliciting spare change from subway riders. Or, as I explained it to my mother before the event, we were going to beg for money at subway stations.

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I was the "team captain" at St. Andrews station. We had T-shirts identifying us as food bank volunteers and we carried collection cans. I was told to bring a backpack or bag to carry home the change we collected. I figured two medium-sized Ziploc bags would be enough.

By 6 20 a.m. my team was assembled. We talked about where to stand, but didn't discuss the approach we'd take. I think all of us thought (hoped?) standing there in our T-shirts would be enough.

As the first trains pulled in, we took our positions. I began yelling out, "Good morning," and rattled my collection can. People looked, but didn't respond. After about 15 minutes, one team member announced the time to us. Given how slowly those first few minutes passed, it seemed we were in for a long morning. I confided to my team I felt like a fish out of water and I didn't like doing "this kind of thing."

As more people passed without making eye contact or dropping coins into my can, I became quite discouraged.

Realizing that "Good morning" wasn't working, I began shouting "Spare some change for the food bank." This caught more people's interest. A surprising number of people had coins out, ready to buy their morning coffee. When they realized we were canvassing for the food bank, many dropped their coffee money into our cans.

Others who didn't have money in hand stopped when they heard my plea and rifled through their purses, briefcases and pockets, often handing me a fistful of coins. One woman put a \$5 bill in my can saying, "This was my lunch money for today."

Then I noticed little chain reactions. People who stopped to donate forced others to slow down. This caused more people to hear our pitch, which led to more people donating. A chain reaction also hit our team; the heavier our collection cans got, the more our spirits were buoyed, and the louder we shouted our appeal.

As the morning passed, I was humbled by the generosity and kindness people showed in so many ways. When I started sounding a bit hoarse, for example, people offered words of encouragement, in addition to spare change.

A number of people also took time to thank us for helping the needy. In time, my earlier anxiety about "begging" gave way to a sense of pride, as I realized all of us - volunteers and those who gave - were all just doing what we could to help.

Though we had planned on stopping around 8 30 a.m., things were going so well none of us wanted to quit. We ended up staying until 9 30 a.m. The canvas tote I had carried the T-shirts and empty cans in now weighed nearly 11 kilograms (24 pounds). Yes, I weighed it when I got home!

On my way to lunch with a friend that day, I thought about what a wonderful experience it was and about how much I learned from it.

For example, though I have always appreciated the value of money, counting hundreds of pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, loonies and toonies reminded me that every little bit helps and adds up.

I also realized that referring to it as "begging" had had a negative impact on how I felt and behaved.

As soon as I began seeing it as asking for help for a cause I believed in, people began opening their hearts and wallets.

We all know life's a journey, but sometimes we lose sight of that. Journeys are wonderful because they are transformative, putting us in touch with thoughts, ideas, and feelings we may not have experienced before, or that we somehow became disconnected from.

That morning's journey was especially sweet because it reconnected me to the reason I volunteer and to the goodness and generosity of others.

Ingrid Sapona is a former member of the Star's Community Editorial Board.

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