

# foot forward — I

## Chester Smolski

Entrance into a city can take many forms, be it by car, bus, train or plane. When approaching a city, one's first impressions of it, and frequently lasting ones, often tell us much about the city and its people. This is why it is so important that this entrance project a positive image.

These first impressions on entry into a

city may come from the drive along a commercial strip with its garish signs declaring that tacos, pizzas, hamburgers and other types of food are there to delight the stomach, but the signs which catch one's attention also assault the eye. Since this is the usual route into our cities, whether by car or bus, many American city entrances including a Providence and a Wilmington, look exactly the same.

The entrance by train is no better, taking one, as it does, through industrial districts, back yards of slums and similar aesthetically and visually vapid scenes of the city's underside.

The entrance into a city by plane can be very different and far removed from the city in question. For me, the entrance into Toronto, Ontario, started as I was preparing to board Allegheny flight 174 at Logan Airport in Boston.

It was the day after the Boston Marathon and the plane was overbooked because the many runners were returning to their homes in Toronto, Cleveland, Indianapolis and Louisville. They were wearing their running hats, T-shirts and jackets that told of their run in the marathon. And they were trading stories back and forth about the run and the next marathons in Montreal and other places.

Their manner of walking told of the ordeal of the run. Walking slowly, painfully and limping when going down the stairs but not up, these successful ones talked about making the run under three hours and hoping to do better next year. Then the man without legs and in a wheelchair received a warm round of applause as he entered the lounge to board the plane. Later they packed his trophy on the plane and, almost immediately, he dropped off to sleep as the plane reached its cruising speed. The grueling ordeal of pushing oneself 26 miles in a wheelchair is just too difficult to comprehend.

The quiet and unassuming young man sitting next to me was also one of the runners. A 21-year-old Waterloo University student who took time off from his university exams to join the pack of 7,500 runners, received this trip as a birthday gift from his parents so that he could come to Boston for the run from his home in Toronto.

Mike had been running for only three years and, although not dedicated to the sport, wanted to test himself in the Boston run. Placed in position 3,115, based upon his other running time experience, he finished in 2 hours, 39 minutes, a time which would have placed him in the top

10 a few years ago but now only in 712th place. Next year, should he choose to run again, he would be placed in that position at the start of the race and would not lose precious minutes after the starting gun goes off and the pack waits for the leaders to move out.

We talked about Toronto, and I had to tell him from my reading about his fine city with its efficient public transportation, unique metropolitan government, tidy appearance and environment virtually free from crime when compared to American cities. Having lived there all of his life and having little basis for com-

parison, he did not realize the excellence of his own city. But he loved Boston with its historic charm, old buildings, winding streets and general good feeling that was engendered with the run.

On arrival at Toronto International Airport located 18 miles from the downtown, Mike called his mother to come by and pick us up, for he had kindly offered to have me dropped at the subway, 15 minutes by car from the airport. Not the returning hero type of welcome, the low-key conversation of mother and son made it evident that she was very proud of him, a young man that any parents would be pleased to call their own.

They left me at the subway station for my 20-minute and 60-cent run into the city. As I looked at the spotless cars, clean station and ethnically diverse people, I began to get some sense of what Canada's largest city has to offer the visitor.

Claimed to be the finest public transportation system on this continent, this integrated subway, bus and trolley operation is so efficient that the bus waits for passengers as they exit from the subway rather than vice versa. For me it meant an easy, comfortable and inexpensive ride into the downtown and a one-block walk to the motel located in the heart of a city of 2.3 million residents, all done without any sense of urgency or haste.

The first impressions of a city are revealing. Cities can be efficient and orderly as demonstrated by a Toronto moving its people quickly and effortlessly into and throughout the city. My entrance by plane, car (buses are also available) and subway provided a lasting impression of a city that has come to grips with movement, and demonstrated that public transportation is an excellent alternative to the private car.

The second positive impression I received on entering Toronto came from talking with a young city resident who offered engaging conversation; unassuming manner and the kindness of a ride. It made me aware again that cities are more than buildings, shops, cars and all those components associated with large concentrations of people; cities are really made up of many individuals who can be helpful. And this is the way I entered this city from Boston, having experienced some of its good people and the efficient means to move them.

Chester E. Smolski is director of urban studies, Rhode Island College. This is the first of two articles on his visit to Toronto.