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A cold Montreal street

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Once upon a time, there was a penny lying on a cold Montreal street.

Lost.

Alone.

Useless.

The penny caught a man's eye. He bothered to pick it up.

An advertisement for a contest was the next thing to catch Ezra Soiferman's eye.

A filmmaker wanted to cast a Canadian copper in the lead role of his film, *The Hermetian Penny*. In his online Penny Idol contest director Raphael Levy asked participants to name their penny, jot a few notes on why it should land the role, and mail in the penny attached to the entry form.

Being a man of the cinema, Soiferman, director of CinemaSpace at the Segal Centre For Performing Arts, and documentary filmmaker (*Man of Grease*, *Posthumous Pickle Party*), was intrigued by the Penny Idol concept.

As luck would have it, he had a penny in his pocket. As character would have it, Soiferman was determined to win.

He named his penny Juan Redscents, wrote its history in a poem titled "The Ballad of Juan Redscents" and, with a committed online lobbying effort from supporters, won Penny Idol in a gruelling five-month, four-round campaign against 50 other cents.

Soiferman pocketed a cheque for \$500. He did not blow the winnings on candy or drink. He spent it instead on Hemp for the Homeless.

Being a hemp enthusiast and a charitable type, Soiferman decided he would assemble 25 packages of hemp products — clothing, toiletries and snacks — to deliver to the homeless. More than a dozen businesses contributed to the cause. In the end, he delivered 50 packages to womens' shelters and people on the street in Feb. 2007.

One of the donors was Ralph Bronner, owner of the Dr. Bonner's Magic Soap empire, which gives 70 per cent of its profits to charity.

Bronner was soon introduced to Soiferman's fiance, Alexandra Yanofsky, who was managing Homeless Nation, a website created by and for the homeless. Bronner was impressed by the web project as well. He gave generously and then added another gift.

Estranged from his family for a time, Bronner experienced what it was like to pass by restaurant windows and not be able to afford a meal. "He gave us several hundred dollars to take some homeless people out for dinner," says Yanofsky.

Yanofsky and Soiferman approached Hussayn and Hassan Friedman,

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owners of Rumi restaurant, where the couple had their first date and would later be engaged.

The Friedman brothers fixed a feast for 15 women who had spent the previous night at the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal.

"It was bittersweet, the way the women filed in suspiciously, wondering what the hell this was all about, and what was expected of them," says Yanofsky. "They warmed up when it became clear the only expectation was to be treated with respect, to enjoy some delicious food and drink, to be served in a beautiful, warm restaurant.

"At the end of the meal, I thanked each woman for joining us and offered a hug — per Ralph Bronner's request — and none turned me down. I was surprised because one woman who had remained silent throughout gave me the longest and hardest hug."

Could the cash have gone further at the grocery store? That's not the point, says Yanofsky. "Fun is one of the most important things in life and none of us is more or less deserving of it than another."

Yanofsky paid for the meal with the money from Bronner but the Friedman brothers, in turn, donated the cash to the Sufi Centre of Montreal, whose mandate is to cultivate love and peace through Sufi traditions.

The homeless penny had won friends, influenced influential people, and leveraged thousands of charitable dollars and valuable time to make the world a better place.

The story is still unfolding.

Links:

Ezra Soiferman's blog: www.ezez.com

The Hermetian Penny: www.millionpennyfilm.ca

Dr. Bronner's: www.drbronner.com

Homeless Nation: www.homelessnation.org

Friedman brothers: www.tolerance.ca/Article.aspx?ID=309&L=fr

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