



News



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Posted: Thu, Dec. 8, 2011, 6:04 AM

Ronnie Polaneczky: Call 'em the Little Dumber Boys



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Philadelphia Daily News
Email Ronnie Polaneczky

AND NOW, for your holiday amusement, I present A Very Philly Christmas.

The role of Santa Claus is shared by Joe James and Frank Punzo. Which, in any city but this one, would be odd casting.

After all, James got canned in July from his \$124,800 job as Philly's deputy chief information officer for communications and operations.

He and Punzo, a Verizon employee who once worked for the city with James, were caught allegedly defrauding the city by setting up an unauthorized Verizon Business Link Rewards credit account.

According to City Inspector General Amy Kurland, whose office investigated the duo, the men used the secret account to snag \$48,000-plus worth of rewards - we're talking iPods, gift cards, televisions and Tumi tote bags (former PHA head Carl Green's extravagant purchase of choice!) - for their personal use. Kurland was so appalled that she referred the case to the U.S. attorney for review (the office had no comment yesterday).

So how, you ask, does such ignominy earn James and Punzo the privilege of wearing the jolly old St. Nick suit in my imaginary Christmas pageant?

Well, by the time the guys were caught, they'd racked up \$107,600 worth of rewards points (besides the \$48,000 they'd already cashed in for those other toys).

Happily, the Managing Director's Office was able to redeem the points for Lowe's and Best Buy gift cards, which are being used by its PhillyRising program to fund really terrific community beautification projects.

Hence, the sprucing-up of the overgrown veteran's memorial area next to the Lawncrest Rec Center, just in time for a Veterans Day celebration.

And the recent reclamation by church neighbors of a trashy vacant lot in Strawberry Mansion.

And the massive cleanup last weekend by 100 volunteers, including Mayor Nutter, of a blocks-long stretch of Allegheny West.

I'm telling you, James and Punzo's scheme birthed a Christmas miracle, crooked-Philly style!

Except that the elves doling out the cash are better-behaved.

"Every receipt, every expense is being logged in a spreadsheet," says Deputy Managing Director John Farrell, whose enthusiasm for the mission of PhillyRising makes me want to grab a broom and join the next neighborhood sweep-up. The gift cards, he says, have paid for rakes and shovels, weed wackers and tree trimmers, trash bags and paint.

"There are really good people living in distressed areas, and they want to make their neighborhoods better. It's a privilege to partner with them."

PhillyRising, of course, would partner with communities with or without James' and Punzo's ingeniously scavenged rewards points. But in a dead-broke city, every dollar feels like a windfall.

That's why it was an unexpected boon when, just last month, James' lawyer contacted the city to turn in \$2,300 in additional gift cards - for Macy's, Barnes & Noble and Best Buy - and an iPod that had disappeared during the investigation.

Back in July, Kurland had lamented that her office would never recover all the items, given the efforts James and Punzo had taken to keep their rewards scheme under the radar.

"This case proves yet again that corruption spreads in the absence of oversight," she'd said.

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Yet, months later, the booty turns up. Oddly, the cards had been purchased back in 2007, well before the investigation began, and were never used.

It's so stupidly Philly.

The Macy's cards were donated to Youth Services Inc., to help homeless teen mothers. The Barnes and Noble credit found its way to the William D. Kelley School to fund specialized books for struggling readers. And the Best Buy cards will shore up another PhillyRising project.

Oh, a used iPod - loaded with someone else's music - was also turned in. It's now playing tunes in the ear of a high-achieving William D. Kelley student, who received it as a reward.

In my version of *A Very Philly Christmas*, it's playing "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Fun Tumis."

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Congrats to Amy Kurland, whose office appears to be one of the few at city hall that is actually doing its job.

— J H

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0 like this / 0 don't • Posted 6:38 AM, 12/08/2011
A tale worthy of one of my favorite story tellers, William Sidney Porter (O. Henry).

— TomTheCork

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0 like this / 0 don't • Posted 7:18 AM, 12/08/2011
I recall reading the original article about these guys a while ago, but am hazy on the details. Were the points legitimately earned (i.e. would the City still be eligible to earn these points from its Verizon expenses), and just fraudulently accepted by these two guys? If so, does the City have plans to continue participation in the rewards program and have other City departments looked into whether any other expenses are eligible? Free money is always nice!

— zeva4wck

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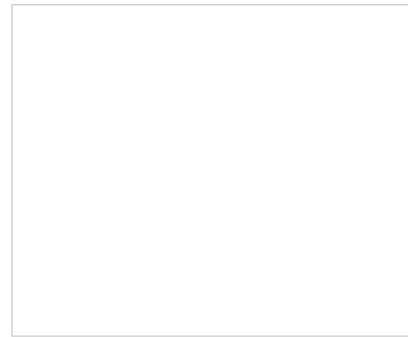
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