

themudroom



LOST IN TRANSIT

Sea-Tac's sleuths reunite harried travelers with their treasures.

I was sure I'd never see my favorite belt again, not after losing it in Sea-Tac's security gauntlet—not even after leaving a note after-hours at Port of Seattle Lost and Found. So I gasped when an official finder called. She doggedly asked for distinguishing characteristics ("We have 50 or 60 black belts") and soon crowed at making a positive match. "We have a really high return rate, about 50 percent. But that usually doesn't include belts, so we're really glad to be able to return one of them." You get a lot of lost stuff then? "About 2,000 items a month. We started getting a lot more after the new TSA rules came in." Any really weird items? "Oh, chainsaws. Oxygen tanks. Ashes." Ashes? "That's right. Cremation ashes. Sometimes they don't get claimed."

Vita Hernandez, the office's coordinator, later explained that its 50 percent return rate is due partly to a proprietary Web application developed by the Port's IT geeks. A description of every found item—"down to the pencils"—goes into the searchable database. Likewise every loss report, whether delivered by note, or phone, in person, or via the Port's Web site. Each

item is packed into an appropriately labeled bin—"Cellphones/Current/Notified/BlackBerries"—in a property room in back and labeled with a digital RFID tag, like those stores use to track merchandise.

She hopes the Port will market the software. "We checked around when we started on this three years ago, and no one had anything automated."

Every 30 days, credit cards go to the shredder, memory sticks to the melt pot, pharmaceuticals to an incinerator, and other unclaimed items to Seattle Children's hospital's thrift shops. Otherwise the accumulation would soon bury the operation. "One man called last year for a ring he lost in 1997," said Hernandez. "People get upset that we don't keep things."

But before they pack items off, they try as avidly as detectives trailing perps to locate rightful owners. They call numbers logged on recovered cellphones. They peruse files saved on laptops and photos stored on cameras. Once, they recognized a local restaurant in a photo, called it—and wound up returning the camera to the eatery's astonished owner, who'd lost it. Another woman

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