

# Tears of joy at homeless son's return after more than a decade

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ONE day, more than a decade ago, a middle-aged businessman named Tom Lawrence\* left home in Ontario, Canada – and disappeared.



At first, his parents and siblings were not overly concerned. Lawrence had a history of wandering off, but had always returned to his loved ones. But not this time. Days became weeks. Weeks became months. Months became years – and no news of his whereabouts came in. His family feared the worst. But then, more than 10 years later, an incredible story began to emerge more than 13 000km from Ontario.

It started in Cape Town on a warm January day this year, shortly after a former school-teacher, Ian Veary, began a new career at the Carpenter's Shop in Roeland Street, just a few hundred metres from Parliament.

The shop had been launched in 1981 by a group of people who wanted to do something to help Cape Town's homeless.

The founders' mission was to find premises to serve as a base to offer homeless people an opportunity to acquire mainly carpentry skills so they could earn an income.

The shop also provided ablution facilities so the homeless had a place to get clean.

Soon after Veary started with the Carpenter Shop in January he met a homeless man – not a South African – who called himself Roger Clayton\*.

“In discussions with him, I slowly got to learn about his personal circumstances,” said Veary.

“He had come to South Africa and had travelled to other countries around the continent – including Mozambique, Somalia, Ethiopia and Egypt. “I knew his age – he was 51. “But what struck me most, and which was missing from our discussions, was that he did not speak about where his family was.

“I inquired about this and it emerged that he had ageing parents in Ontario, Canada. We chatted about whether he would like to contact his family.”

Veary said Clayton's initial response had been ambivalent. He said he had not been in contact with his family for more than a decade.

After much coaxing, Veary got Clayton to provide him with his mother's phone number.

“When I phoned her to tell her I’d met her son, she did not believe me. She thought it was a hoax or a prank,” said Veary.

But he persevered, and eventually set up a telephone connection between Clayton and his family.

“Roger Clayton was, in fact, Tom Lawrence. His mother could not believe she was talking to the son whom she had last spoken to about 13 years before.

“Her husband – his father – was ailing in hospital, and they and the rest of the family had been praying he would return to Canada so that he could have a reunion with all of them,” said Veary.

While the family were waiting, hoping and praying, Clayton had been travelling all around Africa.

“He had become a bit of a wanderer, with no fixed address, no permanent work.

“His finances eventually ran dry and he started living on the streets of Johannesburg, using the city’s welfare services to get by.”

Clayton’s next destination was Cape Town – and his unofficial home, like 40 to 50 other homeless people in the city centre, was the Company’s Garden.

Like his companions, he used the welfare services offered to the destitute, which is how he started visiting the Carpenter’s Shop.

“After we had made contact with Clayton’s family, and after we had ascertained that they were keen to have him back home, we contacted the Canadian High Commission,” said Veary

“Nothing was too much trouble for the high commission.

“First they arranged emergency travel documents. Clayton’s passport had expired, and his visa was no longer valid.

“The family put money up for the flight – and for any accommodation needs to get him back to Ontario – and we had to make sure we could prove his identity. It’s no good you saying who you are without valid documentation.

“Luckily, despite eight years on the streets of South Africa, he had managed to retain his expired Canadian passport.

“So there was a way we could approach notaries and go to lawyers to get them to validate the copies. After about a month, they came back to us with the date for his departure.” There were other difficulties too. “If you’ve lived on the streets for eight years, it takes an extraordinary amount of time to re-adapt to ordinary, everyday living,” said Veary.

Clayton had to be taken into shelter at the Carpenter’s Shop for a month. They had to make sure he was off the streets so that they could guarantee his safety for the flight back to Canada.

During this period of adjustment, it emerged that Clayton had some mental health issues.

The shop’s social care team had to deal with episodes of paranoia.

“He refused to fly a certain route for fear of being abducted in Turkey on his way back to Canada,” said Veary.

“Eventually, I had the pleasure of accompanying him to Cape Town International Airport and seeing him board an aircraft to Ontario. He had to fly via Johannesburg to get on to an international flight, and the high commission provided border police to escort him through South African customs and on to the aircraft.

“It took six months for this to happen. But luckily, he was committed to going home,” said Veary

Roger Clayton could become Tom Lawrence again.

“Tom had been a businessman before he left Canada and had set up a clothing company, but it had got into financial difficulties. Stress often forces people to run away and not confront the difficult things. “But I’m happy, having seen some of the photographs from his family. He’s connected to his daughter, now 16 years old, to his parents and to his siblings.”

On August 11, in a letter that brought tears to the eyes of Carpenter’s Shop Board members, Tom’s sister, Delia\* thanked the shop for rescuing him from the streets, for listening to his complaints, for being patient with him and for helping him to secure a passport.

\* Names have been changed.