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Nashua man finds 10,000 reasons to answer the door

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That seemingly made-only-for-TV event – a Publishers Clearing House camera crew surprising people at their front doors with large cardboard checks – actually happens.

Nashua resident Byron Stepner, a single father of an 8-year-old boy, had a gigantic \$10,000 check thrust into his arms Friday morning, about 12 hours after he could barely afford to buy a gallon of milk.

Now, Stepner – an HIV sufferer and recovering drug addict – has enough money to buy his son, Byron Jr., the bicycle he has long wanted.

The prize presentation demonstrated that contrary to what some skeptics believe, Publishers Clearing House does, in fact, knock on doors unannounced. But the moment also revealed how televised spontaneity flirts with disaster.

For one, PCH check presenter Dave Sayer never had the chance to knock on Stepner's door.

Sayer and his cameraman, Brian Henderson, sat in a rental van feet away from Stepner's Regent Park apartment waiting for a groundskeeper to leave so their one opportunity to record the surprise wouldn't be ruined by the loud buzz of a tractor lawnmower.

As they waited, Stepner's friend Jay Hines stopped by. Hines studied the van – with a Publisher's Clearing House Prize Patrol sign duct-taped to a side window – before going inside the apartment entryway with the suspicion that something wasn't right.

But Stepner didn't answer his unit door; he was blasting music and using a computer. Hines walked outside, and finally Sayer and Henderson approached to ask if he was Stepner.

As Hines answered questions, Stepner opened the building door to find his friend nearly doubled over with joy. Sayer ran forward and handed Stepner the showpiece check, a dozen red roses and balloons as Henderson recorded the winner's reaction: the silence of shock followed by short shouts of disbelief and then exclamations of delight.

Struggling to make ends meet on a monthly \$637 disability check, Stepner couldn't afford to buy milk Thursday night at the 7-Eleven convenience store nearby on Amherst Street, so he instead went to Market Basket for a more affordable \$2.99 gallon, he said.

Stepner, 35, was diagnosed with HIV in 2001, and after receiving no treatment in his hometown of Las Vegas, he moved to Nashua two years ago and was connected to medication and support through the Southern New Hampshire HIV/AIDS Task Force. He hopes to soon attend school in Hooksett and learn a welding trade.

Byron Stepner Jr. was at Birch Hill Elementary School when Publishers Clearing House came to visit. But several of Stepner's neighbors watched the presentation unfold.

"I believe it now," neighbor Erin Sullivan said. Sullivan and her husband, John, never gave much thought to entering the marketing company's sweepstakes because they believed only people "who don't need it" won, she said.

But seeing a Publishers Clearing House camera crew visit the apartment next door prompted her to rush upstairs and register online for a contest.

A few doors down, Heather Fraser couldn't believe her bad luck. "I've been playing it for years, putting stamps on envelopes . . . and nothing," she said.

Publishers Clearing House offers several cash prize and luxury car contests as a way to promote magazine subscriptions and other merchandise on its Web site and through mailings. Stepner registered several times for the company's ongoing \$10 million sweepstakes, and thus was selected for the \$10,000 prize. He's still eligible for the bigger cash award, Sayer told him.

PCH ran into legal trouble in 2001, settling a consumer fraud lawsuit filed by 26 states. It paid \$34 million in restitution to consumers misled by deceptive contest entry forms.

The Prize Patrol became a television staple 20 years ago, when commercials first replayed winners opening their doors with various reactions and in various states of dress. (Tonight Show sideman Ed McMahon did a similar promotional gig for another company, American Family Publishing.)

PCH doesn't visit New England often probably because its residents are "more skeptical" of such sweepstakes, Sayer said. But with PCH contests offered online now, people are increasingly less wary of registering on a computer than they would be via mail, he said.

Sayer, executive director of the Prize Patrol, started handing out PCH checks 27 years ago, he said. Even though contestants hope to be articulate and well dressed when the patrol rings the doorbell, they are inevitably caught off guard and stammer in their bathrobes, he said.

A contestant has never refused a prize, Sayer added.

Stepner was no exception.

He clutched his phony check until Sayer gave him a better prize: the smaller check that banks accept.

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