The stuff love is made of: A Dallas man's search for a long-lost childhood toy

His wife's much-hugged Minnie Mouse doll went missing after a run-in with their dog and a postal mishap.



Leslie Cohn-Wein's Minnie doll has seen better days, but she plans to have the plush toy repaired and restored. (Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

Whether you call it a lovey, blankie or any other endearing name, there's something heartwarming about seeing a child hold on to a tattered toy or

trailing blanket while learning to navigate life.

And every once in a while, as one Dallas couple learned last year, you get to return the love and then some.

Leslie Cohn-Wein's lifelong lovey was always Minnie Mouse. The overalls-clad plush toy, a baby gift from her aunt, had a nose so soft its young owner nearly rubbed it off over time.

"I don't know why I loved it so much, but it became my favorite stuffed animal, and I was obsessed with it when I was a kid," recalls Leslie, now 33. "It was like my blanket; I carried it around everywhere."

In the years that followed, there was a Minnie-themed birthday party, a matching Halloween costume and later, some less public yet unceasing displays of affection. Minnie had her place in the dorms at the University of Denver, traveled to Australia for study abroad and was a fixture in the car when Leslie and her new husband, Eli, made the cross-country move to Dallas from New York five years ago.

Eli even presented his wife with a stuffed-plush Mickey, Minnie's dream companion, when they married.

Disaster strikes

So, when the couple came home one night in 2016 to find their basset hound puppy amid a mass of Minnie's interior fluff, Leslie was devastated. Somehow, 6-month-old Mack had managed to nab the toy from a high desktop for a puppy play date gone horribly wrong.

Leslie and Eli Cohn-Wein have recovered Leslie's childhood Minnie Mouse toy, which came out on the losing end of a tussle with their dog, Mack.(Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

Minnie's worn and shredded remains were packed up and shipped off to a doll repair company in California, and the couple waited for an arrival confirmation that never came. Eli filed a lost-package report, followed by a lost-package claim, and still nothing.

"When I realized we were never going to find this package that we had mailed off with my shredded Minnie, I was so disappointed," Leslie says. "I just put it out of my mind. I didn't want to talk about it anymore. It was sort of

a sore spot."

Eli never gave up. Over the next nearly four years, he tracked forums for lost postal packages and continuously combed eBay, hunting for a replica of the vintage mouse to no avail — until he got a phone call last July.

A postal worker sorting through a pile of old packages at a Lubbock mail center found a box linked to Eli's lost-package claim.

"'She starts to describe the box — and it is not in the front of my mind, but as she was describing it, I thought, 'This can't possibly be,'" Eli recalls.

The rescue mission

The U.S. Postal Service, often maligned for its struggles with reduced staffing, has made a believer out of Eli. Still, the 34-year-old politely declined the offer for someone to mail back the waylaid package, hatching a clandestine plan instead for a West Texas road trip. He chose a day when he knew Leslie would be in deep work mode in her role as a software engineer for a San Francisco-based startup.

Minnie Mouse (center), a beloved stuffed toy belonging to Leslie Cohn-Wein, has been a lifelong companion. (Leslie Cohn-Wein)

When he arrived in Lubbock after a nervous double-check midweek on the status of the box, he found Minnie's pieces had stayed safely stowed.

"Everyone there was incredibly friendly; no one was nearly as excited as I was," Eli says. "I was over the moon."

At the end of the one-day, nearly 700-mile round-trip trek, Eli made one last pit stop at the pair's favorite pizza spot as a backup diversion.

"When I got home, Leslie said, 'Oh, I feel like you were gone all day,'" Eli recalls. "Instead of answering her, I was like, 'Look, I brought home pizza.'"

Reunited, at last

Eli waited a month to unveil the surprise of this precious cargo. It was the perfect way to celebrate the couple's fifth wedding anniversary.

Leslie cried — along with Eli — as they took in "a great moment that I never thought in a million years would happen," Leslie says.

The safe return of the most emotionally valuable thing she owned was like getting cherished memories back, says Leslie, who recently gave her newborn niece a Minnie of her own.

"Eli was so dedicated to having this moment and spent all those years trying to track it down," Leslie says. "He drove all the way to Lubbock to pick up an old box with a torn-up stuffed animal because he knew how much it would mean to me. I loved how it came full circle, and all his effort paid off."

As the Aaron Family Jewish Community Center's executive chef, Eli's

commitment to caring is always front and center. Throughout the pandemic, he has continued to make sure food gets into the hands of seniors in need by preparing thousands of meals to be frozen and distributed.

For his part, Eli says that while his wife experienced one magic moment during the "sometimes comical, completely improbable journey," he feels like he got three: the call, the hope that came with opening the long-lost box and the joy he saw on Leslie's face.

"There's so much that seems to be dark within our community and the world around us at this moment," Eli says. "It's a nice reminder that while we often feel as though we are being bounced and tumbled by the universe in a random fashion, every once in a while, the bouncing and tumbling bounces correctly towards joy, love and compassion."

The lost-and-found story of a cherished childhood treasure isn't quite over. The Cohn-Weins plan to return Minnie "to her former glory" once they find a doll-repair source they can trust — within driving distance.

How to avoid a lost package

The mystery of how the Cohn-Weins' package that was headed to California ended up in Lubbock — let alone after four years — has never been solved. But the Cohn-Weins' mail mishap is a reminder to always take advantage of U.S. Postal Service tracking, which Eli says that "foolishly" he did not. For good measure, Albert Ruiz, a spokesman for the USPS, encourages customers to slip a piece of paper inside the package that includes the tracking number, return address and recipient's address, in case the outer label becomes unreadable or accidentally falls off on the way to its destination. Customers can also fill out the Missing Mail application at usps.com (click on "Help" and then choose "Find Missing Mail"), complete

an online search request or call the Consumer Affairs department at 1-800-275-8777.