

Oct 20, 2026

Lost Valuable Searches: Helping Families Recover the Irreplaceable

The story behind the viral ring recovery: The recent search that made national headlines highlighted a little-known WM and New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) program that has been helping New Yorkers recover lost valuables for more than 20 years.

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- WM and the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) have conducted Lost Valuable Searches for more than 20 years.
- A recent heirloom ring recovery brought national attention to the program.
- Searches have helped recover everything from wedding rings to religious items and family keepsakes.

A Brooklyn family's reunion with two rings, including a nearly 100-year-old family heirloom, captured national attention, earning coverage from [TODAY](#), [The Washington Post](#), [People](#), the [Independent](#) – and many other media outlets.

But behind the headlines is a story most people have never heard.

For more than 20 years, WM and the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) have quietly worked together on a unique program known as **Lost Valuable Searches**, helping residents recover treasured possessions accidentally discarded in the waste stream.

What WM and DSNY have helped recover

Over the years, searches have uncovered:

- Wedding and engagement rings
- Family heirlooms passed down through generations
- Wallets, passports and important documents
- Wedding dresses
- Tefillin and other cherished religious items
- Comfort and support devices for children with special needs
- Photo albums and treasured keepsakes
- Laptops, backpacks and personal belongings
- A Rolex watch inherited from a resident's father
- Luggage and clothing accidentally discarded before a family wedding

While some of these items carry significant monetary value, many are priceless for a different reason: the memories and family stories attached to them.

The recovery that went viral

Against the odds, a 35-minute search reunited a Brooklyn resident (right) with two cherished family rings.

One recent search involved a Brooklyn resident who discovered two family rings had been accidentally thrown away. One was a gold promise ring. The other was a platinum and diamond engagement ring that had been in the family for nearly a century, passed down through four generations.

"The sentimental loss, however, was a horrible, helpless feeling," the resident later wrote in a letter to WM and DSNY employees.

After learning what had happened, DSNY identified the collection route and worked with WM to conduct a Lost Valuable Search at WM's Varick Avenue facility in Brooklyn.

The odds were daunting. The rings had been discarded through a trash chute connected to a compactor serving about 600 apartments. By the time the loss was discovered, about eight tons of material had already been collected.

Despite the challenge, the resident found both rings in just *35 minutes*.

The story quickly spread beyond New York City.

How do Lost Valuable Searches work?

"We call it a Lost Valuable Search. We've done this for 20-plus years with the city. This is not something new," said Peter DeLuca, senior district manager, WM.

The process begins when someone realizes an important item may have been thrown away and contacts DSNY. If sanitation officials can identify the collection truck and corresponding load, they coordinate with WM to determine whether a search can be conducted safely.

"We cordon off an area and conduct a safety briefing with the community member, explaining the hazards associated with searching through the trash," DeLuca said. "We provide safety gear, make sure they have proper footwear, and then have the truck unload its material in a designated area."

For safety reasons, WM limits searches to two community members at a time on the tip floor. Larger groups can participate in shifts, but no more than two people are permitted in the search area at any given time.

WM employees assist throughout the search process, using equipment to move and spread material for easier access, but community members are the ones sorting through the trash by hand.

Lost Valuable Searches are relatively rare, with WM and DSNY conducting roughly 10 searches each year.

Not every search ends in a recovery, but DeLuca estimates that approximately half are successful.

Why is it important to report a lost valuable quickly?

The difference between a successful recovery and an impossible search often comes down to timing.

The sooner residents realize an item is missing and contact DSNY, the better the chances that the collection truck can be identified and isolated before its contents are combined with larger volumes of material.

In some cases, information provided by residents can help narrow the search even further.

"If they give detailed information, the truck crew may be able to say, 'This was one of our earliest pickups,' so we know it's likely toward the front of the truck," DeLuca explained. "Or if it was one of the truck's last pickups, it might be right at the tail. The more information that the customer or community member can provide, the better."

Once material has been unloaded and incorporated into larger piles, recovery becomes too difficult and is no longer attempted.

"At that point, it's not 10 tons of garbage, it's 1,000," DeLuca said. "The key is acting quickly."

Remarkable recoveries through Lost Valuable Searches

Over the years, Lost Valuable Searches have involved some remarkable recoveries.

Among the items successfully recovered have been engagement rings, wedding bands, passports, wallets, important documents, wedding dresses and devices belonging to children with special needs.

Among the most memorable recoveries were tefillin, sacred Jewish prayer items containing Hebrew texts that are traditionally worn during morning prayer. After security footage revealed the items had accidentally been thrown away, volunteers worked with DSNY and WM employees at the Varick Avenue facility, spending hours searching through material before successfully recovering them. The discovery sparked a celebration among community members and religious leaders.

Another search involved a woman who was reunited with her wedding dress after it was mistakenly thrown away in a box.

The searches can be emotional experiences, not only for the families involved but also for WM employees who help coordinate them.

"You see the expression in some of these folks when it's located," said Kirk Williams, district manager, WM. "Forget about a sigh of relief. Some of them, you would think it's life or death. It's that precious for folks."

The Harlem River Yard team helped avert a wedding-day disaster, reuniting a family with a wedding dress and luggage that were accidentally collected during service.

Giving people hope

Most searches never make the news. Most happen without television cameras, social media attention or viral headlines. But for the families involved, the outcome can mean everything.

Following the successful recovery, the Brooklyn resident wrote to thank the WM and DSNY employees who helped reunite his family with an irreplaceable piece of its history.

"I never stopped to appreciate what WM was actually doing for me," he wrote. "Employees were working overtime to give me this opportunity, with nothing in it for them except knowing it was the right thing to do."

The experience, he added, gave him "a humbling look at how hard the people at WM work and what an unbelievably daunting task it is to manage a city's trash, and how organized and efficient the entire process is."

For the family, the recovery meant something more than finding two rings.

It meant recovering a family heirloom whose story can continue for generations to come.

"I want to thank the company and its staff for this amazing ending to a story that I'm sure will be told in my family every time that ring is mentioned," the resident wrote.

Then he closed with three simple words:

"Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Learn more

To learn more about WM's work in communities across North America, visit the [Social Impact](#) homepage.

You can also explore additional stories about how WM employees help serve communities every day right here in the WM [Media Room](#).

<https://mediaroom.wm.com/Lost-Valuable-Searches-Helping-Families-Recover-the-Irreplaceable>