

The Flame of Pride Never Burns Out

BY TOM REID



The Olympics were held February 8-24, 2002, in Salt Lake City, Utah. On November 21, 2001, the Olympic torch left Olympia, Elis, Greece for the journey to Salt Lake. More than 11,500 people were honored with the privilege of carrying the torch for the 2002 Olympics. Millie Simon (MS), CPCM, Fellow, and member of the Denver Chapter, was one of the American citizens chosen to carry out this honor. On behalf of CM magazine, Tom Reid (CM), president of the Denver Chapter, sat down with Millie (pictured above) to talk about her experience.

CM: Millie, could you tell us how you became invited to carry the Olympic torch?

MS: Yes, that was kind of interesting. I guess we all have to have small moments when we have pride in ourselves, but the public nomination for the Olympic pride torch relay team was done actually about a year in advance of the Olympics.

You read the stories in the paper of people who are nominated to be a torch relay person, based on a variety of backgrounds.

In September of 2001, the state of Utah, Coca Cola, and Chevy got the opportunity to do their own special nominations. Some of the folks in the Office of Economic Development for the State of Utah actually nominated me during that special nomination period.

The criteria were things that you've done to further your career—adversities encountered, where things stood today, and success accomplished in spite of adversities. They also wanted to know your feeling about the country, how you were a loyal American.

CM: How were you notified?

MS: I received an e-mail notice in September that I had been nominated, and the very next morning, by e-mail

that I had been selected. There was such a sense of pride in me, as I thought how the theme of the Olympics was “Light the Fire within.” And I thought to myself, you know, to be nominated to be one of the 11,500 people to carry it is such an honor.

CM: You were assigned a slot in Grand Junction to carry the torch.

MS: Yes, I got to run in Grand Junction on the second of February. And I know we waited and waited—of course, the torch was a little late coming into town, as it was everywhere. There were lots of crowds, and right before we had to get on the shuttle bus to go run the torch, a young man from Utah, who was part of the Olympic Committee, did an orientation.

He said two things that were to me so significant. He said, “First, you may think that you’ve never done anything for anyone; you may think that your life is really kinda small and you don’t impact people, but you are here today because you lit the fire within someone.” I thought, that is really an amazing concept that I hadn’t really thought about before. The second thing he said was this: “One thing we always remind our torch runners is never to stop ‘lighting the fire within’ people. Because when you walk away from this room, remember that you’ve done it and that your life should not center around what you *do* for people, but around the idea that you can light the fire within someone.” That really got me.

CM: So tell us what the run with the torch was like.

MS: They loaded the 13 of us, from four pick-up spots in Grand Junction, onto a shuttle bus to take us to the site. Our guide then stepped out of the shuttle bus and introduced us at the top of his lungs to the crowds. And the people just went wild, screaming and screaming.

I stepped out, and there were 30,000 people on the streets. Actually, Grand Junction had the largest per capita gathering across the country (their population is only about 50,000). There were people were wearing flags, everyone yelling “Go USA, Go USA!” Many of my friends and family had come out to support me, and I had personal “support” runner with me, for extra encouragement.

I remember thinking how much people in our country love the USA and show it exuberantly. I think until you are in a setting like that, you can’t even envision the pride you have in carrying the torch and your general pride for your country. It’s the kind of thing you wish everyone could do—you cannot envision the loyalty you can feel to our country, until you are there with thousands of people, who are screaming just because the Olympic torch is passing by them.

The thing that really crowned the whole event for me was the fact that I got to carry my own torch away with me, as a gift from the state of Utah. I was so pleased about that.

CM: Now a couple of the pictures you shared with me are of you signing autographs. How did you like being famous for a day?

MS: That was a very exciting part. The day of the torch run, which again was the second of February, one of the hosts for the Olympics was Chevrolet. My pickup point was at the big Chevy company in downtown Grand Junction. When I went in, the man who owned the dealership came up, introduced himself, and gave me a black pen for autographs for hundreds of people.

First, we were swamped by the neatest little kids, who asked us to sign everything and anything—programs, little flags, and other souvenirs. Adults, too, asked for signatures. I’ve never thought of myself as anything like a “hero.” I thought, you know, I could say something to one of them that might influence them in years to come. Children just don’t forget some things that you tell them. Kids truly worship the people that run in the Olympics, and even the little things like the torch relay. They truly look at you as kind of idol. It was fun to think that something that I said to one of them may someday make a difference in their life. It was quite a day.

CM: Any last comments on this experience?

MS: Do you remember when there was talk at one point after 9/11 that maybe the Olympics should be cancelled? It was, however, truly part of the rebuilding of this country to have the Olympics. I am glad they did not cancel it, and I think that from the crowds in Olympic Square, it went off beautifully. Utah did such a great job with it—it’s good that we have these things to bring us all together.

Such an experience like the torch-carrying makes you glad that we in the U.S. can demonstrate our affections for this country in whatever way we want to demonstrate them. With the war going on now in Afghanistan and Israel, I think how proud I am to be an American. Sometimes, it may be at a high cost, but it’s worth it.

CM: Well, Millie, we thank you for sharing your experience with us. And congratulations again on being selected to carry the torch! *cm*

About the Interviewer and Interviewee

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MILLIE SIMON, CPCM, FELLOW, has been in government contracting since 1998. Her career started with the Department of Defense and then with the SBA to become a procurement center representative. She came to Denver in 1998 with the SBA, as the deputy district director for the Colorado District Office.