



THE FINISH LINE



MT LAW ENFORCEMENT TORCH RUN NEWSLETTER

VOLUME SIX – NOVEMBER 2007



6000 miles later . . .

For over twenty-one years, I have been an active member of Montana's Law Enforcement Torch Run program for Special Olympics. Each year in May, I have facilitated and participated in the local portion of the Torch Run relay that spans the great state of Montana. I have participated in Montana's Final Leg run that is responsible for safely delivering the Torch to Opening Ceremonies for the State Summer Games. I have proudly donned the department dress uniform and stood as part of the Circle of Honor while the Flame of Hope enters the arena and the cauldron is ignited from that Flame. Each year in May, as I've stood at attention in the Circle of Honor, tears well up in my eyes and trickle down my face because of the great sense of pride I have for what the Torch means to the athletes. The overwhelming emotion that overcomes me has become predictable, yet unpreventable. Given my twenty-one years of interaction with Special Olympics athletes and continuous Torch Run endeavors, I've been under the impression that I fully understand the importance of the relationship between Law Enforcement Torch Run and Special Olympics. For all of these years, I've truly believed that "I get it." Well, not so fast my friends!

In April of 2007, I was notified that I was nominated and selected to represent Montana's Torch Run program on the 2007 Final Leg team in China. The team consisted of over one hundred law enforcement officers from around the world and ten Special Olympics athletes. The Final Leg team's mission was simple; as Guardians of the Flame, we were expected to run the Flame of Hope from Beijing to Shanghai in time for opening ceremonies of the 2007 Special Olympics World Summer Games. On September 23, 2007 at 6:30 AM, I boarded an airplane in Missoula, Montana destined for the People's Republic of China. On September 24, 2007 at 2:25 PM, I arrived in Beijing, China – sixteen hours after leaving Montana.

I was greeted by support team members and met a handful of Final Leg members at the airport. As luck would have it, out of the entire Final Leg team, mine was the only luggage that did not make the trip to Beijing. Buses transported us to a beautiful hotel where we met up with other team members. There was a definite buzz in the air. The Final Leg team was divided into eleven teams of ten; I was assigned to team six. Team six was comprised of an officer from China, Ireland, Romania, Taiwan, Nova Scotia, Delaware, Missouri, Nevada, Minnesota, Montana and our athlete from southern California. Our first full day in Beijing led the entire Final Leg team to the Great Wall. We were fortunate to have the opportunity to hike up and down the Wall in the heat of the afternoon. Later that night, China's premier television network, CCTV, did a live broadcast of the Final Leg team running the Flame of Hope on the Great Wall. It was a spectacular broadcast with all the dignitaries present, pageantry, magnitude of event and fireworks. I recall asking myself, "Are you kidding me, am I really running on the Great Wall of China?"

The Final Leg team broke into the eleven teams and those teams traveled to their individually assigned host city somewhere in China. Team six took a two hour flight from Beijing to the host city of Nanjing. Nanjing has a population of seven million with a police force of fifteen thousand five hundred. Allow me to digress for a moment. The Taiwanese (Chinese Taipei) officer's name on our team is Paul Chen. Until my whirlwind tour in China, I was unaware the People's Republic of China and Taiwan **do not** get along politically, socially or theoretically. I witnessed this first-hand at a press conference held at the Nanjing Police Bureau headquarters. During the press conference, team six sat across the table from numerous high ranking police officials and some of China's government officials. We were each asked to introduce ourselves, state where we were from and talk about the job we do at home. When they learned who Paul was and where he came from the mood at the table changed dramatically. I observed the Chinese officials whispering amongst themselves and display looks of obvious disgust. When the conference ended, we learned the Chinese officials would not allow Paul to run in the city of Nanjing; purely out of pride, prejudice and years of political feuding. It was an ugly moment during a beautiful journey.

During our stay in Nanjing, we ran with the Torch between six and nine times each day and took part in celebratory ceremonies after each run. Thousands of Chinese citizens lined the streets each time we ran with the Flame of Hope. I witnessed Chinese men, women and children wave at us, cheer for us, smile with us and embrace us. I never imagined this outpouring of love from these distant strangers. During one of our runs in a district of Nanjing, I had the honor of leading the team and carrying the Torch out front. Carrying the Torch with me was a young Chinese male athlete and a uniformed Nanjing Police Officer. When we came to the end of that particular run, we were greeted by thousands of very enthused Chinese citizens. I noticed a raggedy, worn looking Chinese man standing about ten feet from me. The man was weeping hysterically while pacing back and forth. This man would pause, extend his arms toward us, verbalize something at us and continue the hysterics. As we were holding the Torch high in the air, I asked the Nanjing officer what the man was saying to us. The officer informed me the man was the Chinese athlete's father. He was happy and proud that his son was part of the Torch Run and able to carry the "Holy Flame." After learning that, I motioned for the man to come closer and he did. I extended my hand to his and placed his hand on the Torch next to his son's hand. This man buried his face in my chest and sobbed uncontrollably. Through an interpreter, he told me that was the happiest day of his life. Do you think that affected me?

After each team's three to four day stay in their host city, all teams traveled to Shanghai and reunited to become **the** Final Leg team again. During our three to four day stay in Shanghai, team six partnered up with other teams as we ran the Flame of Hope through numerous districts in the city of twenty three million. Shanghai has a police force of fifty thousand officers. Between one and two hundred Shanghai officers always ran with us. It was always a sight to behold. Similar to Nanjing (and all other host cities), the citizens of Shanghai lined the streets by the thousands to greet and cheer for us. At times, it was sensory overload! The competing Special Olympics athletes began arriving from around the world and we were able to spend a bit of time sharing the love with *our* athletes. I can testify to the fact that we do not have to speak the same language to communicate. A smile, a high-five and a hug seem to be the only communication necessary at times – with our athletes and with each other.

Opening Ceremonies for the World Games were held on the evening of October 2nd. The enormous stadium seated over eighty thousand spectators, forty thousand volunteers, eight thousand athletes, thousands of entertainers, and the Final Leg team. Over one hundred thousand people came together for a few hours for the same reason, the same common thread; to share their love for the Special Olympics athletes. This was the night the Final Leg team donned their dress uniforms from each of their respective departments and stood at attention as the Torch entered Shanghai Stadium. At floor level we were able to grasp the magnitude of the event. One athlete from each continent took a turn relaying the Flame of Hope around the stadium track until it was given to a beautiful female Chinese athlete. She ran the Torch with so much grace, elegance and dignity to the cauldron. At that time, she ignited the cauldron from the Flame of Hope and the cauldron rose from the floor high into the air. The crowd let out a deafening roar. The athletes cheered with all their heart. Fireworks burst high overhead into the night sky. As I stood at attention next to my team mates and viewed my surroundings, the tears streamed down my face. Thoughts raced through my mind; **this** is why I continue my relationship with Torch Run and Special Olympics and **this** is what it is all about. **This** is the pinnacle of what we strive for back home – to raise awareness and funds for our Special Olympics athletes so they can train for competition and daily life. Through their competition, they might be fortunate enough to make it to the World Games some day. Because of their existence, society has become more accepting. As a result of their spirit, I've become a better person. 6000 miles later . . . Ah, *now* I GET IT!

-author Lieutenant Mike Pfau, Missoula County Sheriff's Office-