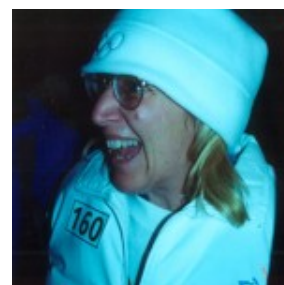


2002 Olympic torch run unites South Shore community

By Susan Wood

As a new year and decade begin, I reflect on a time when South Lake Tahoe had reason to celebrate.

If only for a moment, no unfinished projects, crumbling sidewalks, lost tourism promotion opportunities or staggering unemployment figures cloud my mind. One year ago today, the South Shore was placed on the world map and forever in my heart when we hosted the 2002 Winter Olympics torch relay on its way to Park City.



Susan Wood on the torch route in 2002. Photo/Trish McGraw

I was honored to be selected as a U.S. media representative by sponsors Coca-Cola and Chevrolet to run a stretch of the torch relay. And I was humbled for being in such good company of South Shore residents who were nominated to take part in it by their fellow citizens.

David Kurtzman served in the Peace Corps before becoming active in the South Lake Tahoe community. Mary Ebright lost her lower right leg to bone cancer but has a million-dollar

smile that can light up a room. Pat Welze made a career out of her community involvement and gave new meaning to the term 'family values' having cared for her injured daughter.

I learned how Ron Nageotte never quits, how Lauren Thomaselli will always be young at heart and how her father Larry Foster beamed when he talked about the honor of passing the torch to his daughter. Polite and mature beyond his teenage years, Adam Matzinger taught me the true meaning of being an Eagle Scout.

There's a reason why Matt Williams was so respected when he worked at South Tahoe High School and why Jan Ashcraft chose Tahoe as her home to teach before retiring – the great outdoors. I was so proud to have known Bart Owens on the police force because he embraced the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps attitude.

And it's only fitting that Dominique Westlake's love of running placed the torch in his hands.

My hat is off to Mike Shreve, who as a skiing coach could have been an Olympic hopeful, but shared the mere pleasure of his loved ones cheering him on during his torch run. Irene Kaelin's talk of loving Tahoe was commendable. I have the utmost respect for Karen Wilson, a cancer survivor who has dedicated her time for the cause in our community.

And speaking of dedication – it was only appropriate the community threw a big birthday party for longtime dance instructor Marcia Sarosik on her special day, the day the torch came through. Danny Masellones has proved to be another inspirational personality in this town; every year helping a new class of college students negotiate their path to a better future.

And Sam Borges gave me an extraordinary glimpse of how interesting Tahoe's past is. The man embraced it like few people I know.

There was nothing like meeting Martin Hollay, a veteran skier who escaped war-torn Hungary to ski the slopes of Heavenly practically every day. I caught up with him weeks ago. At age 89 he shows no signs of slowing down. He's celebrating 50 years of working at the 1960 Winter Games at Squaw Valley.

When the night of Jan. 20, 2002, rolled around, my family came down from Oregon to cheer me on – but I had a huge dilemma. I wanted to see Hollay carry the torch before I did, so we drove up the traffic-clogged streets to Heavenly to see him ski the flame across the slopes. The crowd was so huge and noisy it was difficult to hear Hungary's national anthem playing for the native.

With not much time to spare, we inched into town so I could catch my torchbearer bus. I could barely contain my emotion as I saw hundreds of people wrapped in blankets lining the streets on a cold Tahoe night with their children, dogs and flashlights. They roared with glee as we drove by to get into position, and I remember bus driver Diego calling us "rock stars." Another Olympic official on our bus asked how many people on board are cancer survivors. Kaelin threw her arm up fast and proud. I thought about my father's fight against the disease and became grateful he would witness this event with me.

From tears to cheers

This was certainly a celebration of the human spirit like no other I have experienced. I looked at officer



Susan Wood

signs
autographs
along the 2002
torch route in
South Tahoe.
Photo/Trish
McGraw

Owens and saw tears streaming down his face. Then, it hit me. Given the tragedy of Sept. 11 that occurred only months before, I soon learned the ties that bring people together extend well beyond our immediate families.

This was quite a departure from the Munich Games 30 years before.

As we approached my designated stretch on Sierra Boulevard, I saw the flame dance in the night on a horse-drawn carriage and felt the comfort of knowing Borges was behind me. When I got off the bus in my uniform, the crowd on the street erupted and a no-nonsense black leather-clad motorcycle rider with an entourage next to him handed me the torch. As the entourage guided me down the street, I remember thinking how I wanted to make the two-tenths of a mile down Sierra Boulevard last a long time. However, one of the officials told me the torch was a little behind schedule. It wasn't the time to sprint, though. I was careful not to slip on the icy streets and dropping this world symbol of goodwill.

My heart swelled and my eyes grew wide as Sierra Boulevard emptied out on Highway 50 to a crowd as big as a rock concert's. After I passed the torch on, I was swarmed by youngsters wanting my autograph.

The night was only beginning. South Shore threw the best party I've seen here in what was Caesars Tahoe parking lot. I give a lot of credit to then-Mayor Brooke Laine for organizing such an event that she recently told me was the high point of her

term. The low point was the Gondola Fire six months prior.

Between the hugs and displays of national pride, we came together that night.

That was a time when we could truly say we lived in a world-class destination. Few aspects of Tahoe impress me today beyond the stunning beauty of the lake, vast array of recreational options and Sierra-at-Tahoe's level of customer service. Maybe one day we'll return to that time when we came together as a community and our differences were set aside for something that was much larger than any one person.

Publisher's note: *Find out on Jan. 24 what longtime Tahoe journalist Nancy Oliver Hayden thinks of the book "Snowball's Chance".*