

# Carrying a torch

Many queers plan to make visible statements along the Olympic torch run route—some will do so as torchbearers

by Inga Sorensen

**E**rika Silver is still trying to figure out what all of the fuss is about. "Everyone around me seems to think this is the neatest thing," says the 32-year-old executive director of Bradley-Angle House, a Portland-based organization providing services to battered women and their children.

Silver, who is openly lesbian, has been tapped to carry the Olympic torch as it wends its way through Oregon on May 5 and 6.

She is one of 90-plus Oregon and Southwest Washington residents who were chosen by the United Way and Coca-Cola Company to participate in the 1996 Olympic Torch Relay, which kicks off April 27 in Los Angeles.

An estimated 10,000 people will carry the torch for distances of up to a mile as it makes its way across the country. The 15,000-mile relay is slated to last 84 days, ending July 19 in the Olympic Stadium in Atlanta, site of the Olympic Summer Games.

"My family is really into it. My dad said that he wanted to come out [from New York] to watch me carry the torch, and my brother said he might motorcycle in from Montana," says Silver, who, while not a running fanatic, puts in her fair share of miles at the gym. "I'm actually kind of surprised at people's enthusiasm."

So how exactly did she find herself in this position?

"My partner [Pamela Pegg] and my 11-year-old son, Sage, filled out the forms a few months ago," she says. "The next thing I know, I'm an Olympic torchbearer."

"When I heard about the relay, I thought [Silver] should be nominated right away," says 42-year-old Pegg, who works for the Portland Housing Council. "That's because she is so active in the community and the battered women's advocacy movement. She's active in special-needs housing issues and civil rights. She's on all of these committees in the county. She likes to run. She's great at bringing people together. I felt she should be recognized for being the local hero she is."

As *Just Out* went to press, Silver had yet to be informed about where she would run her leg of the relay.

"Maybe I'm being a little cynical, but it seems like that information is being withheld for some reason," she says. "Maybe they're worried about protests."

For generations, the Olympics and controversy have been linked. This year is no different.

"We told Olympic officials that we estimated at least 1,000 of the torchbearers will be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered and that it would be a total affront to them—as well as gay men and lesbians everywhere—for the torch to pass through Cobb County," says Pat Hussain, a National Gay and Lesbian Task Force board member and the principal organizer of the Olympics

Out of Cobb Coalition.

In July 1994, the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games agreed to remove the 1996 Olympic volleyball competition from Cobb County, Ga., following months of talks with Olympics Out of Cobb Coalition members.

They were angry about the Cobb County Commission's approval the year before of a resolution that condemned the "gay lifestyle," saying it was incompatible with community standards.

The coalition, comprising primarily gay and lesbian citizens, met several times with ACOG to request that the competition be moved. ACOG had reportedly hoped to see a compromise

between Olympics Out of Cobb Coalition and the Cobb County commissioners, who adamantly refused to rescind the resolution. A compromise failed to transpire, and ACOG decided to pull the volleyball competition from Cobb County.

Hussain and others hailed ACOG's move, and vowed to deactivate the Olympics Out of Cobb Coalition as long as Olympic-related events were kept out of Cobb County.

Hussain is singing a different tune these days. She says the group was jolted back to life several months ago after ACOG's Payne told a local television reporter during an on-

air interview that Cobb County *would* be included in the relay route.

"We were shocked and just outraged and we came roaring back," says Hussain.

She says, however, the reaction prompted Olympic officials to get tight-lipped about their plans, and subsequent questioning regarding Cobb County has been met with resistance and secrecy.

Hussain says there has been talk of gay and lesbian torchbearers donning rainbow gloves when it comes their turn to carry the torch. Torchbearers must wear a designated uniform, so individualized T-shirts, shorts, etc., are a no-go. She says some people may throw pink confetti at the torch, while others plan to dress in black and lay down in the middle of the route with makeshift tombstones that say "Human Rights Rest in Peace."

"We've talked about what we would like to do," says Pegg, who is actively involved in Love Makes a Family, a Portland-based organization that promotes the visibility and rights of gay and lesbian families.

"We thought about writing 'Love Makes a Family' on Erika's shoes, or holding rainbow flags along the route where she'll be running," she says. "We are hoping we can get her interviewed on TV. She will say, 'My wife and my son nominated me for this.' It will be our way of letting people know that we are a family."

Boycotting the relay, adds Pegg, is definitely out of the question.

"No matter what, this is a wonderful opportunity for Bradley-Angle House and for our community," she says. "We shouldn't ignore that."

For more information about Olympics Out of Cobb Coalition's plans, call (404) 212-9695.



Erika Silver

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