Torch Song

When I was chosen to be the only openly HIV-positive person to carry the Olympic torch through the streets of San Francisco, I felt proud and honored. But it wasn't until a protester tried to extinguish my flame that I learned my true place in Olympic history.

July 1, 2008 By John Caldera

As an openly gay, Latino, U.S. Navy veteran living with HIV, I know a thing or two about fighting for a cause. As a San Francisco commissioner and commander of the American Legion's Bob Basker Post #315—the only one named after an openly gay WWII combat vet—I have advocated for veterans' rights for the past 10 years. And as an activist for the rights of gay and HIV-positive people, I have taken to the streets of my hometown. But, it wasn't until I was chosen to be the only openly HIV-positive person to carry the Olympic torch through our city—on its sole visit to North America—that I understood how no cause exists in isolation. I thought that my being HIV positive could send a strong statement to others about the power to survive and achieve. Little did I realize that another cause would compete for the flame and the spotlight: China's human-rights violations in Tibet.

Prior to the torch's arrival in San Francisco, I watched as protesters in different countries tried to halt the relay. The day before the flame was to arrive here, activists climbed the Golden Gate Bridge with a "Free Tibet" banner. Still, I hoped that a city that embraces tolerance and inclusion would find a way to accommodate a variety of human rights activists, protesters and causes, while allowing the torch—and me—to run past them peacefully.

On the morning of the run, I awoke early. While I was putting on the official relay running suit that I'd been assigned, Madonna's "Dress You Up" was playing on the radio. I took it as a good sign of things to come. But when I arrived at the staging site, I was told that due to persistent threats of violence, the plans for the relay had been seriously curtailed. It had been shortened from 6 miles to 3. Also, what I thought would be a solo run had now become a team activity; all of the torchbearers would now be doubling up, running in pairs, with each person in the duo putting one hand on the torch for a run of about three blocks. My adrenaline began to flow.

My partner was Majora Carter, an environmental advocate in the South Bronx, New York City. She and I were directed to our running position: me on the left and Majora on the right. Finally, the preceding team handed us the torch. It weighed about 2 pounds and was one of the most beautiful things I've held in my life. Majora and I started running, and I was exhilarated to carry the Olympic flame through the city I've loved for more than 20 years. Our part of the relay was near the Golden

Gate Holiday Inn, where I'd won the first International Mr. Bear Contest, in February 1992! (For those not familiar with the bear community, we're the furry, fun-loving folks who enjoy wearing flannel and comfortable shoes.)

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I watched as Majora pulled out a small Tibetan flag she had hidden in her sleeve. As so many TV and news reports have documented, she then shocked the relay organizers, and me, by trying to commandeer the torch. I pulled it back, as hard as I could, and hurt my right shoulder's rotator cuff. The Olympic relay team immediately confiscated her flag, and she was physically removed from the route. Other Tibetan protesters along the route were yelling in her defense, and Olympic relay team members were shouting orders at me. I remember hearing, "Don't look back, keep running forward." Then, before I knew it, my short run was over and I passed the Olympic fire to the next team of runners. The Olympic committee and my fellow runners greeted me as a hero for keeping the torch lit during the melee.

It was a day I'll always remember. I am proud to have carried the torch, and I publicly dedicated my run to everyone living with HIV/AIDS. I even altered my will to donate my disposable torch holder, which each of us used to pass the fire along the route, to the San Francisco LGBT Historical Society. My hope is that this endowment will inspire others to reach for their dreams and that we will all work together to keep each other's flames—wherever and however they burn—alive.

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