

Tom's Excellent Olympic Adventure

**One PHA.
One Olympic torch.
One experience of a lifetime.**



April 2009, I embarked on the opportunity of a lifetime: I entered a contest to win a chance to participate in the Torch Relay for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. One of the contest requirements was to write a pledge about how I would make Canada an even better place to live. As a person living with HIV for 18 years, and someone who has been delivering support to people living with HIV/AIDS (PHAs) for the past decade, I knew instantaneously that my pledge would be to continue to address HIV stigma and discrimination, both in my local community—Guelph, Ontario—and across Canada.

After my diagnosis, the AIDS-phobia I faced kept me from reaching out for the support and care that I needed. I lost control of my life. Years later, after I got back on track, I realized that I wanted to share my experience so that other PHAs would not have to suffer alone as I did.

In my work at the AIDS Committee of Guelph & Wellington County, I strive to empower and instill hope in people

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living with HIV. My personal mantra, shared with coworkers and clients, is: “Imagine the possibilities.” That mantra filled my mind as I completed the online application. It worked! I was selected to be Torchbearer 010; my leg of the relay would be 300 metres along the road heading out of Owen Sound, Ontario.

I had to prepare. In the months leading up to the relay, my coworkers, one of whom is an avid runner herself, thought it would be a great fundraiser to do regular training runs. I made a pledge to run 100 kilometres with the hope of raising \$1,000 for our agency’s contribution to the United Way. I didn’t think I would be able to run even 300 metres, but we trained three times a week, during our lunch break, running

five kilometres each time. As the summer progressed, I began to look forward to our training sessions, and despite the numerous running injuries that crept up, I met my goal.

Finally, the day arrived. December 29 was a typically cold winter morning: -20°C at 7 am. As I stepped off the shuttle bus, the people who came out to see the flame began to approach me wanting to have their photos taken. I encouraged them to hold the three pound torch as I answered their questions. As camera flashes popped in the early morning darkness, my face was lit with a perma-smile. The caravan of vehicles approached and I saw my fellow torchbearer preparing to pass the flame. As the Olympic volunteers moved me into position, I was circled by security. Our torches touched and mine burst to life. My moment had arrived; I took a deep breath, turned to the crowd and reflected for a moment on my pledge. Then I ran. +

Tom Hammond is executive director of the AIDS Committee of Guelph & Wellington County.