

The Olympic Torch Relay

Rosemary Phillis

Each night on the news we watched the progress of the Olympic Torch Relay around Australia. The relay had extra significance for those of us who work at the local Museum at Riverstone as Melissa Bushby, daughter of Paul who runs the Movie Making display, had been chosen to carry the torch. Melissa is a Downs Syndrome girl who has never let that hold her back, becoming a champion swimmer and member of the renowned Melody Makers dance group.

The official announcement of Melissa's role in the relay had been made earlier in the year and at the time it seemed so far away, then suddenly it was here. Paul and his wife Kimberley provided maps and details of the leg that Melissa would run along the Great Western Highway at Eastern Creek.

At 5.30 am on the morning of the Wednesday 13th September 2000, Judy Lewis, Mum and I stood along the edge of the highway in the dark of a very chilly morning. We were not alone, for it seemed that half of Riverstone had come to see Melissa carry the torch.

We had been encouraged to bring sparklers so that Melissa would know that people were there to see her and many people lit them early to keep themselves entertained as they waited.

The torch was preceded by an array of support vehicles, the mini bus carrying the torch bearers, police cars, police bikes and the striking blue official support bikes and trucks.

The darkness cleared to a beautiful pre dawn light. The atmosphere was great, the crowd good natured, laughing and joking together and as time passed the anticipation grew. Finally came the call, "here she comes". People milled forward, sparklers shining, Australian flags waving, and the yells of "Go Melissa Go" started along with applause.

Suddenly there she was, our girl, proudly carrying that torch and waving as she passed. She was flying! Paul had put her into training for the event, using a baseball bat taped to a cricket bat to simulate the height and weight of the torch. Despite the training Paul still expected her to walk. Not Melissa, it was her relay leg and she was going to run it. Cathy Freeman would have been lucky to catch her over that 400 metres.

In an instant she was gone, some of the crowd ran along the footpath to see her change the flame over to Michelle Cooper nee de Vries. (Who coincidentally is a friend of a lady that I work with.)

We waited for her to return to the Service Station where they had started out from, filling in time by watching the others around. The torch bearer before Melissa was an Australian-Chinese basket ball player and he had a legion of fans. Dressed in green and gold tracksuit, they posed for photos with him, holding a banner and yelling the cry that was soon to be so familiar, “Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi Oi!”

Over half an hour later Melissa returned. She had stopped to show people the torch and to have photos taken. Like everyone else we did the same, photos to be treasured forever.

Paul and Kimberley had invited everyone back to their place at Schofields for breakfast and we were so pleased they had, as it allowed us to come back to earth gradually. A large group mingled in their backyard, eating pancakes cooked on the barbecue, posing for more photos and sharing our memories and impressions of the morning.

A week later I dropped some photos into the Bushby family. There was something very special about sitting in their lounge room, watching the Olympics on the television, the torch sitting proudly on a stand in the corner of the room, a tangible reminder of the connection between the Olympics and the Riverstone District.