

Pan Am Torch receives wet -- but warm -- welcome



By Jake Courtepatte

The heavy rainfall couldn't put a damper on the arrival of the Pan Am Games torch in Aurora last Thursday, making a stop in the community on Day 26 of its cross-Canada tour.

Winding its way along Yonge Street and Wellington Street through the hands of over a dozen participants, the flame was passed to Storm Volleyball's Bruce Stafford, chosen as the Community Torchbearer in Aurora.

At 1 p.m., Stafford and the relay team arrived at Lambert Willson Park, met by hundreds of supporters who braved the torrential downpour for a chance to witness the flame.

The Town of Aurora held quite a welcoming party in recognition of the largest multi-sport event ever in Canada. The excitement started to build around 12 noon, with a free barbecue, music, and inflatable games for the throngs of young supporters.

The White Pine Dancers, a First Nations group who brought their style of dance to the length of the route in Aurora, were deep into a traditional dance when the rain came down, sending most of the crowd scrambling for cover. But, when word came out that Stafford and the torch had reached the parking lot, the cheering crowd formed a human pathway to the stage.

Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard said he was delighted by the sight.

"You people out here are the spirit of these games," he said. "You are truly dedicated to be standing here in this rainstorm? congratulations for all you are doing for the runners, you are the spirit of Aurora!?"

MP Lois Brown urged the crowd to support the local athletes from across York Region that will be participating in the games, like Aurora's own trampolinist Sam Sendel.

"I trust that all of us here from Aurora will be there to cheer them on? I'm proud of our community, and I know I'll be there to cheer,"

she said.

The rain didn't seem to bother Stafford, who was told by Relay staff to walk down the slope leading to the park for fear of a fall.

“For all those people to be there in the pouring rain, it showed me they wanted to be a part of it,” he said. “It was truly amazing.”

Among the crowd was his wife, his mother, and his sister, a minister from Hamilton whose last-minute decision to make the trip was a surprise to Stafford. He also was happy to see a number of faces from the Storm organization, both parents and kids, along the route as he watched from the shuttle bus before his moment.

And when that moment came, the lighting of the cauldron at the ceremony was met by raucous cheering from the poncho-donning crowd.

“It was everything I thought it would be, times ten,” said Stafford, who high-fived the children on his way to the stage. “Seeing my family friends, neighbours, everybody as I’m coming down, was really awesome. You can’t describe what a feeling that is.”

The past eight months have been quite a rollercoaster for Stafford, who was inducted into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame in November of last year. When asked which of these two momentous events was the bigger highlight of his career, he couldn't bring himself to choose.

“They’re probably the number one and number two. I’ve had quite a few along the way—one of my early awards in Ontario Volleyball was a Volunteer of the Year—each one seems to be higher and higher. The hall of fame knocked my socks off, the torch did the same. They’re the highlights of anything I’ve accomplished.”

The 26th day of the relay began in Richmond Hill, stopping in Aurora and King City before ending the day in Newmarket. This week, the celebrations are wrapping up as the flame tours Eastern Ontario before landing back in Toronto, with the Games just over a week away.

For more information on the Pan Am Games, visit www.toronto2015.org.