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## 'Light the Fire Within'

Si Pearman '87  
*Furman University*

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# Furman reports

## ‘Light the Fire Within’

*Furman folks bask in opportunity to carry Olympic Flame*

I awake to a cool, crisp morning on December 4, 2001. Today is a special day! It is also a time to remind myself of my guiding philosophy to live life one day at a time, knowing that I have a deep love for life and all that it has to offer.

The anticipation builds as I prepare to fulfill a lifelong dream kindled at age 7, when I watched the 1972 Munich Olympics. I have been selected to be an Olympic torchbearer, one of 11,500 people who will take the flame across the country from Atlanta, Ga., to Salt Lake City, Utah, for the Winter Olympics February 8-24. I greet my wife, Wanda, who nominated me for this honor, with an extra large smile and a kiss as she leaves for work.

By the time I arrive at my desk, Charles Mason, a Furman freshman from East Point, Ga., who is legally blind, is preparing to carry the flame out of Atlanta’s Centennial Park. I later learn that Charles is the third runner in the long chain of torchbearers (I will be number 192). He received the torch from Billy Payne, the organizer of the 1996 Atlanta Games, after it was passed from two Olympic champions, skater Peggy Fleming and boxer Muhammad Ali. Charles’ grandmother later exclaimed that Charles was the first “regular person” to hold the flame!

I go about my day at Furman — counseling students, teaching a class, attending a few meetings — all the while wondering what the night will bring.

At last, it is time to head to downtown Greenville. There I am excited to see Cathy Frazier from Furman’s Department of Computing and Information Services, who will serve as a support runner for those of us who were fortunate to be chosen for this experience. Our group includes a young cross country runner who almost died a year ago after being struck by a drunk driver, a television personality, and DeeDee Corradini, the former mayor of Salt Lake City who now resides in Greenville and teaches a class at Furman.

Cathy would later describe the moment as “the chance of a lifetime — a spiritual experience — a group of people who just brushed up against each other with intense camaraderie for a few hours, leaving eternal, magical memories for a nation that is still



**For Cathy Frazier, Christie Matthews '96, Si Pearman '87 and Charles Mason '05 (left to right), participating in the Olympic torch relay proved to be a remarkably uplifting experience symbolizing peace, unity and respect for humankind.**

reeling from the chaos of recent months and the world that is trying to pull together to find peace once again.”

I board a van with the final group of torchbearers who will take the flame down Main Street. After finding out that the torch is delayed, we get to know each other. There are two 87-year-old men who have been best friends from childhood; a 12-year-old; a homemaker; and a few Greenville notables, such as Stewart Spinks, the gas station/convenience store owner, and businessman Hayne Hipp, who will light the cauldron.

Finally, we see the flame! Our van pulls into the procession heading toward our destination, and one by one we step out at our appointed spots. I am greeted by a cheering group of Furman students chanting, “We want Dr. P!”

I am overwhelmed by what is about to happen. In a few moments, I will be holding the Olympic Flame.

As the flame is passed to me, I begin to jog, remembering that in the wake of September 11, I have pledged to carry the flame as a symbol of what is good and right

in the world — peace, unity and love for one another. While I run and wave to family and friends, I have visions of dear friends, students and family members who have died but are with me in spirit — especially my grandfather. As the hill begins to swell, I think of one of my late professors, Sandor Molnar, and how he inspired so many of us.

When I arrive at the top of the hill I’m greeted by Christie Matthews ’96, who is the director of the Clubhouse Gang, a Greenville ministry for inner-city children. The symbolism of passing the flame to Christie embodies the community spirit found in the torch run and in my ties to Furman. With teary eyes, I turn to see family, friends, colleagues and students cheering. Together, we have experienced the theme of the Salt Lake Olympic Games: “Light the Fire Within.”

— Si Pearman

*The author, assistant academic dean and associate professor of health and exercise science, is a 1987 Furman graduate.*