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Olympic Torchbearer: an Honor Reserved for the Worthy -- Mostly

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DETROIT -- On a bus carrying local torchbearers to the spots where they carried the Olympic flame last week, Gary Cowger says he was a little shy about speaking up.

Among the passengers were a high-school teacher nominated for the honor by an admiring co-worker and a man who has struggled with multiple sclerosis for 13 years. Mr. Cowger, the president of North American operations for General Motors Corp. , was there because his company, through its Chevrolet division, paid millions of dollars to sponsor the torch relay.

"I was afraid to say, 'I'm here because Chevrolet had to have me,' " he says, recounting his thoughts as torchbearers on the bus began sharing their stories. He was one of at least six GM executives who carried the torch that day.

Across the country, 11,500 torchbearers will carry the Olympic flame through 46 states en route to the Winter Games in Salt Lake City next month. All along the route, it is a rite that stirs emotions, as communities get to bask in their bit of Olympic glory.

The torchbearers were chosen in a well-publicized contest in which the judging criteria included how much each nominee embodied the Olympic spirit, inspired others to greater achievement or had overcome adversity. In fact, only about 7,200 of the torchbearing slots were filled through the contest, in which 210,000 people were nominated.

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The other 4,300 were quietly divvied up among Chevrolet, the Coca-Cola Co. and the Salt Lake Organizing Committee to hand out as they saw fit. The result is that car dealers, celebrities, local television-news anchors and corporate executives are passing the flame to torchbearers selected from the pool nominated for their inspirational work and courage. The Olympic Web site and much of the promotional

material from the sponsors fail to mention the 4,300 exempted slots, as organizers call them.

Those selected outside the national nomination process include New York Yankee Derek Jeter, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, CNN anchor Paula Zahn, and singer Aretha Franklin. Torchbearers carry the Olympic flame for two-tenths of a mile before lighting the torch of the next person in the relay.

Participants can have their torch to keep if they pay \$335 for it.

Chevrolet and Coke won't say how much they paid to sponsor the two-month-long torch relay, but Salt Lake Organizing Committee President Mitt Romney says sponsors picked up most of the \$25 million cost of the event. A Chevrolet spokesman says the relay is the largest sponsorship program in the company's history.

The car maker has used many of its torchbearer slots for promotional and marketing purposes. In Daytona Beach, Fla., Nascar driver Jeff Gordon, who races a Chevy Monte Carlo, took the flame soon after it was carried by Chevy dealer Glenn Ritchey, and handed it off to Chevrolet General Manager Kurt Ritter, the GM division's top official.

The flame has also been used to benefit Chevy dealers across the country who were willing to pay Chevrolet to have the torch relay stop at their dealerships. Chevrolet guarantees each participating dealership one slot, according to a company spokesman. (Chevy has 4,300 dealers but won't say how many are participating, invoking competitive reasons.) The torchbearer selected by the dealership must have an inspiring story, the spokesman says. The company won't disclose the sum dealers have to pay, but a dealer who asked not to be identified says it cost him \$15,000.

At Hamilton Chevrolet in Warren, outside Detroit, a crowd of several thousand gathered to watch the flame arrive Jan. 6. Spectators waved American flags with Chevrolet's logo on one side of them. The dealership, according to a Chevrolet representative, paid top dollar to have the torch pause at the location for 15 minutes.

Coke used 700 of its slots to reward customers, including McDonald's, Burger King and big supermarket chains. Some of these slot holders held internal competitions, similar to the national contest, to select worthy torchbearers. About 50 of the Coke slots went to former and current Olympians as well as athletes the company sponsors, such as race-car drivers Dale Jarrett and Bobby Labonte.

Coke also used an exempted position for ESPN anchor Stuart Scott, who has done promotional work for the company. Mr. Scott says he had no idea who sponsored him for the torchbearer role. "My agent told me about it," he says. Of his experience carrying the torch, he says, "I was in awe. For that two-tenths of a mile I was the only human on Earth who had that flame."

Both Chevrolet and Coke say they also used slots to recognize employees nominated by co-workers.

The Olympic committee says it can't provide a list of the torchbearers running in the slots reserved for the committee and sponsors. The names of torchbearers selected through the national nomination contest are posted on the Olympic Web site (www.saltlake2002.com).

Mr. Romney says the selection process for torchbearers was "clearly stated" and there was no attempt to hide the fact that several thousand slots were held for sponsors and the Olympic committee. The Olympic Web site states that "official torchbearers were nominated by family members, friends and colleagues who wrote an essay of 50 to 100 words explaining how the nominees embodied the Olympic spirit and provided inspiration to their communities."

The Olympic committee says it has set aside 125 torchbearer positions for families of Sept. 11 victims and heroic firefighters, and another 200 slots for current and former Olympic athletes. He describes the awarding of torch positions to media members as a strategic decision designed to engender positive images of the flame relay. One media star selected was ABC's Diane Sawyer, who carried the flame

through Louisville, Ky., her hometown. Ms. Sawyer's run was broadcast live on ABC's "Good Morning America," which she co-hosts with Charles Gibson. "It brings great credibility and recognition to the torch," Mr. Romney says.

NBC, which will broadcast the games starting Feb. 8, says it was given 137 slots for local news anchors and reporters to run in every major city the torch passes through. In many locales, the carrying of the torch by a news personality has dominated relay coverage. In Detroit, NBC affiliate WDIV-TV had a live broadcast of the run of anchor Carmen Harlan, with shots from the station's helicopter.

In Columbus, Ohio, station WCMH-TV featured the run of anchor Colleen Marshall, adding briefly that a 102-year-old Ohioan in the relay that day, Sarah McClelland of Xenia, was the oldest torchbearer in the country. No other details were given in the newscast about Ms. McClelland, nominated in the essay contest by her great-granddaughter, who cited her strength and independence. Until a recent fall in which she broke her hip, Ms. McClelland had lived alone. She tended a 97-acre farm until she was in her 80s. During her torch run, she rose from her wheelchair and walked the last half of her relay leg.

Torchbearer slots were also given to a half-dozen editors and reporters at the Deseret News in Salt Lake City.

Judges in the essay contest say that many worthy candidates met the criteria but didn't make the cut. In Boise, Idaho, Jason Prince immediately thought of his former calculus teacher at Borah High School when he heard the Olympic committee was looking for inspirational figures in the community. The teacher, Bob Firman, has taught in the same classroom for 39 years, has received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics and won two state titles as a longtime cross-country coach.

Mr. Prince says he nominated Mr. Firman because of his passion for teaching and the hundreds of hours he has spent before and after school working with struggling students. Mr. Prince says "there isn't anyone out there who could have been more deserving." Mr. Firman says "it would have been kind of neat to have a chance" to carry the flame. He added, however, that the real honor was having a former student nominate him.

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