Freshman Kaitlyn Chana ran in Calgary, Canada, on Jan. 19, carrying the Olympic flame on its way to the Opening Ceremonies in Vancouver.

CARRYING THE TORCH

Kaitlyn Chana’s inner light shines as bright as the Olympic flame.

BY CHRISTINE DELLERT, ’06
On the bus to Calgary, Chana shared some "girl talk" with Olympic gymnast Shawn Johnson and then asked the Dancing with the Stars winner for some insight, since Chana's "greatest fear in life is dancing." When she lit Johnson's torch, "we did this kind of hip bump action she taught me," she says with a smile.

As she ran with the 33-pound torch, Chana realized that it reflected the flame within herself. "I thought, 'Kaitlyn, you can do anything,'" she recalls. "It's a message I want to share with others. You can do the impossible because you have a flame inside that motivates you. When something gets in your way, find a way to get around it or cross over it.'"

For the bubbly aspiring TV journalist, the Olympics were just a part of her mission to make other people smile. During the weeks after she returned from Canada, Chana volunteered at Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children and Bear Lake Elementary School, showing the children her torch, sharing her experience of carrying it and encouraging students to strive for their best.

It's the same message that goes into the cards that her organization, Love Letters: Random Cards of Kindness Inc., has sent to nearly 35,000 children around the world. Inside, the cards carry messages such as "Believe in yourself," "Send you a great big hug" or "You shine like a star."
Chana is the founder of Love Letters: Random Cards of Kindness, an international organization that creates and delivers cards to ill children.

"Through a simple card we can bring smiles to children's faces," she says. "They're made by individuals who devote their time, energy and hearts to making cards that inspire others."

Chana was just a child herself when she started making cards and inspiring others to do the same. In the eighth grade, she received an assignment to go out in the community and make a difference. She remembered the joy she had felt as a Girl Scout making cards for Linda Bremner, the founder of Love Letters Inc., who started the national organization when her son, Andy, was battling a life-ending illness. Bremner began by sending weekly homemade cards of encouragement to all of Andy's friends at a cancer camp.

When Chana asked if she could make cards for Love Letters as her project, Bremner was delighted to oblige. When the assignment was over, Chana's life had a new purpose.

"What was supposed to be a five-minute class presentation turned out to be 45 minutes," Chana says. "My teacher and my peers were in tears, and everyone wanted to know how they could volunteer and be a part of this."

Bremner suggested that Chana start a local high school chapter of the organization. As a freshman, Chana started Lake Brantley Love Letters at the Altamonte Springs school.

"Linda was an extraordinary lady," Chana says. "During one of our phone conversations, she said, 'It only takes one person to move a mountain, and then others will follow.' I didn't know exactly what she meant, but I knew there was something more to it, and I wrote it down."

A week later, she learned Bremner had died and that the national organization would be closed down.

"Kaitlyn's philanthropic spirit is putting smiles on the faces of children with life-threatening illnesses and their families. It is wonderful and heart-warming to see her enthusiasm and passion for helping others making such an extraordinary difference in her community and around the world."

— Florida Gov. Charlie Crist
“I realized that she was saying that I could be the one person to move a mountain and make that difference,” Chana says. She decided to carry on Bremner’s legacy by starting her own organization called Love Letters: Random Cards of Kindness Inc.

“It has the same mission, but it needed a different name,” Chana explains. “It’s random individuals across the country who are volunteering to create positive, inspirational messages for children who are going through treatments and surgeries and fighting chronic and terminal diseases.”

Since then, she says, the organization has grown exponentially. But Chana continues to run the entire operation, with help from volunteers, despite her ever-increasing responsibilities as a college student.

Chana shared the project with UCF’s LEAD Scholars, a selective two-year leadership program committed to academic and community service. And she’s hoping to expand it during the rest of her undergraduate years.

“That’s one reason why I love UCF,” Chana says. “Not only is it community oriented, but if you have a mission, there are so many faculty and staff members who are able to assist you.”

In all, thousands of volunteers, both at and outside the university, have helped with card-making parties, and Love Letters chapters are spreading across the country. Chana is constantly her own cheerleader, talking with everyone she meets about her organization and ways to help.

Even Florida Gov. Charlie Crist recently recognized Chana for her charitable efforts.

“Kaitlyn’s philanthropic spirit is putting smiles on the faces of children with life-threatening illnesses and their families,” Crist said while honoring Chana with the Governor’s Point of Light Award. “It is wonderful and heart warming to see her enthusiasm and passion for helping others making such an extraordinary difference in her community and around the world.”

Many of the organization’s chapter volunteers mail the cards to the headquarters. Chana says it’s like Christmas every day when she gets her mail, which might include up to 2,000 handcrafted cards, often accompanied by teddy bears and coloring books at holiday times. Every card is read, delivered to hospitals or children’s organizations and then distributed based upon each child’s situation or personality.

“It’s a lot of work, but I absolutely love it,” she says. “I feel like I’m a little kid in a candy store, because I get so excited to read about the volunteers’ personal lives and learn how they feel a connection to Love Letters: Random Cards of Kindness Inc.”

Whenever she can, Chana personally delivers the cards herself.

Chana was able to keep the torch she carried through Calgary, where she says the logistics and security were paramount, including a back-up plan in case the torch was dropped. Her torch had to be unlocked with a special key, before it could be lit, and once she passed on the flame, a cord was cut so it could never be lit again. Before she returned to Orlando, she sprayed the torch with hairspray to adhere the soot from the flame onto the torch forever.

“A lot of times when you go into these hospital rooms, they’re isolated and surrounded by white walls,” she says. Too often, she adds, the parents are just as distraught as the kids. “But we bring happiness and the zest for life. A lot of the time, parents will grab their cameras because their children are smiling and laughing, and, sadly, these treasured glimpses seem to be very scarce. Parents want to capture those memories.”

For Chana, donning the Olympics’ white tracksuit and official red mittens was an experience she’ll never forget. It’s one of the many stories she’ll continue to share with kids in hospitals and local schools, in hopes that she can help them achieve their own dreams.

“Carrying the torch helped me realize that we can obtain our dreams and endeavors if we continue trying,” she says. “When I go to bed at night, I want to know that I brought a smile or laughter to someone’s heart.”


Pegasus