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3 chosen to carry the torch

By Frank Carroll
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KISSIMMEE -- Kissimmee's Daniel Lackey and Miranda Asche, along with Celebration's Frank Harmer, have been walking on air since they were chosen to run in the Salt Lake 2002 Olympic Torch Relay.

"Nervous? There's some anxiety, but I'm happy to be involved," said Daniel, 17, an Osceola High School senior.

Miranda, 16, an Osceola High junior, "was very surprised" to be selected but "very much looking forward to it."

Both teenagers are "support runners" for Friday's Central Florida run.

Harmer, a 48-year-old father of one and Celebration School social-studies teacher, will be a torchbearer.

"It was a total surprise when the package arrived from the Olympics around Thanksgiving. I had no idea," he said.

Nationwide, panels of community judges selected 11,500 torchbearers they think embody the Olympic spirit.

Salt Lake Organizing Committee President Mitt Romney added 100 relay slots for "champions of greatness," those who survived the terrorist attacks or helped rescue victims of Sept. 11.

Norma Evans-O'Connor, sponsor of Osceola High's Students Against Violence Everywhere and Students Against Destructive Decisions clubs, nominated the teenagers.

Hoisting the 3-pound, 33-inch-long torch that contains the Olympic flame is an honor not wasted on Osceola County's participants.

"It seems like a great thing to take part in," Daniel said. "When I'm older, I'm sure I'll realize it was one of the best experiences of my life."

Miranda, a first-year cross-country runner and avid collector of baseball cards, accepts

the assignment as "a privilege. It's something my family will remember me doing for generations."

Nominated by a former student, Harmer, retired military brass, shares a similar feeling.

"It's an incredible honor," he said. "Everybody's dream is to be in the Olympics. The relay allows an average person to be part of it. This will be a memory that will pass from generation to generation. The torch I'll carry will be prominently displayed somewhere in the house."

U.S. Olympic Committee President Sandy Baldwin calls the games "the greatest peacetime event in the whole world."

Flame left Olympia Nov. 19

The Olympic flame left ancient Olympia, Greece, about 135 miles southwest of Athens, on Nov. 19, headed for Atlanta, site of the 1996 Summer Games.

The United States' kickoff event begins Tuesday when the Torch Relay begins its 65-day journey to Utah, the site of the 2002 Winter Games.

Lambis Nikolaou, president of the Greek Olympic Committee, hopes the flame conveys a spirit of unity "at a time when humanity is shaken by tragic events."

The 13,500-mile Torch Relay by air, train, ship, dog sled, snowmobile, horse-drawn sleigh, ice skates and runners traverses 46 states -- bypassing Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and Hawaii -- and arrives Feb. 8 at Rice-Eccles Olympic Stadium in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Eighty Central Floridians will gather in Daytona Beach to run segments of the relay.

"It feels really good to be invited to take part," Daniel said. "I've never done anything remotely like this."

Preparation won't be much of a problem for Daniel, a three-sport letter winner at Osceola High, where he competes in cross-country, track and wrestling.

More than an athlete, Daniel ranks No. 1 academically among a class of 430 with a 3.98 grade point average.

Harmer terms himself "a recreational jogger" but expects no difficulty in carrying the Olympic flame for a segment he has been told that is about two-tenths of a mile.

Harmer, a Navy commander with 20 years aboard a frigate, guided missile destroyer and the aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk, has former student Marlissa Morton to thank for his selection.

Marlissa, an eighth-grader a year ago in one of Harmer's world history honors classes, nominated her teacher for his ability to motivate her to do her best.

Sept. 11 widow chosen

The torch-relay team members are in good company.

"Everybody has a story," said Steve Young, a former San Francisco 49ers quarterback who heads an Olympic team of volunteers.

Lyz Glick will carry the torch Dec. 23 in New York City. Her late husband, Jeremy, was aboard United Flight 93 that went down Sept. 11 in rural Pennsylvania as passengers struggled with terrorists for control of the ill-fated jetliner.

From a public perspective, Glick says of her Olympic Torch Relay leg, "I think we're luck it's an Olympic year. [The Olympic Torch Relay is] an element of hope, especially with the games in the United States."

John Lipsey is another. Born blind, the 16-year-old snow skis and wrestles while studying theology at Juan Diego Catholic High in Draper, Utah.

"I think it's really good that I'm going to be allowed to do this, especially considering what happened Sept. 11. We need more positive things like this, rather than tragedies," John said.

Perris Jensen of Sandy, Utah, whose 100th birthday is Feb. 5, will help push the torch its final leg.

"It's quite an honor for an old man," Jensen said. "I was never much of an athlete, but I had the legs of a grasshopper."

Jensen isn't even the oldest. That honor belongs to 102-year-old Sarah McClelland of Xenia, Ohio.

In nominating McClelland, a great-granddaughter said, "Don't let her age fool you. She still lives alone, is in good health, plants her own flowers and is still active in her church and community."

Wire services were used in this report.

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