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Olympic moments

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Olympic moments

Why would an American elementary physical education teacher want to spend her summer in Greece? For me, it wasn't because of my Greek heritage. (I don't have any.) Nor was it because of a desire to vacation in the Greek Isles or to find peace and quiet in another corner of the world.

No, there was only one reason: to be on the greatest team in the world — the Olympic Volunteer Team — helping to make the 2004 Olympic Games the best!

Volunteering at this year's Games was the ultimate experience, and even though at first everything was Greek to me, each day provided opportunities to meet other "Olympic nuts."

I had worked at the Olympics before, as a support volunteer for the Opening and Closing Ceremonies in Atlanta in 1996. But why go all the way to Greece, especially after hearing that construction was

behind schedule and that things might not be ready when the Games were supposed to start?

It's simple: Greece is the birthplace of the Olympics. For years I had taught a unit on the Olympics. My students and I would talk about ancient Olympia, where the Games started, and I would show them pictures of the sites. I'd also organized Olympic field days for my classes. When Greece got the bid to host the Games, I knew I wanted to go and experience all the things I'd talked about through the years. The urge was too strong to ignore.

After months of applying, interviewing and searching for housing, my official acceptance to be a volunteer on a ceremonies team arrived in late April. Two months later, my family and I boarded a flight for our first trip to Europe. We arrived in Athens on June 30, and for nine days my husband Ed '78, daughter Erin '04 and son Austin ('11?) and I traveled around Santorini, Corinth, Marathon, Athens and, of course, Olympia.

As I stood on the hill at the original stadium site in Olympia, tears streamed down my face. I could

hardly believe I was there, on the same ground where ancient Olympians once competed. At that moment, with the Olympic spirit swelling within me, I'm sure that the ancient gods made me an honorary Greek citizen.

My family had to return to the States after our tour, but by then Greece was beginning to feel like home. It was time to get to work.

My first assignment in Athens was in radio communications, helping to prepare for the Opening Ceremonies. While this was very interesting, I wanted to be closer to the action. I was granted permission to join the stadium operations team, where we did a little of everything. We posted signs in the stadium, prepared the staging rooms for the cast and even assembled a refrigerator. During the Opening Ceremonies August 13 and the Closing Ceremonies August 29, my post was in the tunnel through which the main performers entered.

Between the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, I requested more volunteer work and was assigned to the tennis venue, which was perfect for me since I play and coach the sport. I was stationed in the players' lounge, where we posted results, made sure the athletes were comfortable and assisted them when they had questions. We weren't allowed to take pictures or ask for autographs, but still, when else would I be able to hang with Andy Roddick?

After the Closing Ceremonies, I came home with a wonderful feeling of accomplishment. I had spent two months in an international setting with thousands of people working for a common cause. The Olympic staff and volunteers proved to the skeptics that the Athens Games could be a success. When the flame was extinguished, we had the satisfaction of knowing we had contributed to a job well done.

I returned to my students at Crestview Elementary in Greenville with my souvenir uniform proudly tucked under my arm, memories sculpted in my mind and the Olympic flame burning in my heart. I've been able to share with them firsthand how the Olympics bring together people from all over the world. I've told them about the joy of volunteering and the value of learning another language, of understanding other countries and customs.

While my life may seem to be back to normal now, part of my heart is still in Greece. One day I will return — and relive those days when I was a part of Olympic history.

— Tricia Toole Boehmke '78

