

## RICHMOND REVIEW

### Thousands flock to Olympic party

By Don Fennell - Richmond Review

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They began lining up as early as 3:30 a.m. By the time organizers and Spirit of B.C. Committee volunteers arrived for the launch of Richmond's 08-08-08 celebration at Aberdeen Centre 90 minutes later, the crowd had grown to several hundred.

Henry Beh, who was busy flipping pancakes just outside the main mall entrance, estimates he served up as many as 3,000 flapjacks by 6 a.m.

And the people kept coming, crowding into every conceivable space. They came to celebrate the Olympic spirit and watch the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Summer Games—the last Olympics before Vancouver, and Richmond, gets their chance to host the world at the Winter Games in 2010.

"We're very happy with the turnout and very happy to do it, but you never know what to expect," said Ed Gavsie, chairman of the Richmond Spirit of B.C. Committee, which helped to organize the festivities. "This suggests there is a lot of spirit in Richmond and the Olympics are really engaging the community. We now know we've got our job cut out for us to keep this growing."

For several local Olympians who were brought on stage as part of Friday's local celebration, the party brought back a flood of positive memories. For at least one Olympian it was overwhelming.

As her eyes filled with tears and her voice cracked with emotion, Diane Clement spoke of her passion for the Olympic movement.

"Once an Olympian, always an Olympian," she said. "Not everyone is going to win a gold medal but as in life we do our best and I think that's what the spirit of the Olympics is. Forget who's taking steroids or not and celebrate the athletes there who have dedicated themselves and are proud to be representing their country."

Clement was one of Canada's top sprinters when she wore the red and white in the 1956 Games in Melbourne, Australia. Her first impression entering the stadium for the opening ceremonies was one of being overwhelmed by the scope of the Olympics.

"When I walked in there were 70,000 people and I was like I am now, crying and laughing," she said. "And when I saw the Canadian flag there was not another moment like it—other than getting married. That's the feeling every one of us today has, we're so proud and excited to think we will be hosting the next Games."

Clement and her husband Doug, also an Olympian in track and field (he represented Canada at the 1952 Games in Helsinki as a member of the men's four-by-400-metre relay team) formed the Richmond Kajaks Track and Field Club in 1961 and coached many future Olympians over the next three decades.

One of their proteges was Ann Covell, now Ann Cliff, who also attended Friday's Olympic celebration in Richmond.

"It was totally overwhelming, lots of smog, but an experience of a lifetime," said Cliff, who was the first of the Kajaks to participate in an Olympic Games in Mexico City in 1968.

"It was much bigger than I expected, even the crowds were overwhelming," she said. "There are so many memories it would be hard to pick out just one. This turnout today indicates to me there is lots of support, interest and enthusiasm for the Olympics and Richmond should be very proud."

Cliff set a then Canadian record at the Mexico City Games by running the 400 metres in 54.3 seconds.

Lance Carey, who along with his wife Nancy built the Richmond Field Hockey Club into a provincial powerhouse and also produced several future Olympians, played for Canada in the 1976 Summer Games in Montreal. His most poignant memory of those Olympics was the competition.

"I remember us beating Argentina 2-1," he said. "We won only that one game, but we were very close and never lost by more than one goal."

"In fact against Belgium I think we went to 35 or 40 minutes of overtime before they scored on a penalty corner. But defeating Argentina after coming seventh at the Pan-Ams was a big big milestone."

Carey said he'd worked hard to earn the opportunity to compete at the Olympics and cherished every moment.

Although the team stayed at the athlete's village and enjoyed the camaraderie with athletes from other nations, he said there wasn't a lot of interaction. All the teams were there on business so to speak, he explained.

Richmond snowboarder Alexa Loo, who competed for Canada at the Torino Winter Olympics and hopes to be on the scene in 2010 in Whistler as well, represented the current Olympians Friday.

"Seeing so many people out for the Beijing opening ceremonies I can only imagine what it's going to be like for our Olympics," she said. "I imagine at least 10 times this many."

As they watched the opening ceremonies from Beijing on the mall's giant 28-foot screen, the crowd twice erupted to euphoric heights—once when the Canadian team entered the main stadium and later when the host Chinese athletes paraded behind NBA star and flag bearer Yao Ming.

Similarly, Yang Qiang, China's Consulate General to Canada, evoked an enthusiastic applause from the crowd when he spoke of the Chinese people's "profound understanding of the Olympics" including the hopes and dreams for peace, friendship and fair play that the Games symbolize.



Aberdeen Centre hosted an early-morning party yesterday to celebrate the start of the Beijing Games.

Chung Chow photo

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