

A Torch Rediscovered, a Legacy Remembered



Catherine Aileen “Cathy” Ritter. Photo courtesy of the Ritter-Rogers family.

More than four decades after Catherine Aileen “Cathy” Ritter carried the Olympic flame through South Lake Tahoe, the actual torch she carried—Torch No. 0244—will travel once again.

From October 2–24, 2026, Rotary clubs across District 5130 will carry and pass the same original Olympic torch Cathy carried in 1984 from club to club and community to community. Beginning in Crescent City, the World Polio Torch Relay will travel south through North Coast, Lake, Sonoma and Napa communities before concluding in Petaluma on World Polio Day. Each handoff will raise awareness and support for Rotary’s worldwide effort to eradicate polio while honoring Cathy’s life, her spirit of service and the enduring power of hope.

In 1984, Cathy was 23 years old and working at the South Lake Tahoe Women’s Center. Founded in 1977 in a small lakeside cabin, the center grew to provide a crisis line, counseling and domestic-violence support. Today, the organization is known as Vista Rise Collective.

One day, while Cathy was alone in the office, she received an unexpected telephone call from Caesars Tahoe. The casino had made a major contribution to the charitable campaign associated with the 1984 Olympic Torch Relay and had earned the opportunity to select someone to carry the Olympic flame. It wanted a representative from the Women’s Center to participate. When Cathy was asked if she would be interested, she immediately accepted.

Cathy became one of 3,636 torchbearers who carried the flame across the United States. The relay began in New York City on May 8, 1984, and concluded at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum on July 28. The charitable initiative associated with the relay raised nearly \$11 million for youth-serving organizations, including the YMCA, Boys Clubs, Girls Clubs and Special Olympics.

According to her father, Bob Rogers, Cathy carried the torch along Highway 50 in South Lake Tahoe, running approximately one kilometer from the area known as “the Y” toward the airport. Crowds lined the highway, the Tahoe Tribune covered the occasion, and people wanted to have their photographs taken with Cathy when she stopped.

As a lasting remembrance of the experience, Cathy was able to keep the torch she carried—Torch No. 0244.

Years later, when the family moved from Lake Tahoe to Sebastopol, the torch seemingly disappeared. No one knew where it had gone. Although its whereabouts occasionally came up in family conversations, everyone feared it had been permanently lost.

Then, as Rotarian Renee McKenna was developing the idea for the Rotary District 5130 World Polio Torch Relay, something remarkable happened.

Cathy's husband and their two sons were sorting through boxes that had been stored since the family's move from Lake Tahoe. Inside one of the long-forgotten boxes, they discovered an unusual-looking case.

It contained Cathy's Olympic torch, unseen since approximately 2006.

"I believe some things happen that are beyond our comprehension or understanding," said Cathy's father, Bob Rogers. "I think this torch turning up when it did could possibly be one of those times."

For Bob, the torch's new purpose has an especially personal meaning. A polio survivor, he joined Rotary in 2007 and soon became involved in Rotary's highest humanitarian priority—the worldwide eradication of polio.

Cathy was a fighter and a thriver who supported many others facing breast cancer. For years, she served both as a team member and as a counselor with The Cancer Journey Institute. Her breast cancer later metastasized, and she died on March 15, 2025.

Her family now sees the torch's participation in the World Polio Torch Relay as a meaningful way to honor and remember Cathy's life, her generous spirit, her service to others and the unforgettable role she played in the 1984 Olympic Torch Relay.

The torch Cathy once carried to help raise money for charitable causes will travel again—this time carrying her memory and supporting the effort to end polio.

"We think this is a fitting tribute to Cathy," Bob Rogers said. "The torch originally helped raise money for worthy causes, and now it will help support the effort to eliminate polio."

As Rotary clubs carry the torch through communities across District 5130, they will also carry Cathy's story—a story of service, courage, loss, rediscovery, remembrance and hope.

The torch Cathy carried more than 40 years ago now has a new purpose: honoring her legacy while inspiring communities to help Rotary create a future in which no child will ever again suffer from polio.