

Editorial comment: Shining a torch on China

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Majora Carter had a good trick up her sleeve. Chosen to be a bearer of the Olympic torch on its only North American appearance in San Francisco last week, the founder and executive director of the environmental organization Sustainable South Bronx concealed a small Tibetan flag in her long-sleeved T-shirt. As she was handed the torch, she unveiled the flag.

Ms. Carter was chosen as a torch-bearer as an exemplary American. She lived up to her responsibility. "I'm a torch bearer for peace and justice and freedom," she told reporters after Chinese security guards yanked the Olympic torch away and San Francisco cops pushed her off the street.

That has to have gladdened the heart of Riverdalian Ann Noonan. Ms. Noonan began her career as a human rights advocate as a member of an anti-abortion delegation to the UN's World Conference on Women in Beijing, later becoming editor of the Web site freechurch.org and New York coordinator for the Laogai Research Foundation, an advocacy organization founded by a Chinese dissident.

The two Bronxites - one white, one black; one from relatively affluent Riverdale, one from impoverished Hunts Point; one passionate about religious freedom, the other about environmental justice - could not be more different.

Their common cause demonstrates the ways in which human rights transcend political categories. Both would undoubtedly agree with South African Bishop Desmond Tutu who told protesters in San Francisco the night before Ms. Carter's gesture: "This is a moral universe" where "right and goodness and compassion and freedom are going to remain."

Bishop Tutu and many others have called for President Bush to boycott the opening ceremonies of the Beijing games. What the Olympic torch protests have demonstrated, however, is that the president - and highranking politicians generally - are irrelevant. Ordinary people moved to action don't need them to accomplish the goal of making the world aware. In the light from the Olympic torch, the world has seen not only China's brutal treatment of Tibet, but also its role as enabler of Sudan's genocidal rulers and its suppression of its own people's human rights.

When it bid to host the Olympic games, China wanted the eyes of the world to focus on it. Now worldwide demonstrations have taught it the meaning of the proverb "Be careful what you wish for."