

Star Jones, Tai Babilonia, Michelle Paterson, Mayor Dinkins support a successful gala for Figure Skating in Harlem

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Special to the AmNews

As if by magic, the rain disappeared and the fifth annual Skating with the Stars, a gala benefit for Figure Skating in Harlem (FSH), unfolded at Central Park's Wollman Rink. This year's honorees were the first lady of New York, Michelle Paige Paterson, and former U.S. and World Pairs Figure Skating Champion Tai Babilonia.

Skating was a regular recreational activity for Paterson as a child. She grew up in Staten Island, skating at Clove Lakes Park. When she moved to Man-

hattan, she enjoyed both Wollman and Lasker rinks and took her children skating as well. With one of her focuses childhood obesity, she especially appreciates the work of Figure Skating in Harlem, a program that combines figure skating with many off-ice activities for the program's 125 girls, ages 6-18, including nutrition and counseling.

"I think it's wonderful that they're talking to the kids about these issues," said Paterson. "It's very important that kids learn about this at an early age and take initiative and responsibility for their own bodies and also



Skating members of Figure Skating in Harlem. L-R: Cira Clark, Meiling Jabbaar, Jordan Ali, Nya Weeks and Crystal Burgess. (Lois Elfan photos)



Honoree and former world skating champion Tai Babilonia with members Ky-Ana McKay and Kolby Couch



Former New York City Mayor David Dinkins with Figure Skating in Harlem founder Sharon Cohen, former U.S. Olympian, and Tamara Tunie ("Law & Order"), founding member of the board



Star Jones with World Figure Skating champ Evan Lysacek



Michelle Paterson, the first lady of New York, and Sharon Cohen

Nothing beats a Lil' League parade



Participating in the Harlem Little League Opening Day Parade (l-r) Assemblyman Keith Wright, Jeanette Spencer, President of the Harlem Little League Board, Dwight and Iris Raiford, founders, with their grandkids, Maceo Raiford-Cohen and Maya Raiford-Cohen.



Leading the parade up Seventh Avenue, a volunteer group of musicians.

(Bill Moore photos)

enjoy it. It's fun to exercise and eat healthy."

Although she'd hoped to don her skates for the skating party, she didn't get to do it. Still, after being introduced by former Mayor David Dinkins, one of the evening's honorary chairs, she offered her sincere appreciation for FSH and "the strength it has on the Harlem community," she said. Babilonia, whose mother is African American, has been a longtime supporter of FSH and has attended several past galas. She advised the girls to respect their parents, their skating coaches, their teachers and "most of all, respect yourselves."

Kolby Couch, 9, said participating in FSH makes her feel powerful. "I see hard work. I see teamwork. Everybody is working together to get to their goals," she

said.

For Crystal Burgess, 15, now in her eighth year in the program, "FSH has taught me a lot of responsibility and how to plan the rest of my life. It also gave me fitness."

FSH Founder/Executive Director Sharon Cohen has big dreams for this organization. She hopes to build a skating and education center. "It would be a place for our students to come and learn five days a week after school with education and skating," she said.

Helping the cause was Star Jones, who put together a fabulous auction item—lunch with her and Rosie O'Donnell. "It's far more important to give back to somebody else," Jones noted. "Bid it up. Come and see if there's going to be a cage match."



State Senator Bill Perkins with Bob Ryan, son-in-law of Bill Shea (a major contributor in Harlem Little League's startup), and Dwight Raiford, Harlem Little League founder.