

Rain breaks for Figure Skating in Harlem gala

Stars from all realms gather in New York City's Central Park

By Lynn Rutherford, special to icenetwork.com

(04/08/2009) - A touch of anxiety accompanied the festivities this week at "Skating with the Stars, Under the Stars," the annual gala for Figure Skating in Harlem (FSH) in New York City.

Celebrities, such as skaters like 1976 Olympic gold medalist **Dorothy Hamill** and newly crowned world champion **Evan Lysacek**, as well as television personalities, business titans and politicians, had gathered at Central Park's Wollman Rink.

"I think you could solve the deficit with all of the gold, bronze and silver we have assembled here tonight," attorney and television personality Star Jones, a gala co-chair, said as she surveyed the cast of skaters.

But with off-and-on downpours all day, would there be any skating?

Fortunately, the clouds parted, the stars came out, and, with Manhattan's skyline as a magnificent backdrop, the young and young-at-heart hit the ice to get a few tips from their favorite Olympians. Later, 12 FSH students performed to "New York, New York."

"We were a little surprised; the weather changed in our favor," said FSH founder Sharon Cohen.

"We had three years of bright sunshine for this event, and the last two have just been nail-biters. But it could have been much worse. It's such a thrill for our girls -- and our donors and supporters too -- to get out there and skate with these champions."

There may have been some crossed fingers about the weather, but little is left to chance for the over 125 girls (ages six to 18) of FSH. Enrollees sign a "skater's contract" and maintain a B-average or better in school. The program, including a staff of administrators, educators and coaches, has two components: off-ice education and character development classes and on-ice skating instruction and performance. Each student attends FSH a minimum of six hours per week during the school year. Nearly 100 percent of the girls go on to college.

But boots and blades took center ice at the gala.

"Seeing how much these kids love to skate helps me remember how much I love to skate," said **Kimmie Meissner**, the 2006 world champion who has recently been performing with Smucker's *Stars on Ice*.



FSH's founder Sharon Cohen (left) poses with 2009 honoree Michelle Paterson (middle), the First Lady of New York, and former NYC mayor David Dinkins (right). (Lynn Rutherford)

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Others reflected on how spending hours on the ice each day helped equip them to tackle off-ice challenges.

"We're naturally drawn to [FSH], knowing how much skating has given us, as far as the life skills we've learned and the discipline and patience," said five-time U.S. ice dance champion **Tanith Belbin**, on hand with partner **Ben Agosto**.

"These are all things we can apply later in life. Now that I'm an adult, I can find so many applications in my life today that skating has given me," she added.

Fresh off his victory in L.A., Lysacek -- who like Belbin and 2002 Olympic bronze medalist **Timothy Goebel**, who was also in attendance, serves on FSH's advisory board -- said he's watched some of the girls grow up over the years.

"We're lucky enough to have worked with them for the last four years and gotten to know quite a few of the girls, and we remember some when they were much younger. They've become so eloquent and beautiful, just the brightest young people. To see firsthand what the organization is doing for them is really cool for us."

Goebel, now a coach, technical specialist and full-time student at New York's Columbia University, regularly coaches FSH students.

"It's so refreshing because you can really see the excitement every time the students get on the ice," he said.

"I teach in the afternoons. The kids come straight from school, they have tutoring services and different academic programs they do beforehand, and then we go on the ice. It's a really comprehensive program."

Cohen, a former competitive skater who founded FSH in 1997, has plans to make it even more comprehensive. FSH aims to double or even triple the number of its participants, by opening a 5,000 square foot "Leading Edge Education and Character Development Center" in upper Manhattan to house classrooms, a technology center, a library, a dance/fitness studio, and expanded administrative and storage space.

"Right now, we're using Riverbank State Park, but we're always competing for ice time and we can't serve more kids," Cohen said.

"We could create a learning environment for so many more, if we establish a center in Harlem the kids could come to essentially 24 hours a day and learn and grow with a positive edge."

Cohen has the support of many city and state officials; former mayor David Dinkins addressed the gala, introducing New York State's First Lady Michelle Paterson, who was honored along with skating legend **Tai Babilonia**. Leading businessmen, including Donald Trump and Macy's CEO Terry Lundgren, are big fans of FSH.

With the positive, infectious Cohen at the helm, few are betting against the vision.

"You can't say no to Sharon; she's just that kind of person," said producer and actress Tamara Tunie, another gala co-chair and star of *Law and Order: SVU*.

"She's irresistible."

For more information on FSH, visit www.figureskatinginharlem.org.

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