



ON A MISSION FIGURE SKATING IN HARLEM RECEIVES USOC'S RINGS OF GOLD AWARD

Sharon Cohen, executive director of Figure Skating in Harlem, accepts the USOC's Rings of Gold Award for her organization's impact on underserved youth. U.S. Figure Skating Executive Director David Raith, left, and U.S. Figure Skating President Samuel Auxier joined her at the awards dinner.



by BARB REICHERT

Having trained at the old Broadmoor World Arena in the late 1970s, Sharon Cohen returned to Colorado Springs, Colorado, in September still a skater at heart but with a different passion.

Cohen, the founder and executive director of Figure Skating in Harlem, returned to accept the prestigious U.S. Olympic Committee Rings of Gold Award for her organization's work with underserved youth and making a positive impact on the community.

Walking into the annual U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Assembly Awards Dinner, Cohen was taken aback by the notables mingling inside a dramatically lit ballroom.

"To see the magnitude of it all," she said of a room filled with sports executives, athletes and supporters. "To see the Olympians in the room and be greeted by the president of U.S. Figure Skating (Sam Auxier) and the executive director (David Raith), well, it was very humbling."

Addressing more than 350 attendees, Cohen stepped to the lectern carrying the ideals of Figure Skating in Harlem on her shoulders.

"I am delighted to accept this award in the spirit of the hundreds of black and Latina girls in Harlem and the lower Bronx who have come through our doors, along with teams of staff, board, donors and volunteers to form a vibrant community linked by the strength of the Olympic values," she said.

Those values, Cohen shared, were taught to her by the late Carlo Fassi, a U.S. and World Figure Skating Hall-of-Fame coach. When she was invited at age 23 to teach skating to girls in East Harlem, Cohen immediately understood she was sharing those Olympic values with these students. In turn, they passed them on to each other, peer to peer, and now generation to generation.

But Figure Skating in Harlem is much more than skating. Since 1997, FSH's mission has been "to

empower every girl, regardless of socioeconomic background, with skills to achieve her dreams."

Cohen and her staff of 60 take this mission seriously.

Using professional teachers and mentors, the FSH program puts a white-hot focus on educating girls ages 6 to 18 and building an academic foundation for them to succeed at four-year colleges.

Always evolving, FSH continues to grow its programs. Last year, FSH implemented a unique Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) unit using figure skating as its theme. In June, FSH expanded into four classrooms inside the historic Harlem Commonwealth Council building on 125th Street.

Students attended a career week in Washington, D.C., that included meetings with Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor and White House policy analysts. They also toured the United Nations.

All that effort is paying off: Last year, 33 percent of FSH participants maintained an "A" average in school; 83 percent reached a "B" or higher.

But what about the skating?

Each FSH student is provided with professional instruction, skates, blade covers, skate bag, warm-up suit, sweatshirt, show costumes and ice time — all prohibitive factors to low-income families wishing to participate in the sport.

It's quite an investment, financed by donations from individuals (34 percent), foundations (33 percent) and corporations (26 percent).

"We don't have an Oprah," Cohen said referring to the philanthropic TV celebrity. "We don't have someone write us a million-dollar check. We have to fish for our food. It's a whole bunch of little checks that add up. And it's never wasted."

Recognizing that the need is great, FSH will expand its reach next fall by opening a program in Detroit, its first venture outside of New York.

"We were very specific in choosing Detroit," Cohen said. "Detroit lines up in everything that matters to us: underserved community, facility, philanthropy, deep skating history. And, it has Meryl and Charlie!"

Meryl Davis and Charlie White, the 2014 Olympic ice dance champions, are longtime FSH supporters and proud Michiganders who have lived their entire lives in suburban Detroit. Cohen said Davis introduced her to the philanthropic Ilitch family, which owns the Detroit Tigers, Red Wings and Little Caesars Pizza, among other entities.

And after Detroit, who knows? The unwavering Cohen is determined to share the Figure Skating in Harlem message.

"You see," she told the awards dinner audience, "when the torch is lit, even in the unlikelyst of places, far from the elite training silos, the opportunity to build gold medalists in character takes flight. Today, our students ... work in professions as diverse as law, media, nursing, design and social work. They are now the agents of hope, embodying and living out the values that make the Olympic Movement so powerful."

