

Champions, Heroes & Icons - Ten Who Stood Tall

The inaugural poetry gala of the Library's Black Studies Center

First and foremost, thank you to all who came out on Tuesday, November 17, 2009, to ***Champions, Heroes & Icons - Ten Who Stood Tall***. The event was the inaugural poetry gala at the newly renovated Black Studies Center of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library. The honorees of the evening -- the "Champions, Heroes & Icons" being feted, were Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Duke Ellington, Thurgood Marshall, Marian Anderson, Langston Hughes, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, Jackie Robinson, Malcolm X and Paul Robeson. The celebration was truly an affair to remember, and will soon be available for podcast viewing on the library's website.

Styles & Aesthetics

During the first half of the gala, five guest poets debuted a total of ten poems; one for each honoree. Musical accompaniment enhanced some presentations while others echoed *a cappella* throughout the sanctioned halls of the Black Studies Center. The poets employed a variety of performance styles and literary devices, providing an engaging experience for guests throughout the three hour celebration. Such was the beauty and erudite nature of the evening. The presentation of intellectually and spiritually stimulating poetry in a setting so aesthetically pleasing was a treat unto itself. The near ten foot tall (bookshelf ends) photographs of the ten luminaries encircling the room, coupled with the rich artistic renderings that graced the walls of the Center create a stimulating effect on their own. I can speak authoritatively that the artists paying tribute to these luminaries on this inaugural occasion were elevated by this atmosphere to one of "esteem bordering euphoria." Such also was the reciprocated admiration and appreciation expressed by the audience.

Yes, the evening was all we'd hoped it would be and more! The guests arrived at the elegant and Black Studies Center to the welcoming sounds of Duke Ellington's Greatest Hits. With the chairs in the room almost full and the proverbial (and elegant) clock on the wall indicating the hour was upon us, the opening musical performance began and the evening was underway.

Guests Welcome by Officials

Library Associate Director, Pamela Stovall welcomed guests to the beautifully appointed space that was the setting for Champions, Heroes & Icons. It was this writer's honor to serve both as one of the featured poets and the mistress of ceremonies for the gala. Councilman-At-Large, Michael Brown, who extended greetings from the DC City Council and also welcomed guests to the gala, expressed his appreciation for such an exquisite public evening of the arts. He then made a public commitment, promising to dedicate resources from his office to help ensure the awareness, attendance and participation of youth from area schools in future Black Studies Center and other Library cultural arts programs.

Other notable guests attending the gala included Kimberly Walstad, the newly appointed head of the Library's Special Collections Department; and Renee Newsome of the Library's Marketing Department.

A brief intermission was held during which time guests dined on assorted cheeses, fruit, and other 'nibbles' while drinking sparkling cider from stemmed glasses, ...all quite appropriate for a gala befitting the honorees! Following the intermission, the featured poets and musicians presented more of their original inspirational, personal empowerment and social consciousness poetry.

The Visionary & His Vision

Of course, none of this would have happened without the vision and dedication of Black Studies Center Librarian Dennis Golden. Thank you, Mr. Golden, for the invitation to coordinate and be part of such an extraordinary celebration. It was a pleasure working with you and other library staff to help create the type of celebration which, prayerfully, met your goals and those of the Library department heads that entrusted this project to us. Coordinating the gala and editing the companion poetry anthology, which was debuted at the gala, was a wonderful challenge and opportunity. A BIG thank you to the Library's Marketing staff for ensuring that the anthology was available in time for the gala! With everyone working together we did it, and I dare say, we did it with style! Guests attending the gala received a complimentary copy of the anthology during the intermission, with many guests securing poet autographs before departing.

The Black Studies Center anticipates more partnerships with community artists as well as arts and history enthusiasts to present a series of Champions, Heroes and Icons (CHI) events to include youth activities, musical programs, films, author signings and more. In the interim, Champions, Heroes and Icons – Ten Who Stood Tall, which was recorded, will soon be available for podcast viewing on the Library's website. It is rewarding to know that ever-widening audiences will be able to experience the celebration. Now that the doors to this newly renovated facility have opened, the Black Studies Center hopes the public will embrace its offerings and support with their patronage this revitalized community resource in the nation's capitol.

The artists participating in this event were poets, Sylvia Dianne Beverly aka "Ladi Di," Andre Taylor aka "Brenardo," DaRon Clark, Jeffrey Banks aka "Big Homey" and J. Joy Matthews Alford aka Sistah Joy, and musicians, Doc Powell (Djembe), James "Curley" Robinson (Bongo) and Sydney March (Sax & Flute).

Sistah Joy

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