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Office of the City Representative

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Local design icon Mae Reeves honored at a ceremony and fashion show for her contributions to the fashion and business industry

PHILADELPHIA (July 28, 2010) -- City Representative Melanie Johnson and other dignitaries honored local fashion legend Mae Reeves whose designs were coveted by stars such as Lena Horne and Ella Fitzgerald at a ceremony and fashion show today at the African America Museum of Philadelphia.

Reeves was praised for her millinery career, which spanned over nearly 60 years. The Philadelphia Fashion designer was honored by city officials, family and members of the fashion community in a brief ceremony followed by a fashion show featuring local TV personalities and professional models who wore hat designs chosen from Reeves' illustrious repertoire.

An extensive collection of Reeves' distinctive hat designs has been selected for part of a permanent display at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Melanie Johnson, on behalf of Mayor Michael Nutter and the City, presented Reeves with a personally-inscribed ceremonial Liberty Bell and congratulated Reeves for her passion and entrepreneurial spirit.

"I am here today to offer a tribute to Mae Reeves, an enduring and exceptionally talented designer of women's hats whose sense of fashion was only equaled by her business sense and success as an entrepreneur," said Johnson. "At 97 years of age, she continues to be a role model of vision, initiative and courage that inspires us all."

Part of Philadelphia's fashion design and manufacturing history will be enshrined for the ages, as the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture adds artifacts from the life and career of famed milliner Mae Reeves to its collection. The acquisition was celebrated with a ceremonial presentation by Mayor Michael Nutter and a fashion show of Reeves' vintage designs, hosted by the African American Museum in Philadelphia and organized by the Philadelphia Retail Marketing Alliance.

Mae Reeves learned the trade in the early 1930s at the Chicago School of Millinery, adding business skills to the mix when she moved to Philadelphia in 1934. In 1940, she opened her first shop on South Street, designing, making and selling hats to women from all over the area, as well as such luminaries as Marian Anderson and Leonore Annenberg, who'd heard about her wonderful designs. She moved her business to West Philadelphia in the early 1940s and opened up a shop on 60th Street until her retirement in 1997, at age 85. Reeves currently lives in Darby, Pa.

The collection includes Reeves' extensive hat designs, antique furniture from her millinery shop and other personal items that tell the story of her remarkable career. The items will become part of Washington-based museum's permanent collection which is the subject of an ongoing series broadcast by National Public Radio.

The museum, created by an Act of Congress in 2003, is required by law to build a collection designed to illustrate the major periods of African American history; it begins with the origins in Africa and continues through slavery, reconstruction, the civil rights era, the Harlem Renaissance and into the 21st century. Special emphasis is placed on military history, popular culture and the full spectrum of the arts.

City Representative Johnson was joined by program speakers Michelle Shannon, Vice President of Marketing and Communications, Center City District; Romana Riscoe Benson, President and CEO of the African American Museum of Philadelphia; Designer Sarah Van Aken, owner of SA VA, and Dr. Renee Anderson, the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture's chief textile conservator and fashion historian.

"The Mae Reeves Collection is one of high importance because it tells so many fascinating stories," said Dr. Anderson. "On the surface it tells a fashion story. But beneath that is the story of a woman-owned business that embraced an entire family. Beneath that there's the story of Philadelphia's richly textured African American community. And through every part of this multi-tiered story is clear evidence of core American values – creativity, optimism and resiliency – just the values this museum is committed to celebrating as it celebrates African American history and culture."

In a separate statement released after the ceremony, Mayor Nutter extolled Reeves for advancing the business community.

"Mae Reeves' vision, initiative, and sheer determination in facing many odds to open her business and thrive in Philadelphia are qualities that are not only commendable, but ones we seek from business owners today as we work to attract new establishments citywide," said Mayor Nutter. "When you realize she not only had great business acumen, but incredible design and creative talents as well, it's clear she is highly deserving of this honor from the Smithsonian Institute. The City of Philadelphia is very pleased to be able to acknowledge her today for her impact on fashion and her shining example as a woman-owned, minority business proprietor for so many years here."

The event was sponsored by the City of Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Retail Marketing Alliance, the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation, The Philadelphia Tribune and the Philadelphia Multicultural Affairs Congress.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture was established in 2003 by an Act of Congress, making it the 19th Smithsonian Institution museum. It is the only national museum devoted exclusively to the documentation of African American life, art, history and culture. The Smithsonian Board of Regents, the governing body of the Institution, voted in January 2006 to build the museum on a five-acre site adjacent to the Washington Monument on the National Mall. The building is scheduled to open in 2015 at a cost of \$500 million. Until then, NMAAHC is presenting its touring exhibitions in major cities across the country and in its own gallery at the National Museum of American History.

The Philadelphia Retail Marketing Alliance is comprised of representatives from Center City District, the City of Philadelphia Commerce Department, the Office of the City Representative, the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation, the Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau and Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation with a mission to enhance the quality and quantity of Center City's retail offerings. Its purpose is to elevate Philadelphia's retail market, expand employment opportunities and increase city tax revenues. For more information, visit <http://PhiladelphiaRetail.com>.

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