The Ice Queen

On the small screen, Law & Order: Special Victims Unit star Tamara Tunie is a cool, levelheaded forensic specialist. In real life, she helps young girls in Harlem, New York, build their self-esteem and confidence as part of a laudable community skating program.

December 10, 2010 By Kellee Terrell

For the past decade, actress Tamara Tunie has been best known as the no-nonsense medical examiner Melinda Warner, on NBC's hit crime drama *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. But what people may not know about the Pennsylvania native is that she is a Tony Award–winning producer for the 2006 musical *Spring Awakening* and that she sang and danced on Broadway at the beginning of her acting career. She also grew up in a funeral home (her father is a mortician). "I saw dead people," she quips.

Another little-known fact: She advocates for numerous causes in New York City, such as raising money for HIV/AIDS organizations and speaking in favor of marriage equality for same-sex couples.

But one cause that's most dear to Tunie is helping strengthen young girls' sense of self-esteem. She sits as the chair emerita of Figure Skating of Harlem (FSH), a nonprofit that provides girls, ages 6 to 18, who live in Harlem, with academic and leadership training and figure skating opportunities. The goal of the program is to build girls' self-worth while providing support for their academic achievements and their overall well-being.

"I remember looking for an art and education program for girls in my community [to be part of], and then a business associate introduced me to Sharon Cohen, FSH's executive director," Tunie recalls. "She told me about the program's goals, and I knew that this was something that I wanted to participate in."

Tunie is clear that FSH is not about training the girls for the Olympics. "Skating is just one of the things we have them doing," she says. "We are focused on self-esteem building, education, leadership and preparing these girls to be young adults and contributors to their communities."

Tunie's concern for young girls stems from the serious pressures they face, the low self-esteem many suffer and their exposure to inappropriate material, thanks to technology and the media.

As a former student athlete, Tunie understands that getting involved in extracurricular activities

can combat some of those negative factors. “Because I was an athlete when I was younger, I understand how important these programs are. They helped me maintain my focus, stay on track and put my energies into positive and constructive things,” she says.

When she accomplished something as a student, Tunie recalls, she felt good because she knew her teammates and coaches were depending on her. “So I had to stay out of the mess,” she laughs. “It was also a confidence booster that I took with me into my adulthood and in my career.”

Tunie’s experiences are not rare. Numerous studies show that young people reap benefits when they participate in extracurricular activities. These positive challenges can keep children safe, protect them from negative and harmful behaviors, help them develop social skills, improve academic performance, build strong supportive relationships with adults other than their parents, boost morale, improve conflict management skills and even lead to better school attendance.

FSH, which has served more than 1,000 girls, offers numerous programs, such as tutoring, creative writing classes, figure skating history and theory classes and career development. They even have a mentorship program allowing these young ladies to visit the workplaces of professional women. In addition, the girls must sign a contract vowing that they’ll respect each other and maintain good grades. “We want to show the girls what opportunities are out there if they just apply themselves,” Tunie says. “I truly believe these kinds of programs prevent our kids from experiencing teenage pregnancies and getting involved with drugs. We are seeing success. We even have girls going off to college, which makes us feel great!”

Every year, FSH boasts a long waiting list. And Tunie is not hard-pressed to recite a variety of reasons for the program’s success: the lack of sports-related programs available for girls, FSH’s uniqueness—even the massive cuts that have plagued the art, music and physical education programs at public schools.

But there’s another reason why FSH and Tunie’s work is so important to the area’s young girls. It’s because crime, poverty, drugs and violence still affect many of them, even as Harlem continues to experience massive gentrification some feel is improving the socioeconomic landscape of the famous New York neighborhood.

“Tamara has been such a tremendous angel to FSH, and her involvement, financially and personally, means the world to our girls,” Cohen says. “She really believes in our mission of transforming the lives of young girls through the artistic discipline of skating and the academic challenges of education.”

But Tunie is more than just a celebrity who donates her name to a community program. Her commitment is real. Despite working long hours on the set of *Law & Order*, directing films and working on a feature-length cartoon for black girls, she carves out time to serve on FSH’s board of directors. She also holds fund-raisers in her Harlem home, hosts FSH’s annual Skating with the Stars gala and has treated some of the girls in the career mentorship program to a visit with her on the job.

Of course, Harlem's young girls are not the only ones who can benefit from role models such as Tunie and programs such as FSH. Black girls everywhere need help. The adverse socioeconomic and public health challenges they face on a daily basis are staggering, according to a number of national studies: a 40 percent high school dropout rate, increased poverty, and rising rates of teenage pregnancies, dating violence, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). What's more, these girls are also struggling with self-image issues and feelings of inadequacy. Despite popular belief (and the Alicia Keys song), not all black women and girls are invincible superwomen.

Last year, the Dove Self-Esteem Fund, a campaign to raise young people's self-esteem and body image, conducted a national study that explored these very issues by analyzing online data taken from 1,029 girls between ages 8 and 17. The findings were eye-opening: 68 percent of teenage African-American girls feel they do not measure up in some way regarding their looks, performance in school and relationships with family and friends; 41 percent reported engaging in negative activities such as disordered eating, cutting, bullying, smoking or drinking when they felt bad about themselves; and 28 percent admitted to talking badly about themselves.

"When you are a woman of color and you are surrounded by images of people who do not look like you—who don't have your skin tone, your hair texture, your facial structure, your body type, and who represent only a Caucasian view of beauty—you tend to look at your own beauty through that lens, even if it's unrealistic," says Jess Weiner, a best-selling author and the global ambassador for the Dove Self-Esteem Fund.

Tunie always encourages girls to ignore what the media tell them they should be. "I try to teach girls that you don't have to look like the video girls or fit into the image of the skinny Fifth Avenue blonde woman either."

Health educator Carla Stokes, PhD, MPH, agrees that the media lens distorts young people's self-image. "Media—whether it's the Internet, television, magazines or music—shape how these girls interpret themselves, their sexuality and how they see others around them," says Stokes, the founder of Helping Our Teen Girls in Real Life

Situations Inc. (HOTGIRLS), a nonprofit for African-American girls. Stokes suggests that teachers and parents be more mindful of the media images that their children are consuming. But she also stresses that self-esteem building begins in the home.
"Parents need to have conversations with their daughters about how these images make them feel," she says. Do they make girls feel they have to be overtly sexual to get boys' attention? Do video images of women make them have a negative perception of their own bodies?

Parental support is crucial in young girls' development. The same Dove study found that 95 percent of teenage African-American girls with low self-esteem wanted their parents to change their behavior toward them in at least one way, such as understanding them more, listening to them more and spending more time with them.

"I was lucky that I had parents who supported me and listened me," Tunie recalls of her childhood.

“Not everyone is so lucky.”

At the end of the day, Tunie believes the easiest thing we can do for young girls is to simply celebrate them. “We must teach girls to love themselves for who they are in this moment,” she says. “Constantly remind them they are unique, beautiful, talented and smart in their own individual way.”

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