

Ward 8 Welcomed and Celebrated William Sisters

Posted on November 25, 2014 by SLN4

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The Southeast Tennis and Learning Center (SETLC) in Ward 8 unveiled a new look Friday, Nov. 7 as 22-time Gram Slam title winner [Venus Williams](#) and reigning U.S. Open, World Tennis Association (WTA) Tour Championships and Olympic ladies singles champion [Serena Williams](#) arrived on the red carpet to welcome all to the center honored in their name.

The event, which was titled the SETLC Renovation Celebration, included a "Tennis Shoes, Ties and After 5" gala, followed by a ribbon-cutting ceremony dedicated to the Williams Arena. Also featured during the event were [Mayor Vincent Gray](#), Mayor-elect [Muriel Bowser](#) and former mayor [Marion Barry](#). Sportscaster [James "JB" Brown](#) hosted the gala, and it was all put on by the founder of the SETLC, Cora Masters Barry.

"It was her [Cora Masters Barry] tenacity and her commitment to our children that made this happen," Gray said.

"I grew up in an era when sports for some of us was basically basketball, football, and baseball. Now look at the door that's been opened; to expose young people to tennis."

The center debuted in 2001 and 13 years later, it was renovated with six new outdoor courts, six new indoor courts, an outdoor clay court and the Williams Arena, which could hold more than 400 people. D.C. government paid for the renovations with a grant totaling \$18 million. As far as the Williams' sisters' contribution, Venus' company, [V Starr Interiors](#), was responsible for the interior design of the center. In addition to that, both sisters continued to give their time and dedication to the children since its opening.

"Serena and I came here in 2001 and we're so excited to come back so many years later and see the center thriving," Venus said. "The enthusiasm, the positivity, and the discipline that are instilled in the children here, the 'can do' attitude is really something powerful. You have to come back other than today to see that."

Though the sisters continue to dedicate themselves to the center, that that doesn't mean they aren't busy. Venus is currently the world's No. 19-ranked player in singles. Serena, who recently just won the 2014 WTA finals in singles, is the world's No. 1-ranked player in singles.

"We're obviously on the tour trying to play the best that we can and win as much as we can and ultimately still inspire as many people as we can," Serena said.

"When we heard about this about a year ago we knew we had to be here. It reminds us when we were younger and all the hard work we put in and how it all paid off."

During the event, Cora Masters Barry proclaimed that SETLC's number one volunteer is Justus Bobbitt, who has been with the center for three years. Bobbitt, a [Howard University](#) elementary education major of Los Angeles, Calif., has personally seen the Williams' sisters' contribution to the center.

"The kids really love them and look up to them. They always bring their racquets and give them tips and techniques," Bobbitt said.

"She [Cora Masters Barry] basically dedicates her life to his. She always says tennis is the hook and education is the key. Tonight was really purposeful and a good balance of recognizing the children and fundraising."

The evening included the auctioning of trips, presentation of former SETLC scholars, awards for community leaders, a performance of "God Bless the Child" by two-time Tony Award nominee [Vivian Reed](#), and impersonations of notable African-American figures performed by the SETLC children.

"The most important thing is the children and they've [Venus and Serena Williams] always done that," Cora Masters Barry said.

"We are blessed and beyond blessed, and I'm very happy to have them here."

For Monica Almond, who attended the event and whose daughter is a SETLC participant, the new center a chance for growth for her child.

"The center was a nice center before, but we were limited. For my daughter, I think that the fact that there's more than tennis, there's tutoring and mentoring, and sewing and just tons of space," Almond said.

"Being able to open up this opportunity to more kids is just going to be powerful and we're excited."

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