

SPOTLIGHT on Lily Tomlin

by Clint Hamblin

More than 1,600 guests paid \$100 a ticket to celebrate the efforts and achievements of Horizons for Homeless Children (HHC), an organization that helps tackle the crisis of the more than 100,000 homeless families in Massachusetts. The highlight of the breakfast last week included a performance by the award-winning and quite incomparable actress Lily Tomlin.

It's 8 am, and we're at Boston's Seaport World Trade Center

enjoying former WCVB-TV anchor and journalist Natalie Jacobson as the guest emcee for HHC's 10th Annual Women's Breakfast. This non-profit organization is dedicated to improving the lives of young homeless children and families throughout Massachusetts, and according to testimonies given, this dedicated group has every right to be proud of their accomplishments.

Before Tomlin's appearance, the audience listened to several



PHOTOS: JACQUETTE SECTOR



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Thomas M. Menino, Mayor

distressing and yet triumphant stories. "After we moved to Boston, my husband left me and I found myself penniless with two children to take care of," said Charpay Batten, a program participant at one of HHC's Community Children's Centers. "Horizons for Homeless Children took care of my kids so that I could go to school. I graduate tomorrow, and I'm happy to say that we have a home, I have a job and I have two healthy and very happy children."

As if she were shot out of a cannon, the iconic Lily Tomlin then exploded on the stage, instantly turning this massive

dining room into an intimate Broadway theatre. On stage and on four enormous television screens, the audience loved seeing characters made famous throughout Tomlin's career including Ernestine, the ringy dingy telephone operator from television's "Laugh-In," and the oldest beauty consultant in the world, who demonstrated a fabulous new wrinkle cream that tightened up her sagging facial muscles until a dramatic sneeze forced her face to fall back to its original drooping state. The audience roared.

Tomlin has made 18 films, received an Oscar nomination for

the film *Nashville* and has won two Tonys, two Peabodys, six Emmys, a Grammy, the Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle awards, plus the Mark Twain Prize for American humor. Somewhere in this busy life, Tomlin finds time to be a determined advocate not only for HHC's homeless families, but also for animal rights. She is now embroiled in a project to move Jennie, a 22-year-old elephant living in a zoo in Los Angeles, to a safe and more appropriate habitat.

In a private interview while autographing her CDs, Tomlin lit up when asked how Jennie was doing. "After 22 years of service to the City of Los Angeles," Tomlin said, "Jennie needs to be retired to finish out her days in peace in a larger space and with other elephants she can socialize with. Elephants are very complicated animals, and it's time for Jennie to be put in a sanctuary."

After the performance, Tomlin met a small group of donors and reminisced about some of her career achievements. "9 to 5 was a difficult film for me," she said. "I had to pretend that Jane Fonda, Dolly Parton and I were doing a documentary on office procedures to justify my character."

Now approaching 70, Tomlin's passion, energy and physical stamina have not diminished. "When I was in school, I'd throw more and more of those rubber rings to the bottom of the swimming pool and then try to recover them all at the same time. This helped increase my strength for the physical humor I do," she recalled.

Surprisingly enough, Tomlin doesn't think of herself as a humorous person. "I'm not naturally funny. I do things that are funny," she said. When asked who influenced her, she said, "Imogene Coca, Joan Davis and Bea Lillie were wonderful physical comedians that made a great impression on me. I was never interested in Sid Caesar - only the female comedians."

Whether it's animal rights, rescuing families from homelessness or theatrical endeavors, Lily Tomlin is indefatigable. What's her latest project? "I'm thrilled to be cast as Mrs. McCluskey's sister on *Desperate Housewives*," Lily said.

Look out folks! Wisteria Lane will never be the same.

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