

OUT & ABOUT

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Birthday cakes, balloons, champagne -- this is the stuff of ordinary birthdays. But for civil rights legend Dorothy Height, who turned 93 on Thursday, only something really special will do: a musical.

"The Height of Excellence" is based on Height's 2003 memoir, "Open Wide the Freedom Gates." Friends such as Maya Angelou, George Faison and Joe Coleman are involved in the writing, directing and music, said Height, and plans call for a five-city tour in late spring or early summer. The only staging so far was a one-night sneak peek last September at Howard University. "That was sort of a dry run of a test," said Height. "They told me last night they're ready to go." The musical traces her remarkable life from childhood in Richmond through the civil rights and the women's movements. "So little is shown how much women do," said Height, who described seeing her life portrayed onstage as "awesome."

Thursday's annual Uncommon Height Awards -- which doubled as a birthday bash -- featured two numbers from the show, but it wasn't the night's only lyrical treat. After dinner, singer Patti Austin paid a musical tribute to the evening's guest of honor, Nancy Wilson. The 68-year-old jazz singer said she was moved to be singled out by Height for the award. "She wrote me this letter, and it brought tears to my eyes," said Wilson. "For someone who I admire so much to recognize me, it was --" Wilson then reached over her shoulder and patted her back.

The 700 guests at the J.W. Marriott included **National Council of Negro Women** Executive Director Cheryl Cooper, Maryland senatorial candidate Kweisi Mfume and actress Cicely Tyson. If you think this was glam, just wait for opening night.

Calories don't count when you eat standing up. That was just one of the great things about "Taste of the Nation" Thursday at the Marriott Wardman. More than 800 food lovers showed up for the benefit, which raised \$125,000 for Share Our Strength hunger relief programs, sampling food and wine donated by 50 of Washington's top restaurants.

The night was full of the randy good spirits that come when food, drink and good-looking singles squeeze together for a good cause. Chefs got the night off from the kitchen, there were plenty of wine samples, and guests had a tempting choice of finger-licking options. One of this year's favorites was Signatures' cheesecake pops (a mini lemon, white chocolate or cookies-and-cream cheesecake on a stick). "They went like hot cakes," said the restaurant's aptly named pastry chef, Leon Baker. The pops could be messy to eat, but that was part of the fun. "It just exploded," laughed Laura Hoffman, who ended up with cheesecake on her foot. "But it was yummy!" Not unlike, we might add, the party.

The first night of Purim on Thursday was the perfect excuse to learn more about Esther, one of the Bible's ancient heroines. About 30 women gathered at the home of Anne Ayalon, wife of the Israeli ambassador, for coffee and a lecture by Naomi Harris Rosenblatt, author of "After the Apple: Women in the Bible -- Timeless Stories of Love, Lust and Longing."

"We're talking about a woman who lived 2,400 years ago," said Rosenblatt. "But human nature has not changed one iota." Esther, an orphan, risked her life and saved the Jews in ancient Persia by using the classic enticements (food and sex) to plead her case to the king. Esther prevailed, the bad guys in the story die, and to this day Jewish children dress up as Esther, King Ahasuerus and his villainous adviser, Haman, to mark the holiday. Three cheers for the power of women, and pass the hamantaschen.