

Short on tiaras, long on elegance, International Red Cross Ball marks 55th year

By SHANNON DONNELLY

Sunday, Jan. 29, 2012

So this is what 55 gala years looks like elegant, bejeweled and all done up in red. The 55th annual International Red Cross Ball took place Saturday at The Mar-a-Lago Club -coincidentally, also all done up in red.

Mary Ourisman, former U.S. ambassador to Barbados, served as chairwoman for the event. The evening began around the pool — sheltered by a clear tent with open sides to keep the balmy breezes moving — with cocktails, food stations, a raw bar with an ice sculpture in the shape of the Red Cross symbol, and trays and trays of passed hors d'oeuvres.



The traditional diplomatic receiving line was in Mrs. Post's Ballroom, where red velvet ropes managed traffic flow and the closed doors kept the cool air in and noise out, making the how-do-you-dos less grueling — and considerably less sweaty — than in previous years.

There was a marked absence of tiaras this year, with even the chairwoman going without. But the women guests still sported their big gemological guns around necks, wrists and fingers, and dangling from earlobes. And the medals? Well, always the medals. Après reception, a quartet of trumpeters announced dinner, and the 450-plus guests made their way to the Grand Ballroom, which left no doubt as to why everybody was there.

Firey dance floor

Boston-based designer Bryan Rafanelli — he's the guy who did Chelsea Clinton's wedding — used deep red cloths for the tables, and set them with the club's gold-rimmed china and ornately patterned silver flatware. Gigantic "roses" made from red paper centered the tables, nested on either candelabra or in oversized crystal vases.

"Isn't this just the cleverest thing you've ever seen?" cooed one matron, tugging at a giant "petal" with a perfectly manicured hand. "So California." And then there was the red dance floor, which, after a few drinkees, was a bit like dancing atop fire. Not that we would know.

The event retained much of its traditional trappings — the Marine Corps Color Guard, the presentation of the ambassadors to the music of the Grand March from Aida; a sweet, though somewhat tremulous, a capella rendition of The Star-Spangled Banner; and, of course, The Marine's Hymn.

The evening's highlight was the presentation of the Lifetime Achievement Award to Michele Kessler, three-time chairwoman of the Red Cross Ball and Global Ambassador for the Red Cross' Measles Initiative, which has vaccinated almost a billion people and reduced childhood measles deaths by 78 percent.

Oh, and there was Donald Trump's donation of \$50,000 to the organization, paid on the spot with a check that somehow ended up in the hands of Patrick Park. "I thought it was for me until I saw the name on it," he said, laughing.

Dinner and dancing

After the thankfully brief presentation, the evening continued with dinner, lots of wine poured by lots of exceptionally good-looking young people (who were good-looking even before we put on the Champagne goggles, if you know what we mean), and dancing to the music of Peter Duchin and his Orchestra.

Kessler was honorary chairwoman. Susan Keenan and Mary Mochary were co-chairwomen. Proceeds benefit the programs and services of the Greater Palm Beaches Area chapter of the American Red Cross.

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