

## SPORTS

SUNDAY, JUNE 24, 2012 SPORTS 1

## BEST CELEBRITY RECEPTION AND GOLF TOURNAMENT

## Officer Lasso remembered at sports gala

By KEITH GROLLER  
Of The Morning Call

Baseball Hall of Famer Jim Rice got a huge ovation.

So did all of the popular ex-Phillies such as Tommy Greene, Jim Eisenreich, Ozzie Virgil Jr. and Allentown resident Art Mahaffey. Local favorites Jimmy Schaffer, Jack Fisher and Ned Bolcar took their bows as well.

In all, more than 30 former professional athletes were introduced at a reception Sunday night at the Sands casino, where the fourth annual BEST (Building Education Support Systems) celebrity sports gala combined the pro stars of yesteryear with the academic stars of today and tomorrow.

Local sports author, teacher and motivational speaker Billy Staples, serving as emcee, drew a rousing response for all of the athletes.

But he brought down the house with one special introduction.

Staples told the story of Katie Rivera and the horror that she and her family experienced in September 2003 in Freemansburg.

According to Morning Call reports of the case, George Gonzalez had dated Myra Rivera, Katie's mother, and became violent after she tried to break up.

Katie, 14 at the time, confirmed that he beat up, choked and stabbed her mother while in Queens, and then, after escaping police, followed her to Freemansburg, where he broke into the family home.

Gonzalez kidnapped Katie's aunt and was on the hunt for more family members in an incident that led to a five-hour standoff with police. The standoff cut off Freemansburg and caused a lockdown of an elementary



Jen Lasso (left), widow of Freemansburg police officer Robert Lasso, stands with scholarship recipient Katie Rivera and Joseph Lasso, Robert's brother.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

school.

It wasn't resolved until Gonzalez shot himself in the stomach after being tackled by a police officer.

Through the nightmare, Katie saw the valor and bravery of the law enforcement community. She called them her "heroes."

Nearly eight years later in August 2011, one of Katie Rivera's heroes answered another call. This call ended with much more

sadness.

It was the call that took the life of Freemansburg officer Robert Lasso, a husband and father of two, who was killed in the line of duty.

Since the incident involving Gonzalez, Rivera has grown up, graduated from Freedom High and Northampton Community College with a degree in criminal justice. While pursuing a bachelor's degree at St.

Francis College in Brooklyn, she has gone through the testing and is a prime candidate to become a member of the New York City Police Department.

So, it was only fitting on Sunday night that Rivera was named the first recipient of the Officer Robert Lasso Scholarship Award, one of the many honors presented by the BEST organization.

The entire Lasso family was present to honor Rivera.

"I am truly honored," she said. "I have such gratitude and admiration for all of those who put their lives on the line, like officer Lasso, to help others. They are true heroes. I wouldn't be here without them."

Both Rivera and Joe Lasso, Robert's brother, were students of Staples.

"Billy Staples, my middle school English teacher, and my brother are two people who have greatly impacted my life and they are both connected to this scholarship," Joe Lasso said. "It would mean the world to my brother to have his name attached to something that helps others, especially someone like Katie, a criminal justice major who is going to become a police officer just like him."

"It's amazing how everything comes full circle. Mr. Staples was my teacher and he has greatly helped Katie as well."

Joe Lasso said his brother was a big sports fan who was involved in athletics at Freedom and would have loved to meet the sports celebs in the room Sunday night.

But as many of them dabbed their eyes, it became clear that while he never met them, many of the sports stars now know who Robert Lasso was and what he was all about.

And they'll be rooting for Katie Rivera as well.