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ENTERTAINMENT/TGIF

Posted on: Friday, July 3, 2009

Tihati's Cha Thompson shares D.C. lu'au memories

Get the scoop on when the Obamas will next visit Isles

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By **Wayne Harada**

The Obamas are heading to Hawai'i this December.

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That's one of the untold morsels — shared by Michelle Obama with Cha Thompson — during last Thursday's White House lu'au, staged by Thompson and her Tihati Productions 'ohana on the South Lawn.

Congressional delegates and their families attended, about 2,500 altogether, with media coverage aplenty that should at least throw some sparks into Hawai'i's sinking visitor count.

The revelation of the first family's holiday plans emerged in a one-on-one conversation between the first lady and Thompson.

"We'll see you back home in December," Mrs. Obama told Thompson, a Honolulu-based Polynesian show producer who also did a solo hula at the summer bash.

It was no surprise that award-winning chef Alan Wong was tapped to provide the lu'au menu; the Obamas dine at his Alan Wong's flagship restaurant when they're in the Islands.

So how did the president designate the Tihati organization to do the entertainment?

Oprah Winfrey recommended them.

"I asked a social secretary in Michelle's office, 'Just how did we get asked?'" said Thompson. Turns out it was the broadcast mogul, who last

August similarly enlisted the Tihati talent to perform at an exclusive soiree at The Lodge at Koele on Lana'i, where 30 Tihati dancers, singers, conch shell blowers and fire knife dancers performed.

"I flipped out," said Thompson. "They talked to Oprah!"

Thompson — still on an emotional high — had lots of other observations:

"The president is a good kisser, he kissed me on the cheeks. He has not lost that aloha kiss. And he's also a hugger. We hugged, a couple of times.

"He talks so normal, you have to remind yourself he's the leader of the free world. Looks exactly like he is on TV," she said of the president. "The first lady is tall; that's why she usually wears flats."

When President Obama first appeared on the South Lawn, he was swarmed by the party-hearty politicians, said Thompson. He said, "Guys, will you excuse me. I gotta go see my people from Hawai'i," and grabbed Thompson's hand before exchanging hugs.

She addressed him as Mr. President. He correctly called her Cha pronounced as in Charlene, her full name (some folks mistakenly pronounce Cha as it sounds in Charlie).

She was in a kiss-kiss mood. "I kissed the children. I kissed Bo (the first dog). The president and the first lady shook everyone's hand. Everyone in the cast had a chance to take pictures."

The first lady and the girls, Sasha and Malia, walked over to the Tihati performers to say aloha. "It was all just amazing," said Thompson.

The first family dressed casually; the president avoids aloha shirts, so chose a plain blue/purple short-sleeve number, accentuated by an orchid lei; Michelle chose a floral-print dress, "kind of like spring, so definitely aloha wear," said Thompson. "The children had aloha wear."

There was local-style, good-fun rivalry, about crosstown high school loyalties.

"The president shouted, 'Who's from Punahou?'" said Thompson. "And Afatia (son Afatia Thompson) said, 'Me. Class of '96.' The president said, 'Oh, I'm '79.' And those of us from Farrington and Kahuku blew them to the ground; it was fun kind teasing, not bad kind."

There was one gotta-do thing. "I told Michelle, 'You touched the queen of England; can I touch you?'" said Thompson, embracing her.

The Tihati group spent hours in the White House. Rehearsal space was provided; dressing room space, too, though a tent on the lawn was erected for quick-changes during the three half-hour performances.

"We rehearsed just outside the Oval Office," said Thompson. "The president must have been inside; the doors were closed. Then, lights came on at darkness; we could see the light shining in the cracks of the door."

Security was tight. "It was like airport security; dogs sniffed our luggage, we had our IDs checked," said Thompson.

Sen. Daniel K. Akaka's office arranged a White House tour for the Tihati group.

"In the White House tour, I stood in front of Hillary Clinton's picture. 'Oh, I love you, too,' I said.

"The docents told us that every room is used — like a living museum. We were told about one of the presidents, in the 1800s, and I asked the docent if he was aware that the only palace in America is in Hawai'i? That it had flushing toilets, hot water, phones and electricity — before the White House? That was one of the lasting things I remembered about being an 'Iolani Palace docent myself."

Hawai'i's congressional delegation attended the lu'au — Sen. Daniel K. Inouye and his new bride; Akaka and his wife, and Congressman Neil Abercrombie. "It was a surprise to see Congressman Faleomavaega (Eni Hunkin), delegate from American Samoa, wearing a Tihati shirt," said Thompson.

Everyone in the Tihati entourage was under the presidential spell. "The president had an arm on (Tihati comptroller) Alan Kutaka's shoulder; someone shot a photo with Alan's back and Obama's hand, but there are no faces." No matter. Kutaka-san has an I-was-there-treasure.

Thompson has one regret. "I didn't get his autograph."

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Tihati dancers at the White House lu'au.

Pili'alo'ha Gaison/Tihati Productions photos



Amid Tihati troupers, the Obamas, in lei, flank Cha Thompson, organizer of the lawn lu'au, which replaced the conventional White House picnic usually held for Congress members and their families.

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