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Ewing's 'Miss Amy' gets her Grammy

By Michele Angermiller/For The Times

Last year, Ewing resident Amy Otey was thrilled when she learned she had been nominated for a Grammy Award in the Best Children's Album category.

Otey was part of a compilation called "Healthy Food For Thought: Good Enough to Eat" a spoken word/musical CD featuring artists such as Julian Lennon that touted the virtues of good food habits.

She walked the red carpet and happily chatted with reporters about the project, but the award last year went to Julie Andrews.



Chris Pizzello/AP Photo

Miss Amy and Big Kids Band arrive at the 54th annual Grammy Awards on Sunday, Feb. 12, 2012 in Los Angeles.

Otey, known to her audience as Miss Amy, kept her chin up, cheerfully quipping that if you were going to lose to anyone, it might as well be to Andrews.

She returned to the 54th Annual Grammy Awards this year with multiple nominations -- for her solo record, "Fitness Rock and Roll" and her involvement on the album "All About Bullies ... Big and Small." The album, with its message of self-empowerment, won the Best Children's Album category Sunday, and Otey can now add multi-nominated/Grammy Award Winning Featured Artist to her name.

For the project, Otey recorded a new song, titled "Keep Your Chin Up." The song, produced by Otey's husband, Alex, is a rap/musical version of the children's poem by author, poet and songwriter Eric Ode. It was featured along with contributions by Hooters member Eric Bazilian; E Street Band member Steven Van Zandt; former E Street drummer Vini Lopez, as well as Philly radio personalities Grover Silcox, Debbie Calton and Cyndy Drue. Produced by Steve Pullara, Kevin Mackie, Gloria Domina, James Cravero and Pat Robinson, the collection of spoken word poetry and music brought the very current issue of bullying to its targeted audience of young people who may be dealing with the issue.

"It's all part of building a better world and fits directly with my mission of improving the lives of children," Otey said.

Other Grammy Award winners Sunday included Montclair State University professor Robert Aldridge and Princeton University professor Steven Mackey, who both received honors in the classical music categories.

Aldridge won the contemporary classical composition award for his opera "Elmer Gantry," a lively, skillfully constructed and moving examination of religion based on Sinclair Lewis' novel. Created with librettist Herschel Garfein, the opera received its New Jersey premiere in 2008 at Montclair State University, and the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra performed a suite from the work in 2010.

The "Children's Album" category was announced in a preshow telecast at Los Angeles' Convention Center.

On the night before the awards, Otey attended the Special Merit Awards and Nominees Reception in the Ebell Theatre in Los Angeles with such legends as Diana Ross, Glen Campbell and The Allman Brothers Band. It started as a joyous event, but the momentum shifted the second news broke about the death of singer and Newark native Whitney Houston.

"Grammy President Neil Portnow was giving his closing remarks, when everyone's phones started vibrating, and a buzz went through the audience: Whitney Houston had died. So many of us were in disbelief," Otey said. "It was a somber night, but nevertheless, every time the members of my band and I turned around we were bumping into people and having a chance to share musical stories."

While in California, Otey got a chance to entertain 800 children in four schools in Pasadena. She did full shows -- a mix of fitness and music. Otey, a fitness advocate, also played a show with her Big Kids Band for an audience of service families at the Los Angeles Air Force Base, and she visited the UCLA Medical Center pediatrics ward as part of her involvement with Musicians On Call, an organization that brings music to patients in the hospital in an effort to lift their spirits through music.