

'Oprah's Big Give' Comes To Park Avenue Out & About

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Since when did being a couch potato count as the kind of public-spirited behavior typically associated in this column with attending a fund-raising event? Since Sunday night, when a group of creative professionals gathered at the Park Avenue home of Island Def Jam Music Group chairman Antonio "L.A." Reid and his wife, Erica, to watch the premiere of the new reality television series, "Oprah's Big Give," produced by Oprah Winfrey's production company and the producers of the "The Amazing Race."

In the first show, set in Los Angeles, 10 contestants had four days to help raise money for five people, including a wounded soldier who fought in Iraq and a homeless woman. The challenges will continue for the next seven weeks on ABC Sunday nights at 9 p.m., with the judges — Kansas City Chiefs football player Tony Gonzalez, British chef Jamie Oliver, and Malaak Compton-Rock, the wife of comedian Chris Rock— eliminating a contestant each week.

The viewing party at the Reids' home was special because Mrs. Reid had as her co-host one of the judges, Mrs. Compton-Rock, whose qualifications for being on the show, she said, are her years of experience in "philanthropic living." She has raised money professionally and as a volunteer for numerous causes, including Unicef, Hurricane Katrina relief, Safe Horizon, Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools, and the Triple Negative Breast Cancer Foundation. She also founded a Brooklyn-based nonprofit that provides beauty services to women going from welfare to work, StyleWORKS. Coinciding with Mrs. Compton-Rock's stint on "Oprah's Big Give," she has recently launched a Web site, www.angelrockproject.com, which she says is intended to inspire acts of generosity and chronicle her own activities.

True to her spirit, the "Big Give" party Sunday was no couch potato party. Before the show started, the hosts engaged guests in an act of generosity by asking them to bring new shoes, which are going to be delivered to the Henry Street Settlement this morning.

Deborah Roberts — who wore to the party patent-leather boots by Lanvin, which she first admired on interview subject Michelle Obama — shopped with her 9-year-old daughter Leila. They brought fuzzy boots and colorful sneakers, like the ones Leila likes to wear.

The chief creative officer of Liz Claiborne, Tim Gunn, stopped by (with cameras rolling — footage from the party will be shown on Monday's edition of Oprah) to announce his company's donation of 500 pairs of shoes.

Mr. Gunn also brought gift bags for all the guests, but Ms. Reid and Mrs. Compton-Rock had very specific orders for their contents: "So many times we wind up with these goody bags and we don't know what to do with them. Tonight, you have to promise to pay it forward," Ms. Reid said.

Actress Holly Robinson Peete said Mrs. Compton-Rock is a constant source of inspiration. "With some friends, I chitchat about what's on TV. With Malaak, we always talk about philanthropy and service. She gets it," Ms. Robinson Peete said. "Lots of our friends are, shall we say, philanthropically challenged. It takes someone like Malaak to show them the way."

During the viewing of the show, Mrs. Compton-Rock answered her friends' burning questions such as "Is Tony single?" (no, he's married and his wife is pregnant) and "Which judge was the meanest?" (No one was mean, Ms. Compton-Rock said, but the toughest judge was Mr. Oliver, because he asked so many questions).

There were also discussions about what constitutes effective giving. Was calling a personal contact to ask for money smart thinking or cheating? Do fashion shows raise money? It was easily agreed on that the most effective teams invested time in getting to know their subjects and tapped into their subject's own support networks.

It remains to be seen whether the reality show format can explore the best practices of philanthropy. In fact, that isn't necessarily a goal of the show. One of the show's executive producers, Ellen Rakieta, said in a conference call last week that "the word philanthropic doesn't really work for me. ... This is a competition show about how big can one person give in a deadline."

But the guests at the party were optimistic about the show's potential — and hopeful that it might have a greater impact than a fund-raising event in a hotel ballroom. "At a charity event, you're preaching to the choir," the Today show's Al Roker, a frequent emcee of such events, said. "Something like this has the opportunity for a massive ripple effect."

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