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Central Park exec is working to make new ice rink, pool a sanctuary for the community



Darline Lalanne, director of public programs for the Central Park Conservancy and general manager of the new Davis Center rink and pool, seen here, set to open in April.

Darline Lalanne spent most of her childhood in Spanish Harlem after emigrating from Haiti with her family at age 7. But despite living close to Central Park — including a few months on 110th Street, just steps from its entrance — it didn’t quite feel like home.

“In my household, we didn’t really talk about Central Park,” she said. “It just wasn’t part of the conversation.”

Now Lalanne is spearheading a project that could transform how the park is perceived by families like her own, serving as general manager of the Davis Center — the \$160 million pool and ice-skating facility set to replace Lasker Rink and Pool just south of the Harlem Meer lake at the park’s north end. Once it opens on April 26 after three years of construction, Lalanne will be in charge of its programming, from lawn games to skating lessons, and hopes to strengthen community ties to the historically neglected uptown side of the park.

“I’m really dedicated to ensuring that everyone, regardless of their income, feels that this space is meant for them and has a chance to experience this beautiful oasis,” Lalanne said.

Lalanne was raised to value education — a bilingual Haitian Creole-English program at a Harlem public school helped her get a foothold in New York. Years later, after graduating from college, she stopped into a storefront on 125th Street that she had mistaken for an internet cafe where she could print her resume. In fact, it was an office for Score! Educational Centers, a tutoring service owned by Kaplan, where she ended up working for eight years.

From there Lalanne built a career in nonprofit fundraising and operations, with stints at a number of city-based educational groups. Around 2013 she heard about the nonprofit Figure Skating in Harlem and began volunteering for it — only to be asked by its founder, Sharon Cohen, to come aboard full time as director of programs and operations.

DOSSIER

BORN Port Au Prince, Haiti

GREW UP Kafou Fey, Haiti; Spanish Harlem

RESIDES Newark, New Jersey

EDUCATION Bachelor's in psychology with a minor in marketing advertising, Pace University

OUT OF OFFICE Lalanne is a big *Law & Order* fan and jokes that she could recite some of Ice-T's lines from the show by heart.

MINDFULNESS She works to keep Central Park a tranquil space and practices the same values in her own life — by keeping a journal and doing daily breathing exercises.

Lalanne developed a love of figure skating during her time at the nonprofit, which aims to build confidence in young women of color by teaching them to skate and offering academic training. It also introduced her more fully to Lasker, the concrete eyesore where Figure Skating in Harlem held many of its programs.

“It was a great opportunity, but more importantly, it allowed me to build a love for the facility,” she said. At the same time, it exposed her to Lasker’s flaws: The building was aging and sat unused for about half the year, when it was too cold to swim or too warm to skate. (Lalanne, despite growing up nearby, had not even known Lasker had a swimming pool.) The facility shut down in 2021, when the Central Park Conservancy began a three-year construction effort fueled by \$100 million raised by the conservancy and an additional \$60 million provided by the city.

Last year Lalanne was working at New York Cares as a fundraising director when a friend sent her an intriguing job opening at the conservancy. She got the position, for which she wears two hats: as general manager of the Davis Center and director of public programs for the entire conservancy.

In running the conservancy’s public programs, Lalanne supervises everything from tour guides to a free event series at the Harlem Meer. As the Davis Center nears its opening, she is planning free and low-cost activities and raising money to ensure they can sustain themselves.

“Ice time is extremely expensive, and we want to do just the opposite when it comes to our community partners, so we are constantly fundraising to make sure we are meeting the needs of our community,” she said. (Figure Skating in Harlem has continued using some of its other venues during the closure and will be among the groups that use the Davis Center once it opens.)

Given Lasker’s yearslong closure, Lalanne and her colleagues will also need to introduce their neighbors to the new facility — and spread the happy news that the Davis Center will be open to the public year-round. She hopes it will play the same role in visitors’ lives as the park itself: “a sanctuary from the pace and pressures of city life.”