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WOMEN AT THE TOP

by Alexia Bararcia

INDIVIDUALLY they are worlds apart - the golden athlete, the terminal cancer patient, the genocide survivor and the pioneer of black performing arts.

But together they are four women whose courage and determination have marked them out among their peers.

Today, double Olympic champion Kelly Holmes, bone cancer sufferer Jane Tomlinson, actress and theatre director Josette Bushell-Mingo, and survivor of the Rwandan genocide-turned campaigner Mary Kayitesi Blewitt were being honoured for their achievements at the prestigious Women Of The Year Awards.

The event - established in 1955 - takes place at the Savoy Hotel, with a guest list featuring some 400 of the world's most eminent women.

Athens gold medal-winner Kelly Holmes was receiving the Outstanding Achievement prize for her athletic successes - and her 'gutsy determination and commitment'.

Applauding the 34-year-old as a 'great champion', the ceremony's executive chair Gayle Morrison told the Standard: 'We want to acknowledge her strength of character, determination and commitment which propelled her to the top of her discipline despite injury, illness and disappointment over the years.'

The awards, voted for by a 57-strong panel of female industry leaders, were also honouring 'truly inspirational' mother-of-three Jane Tomlinson with the Frink Award for achievement through personal hardship.

The 40-year-old was diagnosed with incurable cancer four years ago - but has completed a string of gruelling athletic challenges in a bid to raise cash for her cancer charity, Jane's Appeal.

Among these are the London Triathlon, the Great North Run, and a 1,905-mile tandem cycle ride from Rome to her Leeds home - raising almost GBP 1 million in the process. Despite insisting the epic Rome trip would be her last marathon effort, Tomlinson will now travel to Florida to compete in a full Ironman event.

The competition will see her take part in a back-to-back two-and-a-half-mile swim, a 100-mile bike ride and a 26-mile run within only 17 hours.

Theatre director Bushell-Mingo was receiving the Craymer Prize for Enterprise for her work as founder of pioneering black performing arts organisation Push.

And Rwandan genocide survivor Mary Kayitesi Blewitt is named winner of the Pilkington Window To The World Award for her work as founder and director of the Rwandan Survivors Fund.

A spokeswoman for the Women Of The Year Awards said: 'This is a salute to a woman whose work and courage, in often dangerous or intimidating circumstances, has opened our eyes to a world we would not otherwise have understood.'

Among the judges for this year's event - organised by the international Women of the Year Assembly - are Glenys Kinnock, Maureen Lipman, Eve Pollard and Virginia Wade. Iraq's most eminent female broadcaster Amal Al Mudarris is guest of honour.