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Gold medalist Kayla Harrison welcomed home

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 20, 2012

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MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

About 200 supporters greeted Kayla Harrison at a Boston restaurant to celebrate her Olympic performance in judo.

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Kayla Harrison's coach said she shocked the world when earlier this month she became the first US judo athlete to win Olympic gold. But Harrison did not surprise herself.

On Sunday, the 22-year-old Marblehead resident told a cheering crowd of more than 200 supporters that she knew she had it in her.

"I said before I left that when I won this gold medal I was going to win it for all of you, and that's what I did," Harrison said, proudly wearing her new hardware at the Empire Asian Restaurant & Lounge in Boston.

She built that self-confidence after fighting off thoughts of quitting the sport. She has said that she contemplated suicide.

For three years, beginning at age 13, Harrison was sexually

abused by a coach, Daniel Doyle, who is serving a 10-year federal prison sentence.

When she was 16, the Ohio native moved to Massachusetts, where she trained in Wakefield under her Olympic coach, Jimmy Pedro, who twice won Olympic bronze, and his father, Jim Pedro, Sr.

For the first two years, Harrison lived with Marblehead resident Patrick O'Sullivan and his family.

"She's such a wonderful person, and an icon for my kids," O'Sullivan said Sunday before the welcome-home party, waiting anxiously for Harrison to arrive.

Harrison said she hopes her success will help judo gain more attention in the United States.

"That's my goal now: to get my sport out there, to make people aware that it's one of the best sports in the world," she said. "Whether you're the 6-year-old kid who wants to learn some confidence or you're the 60-year-old woman who wants to learn self defense. It really has something to offer for everyone at all ages."

In a room filled with friends and family Sunday, Harrison was also mobbed by cameras, reporters, and fans. She signed autographs and posed for photos.

She joked that instead of waking up in the early morning hours to "sweat, work, and cry" during training, "now I wake up at 5 a.m. to get hair and makeup done," for media and public appearances.

"It's been overwhelmingly positive and so much fun," she said.

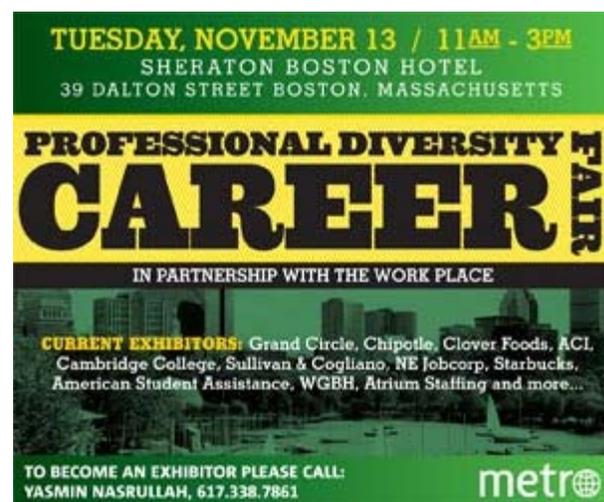
"I don't know that it's ever going to sink in," Harrison added. "You hope that one day your dreams are going to come true. But, to be the first Olympic champion it's huge. I don't think I realize how huge it is."

Sunday's party also welcomed home Travis Stevens, a 26-year-old Woburn resident who trained alongside Harrison in Wakefield before representing the US judo team in the Olympics. The Tacoma, Wash. native narrowly lost a controversially judged semifinal match and then lost a close match for the bronze.

"Everyone else competed to their expectations," he said. "I feel like I let people down."

Moments before Harrison arrived and the celebration began, Stevens said he appreciated his supporters and would do his best to try to enjoy himself.

"It's going to be hard to get through," he said. "It's a reminder of how I didn't succeed."



Harrison hopes to eventually become a firefighter, like O'Sullivan and her fiance, Aaron Handy. She said she is also looking forward to at some point starting to plan a wedding with Handy.

But, for now, Harrison said she is enjoying the moment.

"There's no feeling like this in the world, and I'm probably going to want to feel it again in 2016," she said.

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