“Building Bridges” was the theme of the University’s celebration of its 56th Founders Day, in recognition of the newest addition to the University campus—a replacement road bridge between The Hartt School and Lincoln Theater.

The University community bundled up and came out for a ribbon-cutting ceremony, float contest, birthday cake, and lots of school spirit! The charter establishing the University of Hartford was signed on Feb. 21, 1957.

Past, present, and future were represented as the ribbon was cut by Dave Schupp ’63 (right), a University regent; Emily Audibert ’13 (center), a senior in the Barney School of Business and the reigning Miss Connecticut; and Courtney Payne ’16 (left), a first-year student and resident of the Hawk Spirit Residential Learning Community in Hawk Hall. After the ribbon-cutting ceremony, Schupp, Audibert, Payne, and Hillyer College Dean David Goldenberg judged a float contest held on the bridge. The winning entry, created by the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee, was called “Bridging Athletics and Academics.” President Walter Harrison was master of ceremonies for the Founders Day celebration held on the new bridge. The old bridge spanned a 50-year-old dam that was demolished during the complex construction project that began last June 2012. The road between The Hartt School and Lincoln Theater was closed to pedestrian and vehicular traffic until January 2013. After the festivities, participants paraded to Gengras Student Union to warm up, eat birthday cake, listen to music by the Pep Band, and receive T-shirts and giveaways. Cutting the birthday cake are (l-r) Courtney Payne ’16, Howie the Hawk, and Emily Audibert ’13. Spirits were high despite the frigid temperature, thanks in large part to the University of Hartford cheerleaders, the Pep Band, and Howie the Hawk.
University of Hartford women’s basketball coach Jen Rizzotti distinctly remembers the last time she set foot in Knoxville, Tenn., before this year. It was January 1996, and she and her University of Connecticut teammates were booed off the court after ending the University of Tennessee’s 69-game home winning streak.

Her return trip to Knoxville 17 years later would prove just as memorable—and this time she would receive two standing ovations.

Rizzotti was inducted into the Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame on June 8, along with five other honorees, in a two-hour ceremony in downtown Knoxville’s historic Bijou Theater. Inducted for her accomplishments as a player, Rizzotti is joined in the Hall of Fame’s 2013 class by former players Annette Smith-Knight (Texas), Peggie Gillom-Granderson (Mississippi), and Sue Wicks (Rutgers), and coaches Gary Blair (Texas A&M) and Jim Foster (Chattanooga).

Among the crowd were two dozen Rizzotti supporters, including four of her former players; legendary coach Pat Summitt, whose vision led to the establishment of the Hall of Fame 15 years ago; and Rizzotti’s mentor and college coach, Geno Auriemma, who was present in the theater as well as part of a witty taped video introduction for Rizzotti that also featured former teammate Rebecca Lobo.

In her acceptance speech, Rizzotti gave much of the credit for her success as a player and person to her family. She noted that her father gave her the athleticism and drive and “never let me win at anything until I was able to truly beat him”; her mother handed down her work ethic and competitiveness.

Rizzotti also talked about her newest family. “The people I have met in the last 14 years at the University of Hartford have enriched my life more than I could possibly have imagined,” she said.

After being a key component in the University of Connecticut’s first national championship team in 1995, Rizzotti had a remarkable senior season in 1996. She was named national player of the year by the Associated Press and was the recipient of the Wade Trophy, awarded to the greatest female basketball player in the country who not only excels athletically but also serves as a positive role model on and off the court.

Since taking over the coaching reins 14 years ago, Rizzotti has turned the UHart women’s basketball program into one of the nation’s top mid-major programs. She has led the Hawks to six NCAA tournaments and multiple appearances in the national Top 25 poll. Her coaching success has extended onto the international stage, where she has guided two U.S. national teams to gold medals in the FIBA world championships.

“Although I am in the Hall of Fame as a player, and I’m certainly proud of all my accomplishments,” Rizzotti says, “I feel like I was really meant to be a basketball coach. I do hope, when all is said and done, that I’ll be recognized for my contributions to the sport from a coaching perspective as much as I impacted the sport as a player.”

See a tribute video and photo gallery at hartford.edu/observer.