



Top guns

Academy salutes world-changers



Sean Brady/Republic

Jeffrey Metcalf and Margaret Sibley talk with retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Chuck Yeager.

By **JEAN NOVOTNY**
The Arizona Republic

"A is for apple," said young Steven Sabelman of Culver City, Calif., as he sat down at Jim Henson's table Friday afternoon at the Hyatt Regency Scottsdale.

"And 6 is my number."

Henson, creator of the *Sesame Street* characters who have taught America's kids their ABC's and 1-2-3's, smiled knowingly.

A few tables away at the American Academy of

Achievement's annual meeting sat another honored guest whom the 375 young people in the academy's "Salute to Excellence" program also associate with apples, but Apples of another variety — John Sculley, chairman and chief executive officer of Apple Computer, Inc.

Minutes earlier, Sculley had told the luncheon gathering about the question that Steven Jobs, co-founder and past chairman of Apple and a past academy honoree,

posed to him in 1983 when he asked Sculley to take over the company.

Jobs asked Sculley, then president of the Pepsi-Cola Co.: "Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life or do you want to change the world?"

Sculley said he decided it would be more fun to change the world and engineer Apple's return to glory in the computer field. And he urged the teen-agers to be willing to take similar risks in their lives.

Risk-taking was the theme of all the speeches Friday by some of the 41 celebrities like Sculley and Henson who are being honored this year with the academy's Golden Plate Awards.

During the weekend, there were also talks by some of the past honorees, such as retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Chuck Yeager, the man who broke the sound barrier, and two Valley residents — humorist Erma Bombeck and artist Fritz Scholder.

Each year the academy brings its "who's who of heroes" together with the nation's top graduating high school seniors for a weekend extravaganza that movie-maker Steven Spielberg, who was honored in 1986, calls "the gathering of the greats." The students range from National Merit Scholars to top athletes.

The "greats" are people who have established themselves in a variety of fields.

They have won Pulitzer and Nobel prizes, Tony awards, Heisman trophies and Oscars.

They have sat on the Supreme Court and in the Oval Office, conquered Mount Everest and developed the concept of artificial intelligence. They have supplied us with running shoes and cornflakes, written our best sellers, built our shopping centers, and given us Transformers, those ingenious robot toys.

So if they are all so smart, what are they doing in Scottsdale when the temperature is pushing 110 degrees?

"These people are traveling here from around the world," said Wayne Reynolds, executive director of the academy. "They don't mind. It's much better here than it was in Washington, D.C., last year. It was 95 degrees, and the humidity must have been 90 percent."

And besides, Karl Eller invited them. He is chairman and chief executive officer of the Circle K Corp. and chairman of the board of Swensen's Ice Cream Co., both of which are based in the Valley.

Eller, host chairman, was honored by the academy five years ago, and he and his family attend the gatherings every year to take part in the interplay between the students and the honorees.

"I've learned quite a bit from the meetings," he said. "You learn from the experiences of others. It teaches you that you have to fail in order to succeed."

Eller said the kids ask some very interesting questions, such as wondering what right the media have to pry into the affairs of public figures.

John F. Wolfe, president and publisher of the *Columbus Dispatch* in Columbus, Ohio, was asked that question Friday. He said he feels that such investigation is not necessary unless there are extenuating circumstances, as in the case of former presidential hopeful Gary Hart and Donna Rice.

Yeager said he is asked all kinds of questions, such as which aircraft is his favorite (the F-18 fighter). However, the question he traditionally gets is: "How did it feel to break the sound barrier?"

Yeager's answer: "It's a job."

And to their questions about *The Right Stuff*, the saga about test pilots and the space program, Yeager said, "I didn't really read the book. . . . And as far as the movie goes, you've got to look at it as entertainment, not as documentary."

And his assessment of the hit movie, *Top Gun*: "The story was a soap opera, but the flying was fantastic."

Yeager added, "One thing I do try to impress on these kids is that we all make it look easy. But for every one of us, there were a thousand who tried and failed. You've got to be in the right place at the right time and have a lot of luck. And it helps to have rich parents."

Lloyd Richards, a 1987 honoree who earlier this month won a Tony Award for best director for *Fences*, said he takes the questioning very seriously.

"It's never small talk," said Richards, dean and artistic director of the Yale School of Drama and Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Conn., and one of the most influential men in American theater.

"What is at stake is their lives. They're going to be making some choices that will really affect their lives. . . . From them one learns about passion and the freshness of passion. Fear and desire — you experience all of that with them."

Richards told the students about how he gave up his plans to be a lawyer to go into the theater despite the fact that everyone advised him against it. The naysayers told him there was no security in it.

"What is security?" Richards said. "Is it simply the fact that month after month you can meet the bills? Security for me is getting up in the morning and not being concerned with the hours, not worrying about the paycheck, but doing what one loves."

That, too, was the message from Suzanne Farrell of the New York City Ballet.

Farrell said dancing is what she loves, and she will do it as long as she is able though she knows that may not be for long. Four months ago Farrell had surgery to replace a hip joint.

"Life will be different," she said, "but it will be the best I can make it. . . . My most profound commitment is to now. The past is over, and the future is unknowable. I feel I must experience every moment as I live it because I will never experience it again."

Henson, Sculley, Wolfe, Richards and Farrell are among this year's winners of the Golden Plate Awards, which will be presented by the academy at a black-tie dinner tonight.

Other honorees include former U.S. Sen. Barry Goldwater; Jane Goodall, who has spent the past 26 years in Africa studying the social behavior of chimpanzees; Henry R. Kravis, Wall Street's master of the leveraged buy-out; Reinhold Messner, the first climber to complete mountaineering's grand slam — ascending the 14 highest peaks in the world, without bottled oxygen; Sandra O'Connor, associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court; Dick Rutan and Jeana Yeager, the pilots on *Voyager's* epic flight around the world; and Diane Sawyer, correspondent and co-editor of *60 Minutes*.

This morning, the participants will take chartered jets to the Grand Canyon for lunch at the El Tovar Hotel. Other activities of the weekend, which costs the academy and sponsors \$800,000, include a reception at the Heard Museum, a party at Scholder's home in Scottsdale and a hoedown and barbecue at Rawhide Western theme town, featuring entertainment by country singer Loretta Lynn, also a past recipient of the Golden Plate Award.