

1993 Salute to Excellence

Stars of today and tomorrow meet in Glacier

Notables share insights with young students

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EAST GLACIER PARK – Ben Houston met Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf the first evening here.

Later, the Great Falls High School graduate had dinner with a Pulitzer Prize winner, an architecture historian and a Broadway lyricist.

After dinner, he talked with Montana paleontologist, John "Jack" Horner and novelist Pat Conroy, who wrote "The Prince of Tides."

And that was just the first of three days here at the Glacier Park Lodge, three days filled with household celebrities like Philadelphia Eagles running back Herschel Walker and actor Tom Selleck.

But there were more than celebrities present – there were also lots of intellectual types, people with a Nobel Prize on their resume.

"It's overwhelming, the number of really high-ranking people and the amount of accomplishment they've had in their lives," said Houston, who plans to study chemistry, physics and math at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash. "I can't believe I get to see some of the people we read about in school."

About 900 notables from all corners of the country came to the Crown of the Continent this weekend for what was billed as the greatest gathering of leaders in the history of Montana.

The event was the 32nd annual "Salute to Excellence," a low-profile gathering of high-powered people – including about 330 high school students, almost two dozen from Montana – under the auspices of the American Academy of Achievement.



Retired Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, left, chats with a welcoming delegation in the lobby of Glacier Park Lodge.

In previous years the gathering has been held in major cities like New York and Las Vegas. But Missoula Industrialist Dennis Washington served as an ambassador of sorts, bringing the affair to the 80-year-old lodge in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains.

Washington, who owns the biggest construction company in the state, the former Anaconda Co. copper mine in Butte and Montana Rail Link, says the area holds a special spot in his heart.

When he started his construction company, one of his first jobs was in the park. Washington said he finds the sheer size of the park very humbling.

"I really get a feeling about Glacier Park," he said. Among the notables at the lodge were at least eight Nobel Prize Laureates (six of them winning in physics) and four Pulitzer Prize winners (with nationally syndicated columnist Russell Baker as a two-time Pulitzer winner), a general (Schwarzkopf) and an admiral (James D. Stockdale, Ross Perot's vice-presidential running mate), an opera soprano (Kathleen Battle) and a soap-opera writer (Agnes Nixon, who created "One Life to Live" and developed "All My Children").

While the opening day was cloaked in rain and clouds, the Glacier peaks were visible the rest of the weekend.

"I thank the guy upstairs we got the great weather," said Washington, who kept a low-profile throughout the three days.

Organizers wouldn't disclose the financing of the event, nor would Washington disclose his share of the funding.

But he did allow that "we helped it substantially."

Glacier Park Lodge was closed to the public throughout the event, which started Thursday afternoon and continues through this morning.

The lodge is scheduled to open to the public again at 3 p.m. today, said the Dial Corp. the company that owns the hotel.

Tourists attempting to visit the lodge were turned away. Several groups of people tried to sneak in. But the Glacier County Sheriff Office said no problems occurred.

"We haven't had any major problems of any type," he said Saturday morning.

Officers from Glacier, Lake, Flathead, Pondera and Chouteau counties teamed up to provide grounds security, with officers from the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Montana Highway Patrol providing back-up.

The Dial Corp. pulled in additional staff for the affair, including 11 chefs from the company's properties throughout the country.

"They're our very best," said John W. Teets, Dial Chairman, president, and chief executive officer.

Nearly 100 feet long and 70 feet wide, with gigantic Douglas fir timbers reaching toward the ceiling, a main lobby was lined with its sculptures in the shapes of bears, bighorn sheep and eagles. Tables were set with napkins of bandana print rolled decoratively with straw or twine.

The high school students hobnobbed with their heroes throughout meals and listened to them reflect on their background and success during the symposium series.

Advice: Happy to share knowledge

When Selleck addressed the group the first evening in the 10,000-square-foot tent behind the lodge, it was as if lightening was striking him as a flurry of camera flashes went off.

The actor asked the students not to dwell on autographs and photos. Instead, he suggested they embrace the present. The film and TV star reminded the students they have a right to fail.

"That is a concept you all should embrace and make friends with," he said. "If you don't fall on your face fairly often, you're probably not sticking your neck out far enough."

He recounted his supporting role in a recent box-office flop "Christopher Columbus, the Discovery."

Laura Cary, a student from Glendale, Ariz., had a hard time convincing her younger brother that Selleck was at the gathering. But hearing was believing.

Cary asked the star to say hello to her brother, and handed him the receiver for the lobby telephone. Selleck, a bit perplexed, said a quick "hello."

Naomi and Wynonna Judd, the mother-daughter duo who have sold more than 12 million records and received 60 country music awards, related their tough early life before reaching stardom.

"What I'm trying to tell you is that we are not magical beings," Naomi Judd said. "You're not born with your destiny stamped on your forehead."

Her daughter, Wynonna, who recently struck out on a solo career after her Mom had to quit because of illness, told the students: "Follow your hearts" and to reach down and grab your gift.

Great Falls students Ben Houston and Brian Cook lobbed questions about light and relativity to Nobel Prize-winning physicists.



Academy participants in the Salute to Excellence programs arrive at East Glacier, Montana.

"It's neat to see all the stars, but the people I like to talk to are the scientists," said Cook, who will head to Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., to study biology and chemistry. "It's easier to approach them — not everybody knows who they are."

Mr. Kuralt, can I borrow your ear for a minute?" asked Brent Silver, a high school senior from Santa Fe, New Mexico.

"If you don't fall on your face fairly often, you're probably not sticking your neck out far enough."

— Tom Selleck

Charles Kuralt, the anchor of CBS News Sunday Morning, drove to East Glacier from his cabin in southwest Montana, with his fly rod in tow.

The student and the anchor chatted on the softly sloping hill outside the lodge for a bit. "I'm very glad to meet you," Kuralt said.

Academy of Achievement Program

■ **What:** Founded in 1961, the non-profit group is dedicated to the education and inspiration of youth through the "Salute to Excellence" program.

■ **How:** Each year the group honors people who have made names for themselves in the arts, sciences, business, entertainment, sports, government and academic fields and invites some of the nation's outstanding high school students to share the weekend. Typically, they're joined by past honorees.

■ **Events:** Students share meals with the honorees and attend symposiums, where the notables speak about their background and highlights of their careers, and they give advice.

■ **Where:** The 1993 event was held at Glacier Park Lodge, with Dennis Washington the chairman of the 32nd annual Academy program.

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