

Students rated Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf as one of the friendlier and more approachable notables at the American Academy of Achievement's "Salute to Excellence" this weekend. Hard hats were required apparel for a party at Hoover Dam attended by the retired general and students Michael Makhinson, right, and Kevin Armstrong. Dolly Parton (not pictured) wouldn't wear hers - "I just didn't want to break my hair," she said.

## Bright students, stars shine together

□ The nation's smartest high school seniors hobnob with celebrities in L.V.

By Jane Ann Morrison

Review-Journal

Here's the question put to 450 of the nation's brightest high school seniors: How would you like a chance to spend three days in Las Vegas hobnobbing with celebrities, scientists, artists, business titans and national political and military leaders.

Folks such as celebrities Barbra Streisand, Kevin Costner and Oprah Winfrey, scientist Dr. Edwin Teller, author Tom Clancy, Gens. Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell, CIA Director Robert Gates, FBI Director William Sessions and Surgeon General Antonia Novello.

Or prize-winning scientists such as the guys who discovered DNA and the planet Pluto, the inventor of the laser, and the father of the hydrogen bomb.

The trip is free and students can ask the speakers questions, either after the speeches or one-on-one.

One Connecticut student said the offer sounded unreal to him, so he asked his principal and they looked up the American Academy of Achievement to make sure it was for real.

"My principal said it was legit, so here I am," he said.

Corporate sponsors such as The Mirage and the Hahn Co., pick up the costs for the students, who are chosen in a variety of ways, but always from the top of their class. Some students just get a letter extending an offer they can hardly refuse.



Wayne C. Kodey/Review Journal

Capt. Jacquelyn Parker hugs actor Tom Selleck at the Hoover Dam party. Parker, a test pilot, as a high school student attended the 1979 "Salute to Excellence." More than 9,000 students have attended since it began in 1961.

So Thursday, Friday and Saturday, The Mirage was overflowing with brainpower.

The students were among the brightest in the country,

The speakers were no slouches either.

Many were people whose names weren't as familiar to the students, but whose achievements are recognized worldwide - such as Susan Butcher, the first woman to win the 1,158-mile Iditarod dog-sled race, or Chuck Jones, the cartoonist who gave the world Bugs Bunny, Elmer Fudd and Daffy Duck.

Hostage Thomas Sutherland, who spent 6-1/2 years in captivity in Lebanon, delivered a speech that reduced many to tears as he poignantly told of enjoying his first spring in seven years.

But many will leave the three-day event with vivid personal memories, aside from the often inspiring speeches.

It's hard to forget seeing the head of the FBI looking around a cocktail reception and saying, "Where's Alice? Where's Alice?" The nation's top investigator had lost his wife in the crowd.

But it's also hard to forget seeing Sessions in the middle of our students answering questions ranging from how did he like "Silence of the Lambs" to what does he think of gun control, and are we winning the war on drugs?

Sessions said he liked the movie, although he had to force himself to see it because he abhors violence toward women and children. Gun control? "That decision has to be done by Congress and the state legislators," he said. And the drug war is achieving some success, he said.

Seeing football great Herschel Walker's head bent in intense conversation with Dr. Steven Rosenberg, America's "Scientist of the Year," raised questions: Were they talking about sports or cancer, or did those two diverse men share something totally different?

Walker was one of the early students, class of '79, who later returned as an honoree and this time is back just as a visitor.

One reason the adults attend is to give them a chance to interact with others in unrelated fields, explained The Mirage boss Steve Wynn, host of the academy's 31st annual "Salute to Excellence."

What most of the adults and students share is "a great and abiding curiosity in all things," Wynn said.

Wynn was honored in 1989 by the academy with the Golden Plate Award, the same year actor Tom Selleck, talk-show host Oprah Winfrey and Sessions were honored.

The nonprofit, tax-exempt academy invites 25 new people each year and honors them as "Captains of Achievement." And 25 past honorees are invited to return, guaranteeing the students a minimum of 50 adults achievers to mix with.

Wherever it's held, a big effort is exerted by the host to make it memorable.

For their Las Vegas trip, Wynn arranged an excursion to Hoover Dam, where guests took an elevator and plummeted nearly 500 feet for a private party at the dam's base, a party that ended with a spectacular fireworks show. It was only the second time in the dam's history such a party was permitted.

Selleck isn't being honored this year but was the first speaker Thursday. The actor spoke in simple terms:

"My advice is: Dream big dreams, take big risks and don't be afraid of failure."



Hoover Dam is the backdrop of Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf's speech, where he offers pointed advice to the students: "Rule 13 - take charge. Rule 14 - do what's right."

"In acting, you can't be good unless you're willing to stick your neck out and be bad. It's fear of failure that holds a lot of us back in life."

The first dinner also contrasted the Ice Age with the Space Age, featuring talks by dog-sled musher Butcher and the seven astronauts of the space shuttle Endeavour, who called themselves "lab rats of the highest order."

Shuttle Commander Daniel Brandenstein told the students that after the nine-day, 4-million-mile trip, "I have a greater sensitivity for the environment of this fragile planet we live on."

From Kathryn Thornton, the only woman on that shuttle trip: "I didn't see a fragile world, I saw a powerful Earth. We're the ones small and frail. The planet will be here. Whether we will be here is our choice."

Although everyone wanted to have his picture taken with Selleck, Schwarzkopf, Powell and others, many students mentioned Butcher as one of the more memorable people there.

Butcher, who has won the Iditarod four times, spoke of failure and physical hardship; of losing two of her beloved dogs when a crazed moose attacked her on the trail and she had to kill it with an ax; of sleeping less than 20 hours over 11 days of racing.

While the dogs get 12 hours on and 12 hours off, the mushers have to spend their time working and caring for their animals.

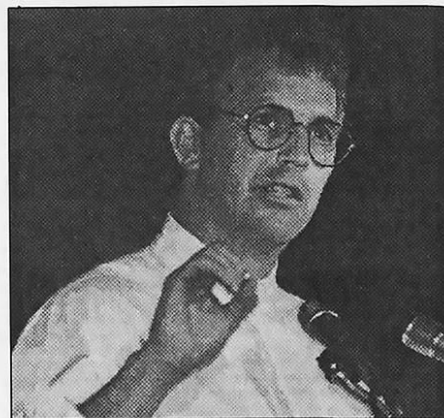
"Now I know that winning is overcoming adversity," such as a broken sled, getting lost, a crazed moose, and 70 mph winds, she said.

Wynn described what happens: "Do you have any idea of the unbelievable level of talent here? Artists are intimidated by the educators. The educators are intimidated by the businessmen, the politicians by the entertainers. It's a riot. Everybody is saying: 'Why me?' And by the end of the weekend, they're all bonded."

The students have to overcome initial shyness.

A seat opened up near Costner and was offered to a table of students at the back at the first dinner - and no one wanted to move.

After the impressive list of people present Thursday was announced, Travis Bullis from Travis Air Force Base near Vacaville, Calif., said, "Frankly, I don't believe they're here."



Wayne C. Kodey/Review-Journal

Actor Kevin Costner tells students to trust their instincts and not the news media. "When was the last time you read something that was accurate in a story you knew something about?"

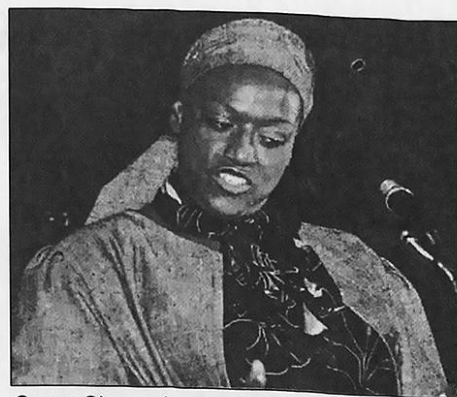
But they were, from Streisand to Schwarzkopf, from Costner to Clancy.

Some were so overwhelmed with requests for photos with students that they couldn't answer questions.

But in other corners, thoughtful scientists and business people were answering thoughtful questions.

Sarah Duncan of Palm Lake, Colo., was asking Rosenberg, chief of surgery at the National Cancer Institute, about his research on fighting cancer by using the body, immune system.

Rosenberg had stressed in his speech the need to ask good questions and question events that don't make sense.



Opera Singer Jessye Norman's rich voices reverberates off Hoover Dam on Friday night as the soprano speaks and reads poetry to the audience of 700 people.

"You should have acute discomfort at incomprehension. You need to develop a rage to know," he said.

The students were urged to consider a life of public service by both Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Novello, the first female surgeon general.

After Novello's no-nonsense speech, the female students were the first to leap to their feet for a standing ovation for her feminist message.

Novello said she believed she was making a difference by attending the event. "We're so busy, so occupied, one tends to think of children as children. We forget the targets number of them can vote and go to war."

From business to ballet, the speakers told of adversity and challenge.

Many talked of having big dreams.

But Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist Jim Borgman of the Cincinnati Enquirer said he met every goal he'd ever had one week out of college - when he got a job as a cartoonist with the Enquirer.

"My dream couldn't stretch any further than making my living doing what I loved. My challenge is making peace with the goal, once I have reached it," he said.

Retaining the privacy and solitude that the world conspires to take away is one of his goals now.

Some were pragmatic.

Robert Earl Holding of Sinclair Oil was a child of the Depression who had one motivating force in his life.

"I wanted so bad not to be poor."

He took a risk, invested \$10,476 and signed a note for \$1.2 million to own a little motel and service station in Wyoming. Today his companies are making about \$2 billion in sales - a year.

from the  
*Las Vegas Review-Journal*  
June 28, 1992