

The Washington Post

© 1982 The Washington Post Company

TUESDAY, JULY 13, 1982

Higher in Areas Approximately 75 Miles
From District of Columbia (See Box on A2)

Getting Along Famously

The Academy of Achievement's Corner on Celebrity

By Paul Hendrickson

Everybody knows what a celebrity is: the person you'd stand up in a restaurant to stare at, knocking over your water if necessary, ignoring your wife's hissed pleas to *sit back down*. Telly Savalas is surely on everybody's A list of famous people, while Charo, Prof. Irwin Corey and Ben Feldman may be a little farther down.

Ben Feldman? He was "America's No. 1 Salesman of 1965." That was the year he got tapped into the coveted American Academy of Achievement, along with Prof. Howard H. Aiken ("Father of the Computer") and Helen Keller ("First Lady of Courage").

Maybe you never heard of the American Academy of Achievement. Well, Lorne Greene, Tom Landry and Richard (Racehorse) Haynes could tell you about it. You could also ask Debby Boone, Dr. Herbert W. Boyer ("Pioneer in Gene-Splicing") or Albert A. Morey ("Largest Insurance Brokerage").

The AAA, as some call it, is a kind of walking, talking People magazine. It deals in fame, momentary and otherwise, the way Frito-Lay deals in corn chips. Prominence is a tricky business, of course. By the time you realize you have it, you may not. In 1846 Kierkegaard suggested that in time all anyone would

be interested in was gossip. Somewhat later Brian Reynolds, the founding father of AAA, said: "All we're trying to do here is bring great Americans together for a night of glory and splendor." Brian Reynolds once took pictures for Look magazine. He had this dream. Now he's got an institution.

At the 1974 "gathering of the greats," in Salt Lake City, the papers said actress Cloris Leachman wept openly when she tried to describe what America means to her. Evel Knievel made an appearance that year, too—in a purple outfit with a pointed pink collar reaching midway down his chest and a black walking stick trimmed in gold. Knievel was

about to jump the Snake River Canyon and came to recite a poem. "We all have a special purpose in life. I make the world go around, just like you do, by doing my thing," he told the academy's assembled hordes.

His jump two months later was somewhat of a bust. Where have you gone, Evel? A nation turns its lonely eyes to you.

At AAA everybody is a "great" by definition, though some are greater than others. But isn't this like life itself? Won't we always have first among equals? At AAA everybody has an instant ID, a kind of Prominence Handle. They are printed in the program notes.

See *ACHIEVE*, C4, Col. 1



Brooke Shields, by Laura Elliott for The Washington Post; at right, from top: Ed Asner, Edward Teller, Alex Haley, Glen Whitney & James Dozier

ACHIEVE, From C1

The Faces of Fame

Alan King? "Master Monologist." (Got in in Dallas, 1969.)

Hank Aaron? "All-Time Home Run King." (Got inducted at the '77 Orlando meet.)

Joseph N. Sorrentino? "Teen-age Gang Leader to Lawyer/Author." (Made it in '75 in Evansville.)

Patrick C. Steptoe? "Mastermind of Test-Tube Baby." (Salt Lake City, 1979.)

Mitchell Wolfson? "Mr. Miami." (Dallas, '69.)

Officially, the American Academy of Achievement is an organization dedicated to the inspiration of youth—"to raise their sights high, to excel in their endeavors." The stated aims of the academy are "to inspire youth with new dreams of achievement in a world of boundless opportunity; to salute all men who give their best efforts to their daily tasks; to rekindle the ideals and principles that America grow and prosper."

Once a year it all comes together at the Banquet of the Golden Plate. Past inductees turn up to don their fancy dress and the academy's medal. High school whiz kids—who, after all, are the last best hope to cure cancer or run the 100 in five flat—are invited for the weekend to ask brainy questions and moon about whether they themselves may one day get the nod to join this odd Order of the Arrow.

This year, the 21st annual AAA convened in New Orleans, jazztown. To an outsider it seemed a little like "Queen for a Day," Oscar Night and a high school graduation all at once.

The city was Hades-hot, even for June. At the Acme Oyster House on the Rue D'Iberville, plump oysters sweated in their shells. The Mississippi rolled like a turgid dream.

But what did heat matter? Heroes, great achievers, had convened here. These included Ed Asner (TV), Wayne Gretzky (hockey), Gordon Fullerton (outer space), Herschel Walker (football), Brooke Shields (movies), Ralph Sampson (basketball), Stephen Jay Gould (paleontology), Edward Teller (nuclear physics), Mike Peters (cartoons), the board chairman of Goodyear Tire & Rubber, the developer of human-powered flight, Brig. Gen. James Dozier, the conquering basketball coach of the North Carolina Tar Heels, a brain doctor who developed a radioactive analogue to glucose, the youngest college graduate in U.S. history (he finished Boise State at 12), somebody who sold just one of his companies for \$100 million, and somebody else who came with a flag mounted on his wheelchair, like Patton's jeep. For a weekend they were as one, brothers in their celebrity.

Well, mostly. Lenny Skutnik, hero of the Air Florida crash in the Potomac last winter, spent a lot of time smoking Marlboros in his room high in the New Orleans Hilton and wondering why he had come. The program planners had billed him as "a new and instantaneous American hero." Lenny Skutnik thinks he's just Lenny Skutnik.

But there were so many others—like teen-craze Brooke Shields, who came with her mother, a sheer dress and a Birds Eye smile. "But, how do you cope with all this attention?" an intrepid reporter asked. "Oh, it's kind of a game," she said with perfect empty brightness.

Steven Jobs, from Silicon Valley, Calif., threw off his jacket and told a rapt audience of 340 teen-agers: "You might want to go to Paris and be a poet, or go to a Third World country. I strongly suggest that one. Go see lepers with their hands falling off. Or fall in love with two people at the same time . . . And don't walk away from Zen Buddhists—sit



The academy's medal; by Laura Elliott for The Washington Post

down and buy them lunch and talk." Jobs is the 26-year-old guru godfather of Apple Computers. To a lot of the kids present, he was the real hero.

Ralph Geiger, boy wonder, showed up. Ralph is 11 and last summer took courses at Duke and Johns Hopkins. He put a ban on interviews and took off running when approached by anyone but his mother.

One night, the junior achievers went on a moonlit cruise down the Mississippi, while the senior achievers went to Antoine's Restaurant in the French Quarter for strawberries jubilee. Alas, someone led them through a side door and a whole room of rubberneckers got disappointed.

The penultimate moment came on Saturday night at the Formal Entrance of the Guests of Honor. Practically everybody sported the academy's gold medal. The medals dangled from scrubbed necks on red, white and blue ribbons. Females wore wrist corsages. J. Spencer Kinard, "Voice of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir," the man with the million-dollar larynx, narrated the Formal Entrance.

"FROM WASHINGTON, D.C., RECENTLY RETIRED DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, HERALDED AS A SUPERSTAR IN THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY . . . ADMIRAL BOBBY R. INMAN!!!"

Shortly it was Reuben Mattus' turn for the spotlight. Reuben Mattus is the founder of Häagen-Dazs. Once, he was a South Bronx boy helping his widowed mother sell lemon ices. The Mormon Tabernacle Voice introed Mattus' product as "the Rolls-Royce of ice creams." Mattus floated through while a bubbly band, à la Lawrence Welk, played "Getting to Know You."

The academy's great idea has always been for each crop of little neotrons to bounce off AAA's big neotrons. Glen T. Whitney, 83 pounds of brainpan, newly hatched from grammar school, came to this year's convocation wearing spectacles and a watch that nearly swallowed his wrist. Glen T. Whitney is deep into mathematics. Next year he'll take calculus. When he was in second grade, his folks had him take a Stanford University achievement potential test: His I.Q. was clocked at 180. Recently the 13-year-old has been starring in the Gifted and Talented program at Abraham Clark School in Roselle, N.J.

The name of that school again, please?

"Abe-ra-ham Clark. Clark. C-l-a-r-k. One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence."

Of course.

"My father is involved in electronic thermometers and special clocks. I do all of his programming. He's a very smart man, actually, but he doesn't really understand about computers. I find myself very interested in design considerations, equations that determine how circuits work. But what I want to do is break out into other languages, specifically Assembly and Forth language. That's Forth, as in go forth."

The scribbler is breaking out into a sweat. Maybe a change of subject. How did you get here, Glen?

"Delta. Flight 709. Departed Newark at 9:30 a.m. Eastern time."

"What's been the highlight of the convention so far?"

"I was especially interested in Dr. Louis Sokoloff's talk on the brain."

Friday a.m. A symposium speaker is growing nearly feverish with rhetoric in the Versailles Room:

"It was swamp, it was jungle, it was bugs, it was fever. They couldn't even bury people in this city. Three days later the dead would pop right up. That's why you see all these above-ground graves. But the builders of New Orleans didn't give up, and if you think about it, that's the story of mankind. Let us tame the swamp of the barbarian in all of us. Let us pave over the barbarian base, let us pave over the jungle. New Orleans is not yet secure—just go out and look at that river. That's why they've got those levees. The adult achievers here are the carriers of the fire. YOU are the carriers of tomorrow. Do it well."

The late Col. Sanders was tapped.

Wayne Newton got in.

Roger Staubach has been back.

Jimmy Stewart has been back.

Bear Bryant is a member.

Clint Eastwood is an AAAer.

The 1966 banquet was covered by Life. The Kantrowitz brothers, Adrian and Arthur, got the plate. So did Troy V. Post. ("Free Enterprise.")

Wayne Gretzky, hockey prodigy from Canada, is blond and stoic. He turned pro at 17. At 21 he had been the NHL's Most Valuable Player three times. God gave him the gift, thank Him for that, he says. He says this quietly, adding: "No matter how good you are, no matter how talented, there's always going to be one person better. Surround yourself with the most capable people. Listen to them, learn from them."

Now comes a question from the floor.

"How did you know you were supposed to be a hockey player instead of a businessman?"

"When I was in grade 9 and got back my math exam."

Gen. David Jones, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs, got his plate four years ago in Salt Lake City. His invitation was signed by Jimmy Doolittle, Omar Bradley, Alexander Haig and George S. Brown, all past honorees. That added up to about two dozen military stars. This year Gen. Jones showed up in a blue sport coat and open-necked shirt. Why does he come at all?

Tucking you in the stomach: "I get better questions from these kids than I do from Congress."

From a letter datelined Hollywood, June 29, 1970:

"Dear Mr. Reynolds: No one could have been more surprised, or pleased, than when I received from the governor of Texas the meaningful award from your organization."

(Signed) John Wayne ("All-Time Box Office Champion.")

Lenny Skutnik addressed an afternoon symposium. He didn't prepare his remarks. "No, I don't do that. I'm not a politician," he said, before he went down to the hall. "I just get up there, and if I feel something I say it. Otherwise I just say 'thank you' and sit down."

He spoke haltingly for about six minutes. His eyes watered. "I cared for her, that's all," he said, trying to explain why he dove into the Potomac last Jan. 13 to try to save Priscilla Tirado. He turned to the moderator. "And that's . . . all I have." His mother, who was in the audience, stood and applauded.

John Sirica was supposed to go this year, but was pooped from all the interviews he had to do in conjunction with the 10th anniversary of Watergate. He would have been glad to go otherwise, he said.

"I like their program. If you look down the list of who's a member, you've got to be impressed. I was inducted in Orlando in '77, I think. I believe Leon Jaworski put my name up. Leon and I are good friends, you know."

AAA's operating budget is about \$550,000 per year. The basic funding is from big businessmen who come back as patrons after they've been inducted. A developer or industrial tycoon from the host city usually puts up dough. Next year, Ernest Hahn of San Diego will cohost the event with the Reynolds family. Hahn owns 42 shopping centers. The '85 convocation will be in Colorado Springs. William Coors of Coors Beer will cohost.

The way you get in is not entirely clear. There are awards councils and nominating committees. Previous honorees put in a word for prospective ones. If you're rich/powerful/athletic/cinematic/scientific or otherwise "hot," you've got a decent shot. Making the cover of Money, Business Week, Time or Sports Illustrated would get you much. In general, it's the misty line where timing and destiny converge to produce fame, or at least its illusion.

Brian Reynolds, whose quixotic dream this all was two decades ago, is getting up in years now. He lives in Palm Springs and still functions as the academy's executive director. His youngest son, Wayne, functions as the academy's managing director. Wayne lives in Malibu and just got out of law school. He's been working on AAA since he was 8. At 15 he was calling up the likes of Louis Nizer and Wernher von Braun to ask them to be members. (He had to lower his voice.) He will carry his father's great mission into the new century. By then AAA may have to book the Los Angeles Coliseum for its annuals. Wayne Reynolds says he subscribes to 50 magazines and combs them week to week looking for heroes and doers. He is a fast, sure fellow who might have been tapped himself. "No, we don't do that," he says.

"You should see these kids' eyes. Maybe they've only met one or two celebrities in their life. And they're sitting there and in comes Brooke Shields or Herschel Walker, and those kids are suddenly up on their feet. They're excited, they're applauding. That's what does it for me."

And on it goes, year in, year out, bigger every season, a kind of geometric progression: part fervorino, part true American value, part Kansas corn, part backslap, it is all the things that made us great.

"Be careful of what you want, because you're going to get it," intones a man one morning to an audience getting fidgety. The man's name is James Sorenson. He is from Utah and owns 200 million tons of coal. "Don't ever let God get out of your thinking process. And remember, the great treasures of the earth are ours."