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CONNECTICUT LIVING

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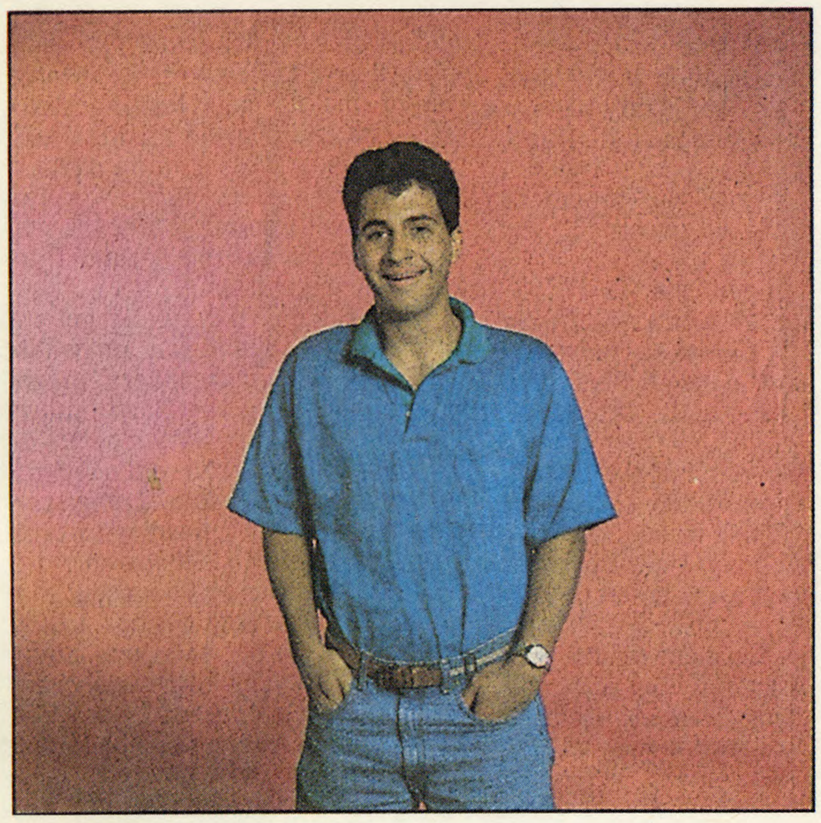

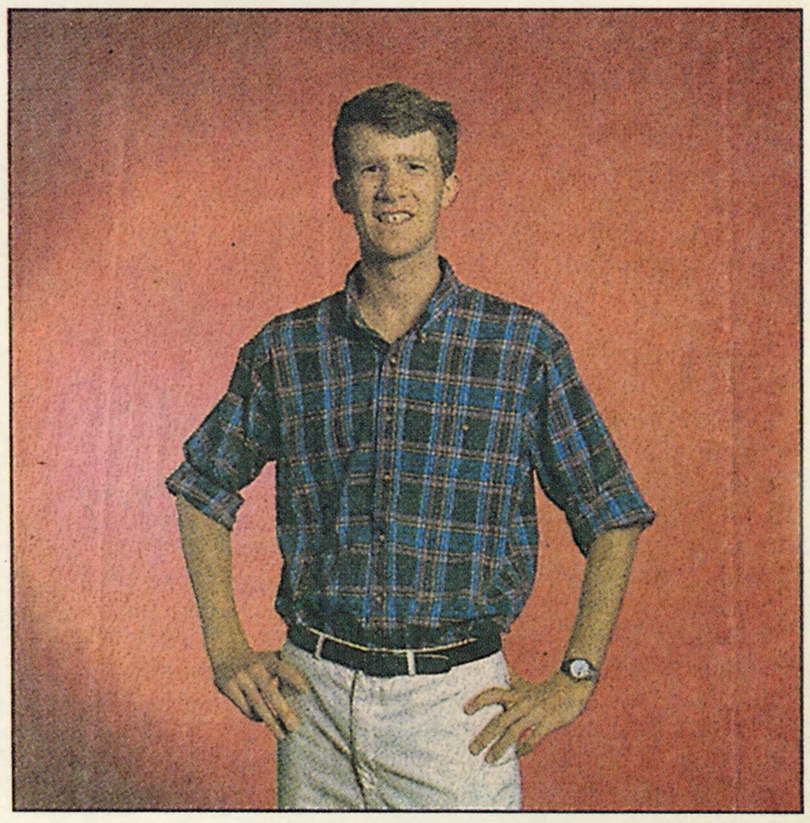

Outstanding teenagers earn the chance to meet notables in many fields

Invitation to inspiration

By ROBERT A. FRAHM
Courant Staff Writer

You can hardly blame these Connecticut teenagers for sounding like name-droppers.

Let them tell you about their weekend with actors Michael Douglas or Ed Asner, physicist Edward Teller, writers E.L. Doctorow or Tom Clancy, editor Ben Bradlee or athletes Walter Payton and Julius Erving.

"When I walked right by Ed Asner without stopping, that's when I knew it was becoming a little routine," said Jonathan Baron, 18, of Storrs, one of six Connecticut students who attended a high-powered gathering that brought together some of America's biggest names.

The American Academy of Achievement's Salute to Excellence conference in Nashville, Tenn., this month allowed 450 of the nation's brightest young people to rub elbows with about 40 top athletes, authors, business giants, entertainers, political leaders, scientists and others.

Given this once-in-a-lifetime chance, the students cornered one big name after another, gleaning advice, inspiration and whatever hints they could about the big question: What is the secret of success?

"They get to go to people they have read about. It sets their goals a little higher. They meet Supreme Court justices, heads of government and say, 'Hey, these people are just like you and I,' " said Wayne R. Reynolds, executive director of the California-based organization that runs the annual program.

In an interview with The Courant, five of the six Connecticut students — the sixth was out of the country — talked about what they learned and who they talked to in Nashville.

Eighteen-year-old twin brothers Greg and Tim Hartch of Greenwich sought out the national security adviser, Lt. Gen. Colin L. Powell, and sat next to him on a bus ride during one of the conference's field trips.

"I've always sort of been intrigued by foreign relations and national security," Greg Hartch said.

They talked with Powell about his meetings with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and also learned that Powell sometimes gets his first information about world events by watching the Cable News Network on television.

"Sometimes even before the CIA gets information, CNN gets it, so he has had it installed in his office," Greg said.

The brothers, graduates of Brunswick School in Greenwich, also had breakfast with Nobel Prize-winning chemist Donald J. Cram and said they were intrigued by some of the business leaders, authors and politicians they met.

Although some of the most popular guests were actors Michael Douglas and Richard Dreyfuss, "Tim and I tended not to go for the actors," Greg said. "I loved some of their movies, but there wasn't anything really great they had to say."

For Kimberly Michalski, 17, of Deep River, the weekend offered a chance to meet Pulitzer Prize-winning police reporter Edna Buchanan of the Miami Herald.

"I want to be a journalist," Michalski said. "She said not to be afraid to try. . . . She didn't believe she could write, but a junior high teacher had given her confidence."

Michalski said, "Most of the people went out of their way to talk to us. Everyone was really nice."

The students agreed, however, that some, such as Tom Clancy, author of thrillers "Red Storm Rising" and "The Hunt for Red October," seemed difficult to approach.

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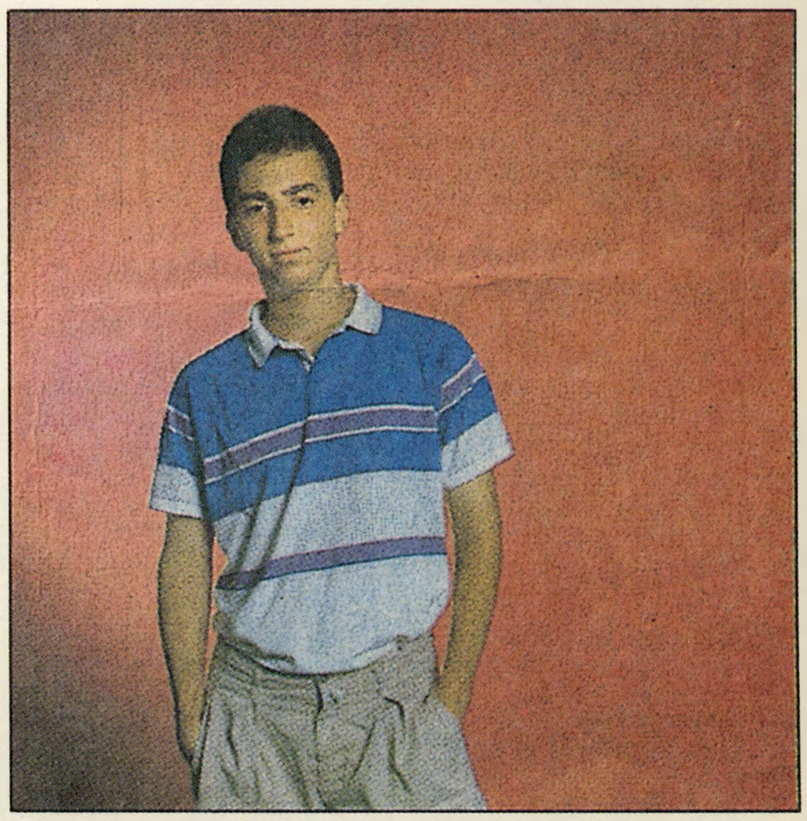

■ Connecticut students in the American Academy of Achievement's Salute to Excellence program include, clockwise from left, Adam Shaywitz of Woodbridge, Tim Hartch and Greg Hartch of Greenwich, Kim Michalski of Deep River and Jonathan Baron of Storrs.

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Teenagers get insights in meeting celebrities

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"He would stand out in the lobby, hands in his pockets, smoking — really aloof," Baron said.

Nevertheless, Baron and some of the others said Clancy, a former insurance broker, offered some of the most sage advice.

"He mentioned that in writing or any achievement, there is no mystical way to success. You really have to do it through grit," said Baron, a graduate of E.O. Smith High School in Storrs.

Not surprisingly, the theme of hard work came up over and over again.

Greg Hartch said that D. Wayne Lukas, trainer of Kentucky Derby winner Winning Colors, talked about working 20-hour days seven days a week in his rise to the top of his profession.

"That seems too intense," Greg said. "If I want to do something noteworthy, I don't want to have to sacrifice everything. I want to work hard, but I don't think 20-hour days are worth it."

Some of the business leaders encouraged students to be entrepreneurs, Greg said. "That was clear. It was better working for yourself . . . and [being] the top man."

And other advice? Take risks, some told the students. Others advised them to pursue goals they feel strongly about.

"All of these people had an incredible amount of drive and perseverance, and all of them really loved what they did," said Adam Shaywitz, 18, of Woodbridge, a graduate of Hopkins Grammar Day Prospect Hill School in New Haven.

"All of them seemed to have an obsession with seeing a problem and finding an answer to a problem or a new way to look at a problem."

Shaywitz cited the case of Steven J. Ross, a man who started with a job at a funeral home and converted the company's underused fleet of limousines into a car-rental business. Through a series of deals and mergers, he eventually became chairman of Warner Communications Inc.

One of the highlights of Shaywitz's weekend was discussing urban problems with playwright August Wilson, who has been described as a chronicler of the black experience in America.

The array of talent was dazzling. At one point, Baron said, "There were literally 11 Nobel Prize winners in one room."

"There were so many people you had read about, you almost didn't know who to run to first," Shaywitz said.

"I had a number of role models," said Professor Emeritus James A. Van Allen of the University of Iowa, one of the nation's leading space scientists and a guest at this year's conference. "One person in particular was my college physics professor, Thomas Poulter. Later, he was chief scientist on the second Byrd antarctic expedition.

"He's the one that really got me into physics," said Van Allen, whose work led to the discovery of the sphere encircling the Earth known as the Van Allen radiation belt.

The teenagers who attended the conference are off to a strong start in their young lives, bearing impressive credentials of their own.

Michalski, who will be a senior at Valley Regional High School in Deep River in the fall, is the Connecticut winner of the Voice of Democracy essay contest sponsored by the Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Ladies Auxiliary.

Baron, Shaywitz and Tim Hartch will attend Harvard University this fall. They are National Merit Scholars, along with Greg Hartch, who will attend Princeton University, and 17-year-old Jane Chang of New Canaan, who also attended the conference. Chang was in Taiwan and unavailable to be interviewed.

The students, sponsored by individual or business donors, were selected because they were winners of National Merit Scholarship Corp. awards, the Voice of Democracy contest or any of various other national youth competitions.

By the end of the weekend conference, the students were less awestruck and began seeing their famous mentors in a slightly different light.

"They were half-mystical figures when we got there," Baron said, "but by the time you got to know them as people, you saw they were more real. . . . It made success seem attainable."

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Among the state students in the Salute to Excellence program were, clockwise from left, Adam Shaywitz of Woodbridge, Greg Hartch and Tim Hartch of Greenwich, Jonathan Baron of Storrs and Kim Michalski of Deep River.