



FRAN KITTEK / The Morning Call

James Santo practices on the piano at home. He plans to attend Bloomsburg University in the fall.

# A symposium on success

## Hellertown youth catches the stars

By TAD MILLER  
Of The Morning Call

Deep down, James Santo of Hellertown knew that diligence in his studies would take him places some day.

He was right. A combination of outstanding academic and extracurricular achievements put him on a plane to New York City recently. There, he stayed at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, attended a black-tie banquet and mingled with 38 celebrity honorees including Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, retired Chief Justice Warren Burger, Barbara Walters, Jack Kemp and Audrey Hepburn — to name a few.

The invitation was from the American Academy of Achievement to attend its Salute to Excellence program. The offer sounded great — maybe too good to believe. Then there was the part about rubbing elbows with these celebrities. Maybe the activities were overstated, Santo thought.

But the reality was that mere words could not have given this weekend a proper billing. "It was the most exhilarating feeling I've ever experienced," Santo managed.

Santo applied for the program but did not expect acceptance because of its degree of competitiveness. Among his credentials were class valedictorian at Saucon Valley High School, membership in the National Honor Society, soccer team co-captain, high school concert and marching bands, church youth group adviser and Eagle Scout.

Santo was surprised and excited by the news of his acceptance. His parents, Michael and Edna Santo, were

understandably proud — particularly since both are teachers.

"I said, 'Jimmy, this is a thank you for 13 years of hard work,'" Mrs. Santo said. Santo took it as just that.

Events unfolded quickly. After landing at LaGuardia Airport, Santo checked into the Waldorf and was soon touring the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He quickly learned at dinner that this trip would be a cut above the sight-seeing variety.

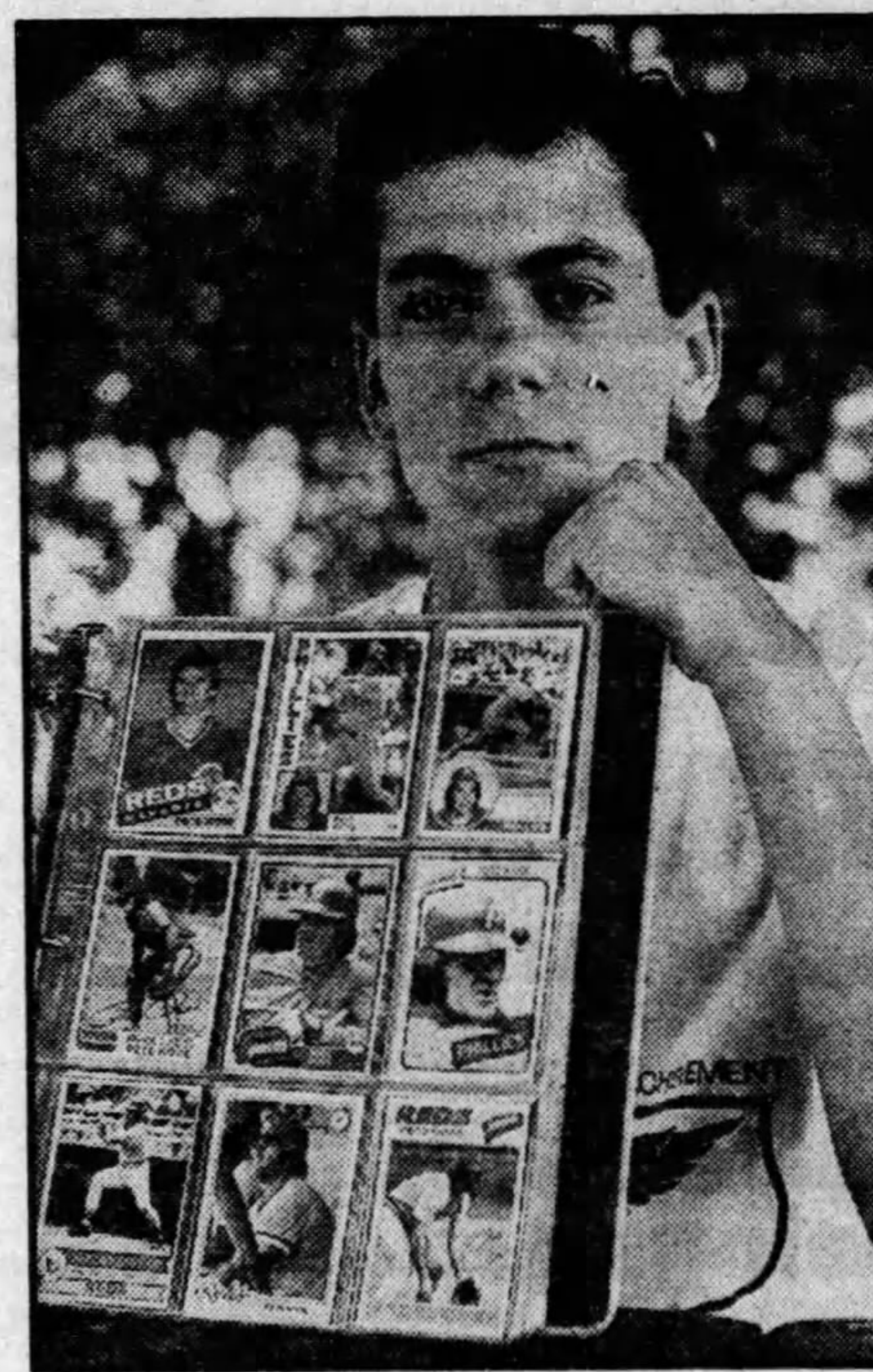
He found himself talking with Ken Burns, the creator of the highly popular Public Broadcasting System series, "The Civil War." Santo found Burns to be personable and down-to-earth as their conversation evolved from initial discussion about the television series to more comfortable talk on baseball.

The next morning's activities included a symposium in the hotel's Grand Ballroom. The 38 adult honorees provided biographical information that included advice to the youths for being successful.

"Each of the dignitaries always said how good we were," Santo said. "For these people to be telling me how good I was really made me feel good. I was impressed with them and yet they said they were impressed with us and our accomplishments."

Santo's highlight for the trip was the nearly 30 minutes he spent during a break with former award winner Herschel Walker. The running back with the Minnesota Vikings was cordial and loose, Santo said. The two talked sports and touched on other interests. The meeting was a particular thrill for Santo because of his interest in sports.

Friday night included a dinner cruise on a yacht around Manhattan Island. A fireworks display was provided at the Statue of Liberty in the group's honor.



One of the biggest thrills of the New York City weekend, says Santo, was meeting famous people from all walks of life. Back home, above, he looks over his sports card collection.

Saturday morning brought more celebrity addresses and a tour of the United Nations building. That set the stage for the formal Golden Plate Award dinner that night in the Grand Ballroom. Former recipient Oprah Winfrey hosted the awards presentation to the 38 adult winners.

Santo returned home Sunday, somewhat unsure of whether he had dreamed the whole scenario.

"I was coming home on the plane, opened a magazine and here was Burns," he said. "Here's a guy in Time magazine that I had met just a few days before."

"Then I get home and I see [Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin] Powell and Schwarzkopf receiving awards in the paper," he added. A weekend ago I was mingling with them. It's ... wow!"

Besides being treated to a first-class trip and having the time of his life, Santo's selection for the elite program served to boost his confidence. "I think about it: There were only 450 students there and I was one of them," he said in amazement.

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James Santo

The session was more than a pep rally. It was a learning experience, though the lesson was not a patented step-by-step guide to success.

"The American Academy of Achievement gives many bright, talented youths the chance to meet some of the most successful people in the country," according to Patricia A. Wier, president of Encyclopaedia Britannica, Santo's sponsor. "We want these students to look at these accomplished adults and see themselves in 20 years."

Some around him took notes. Santo taped some of the speeches. But, he believes, the real benefit was absorption of the thoughts of successful people.

Take, for instance, the advice of the 1990 Nobel Prize winner for chemistry, E.J. Corey. He urged them not to waste time, and to take advantage of every minute.

Some of the other lessons came from his peers. Santo enjoyed exchanging ideas with them and learned that many bright students had anxieties about moving from their parents' homes onto university campuses.

The 18-year-old is planning to major in mathematics at Bloomsburg University. He discovered that his own anxieties were not unusual.

In the trip's aftermath, Santo remembered the many hours of toil throughout his 13 school years: struggling over essays and research papers, reading literature and working math problems.

He's beginning to understand that it was all worth it.