

Young American Dreams Abound at the 38th Annual Achievement Summit

STAFF REPORT

A batch of letters is put in the mail every year addressed to 400 impressive young scholars, most of them graduating high school seniors. Inside the envelopes are invitations to the American Academy of Achievement's annual Achievement Summit. "This has to be a hoax" is a common response to an invitation; many of the students readily admit that on first thought the event seems far too good to be anything other than a pipe dream. However, being possessed of acute intelligence, the doubting students then do a little detective work and, after gathering evidence, come to the conclusion that the summit is very, very real, and that it's very, very incredible.

The invitations that went out this year requested the students' presence in Washington, D.C., for the 38th annual Achievement Summit, held from June 17 to 20. Joining the honor students were almost 50 adult achievers—"representatives of the many who excel," as the academy

describes them—who would be inducted into the academy, as well as a host of past adult honorees. To the delight of the young people, seemingly every conceivable field was represented by the new inductees: among those attending in Washington were Gen. Robert McDermott (Ret.); Judah Folkman, whose research may lead to a pharmaceutical treatment for

cancer; Katharine Graham, chairman of the Executive Committee of the *Washington Post*; Richard Holbrooke, former chief U.S. negotiator for the Bosnian peace agreement; Kurt Masur, director of the New York Philharmonic; Michael Saylor, founder of MicroStrategy; and NBA superstar Grant Hill.

Over the long weekend the youths would do far more than just listen to the adult achievers speak as they took part in roundtable discussions or

In downtown Washington's Warner Theatre, scores of honor students sitting on the stage anxiously await the start of a roundtable. ▼

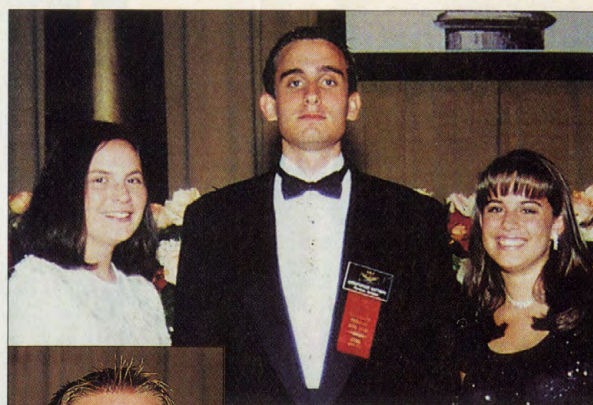


▶ Taking part in a roundtable titled "Entertainment, Media, and Public Policy" are (from left) famed journalist Bob Woodward, film director James Cameron, Oxygen Media Chairman and CEO Geraldine Laybourne, *Goosebumps* series author Bob Stine, former U.S. Poet Laureate Rita Dove, and Benjamin Bradlee, former editor of the *Washington Post*.

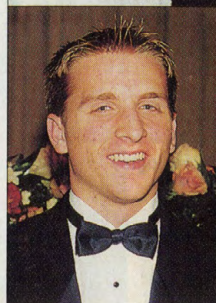




After the conclusion of the "Health and Medicine" roundtable, an honor student catches up with one of its panelists, University of Chicago Department of Molecular Genetics and Cell Biology Professor Janet Rowley, to meet her personally.



At the Banquet of the Golden Plate, which saw the young men in black ties and tuxes and the young women in their finest finery, are (above, from left) "Most Valuable Student" second-place female winner Secily Saunders, third-place male winner Jonathan Gattman, and first-place female winner Tia Gubler as well as (left) second-place male winner Lucas Ames.

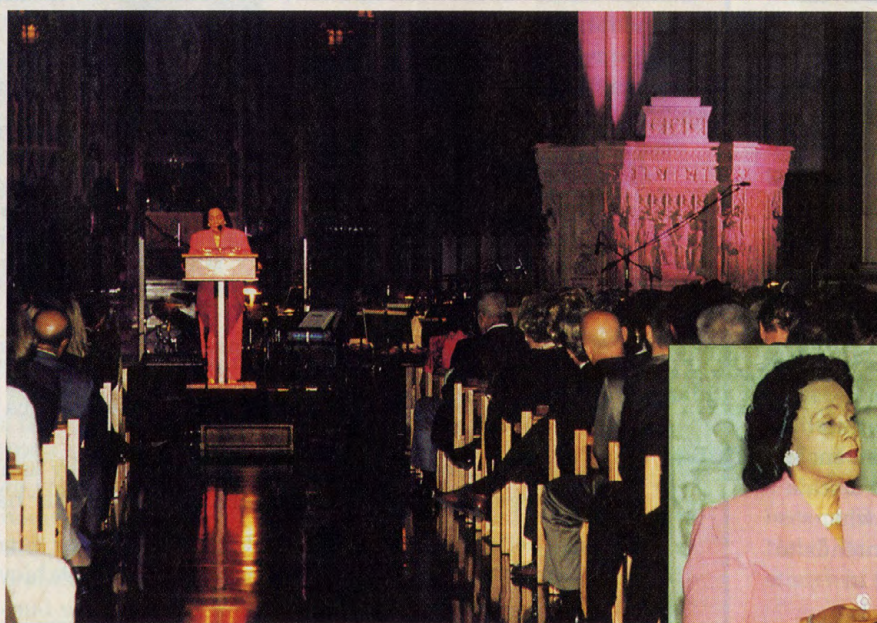


The 1999 "Most Valuable Student" scholarship competition's top male winner, Robby Schwindt, is presented with his Golden Eagle Award by filmmaker George Lucas. The top female winner, Tia Gubler, accepted her award from the movie giant as well.



A space traveler and a space investigator—astronaut Story Musgrave (center) and Astronomer Royal Sir Martin Rees (left)—discuss the science of the universe with an honor student.

Achievement



In Washington National Cathedral, Coretta Scott King, founder of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, speaks near the pulpit from which her husband had given a Sunday sermon for the final time.





▲ At Mount Vernon, where President George Washington lived and died, honor students mingle with their adult counterparts.



▲ Biographer Scott Berg (right) emphatically makes a point during a roundtable titled "The Future of Democracy" as former U.S. Poet Laureate Rita Dove (left) and Pulitzer Prize for Fiction recipient Herman Wouk attentively listen.

gave short talks. At breakfast, lunch, and dinner, at receptions and after the roundtables, and on the buses that shuttled the gathering around the nation's capital city, the students would, with a simple extension of the hand, meet the accomplished adults face-to-face.

As Wayne Reynolds, executive director of the American Academy of Achievement, has described the purpose of the summit, "By giving them [the youths] the opportunity to talk to people they might not otherwise meet, we open the students' minds into believing that their aspirations can be met. These weekends showcase the before and after of the American dream, the celebration of the power of the individual to shape their own lives."

Among the 400 honor students attending the summit with their dreams in their pockets were a handful of young persons with whom every Elk would love to sit down to breakfast—five of the six top winners of the 1999 Elks National Foundation "Most Valuable Student" scholarship competition. Due to an unfortunate scheduling conflict, Bethany Cotton, the third-place female winner from Ashland, Oregon, was unable to accept her invitation, but she did have a wonderful time competing in a major national debate tournament in Phoenix, Arizona. Bethany is a state individual debate champion who, after attending law school, intends to make her mark on the world in international environmental law.

To at least two of the winners who happily could attend, Washington just couldn't have been a more exciting place to be, as both Robby Schwindt, the first-place male winner from Utica, Kansas, and Jonathan Gattman, the third-place male winner from Florence, Alabama, aspire to become U.S. congressmen. Elaborat-

ing on his dream, Jonathan describes his intention to be "a statesman who champions education." The second-place male winner, Lucas Ames of Tully, New York, has a similar goal. Lucas has dreamt of public service ever since researching a high school paper on his family's history and discovering many politicians and

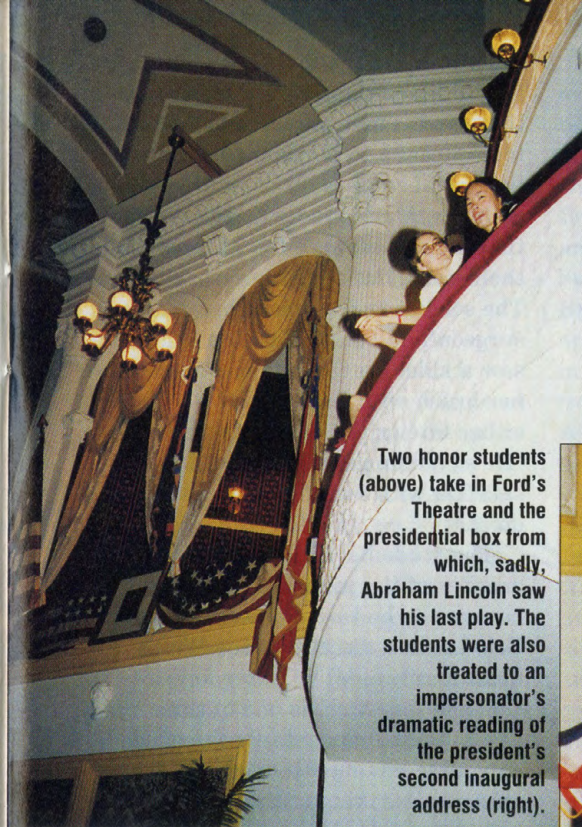
THE ELKS AND THE ACADEMY

"THE Elks are awesome. They do everything," exclaimed Tia Gubler, the top female winner of the 1999 Elks National Foundation "Most Valuable Student" scholarship competition, as she told of how much she had learned about the Order's benevolent work since being granted her educational award. Among the "everything" that the Elks do is financially support the American Academy of Achievement and its annual Achievement Summit. For 13 years now the Elks National Foundation has been one of the academy's patrons.

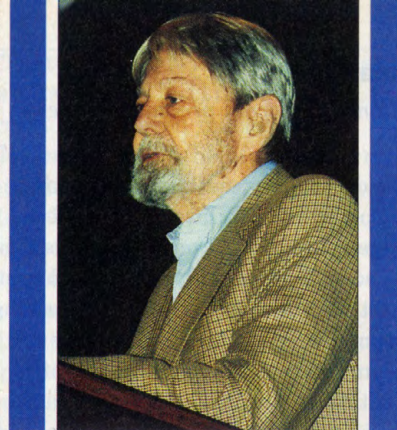
The reason for the Order's wholehearted support is simple—the academy's goals command applause. The aims of the academy are:

- To inspire youth with new dreams of achievement in a world of boundless opportunity.
- To broaden the recognition of men and women of exceptional accomplishment in America's great fields of endeavor . . . and to spark their colleagues with renewed ambition and pride.
- To salute all men and women who give their best efforts to their daily tasks.
- To champion the spirit of free enterprise and equal opportunity for all.
- To rekindle the ideals and principles that made America grow and prosper.
- To foster an international spirit of understanding by annually bringing together the great minds and talents of other nations.

With such lofty ambitions, all members of the Order can be proud of the Foundation's support of the American Academy of Achievement.



Two honor students (above) take in Ford's Theatre and the presidential box from which, sadly, Abraham Lincoln saw his last play. The students were also treated to an impersonator's dramatic reading of the president's second inaugural address (right).



◀ At the podium in Ford's Theatre, Civil War historian and novelist Shelby Foote responds to queries from honor students about the war and his writings.



▲ As time for lunch approaches, some honor students, adult academy inductees, and guests make the walk between Warner Theatre and the headquarters hotel, with the U.S. Capitol off in the distance.

attorneys among prior generations of Ameses.

Rounding out the Elks-sponsored scholars at the 1999 Achievement Summit were two young women who call Utah their home state: Tia Gubler of Bountiful, the first-place female winner, and Secily Saunders of Orem, the second-place female

winner. Secily joins the others who aspire to political careers, as she intends to major in international politics and then attend law school. Medical school is where Tia envisions herself eventually being; she hopes to become a surgeon.

But for the five, their dreams could be put aside momentarily as the start of the summit beckoned them. Their tour around the Washington area and into the nation's past began when the honor students were escorted from their hotel, which was just a stone's throw away from the White House and a slightly longer throw away from the Washington Monument, to the spot in Virginia where the Founding Father that famous obelisk honors spent many of his days—Mount Vernon. It was the first in a series of historically profound venues that would provide the settings for the thought-provoking adult presentations and the student question-and-answer sessions.

Period-costumed musicians playing melodies of Revolutionary times greeted the honor students and adults as they arrived on the banks of the Potomac River during the early evening hours. After exploring President George Washington's estate, the guests dined in a large

tent on the lawn, and a roundtable titled "The Future of Democracy" followed.

Moderated by *60 Minutes* anchor Mike Wallace, the discussion included panelists Gen. Colin Powell (Ret.), biographer Edmond Morris, and *U.S. News and World Report* Publisher and Editor-in-Chief Mortimer Zuckerman, among others. They all shared their thoughts with the students on freedom and on the role of the United States in world politics. Zuckerman, who commented that internationally "the trend toward freedom is inevitable," would later on find himself in the company of Secily. She elatedly said of the encounter, "I really wanted to meet Mortimer Zuckerman, and I did. He signed my *U.S. News*."

The evening ended spectacularly as the gathering relished a good-night concert under a shining moon. Before Mount Vernon's main facade, which was lit a glowing orange, the U.S. Navy Band Sea Chanters entranced the audience, and Patti Austin, singing a cappella, belted out soul-stirring songs while fireworks painted vivid colors on the dark canvas of the sky.

The students and adults reconvened the following morning in the main venue for much of the summit, the elegant Warner Theatre in downtown Washington. "So You Want to Be a High-Tech Entrepreneur" was the first roundtable, and a handful of founders and leaders of successful technical companies entered into discussions about the Internet and about artificial intelligence. That was followed by a roundtable called "Entertainment, Media, and Public Policy," during which such issues as violence in the media and teaching emotional intelligence and anger management to children were addressed.

In the afternoon, William Phillips became the first of the summit's Nobel Prize winners to address the students. Phillips, who won in physics

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Academy

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for developing methods to cool and trap atoms with laser light, offered sage advice based on his experiences in science, especially his experiments that shattered conventional thinking on measuring the temperatures of atoms. While telling the students that "each one of you has a dream, and each one of you will have to find a voice for that dream," he also urged them to "be prepared to change your ideas even about your most cherished beliefs" if you have "sufficient reason to do so."

Minnesota Vikings owner Red McCombs spoke in the afternoon as well. He called himself "a poor man's entrepreneur" while adding, "I am and continue to be a product of the American dream."

McCombs's last comment foreshadowed the evening's inspiring event as the gathering relocated to Washington National Cathedral, arriving just at dusk to witness the sun's fast-fading light softly envelop the majestic structure. As was the case the night before, a concert was going to end the day's activities, this one titled "Voices of the American Dream." Coretta Scott King, speaking at a podium placed but a few yards from the pulpit that her husband had delivered his last Sunday sermon from just four days before his assassination, welcomed the honor students and congratulated them for "all your hard work and dedication that has brought you to this program."

The music was as uplifting as Mrs. King's presence. After the Eastern High School Choir's and the Boys Choir of Harlem's voices filled the spacious cathedral, Patti Austin again dazzled the crowd, singing "America the Beautiful." Both capping off and crowning the night was Aretha Franklin's energetic performance of some of her best-loved songs. She observed, "I don't think the White House has ever had entertainment as good as we've had it tonight."

Leading off the next morning at Warner Theatre was one of the weekend's most popular speakers, William Magee. He and his wife,

Kathleen, are the founders of Operation Smile, a nonprofit organization that sends medical teams to developing countries to perform free corrective facial surgery on disfigured children. Many students expressed their appreciation of the Magees and their work, but none more than Tia. The seed of her dream to become a surgeon had been planted when she saw a video on Operation Smile, and her brush with its founders had to be either fate or the best of fortune. "He's [William's] a good speaker," said Tia with awe. "I really want to do that."

The students easily connected with another of the morning's speakers, because he had been one of their own; Eric Lander, director of the Whitehead Institute/MIT Center for Genome Research, is one of three adults to be inducted into the academy after having attended as a student. Speaking of the myriad twists and turns his career has taken through numerous fields, Lander offered the students his "advice for random walkers," reminding the young people that "careers are not linear and are not planned" and so they should take advantage of whatever comes their way.

The morning's events concluded with a roundtable titled "Health and Medicine," moderated by National Human Genome Research Institute Director Francis Collins. After lunch, the honor students and adults continued their tour of Washington by reconvening in one of the capital's most sobering buildings—Ford's Theatre, where John Wilkes Booth, with a single gunshot, took President Abraham Lincoln from the United States.

Certainly the most captivating speaker of the afternoon was novelist and Civil War historian Shelby Foote. Standing in the shadow of the presidential box where the national tragedy had occurred and on the very stage that Booth had hobbled across while escaping from the theater, Foote spoke glowingly of Lincoln and of how well he had handled the difficulties of his times, adding, "The Civil War was the point at which our country decided what it was going to be and how it was going to be it." Foote also reminded the students that

school is just a place where you "learn how to learn." After commencement—a word he said he far prefers to "graduation"—your "true education will begin," he related.

The distinction between a celebrity and a hero soon became the subject of conversation as a panel of luminaries took the stage for the next round-table, moderated by *Angela's Ashes* author Frank McCourt and titled "What Is a Hero?" Biographer Scott Berg noted that "we live in a cheap age of celebrity" and that heroism must involve some act of bravery and courage. Lenny Wilkens, an NBA hall of famer both as a player and a coach, said that the terminology of the hero is used loosely on athletes and entertainers and that the true heroes are "ordinary people doing extraordinary things."

As the scheduled roundtables drew to a close, the next course on the weekend's menu was the Banquet of the Golden Plate, during which the students, clad in formal wear, watched the new adult academy inductees receive their Golden Plate Awards. Wilkens again spoke, observing that "for you students, this has to have been an incredible three days."

That it was, but the summit wasn't over just yet. In fact, the highest terrain hadn't been reached. The following morning the students were treated to a private screening of the IMAX film *Everest* in the National Air and Space Museum that was hosted by the film's creator, David Breashears. He cited "the value of apprenticeship" as one of the most important lessons he had learned from his mountain-climbing adventures, and he also insisted that "it's not the summit that has the most value . . . it's the climber's journey."

Though it was time for Lucas, Tia, Jonathan, Secily, Robby, and the other honor students to descend from the peak and bid farewell to Washington, the youths' journeys were really just beginning, and in their pockets next to their dreams they could place the experience that was the 1999 Achievement Summit. "It's been a real neat experience to be around all these people," gushed Jonathan with a big smile. Lucas simply said, "It's remarkable."

To learn more about the American Academy of Achievement, visit its Web site at www.achievement.org, which features the Museum of the American Dream. ■



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David Vergason, Member
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