# AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ACHIEVEMENT

## Academy Celebrates Excellence

BY JIM O'KELLEY

"SO, WHAT IS YOUR THEORY ON how the world was created?" —Mahr Elder, $12,000 Elks National Foundation scholarship winner.

"I don't think the world exists." —Dr. Marvin Minsky, Nobel Prize-winning physicist.

Pretty heady subject matter for lunch, but at the American Academy of Achievement's annual "Salute to Excellence," there just isn't time for small talk.

For 33 years, the academy has been offering select students the opportunity to meet, talk with, listen to and ask questions of some of America's most successful people: scientists like Minsky, businesspeople, public servants, soldiers, astronauts, entertainers, writers, artists—people from all fields of endeavor.

Each year, the academy salutes about 40 "Captains of Achievement," adults who have excelled in their chosen fields. The site of the three-day gathering varies. Last year's was held in Glacier National Park, Montana. This year's event was held June 16 to 18 at the Mirage Resort in Las Vegas. In addition to the class of honorees, the academy encourages past honorees to attend the salute. The final ingredient of this meeting of the minds is 350 of the nation's most brilliant high school students.

The academy makes no apologies for its exclusiveness. "This is a blatantly elitist gathering," host Stephen Wynn, chairman of the board of Mirage Resorts, Inc., explained to the newcomers.

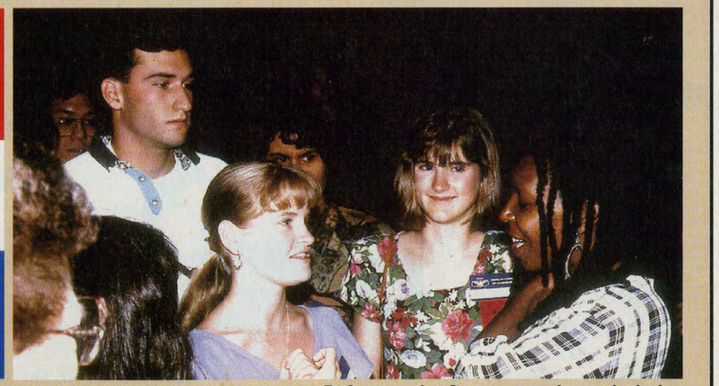
Few people have heard of the academy or the salute because by design the event takes place out of the media limelight. This privacy lends an intimacy to the salute that otherwise would be impossible. The adult luminaries can speak candidly and mingle freely without being hounded by cameras.

For three days, the adults and students attend symposia and social activities together, dine together, do everything but sleep together. The academy's aim, guided by the principle that the best way to become a leader is by getting to know one, is to inspire the young people to even greater levels of excellence.

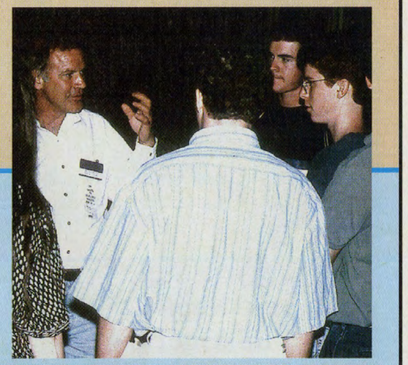
The social activities are designed to give each salute a unique flavor. In Las Vegas, the academy's guests were treated to "Mystere," the *Cirque du Soleil* show on Thursday night. The performance, with its acrobatic feats and eerie music, is completely unlike any other circus. Otherworldly, extraordinary, dreamlike, primal —all these adjectives and a hundred others come to mind, but none does the show justice. "It's different from Barnum and Bailey," joked honoree Dale Chihuly, a master glass artist.

While the rest of the nation was watching the drama of O.J. Simpson's freeway crawl unfold Friday evening, the academy was dining and watching a tribute to the performing arts in the Grand Ballroom of the Mirage. Adult honorees and students took turns sharing their passions.

Rita Dove, the poet laureate of the United States, read some of her poems, and then Katherine Anne Shapiro, one of the students, read one of hers. Classical guitarist Christopher Parkening, a past honoree, played with the orchestra and solo and then turned the floor over to 8-year-old virtuoso Garrett Dahm. Past honoree Arthur Mitchell, founder of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, introduced 10 of his students, who demonstrated four styles of dance. Dannye Thompson, the National Shakespeare Competition champion, read from *Henry VIII.* Filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola and actress Whoopi Goldberg talked to the students about their careers and shared some secrets of their success.



Before and after symposia and during breaks, the adults were swarmed by inquisitive students. Whoopi Goldberg (above) answers a question, while (below) chemist Kary Mullis holds court.



This wonderful, eclectic show ended with producer, arranger and composer David Foster performing a medley of his hits, including "When I Fall in Love," "The Love Theme from St. Elmo's Fire," "Hard to Say I'm Sorry," "Unforgettable" and a bunch of other heartstring-tuggers.

## The Best-Kept Secret in America

BY AERLYN DAWN

*Aerlyn Dawn was the male winner of the Elks National Foundation's "Most Valuable Student" contest. He was joined in Las Vegas by five other Elks scholars.*

IMAGINE THE OSCARS, the Grammys, the Nobel and the Pulitzer prizes all rolled into one smashing event—a who's who of success in the United States. Now imagine that this event was held privately, almost in secret, with no press to speak of, under a name you surely will not recognize: the American Academy of Achievement.

I was lucky enough to be one of the 350 "honor students" from across the nation who were invited to this unbelievable gathering. In my three days in Las Vegas, I had conversations with Harrison Ford, astronaut Story Musgrave, former FBI Director William Sessions, Francis Ford Coppola, Nobel Prize winner Kary Mullis and Tom Selleck, to name only a few. Overwhelming would be an understatement. From the moment I arrived, I recognized an unmistakable tumult, a certain frantic quality that dominated the weekend.

Any one of the awardees would have made for an exciting event. One hundred of them put together was staggering. There was a prevailing feeling among all the students that it was simply too good to be true. At the same time, there was a certain desperation because three days was simply not enough time to interview all of these extraordinary people. It is the kind of event that one would daydream about—a collection of the greatest minds in the country in every field, from art to entertainment to politics. Yet even with such a broad spectrum of views, the honorees had united messages: Follow your passion and don't be afraid to take educated risks, never compromise your character or your integrity, and seize opportunity.

▲ Filmmaker George Lucas presents a "Golden Eagle Award for Promise of Greatness" to Aerlyn Dawn, the Elks National Foundation's top male scholarship winner. The academy awarded Golden Eagles to 17 champions of various competitions.

In addition to the chance to meet adult honorees, the weekend was filled with spectacular performances such as those by the *Cirque du Soleil,* honoree David Foster and the Harlem Dance Theater. Student performances were equally dramatic, highlighted by a stunning vocal exhibition by 15-year-old Jordan Hill, a true class act.

Despite the unique dynamism of the academy, it has managed to remain a secret to all but the small group of people who have participated in it. Both students and honorees admitted they had never heard of the academy before receiving their invitation. One of the honor students told me that she had almost thrown away the glossy academy brochure when she got it in the mail, thinking that it was some sort of advertisement. Even several of the adult awardees acknowledged that they had never heard of the academy before they received news of their award.

As the weekend progressed, the mood of the students transformed from one of intense anticipation to one of thoughtful resignation. Understandably, none of us wanted the weekend to end. The gathering was one giant opportunity to meet close

▲ During the weekend, four panel discussions were taped for the academy's Achievement Television Network. Here, (from left) Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Halberstram; genetic researcher Nancy Wexler; financier Richard Rainwater; paleontologist Jack Horner; dogsledder Susan Butcher, an Iditarod champion; and former FBI Director William Sessions talk about risk taking.