

Ideas Intertwine with the Unexpected at the 39th Annual

STAFF REPORT

Achievement Summit



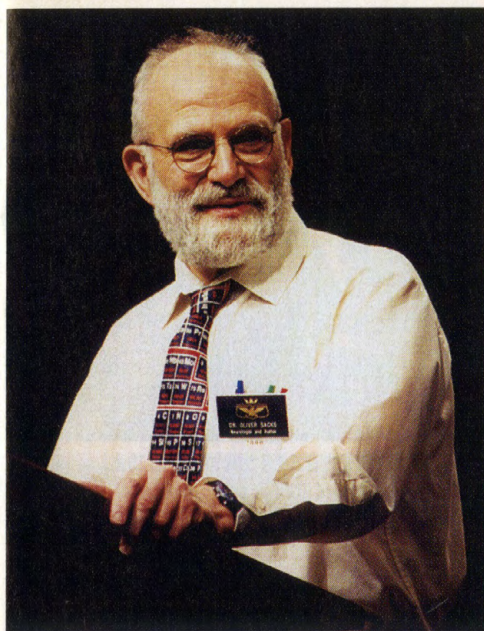
WHEN five five-star Most Valuable Student scholarship winners walked into the Grand Ballroom of the Phoenician, an ultraluxurious five-star resort in Scottsdale, Arizona, for the opening-night dinner of the American Academy of Achievement's 39th annual Achievement Summit, they couldn't possibly have guessed what the next three days held in store for them. They all said as much, for the most part. "I didn't know what to expect" was how second-place male winner Garrett Reed of Wiley, Colorado, described his mind-set. That was a useful attitude—when attending an Achievement Summit, it's generally a good idea to check any preconceived notions

A Participating in the "Spirit of the American West" roundtable are panelists (from left) A. Scott Berg, Justin Kaplan, and Edmund Morris, all Pulitzer Prize-winning biographers; American Indian Language Development Institute founder Ofelia Zepeda, a poet, translator, and professor of linguistics at the University of Arizona; Neil Sheehan, Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction winner; and N. Scott Momaday, Pulitzer Prize for fiction winner.

you might be carting with you at the door.

Entering the unknown with Garrett were second-place female winner Emilie Steffen of Cunningham, Kansas; third-place female winner Emily Kingsley of Heuvelton, New York; first-place male winner Mark Longstreth of Gahanna, Ohio; and third-place male winner Jordan Williams of Dell Rapids, South Dakota. Along with more than 400 other honor students who were privileged enough (and, frankly, bright enough) to be tapped to attend, they would soon discover what the long weekend would bring.

Emilie was an early initiate, somehow dining that night at a table with two big-voiced superstars—none



▲ “We are completely bewildered by the origins of inner life,” observed best-selling author and neurologist Oliver Sacks when addressing the honor students.

➤ Domestic doyenne Martha Stewart and a student have a chat during a break between roundtables.



◀ Most Valuable Student Mark Longstreth, the first-place male winner, is presented with his Golden Eagle Award by biographer A. Scott Berg.

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other than National Medal of Arts winner James Earl Jones and country-music giant Wynonna Judd. The very next morning, Emily breakfasted at a table with paleontologist Jack Horner (one of his claims to fame is being the first person to uncover fossilized dinosaur eggs in North America), who unexpectedly pulled out of a bag a toe bone of a dinosaur for the honor students at the table to examine. “We all got to touch it,” related Emily. “It was cool.”

That's the reality of things at an Achievement Summit, regardless of what the students may have anticipated. Some 50 adult achievers who are present to be inducted into the

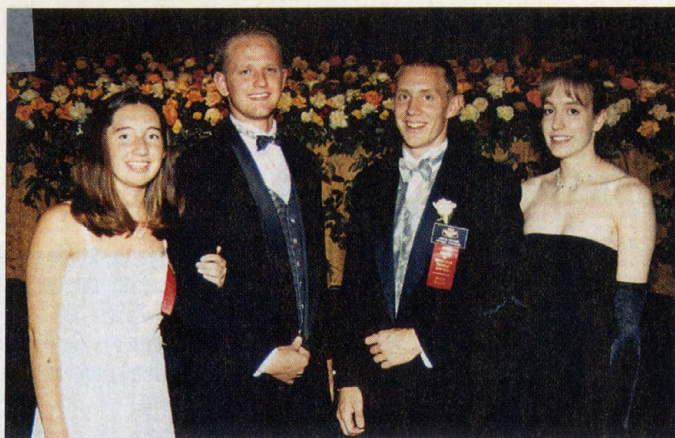
academy as well as some 50 past inductees not only give talks and participate in a myriad of roundtable discussions and question-and-answer sessions, but they also make themselves available to the students during breaks in the scheduled activities so the youths can have close encounters with those who know what it takes to succeed. And we do mean succeed. Emilie (the Most Valuable Student from Kansas) said her favorite encounter was with Noble Prize-winning physicist Murray Gell-Mann, the discoverer of quarks, no less.

Described New York's Emily (who, by the way, finds it “funny” that her

initials are E. L. K.), “I love the way people just mill around. You turn around, and there's someone famous.” Mark, once initiated, was also bedazzled by the quantity and quality of people with whom he rubbed elbows. “It's amazing meeting so many people who have succeeded in so many fields,” he exclaimed toward the end of the intellectual shindig when accepting his Golden Eagle Award, which is given annually to 12 of the honor students. After publicly thanking the Elks National Foundation for his scholarship, he also said, “I'll remember this weekend for the rest of my life.”

Thursday night's opening dinner, which featured a Native American welcoming dance by the Wisdom Dancers and a demonstration of Native American flutes by R. Carlos Nakai, was just the initial cause for memories. Following the meal, the gathering relocated to the Phoenixian's Estrella Theater for the opening roundtable, titled “The Spirit of the American West” and moderated by one Sam Donaldson (yes, the broadcast journalist who so often appears on your television screen). It was time for the students to put their capable minds in gear, for a lot of sizable ideas were about to come their way.

Biographer Edmund Morris advised to think of the West not as a



▲ Pictured in their splendid garb at the Banquet of the Golden Plate are (from left) Most Valuable Students Emily Kingsley, the third-place female winner; Garrett Reed, the second-place male winner; Jordan Williams, the third-place male winner; and Emilie Steffen, the second-place female winner.

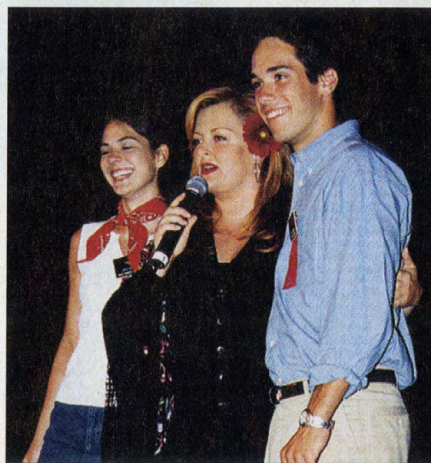


▲ An honor student puts a question to the panelists of a roundtable moderated by broadcast journalist Sam Donaldson (seated).

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locale but as a metaphor for the United States. "The West is a sense of limitlessness," he said, "and it's the most important metaphor we've got." Agreed novelist N. Scott Momaday, "I think of the West as a myth. It is a form of spirit, and it is indispensable to us." The panelists also concurred that the spirit of the West is fundamentally about exploring new frontiers. Biographer A. Scott Berg looked ahead by saying, "Space is the new frontier. An even better example is cyberspace."

His words were prophetic, for a number of people who are trailblazers in their fields and who are paving the way for 21st-century life spoke during a series of talks given the next morning. Craig Barrett, CEO of Intel Corporation, responded to a student's question about the future of education by saying that the real problem we face is in "training teachers to use technology." A trailblazer in the potential of the Internet, Healtheon/WebMD CEO Jeffrey Arnold observed that the Internet kills bureaucratic waste and hypothesized that it "will revolutionize managed care completely." Elizabeth Blackburn and Carol Greider, who are pioneers in the study of telomeres (they're segments of DNA), also spoke.



▲ During a concert given by Wynonna and Naomi Judd, two students (top) have their picture taken with Wynonna while she sings, and Leon Lederman (above) is introduced by Naomi before he and two other Nobel Prize-winning physicists cut a rug for the gathering.

Revealing her Western spirit, Blackburn, who's from England, told the students that she was attracted to the field because it was "a new frontier. It was novel."

The morning concluded with a roundtable called "Society and the Information Age," during which John Sidgmore, chairman of the board of UUNET, the world's largest provider

of Internet access, called the Internet "the greatest explosion ever. . . . It changes all the business models so fundamentally," further offering that "I really see the Internet as the future of professional education." Andrew Weil, a proponent of alternative medicine, pointed out that the Internet has the potential to change the "power relationships" between doctors and patients because of its ability to disseminate information. He warned, though, that the greatest danger of the Internet is "misinformation and disinformation" and cautioned that "people need to use common sense."

The afternoon was filled with speakers as well, including Ruth Simmons, president of Smith College; Bernadine Healy, president of the American Red Cross; and Edward Lewis, publisher of *Essence* magazine and chairman of Essence Communications. Much good advice was dispensed to the students by these adult achievers. Lewis, praising the entrepreneurial spirit, noted that "the only way you can have control of your destiny is to have something of your own." Simmons urged the students to travel, saying that "learning another culture is a way of learning your own." Offered Healy profoundly, "Don't look for jobs. Don't look for careers. Look for missions."

The day's discussions concluded with a roundtable titled "Advocacy and Citizenship." As nighttime approached, perhaps foremost on the



▲ Arthur Golden (far left), author of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, makes a point during a roundtable titled "Art, Science, and Creativity." The other panelists pictured are (from left) Dale Chihuly, glass artist; Maya Lin; and John Napier, the theater designer of *Cats* renown.



▲ Former Mars Exploration Program Manager Donna Shirley and astronaut Story Musgrave discuss the investigation of the heavens. Said Shirley, "We've run out of frontier. If we don't explore space, we'll fall back on ourselves."

minds of the honor students was the need for a break from digesting serious ideas to indulge in a little good ol' fun, which was just what the academy provided that night at a Western-themed dinner.

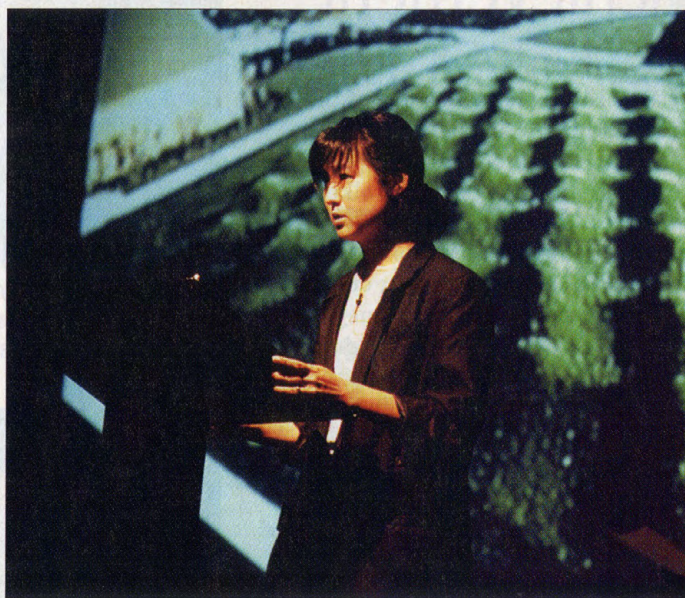
It was more of the unexpected as well, unless any of the students had used a crystal ball to foresee that the Judds—first daughter Wynonna, who was then joined by mother Naomi—would be belting out their country tunes that evening. And ponder this: What would happen to a teenager who ran onstage to try to get his picture taken with Wynonna at a typical, run-of-the-mill concert? You'd think that he or she would get kicked out of the building. But not at an Achievement Summit. The honor student who ran onstage that night got what he wanted, and many other youths followed suit and lined up to have their pictures taken, too.

Wynonna, happy to oblige, wound up singing the first two songs of the set while camera flashes popped almost continuously.

What happened next was probably even less anticipated. The Judds brought onstage the three attending Nobel Prize-winning physicists—Gell-Mann, Leon Lederman, and William Phillips—to dance to a song Naomi had written for the occasion, "The Big Bang Boogie." The flashes again began to pop, as cameras captured the trio of jeans- and bandanna-bedecked scientists hamming it up for the crowd. Later, summit emcee Spence Kinnard would humorously speculate, "I don't know if physics will ever be the same."

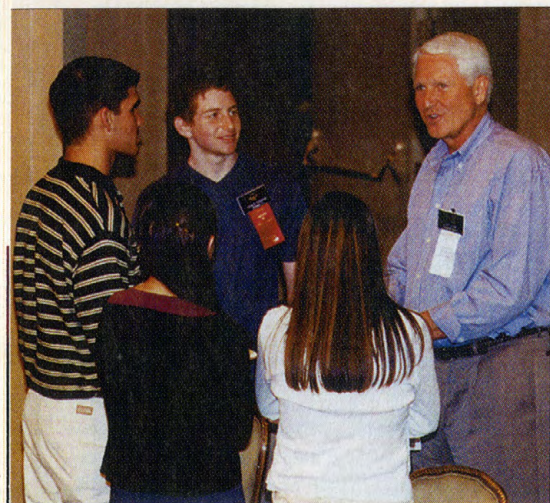


▲ Meals at Achievement Summits are perfect times for honor students to try to catch up with that one famous achiever they really want to meet.



Maya Lin, who as a 21-year-old Yale architecture student won the design competition for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (she had originally created the design as a class project), presents slides of some of her work.

In the morning things returned to normal—for an Achievement Summit, that is—as the adult honorees again took to the podium to offer the students their thoughts on success, the state of today and the path to tomorrow, and many other topics. Gururaj Deshpande, who as chairman of Sycamore Networks is helping to supply the world with high-capacity fiber-optic networks, attacked conceit by defining a genius as "a crackpot who hit the jackpot." While noting that the information age is causing a "tremendous empowerment of consumers," he counseled the students to "turn the digital divide into a digital dividend" so as to "make it a better world for all of us."



◀ The Musical Strings of Youth entertained at the Achievement Summit with their exuberant renditions of classic compositions.

◀ Lute Olsen, longtime University of Arizona basketball coach, enters into discussion with a handful of young people.

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Describing herself as one of the few “right-brainers” in the crowd, Sue Grafton, author of the best-selling alphabet-mysteries series, talked about her struggles with Hollywood when she used to write for television, telling the students, “If you don’t like the game, don’t take the money.” She also said that “left- and right-brainers need each other” and that “all the great leaps in science are made by people in right-brain mode.”

Science leapt to the forefront during the roundtable that capped the morning. Titled “The Mysteries of Existence,” it was moderated by Francis Collins, director of the National Human Genome Research Institute and leader of the publicly funded Human Genome Project, which along with a private biotech company recently completed a working draft of the human genetic code. Physicist and futurist Freeman Dyson identified the origin of life as a “total mystery” that’s not likely to be solved anytime soon, saying “we’ve never seen anything like the early stages of life.” MIT professor Marvin Minsky, the groundbreaking artificial-intelligence trailblazer, pointed out that “the thing we don’t understand is how ordinary, commonsense reasoning works. What we don’t know is how we think of things.” The panelists also brought up the fact that, no matter what happens in the future, science is not about to run out



▲ Young bibliophiles browse the selections at the academy’s bookstall. Many of the books were autographed by their academy-honored authors.



▲ The inventive mind of noted artist Fritz Scholder leads him to create a green rose on canvas during the opening-night dinner. While letting the underpainting dry, he told the honor students that the common denominator to all great people is that “they fall in love with their lives. They become themselves on purpose.”

of mysteries. As Dyson observed, “Every time you solve a mystery in science, there are two more mysteries behind it.”

National Medal of Technology-winner Raymond Kurzweil, a former student of Minsky’s who has pioneered systems for such things as text-to-speech synthesis and speech recognition, was one of many to speak in the afternoon, and he looked to the things that science will provide humanity in the 21st century. We will see an “exponential” rate of progress in technology, he predicted, identifying miniaturization (“nanotechnology,” to use highfalutin jargon) as one certain trend and hypothesizing that in 30 years’ time entering a Web site will be like “entering full-sense virtual reality.”

The second full day of the Achievement Summit concluded with a roundtable called “Art, Science, and Creativity” that synthesized many of the notions that had been presented to the students. Said panelist Maya Lin, the world-renowned public-art designer who created the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., “A lot of the work that I do would not be possible without new technologies because they give us a new way of looking at things.”

The orchestral sounds of the Phoenix Symphony filled the Grand Ballroom as the formal-clad students and adults reconvened that night for the Banquet of the Golden Plate. The young people, on top of watching the class of 2000 honorees be inducted into the academy, were also wowed by

a video presentation that featured many of the best-known past inductees, including the likes of Dr. J (that'd be basketball hall-of-famer Julius Erving) and three former presidents, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and George Bush.

It's a measure of the greatness of these annual weekends that it's not just the honor students who encounter the unexpected at an Achievement Summit. Oliver Sacks, neurologist and author of such best-sellers as *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and *Awakenings* (upon which a feature film was based), related while speaking at the banquet that he had, too. "Being something of an oddity, I was very surprised to hear from the Academy of Achievement," he said. "But coming here, I have the feeling that you are all oddities, and that we are all oddities, and that oddity and idiosyncrasy have been our defining characteristics, rather than any formula or model."

For one last time the students filed into the Estrella Theater the following morning for the final presentations. Now that all the students were initiates and hopefully had seen their selves of tomorrow in the faces of their older counterparts—the point of the Achievement Summits, after all, is to get the young people to realize that they're not so different from the adult honorees and have all the potential in the world with which to do lofty things—a different challenge lay ahead. It was emcee Kinnard who identified it that morning. He warned the honor students, "The hardest thing you're going to have to do is explain this [weekend] to other people."

The Elks National Foundation is a patron of the American Academy of Achievement and annually sponsors the attendance of the Foundation's top Most Valuable Student scholarship winners at the Achievement Summits. To learn more about the academy, visit its Web site at www.achievement.org. ■

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