

The Great and the Near-Great Top Teen-Agers Advised by Adult Achievers

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They were called the "tomorrow of our country" and they were called "the American dream."

They were 390 high school graduates, the best and the brightest flown in from across the country for the weekend.

And the people doing the calling, also in for the weekend, were no slouches -- Muhammad Ali, Jean Auel, Bo Jackson, Adm. William J. Crowe Jr., Loretta Lynn, Joseph Papp, Leontyne Price, Steven Spielberg, Gloria Vanderbilt, Herman Wouk -- all of whom were among those honored.

It was a Gathering of the Greats, or as Steven Spielberg said, "a mutual admiration society."

"You kids are so neat," said Erma Bombeck to the students at a Saturday afternoon symposium, "I've had such a good time. I told someone last night if my kids had looked this great, had been this smart . . . I'd have sold them all."

And the "kids," mostly 17 or 18 and very clean-cut, liked Bombeck, loved Spielberg and were moved by Leontyne Price, but still managed to pick favorites out of the galaxy of adult achievers.

"Herschel Walker," said Tami Magnuson from Hayward, Wis.

Why?

"He's smart. He was breakdancing. He's athletic and he's not snobby."

Diane Bales, from Ashland, Ky., said she particularly liked Herman Wouk.

Why?

"He has such a way with words."

Every year for the past 25 years, a nonprofit California-based outfit called the American Academy of Achievement has been bringing top students together with distinguished leaders in a variety of fields -- arts, athletics, industry, science, politics, business -- to act as mentors and to talk about success, leadership and life.

The students, who were selected through a variety of organizations, included Andrew Boyko, Springfield; Iris Y. Chen, Washington, D.C.; Kenneth C. Chern, Annandale; Lynne Sandra Haggard, Silver Spring; Keith Kessler, Vienna; Lara A. Rice, Alexandria; Peter Sven Shawhan, Silver Spring; Andrew Siegel, Washington, D.C.; Michael D. Tang, McLean; Rebecca Tushnet, Washington, D.C.; and Jennifer Y. Wu, Bethesda. They received an all-expense-paid weekend complete with tuxedos and corsages for the formal banquet. William McGowan, president of the executive committee of the Board of Patrons, figured the budget for the weekend at \$1 million to \$1.5 million.

Set up to encourage access to the leaders, the weekend was packed with short appearances, many with question-and-answer sessions, as well as open seating at meals and late-night dances.

The culmination of the weekend at the J. W. Marriott was Saturday night's Banquet of the Golden Plate, where awards were given to the approximately 40 "Captains of Achievement" or adult honorees.

But because of a sewer line break that damaged the ceiling in the Grand Ballroom, dinner was delayed.

Said Ed Asner, emcee of the night, "This is probably the first time a leak has occurred in Washington involving water."

Said one student in response, "That's the second Watergate joke we've heard this weekend."

But spirits weren't dampened as students sat in their prom best through the 2 1/2-hour awards ceremony in which honorees gave out their final bits of advice.

Muhammad Ali, the first recipient, spoke in almost a whisper: "It's good not to forget where you came from."

Dr. Michael Brown, who along with Dr. Joseph Goldstein received the 1985 Nobel Prize in medicine, said: "I noticed there were a great number of scientists being honored tonight. So I would urge the students if they want to increase their odds of getting a Golden Plate, I'd say go into science."

Erma Bombeck, not an honoree this year, but making her third appearance at an achievement weekend, gave her advice at the afternoon symposium. She told the story of her life, sprinkled with advice and humor, from her job as a newspaper copy aide to her marriage and three kids:

"At that time, my writing was limited to bad checks, grocery lists and occasionally, you know, I would write a note from home saying my kids had an upset stomach. I did this for about 15 years because I couldn't spell diarrhea. One day I took a look at my life and took a hard look at my family and realized if I didn't laugh I'd be ready for paper slippers. The domestic scene just got a little too much for me.

"I had priorities in my life," she said, "and that's not bad. I don't think I have ever done anything professionally that compares to holding a baby in my arms that the experts said I would never have. I also am a card-carrying feminist . . ."

At that, she was interrupted by applause.

Chuck Yeager, a former honoree, praised the students at a pre-banquet, elbow-room-only reception: "They're wonderful to talk to. It's wonderful to expose them to every idea, pro and con, 'Star Wars' and anti-'Star Wars.' Life is not a bed of roses."

Gloria Vanderbilt, painter, designer and author, said "not to plot and plan things too much."

Her advice: "There's something I say to myself often. It helps me. I think to be successful at anything you want to do, I think it takes courage. It takes believing in it. It takes striving above it. It takes work. It takes you liking me and me liking you. It takes the dreaming soul of the human race to want it to go right. Let's never stop dreaming. And Heaven help me, think about it."

But here's what the inquiring minds wanted to know from Vanderbilt:

Q. I'd like to know how you got into designing jeans exactly?

And:

Q. Does it ever bother you that your clothes are used for status . . . because they're an expression of you they're being worn by somebody who views your art as their status?

And:

Q. Is that dress one of yours?

A. "Uh, no, it's not." (The crowd laughed.)

And, from a male voice:

Q. First of all, I want to thank you for making those jeans . . .

And that broke up the crowd.

Bo Jackson, the 1985 Heisman trophy winner who just decided to play professional baseball, said: "Set your goals high. Don't stop at nothing till you reach those goals . . . Put your life in the hands of the Lord."

Clare Boothe Luce said she wanted to give an address to the group. "It's very short, it's very brief. It's 700 New Hampshire Avenue, Watergate South." Then she invited the students to call her when they are in Washington to talk of "what life is all about."

Leontyne Price, international opera star, brought to the weekend one of its most dramatic moments.

She spoke briefly Saturday afternoon, saying, "You are supposed to be inspired by us . . . but I am extremely inspired by you." Her advice: "Never forget your roots."

And went on, ending with "words about your real trump card -- the privilege of being born in America."

With that, Price, one of the world's great opera voices, launched into "America the Beautiful." She walked off the stage with the 390 students standing, applause thundering through the theater.

Freeman Dyson, internationally renowned theoretical physicist and author, said: "No matter how busy you are with your careers, don't forget to have kids."

Vernon Walters, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, recalled his years in the service and stressed the importance of languages.

"The world is getting to be a very small place and everyone does not speak English," he told the students. His advice: persevere, "keep at it."

Robert Mercer, chairman and chief executive officer of Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., said: "Please put in a full day's work and you'll find you zoom past 80 percent of your competition."

Isidor Isaac Rabi, winner of the Nobel Prize in 1944 for devising a way of measuring the magnetic properties of the atomic nucleus, offered this pearl: "The most important thing in life is to be lucky."

After the advice and the awards, the dancing went on until 2 a.m., with private parties for the adults.

Tami Magnuson, Wisconsin Teenager of the Year, said the most important thing she'd learned from the weekend was "to set goals for yourself and try to achieve them."

Her goal?

"I haven't got one yet."

But goal or no goal, as Kevin Wohler of Overland Park, Kan., said: "There's no way that you could come away from this weekend without getting smarter, unless you're an 11-year-old sophomore in college with a perfect SAT score."

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