

# Looking Up to The Stars

Where 50 top celebs dazzle 400 students



PHOTOS BY STEVE CASTILLO/THE CHRONICLE

Opera star Beverly Sills, former 49ers coach Bill Walsh and TV host Oprah Winfrey looked proud with American Academy of Achievement medals around their necks.

BY SHANN NIX

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**W**hile the city slept Thursday night, 50 of the nation's best known, richest, smartest, most powerful celebrities gathered at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in San Francisco. They came quietly, in private jets and limos, wearing dark glasses, under assumed names. They arrived without fans or fanfare, crowds or hysteria. That's the way they wanted it.

Oprah Winfrey was there, and Tom Selleck. Tom Brokaw showed up at the last minute. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar came early and left early. George Lucas slept at his own place in San Rafael but drove over to hang out during the day. Henry Mancini sang a few bars of "Moon River." Ralph Lauren dressed down. Dinah Shore dressed up. John Sununu lurked in the background.

William Hanna and Joseph Barbera faced off with Ernest and Julio Gallo. Beverly (Bubbles) Sills wore pink. Mike Nichols came in his own jet, as did Michael Milken. Charles Schwab drove. The faceless men whose money runs America clustered in corners and drank at private tables.

The occasion was the American Academy of Achievement's 28th annual "Salute to Excellence Weekend." Each year, this little-publicized but immensely powerful organization gathers the nation's most glittering celebrities from business, science, entertainment, sports, arts and politics and throws them together for a weekend with more than 400 dazzled high school kids from around the country, selected for their academic excellence and

ability to win various competitions.

The academy, founded in 1961, forms the base of a tight mutual admiration society. Past "honorees" pick future honorees, and become patrons of this event in a closed system of fame, wealth and influence. Like a collection of bees busily cross-pollinating, celebs chat over cocktails during numerous receptions, speak inspiring rhetoric to the star-struck students, and network like mad.

"It is a social network," said Dr. William DeVries, known for his work in development and implantation of artificial hearts in humans. DeVries was himself honored by the academy and has returned each year for eight years. "Like a club. Now I can call Chuck Yeager up, or Philip "Bo" Knight (CEO of Nike) and they'll return my calls, ask me out places. I promised myself I would never ask the people here for money, but I know a lot of scientists who do."

Said Kevin Lindamood, 18, from Michigan: "These people talking to us are the most powerful in the world, the best America has to offer. It's a little overwhelming."

The quiet mind behind all the hubbub is Wayne Reynolds, executive director of the Academy. Eight years ago the 32-year-old Malibu resident took over from his father, Brian Reynolds, who founded the Academy in 1961 with the purpose of giving the rich and famous from disparate fields the opportunity to mingle.

"I know more influential people than anyone," Reynolds said. He is trim, slick, with curly hair, an expensive suit and a bored expression. "But people are people. I'm used to it."

## Here They Come

By Thursday afternoon, the Hyatt had begun to fill with high school kids excitedly looking around for the stars they knew they'd meet. The hotel had been regally prepared for the onslaught, from the gleaming revolving brass doors to the sparkling glass elevators that rocket up to the top floor with a vertiginous whoosh. Luckily, the hotel has 44 deluxe suites; almost exactly the right amount to house the collection of famous personages that would arrive shortly.

"We've put great care into preparing for this event," said Charles McElroy, general manager of the hotel. "We're accustomed to handling large conventions, but how do you prepare for so many people, all expecting star treatment at the same time? What do you give someone who's seen and done it all? How does one greet a billionaire?"

Hotel staff settled on a teak bowl from Gump's to give the VIPs as a welcome gift, to be filled with exotic fruit and left in the rooms.

Thursday evening, the gaggle of students — each of whom represented \$1,000 corporate dollars donated for their deluxe food, lodging, tuxedo rentals and corsages — streamed out of the hotel and loaded onto chartered motorized cable cars.

At the Empress of China restaurant, a dragon pranced especially for the occasion. Dinner was laid for 750. Retired Air Force general and test pilot Chuck Yeager, who broke the sound barrier in 1947, told stories of wearing pilot suits filled with water and urinating off the wings of the airplane at high altitudes.

Dr. Edward Teller, developer of the hydrogen bomb and participant in the Manhattan Project during World War II, talked about meteorites. "When I was a practical chemist I broke test tubes and cut my fingers. I became a theoretical chemist because I thought it would be easier and safer."

## Royal Style

Celebs and students drifted through the days in royal style. Friday was spent at Alcatraz Island, where participants toured the holding cells and then sat down to a hearty meal in the prison mess. They ate lasagna off paper plates designed as replicas of tin trays.

William Sessions, director of the FBI, said, "Why in the world the Academy has chosen to dine in a famous federal penitentiary, I have no idea."

The Navy placed the USS Carl Vinson, the world's largest warship, at the disposal of the academy on Saturday. Lunch was hosted by the Navy; participants were attended by 210 uniformed sailors. Aircraft, including an F14 and an F16, were loaded onto the carrier especially for the occasion.

Saturday night, the proceedings ended with a huge banquet, at which each celebrity honoree received a "Golden Plate Award" for being "representatives of the many who excel in the great walks of life." Swathed in sequins, diamonds and self-assurance, the celebs beamed down on the assembled collection of scrubbed and polished students. Ralph Lauren wore jeans and cowboy boots beneath his tuxedo jacket.

## Big Plans

Students were obviously inspired by extended contact with the super stars. The following conversation was overheard between Steven Shumway, 19, of Arizona and Trent Warner, 18, of Utah, on the

bus to the aircraft carrier:

"Let's start a business together when we get out."

"OK. You're doing engineering? I'll do business and law. We'll counsel people on how to make wise investments."

"Yeah. Then what? Politics? I'm Republican. You?"

"I'm Republican, too. We'll have to do a dual presidency."

"Nah, it's OK. I'll be vice president."

When asked what they thought the future held, the boys looked up in surprise. "The world."



BY STEVE CASTILLO/THE CHRONICLE

Students listen to Arthur Liman, counsel to the senate committee that investigated the Iran-Contra arms scandal, and film mogul George Lucas talk on the trip back from Alcatraz.

## What stars had to say

**D**uring the three-day "Salute to Excellence Weekend" organized by the American Academy of Achievement, celebrities — in the absence of TV crews and reporters — made some candid statements to their young friends.

■ Arthur Liman, counsel to the Senate committee in the Iran-Contra arms scandal: "I think Congress does not have courage enough to vote their convictions on some matters."

■ Tom Selleck: "I didn't actually go to USC on a basketball scholarship, like my agent tells everyone. I had to go to junior college for two years first. And when I did get into USC, I only scored four points in two years."

■ Oprah Winfrey: "I wanted to be Diana Ross. I wanted to be somebody supreme and stop somebody in the name of love. But I finally realized that no matter how much I dieted, I was never going to have Diana's thighs."

■ Steve Wynn, chairman and

chief executive of Golden Nugget Inc.: "All right, all you latent consumer leisure machines. I'm not going to talk about ethics or dreams."

■ Arthur Rock, CEO of Intel Corporation and legendary venture capitalist: "I don't know what you could do with \$50,000. If you're making an investment, \$50,000 just won't cut it."

■ Tom Clancy, author of "Red October": "We keep thinking Communists are people like we are. We forget that they're vicious, brutal, destructive creatures."

■ Ralph Lauren, fashion designer: "When I was little, I had to wear hand-me-downs from my big brothers. What inspired me was that I wanted to wear my own clothes."

■ Tom Brokaw, anchor and managing editor of NBC "Nightly News": "My first two years in college I majored in girls and thought beer was a food. In many ways it was the most memorable and instructive time in my life."