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Author Herman Wouk addresses students at the edge of the Lincoln Memorial reflecting pool, just one highlight of the 42nd International Achievement Summit.

You Have a Dream

Achievement Summiteers Bask in The Past and Presence of Greatness

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Herman Wouk stood in the cool night, the Lincoln Memorial behind him and the Washington Monument in front of him. The 87-year-old Pulitzer Prize-winning author was here to tell 225 students from 44 countries something about Lincoln.

"The first thing I want you to do is forget

about that huge hunk of marble," he said. "This was a guy."

For a few minutes, Wouk brought the 16th president and his quest to preserve the Union vividly alive in simple, human terms. Then the students walked to the nearby Vietnam Veterans Memorial, where another Pulitzer Prize winner described that war and the men who fought it. "When you stand here, you stand on holy ground," author Neil Sheehan told them. It makes him furious when the sol-

diers of World War II are called "the greatest generation" – the men who fought in Vietnam were every bit as heroic. "They had the bad luck to draw a bad war," he said fiercely, his voice breaking.

Earlier that evening, the students sat in the Supreme Court chambers where they heard Secretary of State Colin Powell defend the war in Iraq, and Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg talk about the court, the Constitution and the con-

For Top Students, Summit Offers Heady Company

roversial 5-4 decision that gave the 2000 election to George Bush.

And that was just the first night of the 42nd International Achievement Summit, a four-day annual gathering that ended last night and that has the distinction of being the most star-studded brainfest you never heard of. The idea is to bring leaders in politics, science, history, business and art together with the brightest of the next generation.

Last night, Nobel Peace Prize winners Shimon Peres and Desmond Tutu, former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani, philanthropist Leonard Lauder, biomedical researcher Robert Langer, Washington Post Chairman Don Graham and rainmaker Bob Strauss were among the new members inducted into the Washington-based Academy of Achievement, which sponsored the summit. And those luminaries were applauded by such former inductees as former president Bill Clinton, filmmaker George Lucas, civil rights icon Coretta Scott King, Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley, Nobel winner Elie Wiesel and singer Aretha Franklin. (Singer Bob Dylan, scheduled to receive his



Pulitzer Prize winners Herman Wouk, left, and Neil Sheehan converse after their talks to participants in the 42nd International Achievement Summit.



During a summit session, graduate students Mohammed Helal, left, of the American University of Cairo, poses a question to Secretary of State Colin Powell about America's role in Iraq.

award along with the others but whose flight was delayed, arrived in time for dessert.)

"The reason these people are here, because none of them have to be here, is because they actually believe that one individual can make a difference in the world," said summit host Catherine B. Reynolds. "And they believe specifically these young people, who are so talented, so capable, can truly make a difference."

The Give and Take

Reynolds, of course, is the famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) philanthropist who gave the Kennedy Center \$100 million last December. And, controversially, made, then rescinded, a \$38 million pledge to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History for an exhibition to celebrate the power of the individual. Her husband, Wayne, is chairman of the American Academy of Achievement, which runs the summit and a Web site promoting the accomplishments and life stories of leaders from all fields.

The nonprofit organization was founded by Wayne's father in 1961 to bring famous achievers and high school students together.

Wayne moved the offices from California to Washington a few years ago, adding world leaders to the roster of prominent Americans. In 1999, Wayne and Catherine married, and the academy jumped into even bigger leagues: The Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation, a multimillion-dollar offshoot of a nonprofit student loan business that Catherine Reynolds controls, became the primary sponsor of the summit. The annual gathering went to Budapest, London and Dublin; and graduate students replaced high school students.

"One of the problems with the Smithsonian project was that at one point they said, 'Don't have an exhibit on achievers. Just have an exhibit on big egos, because that's all these people are,' " said Wayne. "And I said, 'Wait a minute. I think I get it. None of you curators have ever sat down and had breakfast with a Nobel Prize winner or head of state. You don't even *know* what it takes, what they're all about.' "

The main issue for the Smithsonian was the appropriate role of a private donor to define content in a public institution. The Reynoldses have always contended that institution officials were resistant to any

exhibition celebrating individuals – names such as Oprah Winfrey and Michael Jordan circulated – over larger historical movements.

The summit, on the other hand, is specifically designed for the students to see the human side of these men and women, people who seized a moment in their lives and achieved greatness. The Reynoldses said they strive to be nonpartisan and invite guests from all sides of an issue. Students are requested to be respectful; other than that, they can ask whatever questions they wish.

“We like to say that each person here is a participant in a workshop of living history,” said Catherine. “You get to have this one-on-one dialogue with someone who has hands-on experience.”

None of this comes cheap. The members donate their time, but the expenses for all the honorees, former inductees and the students are paid for by the academy. The attendees stay at four-star hotels and are treated to the best food, wine and venues. This year’s summit cost \$3 million.

And worth every penny, she said: “There is no doubt – *no doubt* – that we make a difference in the lives of the students who come here. How do you measure that?”

Student Unrest

Mohammed Helal, a 20-year-old international human rights graduate student from the American University in Cairo, had a question for Secretary Powell on Wednesday night. How, he asked politely, can you say the United States does not impose democracy in light of the Iraqi war? How can you justify what Helal called “in my belief, an illegal action” leading to the destruction of the international legal system?

Powell, of course, disagreed. It was Iraq acting illegally, he said. “I think history will regard this as a legitimate act. History will regard this as a noble act.”

It was the answer Helal expected, he said after the symposium concluded. “He’s been saying it over and over, but I don’t think he means it as a person.” Helal revealed another reason for asking the question. “I wanted to make the American students be exposed to another point of view.”

Thursday’s panel on politics and the press included academy members Sam Donaldson, Mike Wallace, Ben Bradlee and Bob Woodward. “I didn’t think Bush was qualified to be president of the United States,” revealed Wallace. And yes, he answered a student, he thinks the American press became cheerleaders for this war. “It seems to me we cut the cloth to fit the fashion.”

That panel was followed with another on politics and Hollywood, which included lobbyist Mike Deaver, writer Henry Bean, director Steven Soderbergh and movie heartthrob George Clooney. “The majority of people in

the arts are liberal,” Soderbergh told the students. “It’s true, and people just need to get over it.”

Friday afternoon’s panel – Peres, Wiesel, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez, former Lithuanian president Valdas Adamkus and New York Times columnist Tom Friedman – had the dubious distinction of the most collective death threats. (Not at this summit, fortunately, although security was very tight.)

The questions were dominated by terrorism and the Mideast. How can you define terrorism? How should the international community respond to countries that harbor terrorists? How much of U.S. foreign policy is dictated by Israel? What is the best way to address the underlying issues of occupation and inequity? What about civil rights? “There is no human rights without human obligations,” Peres told them.

In the end, there remain far more questions than answers. A student asked if hope is possible.

“If I think of myself alone, I have the right to despair,” said Wiesel. “If I think of you, I don’t.”

Rubbing Elbows

Friday’s dinner at the National Gallery of Art was jammed. The students couldn’t believe these famous people are so “human” (translation: nice, normal and not jerks) and the members were delighted that the kids are so “bright” (translation: nice, normal and appropriately appreciative).

Members took a bow: legendary miler Sir

Roger Bannister, poet N. Scott Momaday, Gen. Wesley Clark, genome researcher Francis Collins, lawyer Brendan Sullivan, Iditarod champion Susan Butcher, former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, former FBI director William S. Sessions and author Jean Auel.

“There’s not a person in this room who needs another honor or an accolade or applause,” said Sullivan. “You know what gives you the most satisfaction? When someone tells you they became a lawyer because you inspired them in some way.”

Anthropologist Don Johanson has been a member of the academy since 1976, two years after he discovered “Lucy,” the 3-million-year-old human fossil. “As I’ve become involved over the years, I realized how important it is for young people to have a mentor,” said Johanson. His own father died when he was just 2 years old, and he was lucky enough to have an anthropologist living next door. It changed his life.

These students might be super bright, he said, but they are still full of normal self-doubts. “I feel an obligation to pass on to the next generation that we can dream – and we can achieve those dreams.”

There was the palpable sense that most of the members enjoy sharing their stories and their passions, especially with young people as bright and driven as they once were.

“This is a place where they get to talk to those who’ve been there and done that,” said “Star Wars” creator Lucas. “The true advice is simple and straightforward and most people ignore it: ‘Be persistent.’ ‘Do something you love.’ I say it to my kids and they don’t



Academy inductee Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Coretta Scott King.



Filmmaker George Lucas, left, with the event's hosts, philanthropist Catherine Reynolds and her husband, Wayne.

listen to me. I say it to these kids and maybe a few of them will."

Transcripts to Die For

Reading the biographies of the 225 student delegates is an exercise in humility. The students are selected from other scholarship and exchange programs: Rhodes, Fulbright, Gates, Marshall, Soros and Hughes. Some are recommended by the faculty at Harvard Law, Wharton Business, MIT, Georgetown, Oxford, Stanford, Johns Hopkins and other top schools.

Rachel Yould, a Rhodes *and* Fulbright scholar, and editor of the Oxford International Review, was back for her second summit. The 31-year-old American is a research fellow at Tokyo's Keio University, studying technology transfer and defense relations between the United States and Japan. She attended her first summit in London, and she was in Washington to interview academy members for the Review.

"People say it's the best-kept secret, which is the beauty of it, really," she said. "The fact that it is not a highly covered event by the media encourages the panelists to be

more candid and creates an environment where students can engage in substantive interaction. It's incredibly over-stimulating in the most positive sense of the term."

Said Helal, "For me, this is a brilliant, brilliant opportunity for me for interaction – especially with the other students. I have made a point of sitting with every single Israeli in this summit."

It's also a chance to be . . . well, smart. Most of the time, they had to hold back a little, concealing the fact they're a Rhodie or the like for fear of showing off. Here, all the students are mega-accomplished. "It's not a smarty-pants thing," said Yould, "because there's the sense that you're in the presence of peers who genuinely care about what they do and are already succeeding at it."

Gold-Plated Fun

Last night's black-tie banquet at the Mellon Auditorium was the week's biggest bash: the presentation of the Golden Plate Award, the academy's official prize, to the Class of 2003, and a program including performances by Aretha Franklin, Chuck Berry, Ray Charles and Patti Austin.

"Catherine said if I showed up, I could introduce Ray Charles," Bill Clinton told the crowd. Just moments before he had effusively praised the academy and its goals. "What's special about the Academy of Achievement," he said, "is that it honors people – with the possible exception of me – who really deserve to be honored."

The genius of it, he remarked, is that the young people get a chance to interact and be inspired by the honorees. In fact, Clinton said, he and his wife had earlier in the day hosted at their Washington residence a number of daughter Chelsea's friends from Oxford attending the summit. "Thank you, Catherine and Wayne," he told the audience, "for giving these kids a chance to see there's a nobility in every form of human service."