



Dick Henning — hosting world notables at Celebrity Forum for four decades

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San Jose Mercury News (California)

September 18, 2010 Saturday

In the late 1960s, when Dick Henning launched a lecture series and a slate of concerts at Foothill College, the speakers got paid \$600 a piece, and the concerts were enveloped in such thick clouds of marijuana smoke that the straight-arrow Henning preferred to stand outside while students in the gymnasium grooved to acts like Janis Joplin, the Fifth Dimension and Jefferson Airplane.

More than 40 years later, the smoke and the concert series are only memories. But Henning is still luring luminaries — using much higher fees than in the old days — to come to the Celebrity Forum, one of the most highly regarded speakers series in the country. Over the years, Henning has snagged celebs such as Colin Powell, Al Gore, Tom Brokaw, Margaret Thatcher, Cary Grant and nearly every contemporary U.S. president to speak as part of the annual series.

This year's roster of star lecturers includes ex-British Prime Minister Tony Blair, pilot Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger and cellist Yo-Yo Ma in a season that begins Sept. 29 at Flint Center in Cupertino and continues until May.

"We live in an area where the most highly educated and highly inquisitive people want to stay up to date, current," Henning says. "They also want to look at new ideas, and they want more than a sound bite that they too often get on television."

Henning was director of student activities at Sunnyvale High School in 1967, when he applied for a job at Foothill College. What got him hired, he says, was his idea that a new concert and speakers series could convince frugal students a student activity fee was worth the money. The speakers series — one of few in existence at the time — caught on. Some students attended, but the majority of the audience was, and is, local residents ages 40 to 70, he says.

The genial, 75-year-old Henning, who lives with his wife, Paulette, in Mountain View on the border with Los Altos, also has convinced scientists and authors to speak. After dogged pursuit, he was the first to book the reclusive Grant as a speaker, in 1982.

"Dick has fashioned a wonderful series with tremendous staying power and also — worth noting — has inspired a half-dozen other series around the country," says Steven Barclay, director of the Steven Barclay Agency in Petaluma, who met Henning in the 1980s.

Today, the Celebrity Forum budget allots about \$1 million a year to speakers' fees. This year's highest paid guest, Tony Blair, will pull in \$125,000 a night for each of three nights. The least expensive speaker, paleontologist Dr. Louise Leakey, will make \$12,000 a night. Ma, a higher-profile celeb, will earn \$75,000 a night, while Boston Philharmonic Orchestra conductor Ben Zander gets \$50,000 and "Three Cups of Tea" author Greg Mortenson will make \$22,000. Rounding out the schedule are scholar Reza Aslan (\$12,500) and Sullenberger (\$45,000).

In addition to the money, Henning is offering better amenities than he did in the early days. Celebrities no longer bunk for the night in the home of a Los Altos resident; they can choose to stay either in San Francisco or at the new Rosewood Sand Hill hotel in Menlo Park. No more rides from Henning, either; speakers get picked up in limos.

"This is a huge business now," says Henning, noting that the rise of talent agencies helped drive speakers' fees way up over the years. "There's hardly a big-time, popular celebrity who doesn't think seriously about going on the speaker circuit after they've come out of their position or job. And they make so much money."

But sales of Celebrity Forum tickets have dropped for each of the past two years with the weak economy, Henning says. Tickets, available for the whole series only, start at \$290. And with both ticket sales and the nation's current political polarization in mind, Henning decided not to include any politicians on this year's slate. "I don't want people to come to the Celebrity Forum and walk away angry, and that was starting to happen," he says.

On the other hand, he sometimes gets notes from ticket-holders telling him how much they enjoy the speakers. "Other people tell me as soon as they leave the theater they go down to Marie Callender's or somewhere for pie and coffee in a small group to talk about the speakers," he says. "So that is rewarding, when I hear those things."

Henning grew up in the Kern County oil town of Taft and took an early liking to drama and speech classes. "Most students were shy about getting up and talking, and I was never shy about getting up and talking," he says, laughing. "So I found those were easy classes."

He attended San Jose State University on a boxing scholarship, and later earned a master's degree from Santa Clara University and a doctorate in education administration from the University of Southern California. He taught drama at Sunnyvale High School starting in 1960, and he's still on stage 21 times a year, introducing seven lecturers, each of whom speaks three times during the stint with Celebrity Forum — on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday nights. He also poses a half-hour of audience-generated questions to the speakers after each lecture.

It's too hard to name the best Celebrity Forum speaker ever, he says, but his recent favorites have been Thomas Friedman, Andrew Weil, Ken Burns, David Brooks and Doris Kearns Goodwin.

New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd also made a memorable appearance a couple of years ago. After finally agreeing to speak, she was so nervous she was shaking before her talk, and carried with her a 150-page stack of notes printed out in enormous type, he says. The lip on the edge of the speaker's rostrum was too shallow to hold the stack, so the stage manager had to nail on an extra piece of wood just before curtain time.

"The lip is still there today; we call it the Maureen Dowd lip," says Henning with a laugh, who adds that, despite all her fretting, "the talk was great."

But even in his 43rd year of bringing in big-name guest speakers, Henning still sits in the front row feeling nervous at the beginning of almost every lecture, knowing that if the speaker is bad he'll hear about it from his many Los Altos friends and associates.

"You can't wait for that next speaker to come to erase that memory," he says. "I really feel responsible."

DICK HENNING

Position: Founder of Foothill College Celebrity Forum; retired vice president of Foothill College

Hometown: Taft

Residence: Mountain View

Age: 75

Family: Married to Paulette Henning; between them, they have three children, five grandchildren and one great-grandchild

Education: Undergraduate and master's degrees from San Jose State University; second master's degree from Santa Clara University; doctorate in higher education and administration from the University of Southern California

Hobbies: Rotary Club; co-founded an organization for directors of lecture series; has led more than 20 safaris in numerous African countries

Celebrity Forum

Seven-lecture series

When: Sept. 29-May 6, 2011

Where: Flint Center, 21250 Stevens Creek Blvd., Cupertino

Series tickets: \$290 and up; www.celebrityforum.net

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