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By Alison van Diggelen

**CELEBRITY
FORUM
HOST DICK
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Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Ginger Rogers, Colin Powell, Benjamin Netanyahu and Joe Montana may not have much of anything in common — anything obvious, that is. But they do all belong to a certain A-list of celebrities, politicians and great thinkers who

Dick L. Henning, ambassador to the South Bay, has introduced to local audiences through his internationally renowned Celebrity Forum speaker series. In 1998 he added a second series, Celebrity Forum II, in San Jose. "He's a man with a magic touch, who enriches our intellectual life by bringing up-close people who might not otherwise come here," says columnist and friend Leigh Weimers, who's no slouch in the Silicon Valley society department, himself.

But Henning's achievements are all the more surprising when you consider his humble beginnings, growing up in the cultural backwater of a Southern California oil town. As a youth, one of his thrills was interviewing a hermit in the wilds of Southern California. But this autumn he anticipates the arrival of some rather more connected guests, ones with considerably more pull on the global scale: former President Bill Clinton, comedian Jerry Lewis and Pulitzer Prize winning author David McCullough, among others.

On each occasion, Henning introduces his celebrity guest, who speaks for an hour and then takes questions from the audience. White-haired and smartly dressed, Henning has the calm composure of a diplomat, the quick intellect of a professor and a penchant for humor like that of his regular satirist guest, Mark Russell.

When you glance over the list of celebrities Henning's bagged over the last 34 years, you'd expect a man with an arrogant edge. The list reads like a *Who's Who* of the 20th and 21st centuries: Reagan to Gorbachev; Frank McCourt to Erma Bombeck; Ken Burns to Oliver Stone. Yet Henning is almost overly modest of his achievements. "All I have to do is put a glass of water on the podium and pay the big bucks," he says.

Henning is so used to getting calls from celebrities and their agents that his closest friend, Adrian Stanga, often calls him up with prank calls, pretending to be Henry Kissinger or Jimmy Carter. One day Henning's secretary said, "President Ford is on the line." Henning, expecting one of Stanga's pranks, took the call, saying, "Hello President Ford, you clumsy son of a bitch." To Henning's dismay, this greeting was followed by a long silence, then Ford's secretary sniffed, "Well, excuse me. I'll put the President on."

With an annual budget of close to \$1.2 million, Henning can go "shopping" internationally for stars. He says things

were easier a few years ago, before celebrity fees increased exponentially. Back then, speakers only wanted sold out, highly educated audiences. But today, he says, "Big-name speakers want both...big money and the full audience, as their egos are involved." Today, he pays up to \$80,000 a speaker. He recalls the day former Communist leader Mikhail Gorbachev came to speak. "You should have seen the way he pocketed that honorarium; he's now a bigger capitalist than Milton Friedman," Henning laughs.

So who makes it onto Henning's list and why? Henning jokes that his definition of a celebrity is "anyone who can sell tickets to the Forum." He describes his job as like making a mosaic, assembling a cross section of people from the arts, politics and public life. Most importantly, he requires at least one big draw per season. "My ego is so tied up in

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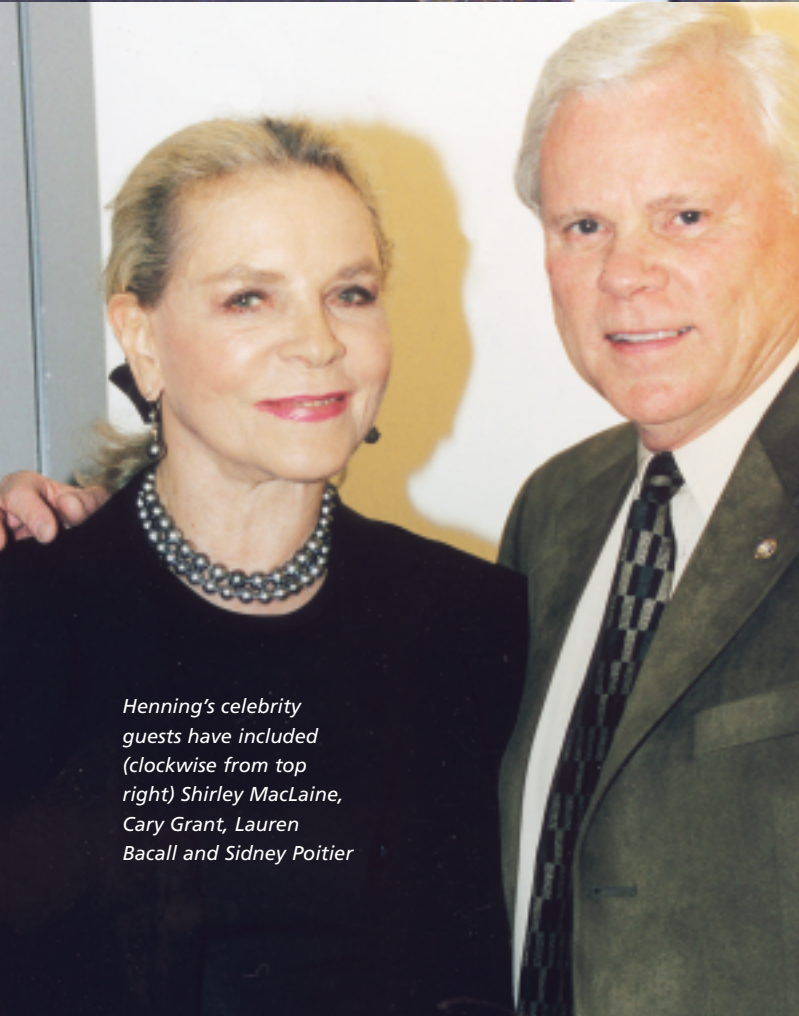
this; I feel an enormous pressure to have a good lineup each year," he says.

Henning has Nelson Mandela on his A-list, a man whom he describes as an ambassador of goodwill for the world. Although Henning admits to a little battle fatigue where actually booking his idol is concerned, he says, "I never give up." Queen Elizabeth II, Bill Gates, Kofi Annan and Toni Morrison are also on his wish list.

Does mingling with royalty, artists, politicians and presidents sometimes make Henning want to pinch himself? "Sure," he says, "all the time. I keep telling myself, 'I'm from Taft.'"

Henning grew up in the town of Taft, near Bakersfield, in Southern California. He describes it as a backward and dusty little oil town. He lived with his parents and two brothers in a tiny clapboard house, and says that temperatures of 108° were not uncommon. He recalls their primitive bedtime air conditioning system: "My brothers and I would dampen the sheets, jump into bed and hope we could fall asleep before they dried," he says.

His father wrote a hunting/fishing column for the local paper. Henning enjoyed going with him to interview and photograph a local 80-year-old hermit named Walt Harrington who was the inspiration for many columns. Henning describes his father as being witty and modest,



Henning's celebrity guests have included (clockwise from top right) Shirley MaLaine, Cary Grant, Lauren Bacall and Sidney Poitier



Henning with (left) Margaret Thatcher. Facing Page: Benazir Bhutto, Jimmy Carter, George Bush and Ronald Reagan are among the forum's political celebrities.

traits that he has obviously inherited.

In Taft, Henning began his college education and, although he was a poor student in high school, he became fascinated by psychology and sociology. He graduated from San Jose State, along with his friend Leigh Weimers, in 1958, then took his education still further, gaining masters degrees at both San Jose State and Santa Clara University. Finally at 37 years of age, he earned a doctorate in higher education administration. "It kept getting easier, so I stayed," he says.

The same could be said of his success with Celebrity Forum; he seems to build each year on the previous year's triumph. As the founder of the forum back in 1968, he has never relinquished the reins.

Henning worked as a high school English teacher and then joined Foothill College as dean of community services. His first big challenge on the job was also an inspiration for him, though it was hard to see the silver lining at the time: He had to sell the idea of a new student card, and he says it was almost impossible. "We had an influx of Vietnam vets and hippie types. They were being strong-armed into buying the card, and they pushed back. We had to give them something for their money." Hence in 1968, the "Special Speakers Series" was born. For \$2 a ticket, students got to see four speakers, including anthropologist Louis Leakey and commentator Alistair Cooke. Henning recalls that the day after his presentation, Cooke went down to Los Angeles to be with Robert Kennedy at the Ambassador Hotel. It was the day Kennedy was assassinated: June 5, 1968.

Very soon, the Forum outgrew its home in the college gymnasium, thanks mainly to enthusiastic interest from local residents. It expanded first into the Flint Center in Cupertino, then also to the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts in 1998.

Henning's Forum was voted "Best Lecture Series in the Nation" by the International Platform Association in 1983. Today, ticket prices for Celebrity Forum II are \$220 for a seven-person lineup — and it's still a sell out. Henning has a waiting list of about 1,500 for both venues.

What is it about Henning that makes him so accomplished at attracting big name celebrities? Characteristi-

cally, Henning eschews credit, attributing his success to the educated and affluent local people, the quality of the venues and the dynamism of Silicon Valley. Yet many speak highly of Henning's attention to detail, his humble charm and his sense of humor.

Friend and mentor Adrian Stanga says, "Dick is meticulous in his preparation. He's his own man, and has to be in charge. I've learned not to offer him advice. Who's going to argue with the success that he's had?"

Several times Henning has had the opportunity — or perhaps the responsibility — to work with celebrities on improving their speech and delivery. He says, "Because someone is a celebrity does not mean they could pass a Speech 1A class. Some professional movie actors have been disappointing because we expect them to be as good

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as they are in the movies. If a speaker reads his or her speech, members of the audience will start walking out, and rightfully so. It is insulting to them." At the other extreme, Henning recalls his favorite guest, Jimmy Carter. "He would ask me 10 minutes before going on stage, 'What do you want me to talk about?' He'd write down three or four words and take that out with him."

Henning makes a point of greeting celebrities at the airport when they arrive and arranging accommodation for them, always at the Fairmont Hotel. When Margaret Thatcher and her entourage of six people, including her hairdresser (and her hairdresser's boyfriend) arrived at the airport, Henning recalls having to stand for about 20 long minutes on the tarmac while the wind almost blew him over. Finally, Thatcher descended from the charter jet, with not a hair on her signature curls out of place.



At times, Henning seems to spark even a little clairvoyance. For example, just weeks after the Oscars, Sidney Poitier was a speaker at Celebrity Forum. But of course, Henning had booked him almost 12 months prior; before mere mortals had any idea Poitier would be honored for his lifetime achievements in film.

Each celebrity is sent a brochure with a list of the previous celebrities who have appeared during the Forum's entire history, and a photo montage of those appearing in the last 25 years. When Henry Kissinger saw the media kit, he reportedly asked, "What are you trying to do, intimidate me?"

Henning acknowledges that he needs enormous tenacity to do his job. Sometimes he simply doesn't take no for an answer, going so far as to work with nervous celebrities to develop a less threatening format, or an approach to speaking in front of a crowd that will seem less like public speech and more like public chat. Bernadine Fong, presi-

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Politically, too, Henning maintains an open mind, a non-threatening approach and a certain eye for publicity. He describes himself as an independent voter, with an audience that is split almost equally between Republicans and Democrats, the vast majority of whom are over 50 years old. When asked, at a recent San Jose Rotary Club meeting, who is responsible for selecting the speakers, he replies, "You can blame it all on me...and people frequently do." Henning is currently getting heat for inviting former President Bill Clinton to San Jose this fall. A recent unsigned card he received in the mail said, "Don't you

dare have Clinton!" He shrugs. "We may lose some subscribers over this, but my feeling is that anyone who will take questions is welcome to speak. Clinton is going to impress a lot of people who think they are unimpressable. The exchange of opinions is the key." He calls the rostrum Hyde Park, after the famous Hyde Park Corner in London, where anyone armed with a loud voice and soapbox can take part in a public airing of opinion, colorful argument and debate.

On the personal front, too, Henning maintains a wide circle of people who are as devoted to him as he is to them. Married to Paulette, a French national, whom he met locally, he has three grown children, one from a previous marriage, and five grandchildren. His family extends to a wide circle of friends, including many celebrities who treat him just like family.

One afternoon, former President Jimmy Carter called him up unexpectedly to ask a favor. Carter wanted to use his spare bedroom to rest before the lecture he was scheduled to give. That day, Henning told him about a family issue: his daughter, Carine, was having some boyfriend problems. Just like an empathetic uncle, Carter took her aside and consoled her. Likewise, when Jehan Sadat (widow of former President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat) departed, there were tears in her eyes. "You are like family," she reportedly said.

Henning says one important thing he has learned about celebrities is that they all have the same foibles as us. He says, "Our society tends to hero-worship certain entertainers and actors without really knowing them and in so doing we can demean ourselves." Although he admits to some apprehension when first meeting a celebrity, he doesn't have to guard against hero worship. "Every time I meet a celebrity, the notion gets reinforced that famous people are like most of my friends...It's just that their timing and luck were better," he says.

What is the biggest reward of the job for Henning? College mate Phil Strong provides one answer. "Dick is an aggressive guy who excels at everything he does; he works in everyone's best interest for a win/win situation." Henning's own answer is emphatic. "Seeing the audience give the speaker a standing ovation is my reward," he says. Occasionally, however, the converse occurs. "Sometimes speakers fall flat," he says, "and I take it personally for several days."

He recalls the evening Harry Belafonte's lecture dragged on and on. Henning laughs as he describes the evening. "He just couldn't stop, and some people walked out. Next morning, I received a handwritten fax saying simply [here Henning breaks into song], 'Daylight come an' I wanna go ho...ome.'" Perhaps it's a testament to the sophistication of Celebrity Forum audiences; after all, it's not just anyone



"Gorbachev was a bigger capitalist than Milton Friedman," laughs Henning.

who can cite the Banana Boat Song and express displeasure at the length of a lecture. But that kind of criticism still stings.

And what of Henning's life beyond Celebrity Forum? "Dick is a true renaissance man," says local investment counselor Steve Lewis, referring to Henning's diverse interests and skills. When Henning is not rubbing shoulders with stars, he's often getting dangerously close to other rare species such as gorillas and leopards. Henning has led many safaris to Africa, takes professional-quality photographs and is involved in Rotary Club activities both locally and abroad. Henning is also a member of several all-male activity groups. He describes one as a "relationship enhancer where we discuss confidential topics that reveal something new about us. We do not sit and talk about last night's game." Henning, who admits to being a little envious of women's intimacy, is a man in search of a deeper

level of connection and understanding, both personally and professionally.

Henning looks forward to Clinton's speech in November. It should certainly be a provocative evening, he says. In true professorial style, Henning's questions will pull no punches.

As to the future, he won't even discuss the thought of someone replacing him one day on his favorite venue, Hyde Park. Friend and fellow Rotarian Mel Kahn reportedly warned him: "You can never leave that job with the Celebrity Forum; it defines you!" Henning retorts, "I could still do the job in my 80's, there's no heavy lifting involved." **SJM**

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