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# Remarks on presenting the arts and humanities medals. (Pres Bill Clinton's speech during the awards presentation of the 1997 National Medal of Arts and National Medal of Humanities)(Transcript)

September 29, 1997

Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the White House. I thank the Members of Congress for coming, the members of the councils who stood up and were recognized. I also want to thank the First Lady for that very nice speech and unusual introduction. [Laughter]

The spin that was put on my going to the opera at home was slightly different than the one you heard. [Laughter] It went more like, "I've been trying to get you to do this for 5 years, now. I know you will like this if you go." [Laughter] "And besides, it's Carmen, it's your kind of thing." [Laughter] And then, afterward, I said, "Gosh, I just loved that, and I thought Denyce Graves was great, and it was fabulous." And she said, "I told you. I told you. I told you." So I was glad to have the sort of sanitized version presented to you. [Laughter] But I thought, in the interest of openness, I should tell you the whole story. [Laughter]

Let me again say to all of you, you are very welcome here in the White House. And let me say a special word of thanks to two people: first, to Jane Alexander for her outstanding leadership of the National Endowment of the Arts, thank you; and second, to Sheldon Hackney, who recently left his job as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, but who did a wonderful job for the United States in the position, thank you.

This morning, we honor 20 men and women and one organization for extraordinary achievement in arts and humanities. And in giving these awards, we also applaud the achievements of our country. We celebrate our capacity for individual expression and common understanding, and we rejoice in our Nation's thriving and growing diversity. We take pride in the power of imagination that animates our democracy.

And above all, by giving these awards we declare to ourselves and to the world, we are, we always have been, and we always will be a nation of creators and innovators. We are, we always have been, and we always will be a nation supporting our artists and scholars. It is our heritage. It must be a great gift we give to the future.

As Hillary said, as we work up to the millennium, we will be observing it in many ways over the next 4 years that both honor our past and encourage our people to imagine the future. Today, I invite each of you to be partners in that endeavor in the White House Millennium Program, to help us to make sure the millennium is marked by a renewed commitment to the arts and humanities in every community in our Nation.

One of the most important goals for the millennium is to give every child in America access to the universe of knowledge and ideas by connecting every school and library in our country to the Internet by the year 2000. Working together with business leaders, we've made solid progress. And as we work to connect our schools and libraries we must make sure that once our children can log on to the Internet they don't get lost there.

So today I'm pleased to announce that on the 27th of October the National Endowment for the Humanities, in partnership with MCI and the Council of Great City Schools, will throw the switch on a new educational website called Ed-SITE-ment - Ed-SITE-merit, not bad - [laughter]. This exciting new tool will help teachers, students, and their parents to navigate among the thousands of educational websites, and there are literally tens of thousands of them now. Most important, it will expand our children's horizons and instill in them an early appreciation for the culture and values that will be with them throughout their lives.

President Kennedy once said he looked forward to an America that raised the standards of artistic achievement and enlarged cultural opportunities for all citizens. The men and women we honor today have brought us much closer to realizing that vision. More than 30 years later, at the edge of the new millennium, we must pledge ourselves anew to meet this challenge.

Now, it gives me great pleasure to present the 1997 National Medal of Arts and National Medal of Humanities awards. First, the National Medal of Arts.

Like Martha Graham and Georgia O'Keeffe, Louise Bourgeois' name is synonymous with innovation, and her life is proof that creative impulse never fails. In 1981, her retrospective at the Museum of Modem Art, the first to be devoted to a woman artist, encompassed 40 years of extraordinary work. Since then, she has created another lifetime of enduring art, and I have no doubt she has more to teach us.

Ladies and gentlemen, Jean-Louis Bourgeois, the artist's son, will accept the award on her behalf. Louise Bourgeois.

[At this point, the President and the First Lady presented the medal to Mr. Bourgeois.]

Don't worry, I'll report this on my gift form. Thank you. [Laughter]

When Betty Carter sings "Baby, It's Cold Outside," it makes you want to curl up in front of a fire, even in the summertime. Performing with the likes of Ray Charles, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Lionel Hampton, she is truly a goddess in the pantheon of jazz. Her greatness comes not only from her unforgettable voice but from her passionate commitment to helping young artists develop their own careers.

Ladies and gentlemen, the incomparable Betty Carter.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Ms. Carter.]

We can't celebrate art today without celebrating the people who help us to experience it. Aggie Gund has spent a lifetime bringing art into the lives of the American people. With the "Studio in a School," she forged a new partnership between professional artists and public schools to introduce children to the joys of creative expression.

And I might say, that's even more important today. One of the things that a lot of us who care about our schools are concerned about are the dwindling opportunities too many of our children have in the arts of all kinds, because we know it gives these children, so many of them, a chance to learn, to grow, to find positive means of self-expression. If they never become any kind of artist, the increase in self-understanding, self-control, self-direction, and pure, old-fashioned enjoyment in life is more than worth the effort. And so we are especially grateful to Aggie Gund. As president of the Museum of Modern Art, she is helping to usher in the 21st century of art.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's an honor to present her today.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Ms. Gund.]

From the National Mall to the National Gallery, Dan Kiley has helped to redefine the American landscape. He's one of those rare artists who join the beauty and variety of nature with the joy and form of design. In his thought-provoking, memorable designs, building and site come together as one, proving that great landscapes and great buildings are part of the same vision.

Ladies and gentlemen, Dan Kiley.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. Kiley.]

It is no mystery - [laughter] - why Angela Lansbury deserves this award. From the Royal Shakespeare Theatre to Broadway to television, she has created vivid characters we can't forget. For that work, she has earned three Academy Award nominations, four Tony Awards, and 16 Emmy Awards. To that wall of honors we add this one, for she is her own unforgettable character.

Ladies and gentlemen, Angela Lansbury.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Ms. Lansbury.]

A hush falls in the Metropolitan Opera as the great chandelier rises and James Levine raises his baton. For 25 years and 1,600 performances of 70 different operas, countless opera goers, television watchers, and radio listeners have shared that experience and shared in the great gift of his talent. His work has renewed the grand tradition of opera and infused it with new life for the next generation of opera lovers.

Ladies and gentlemen, James Levine

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. Levine.]

I really admire him. He was up here looking for his mother. He says, "I know she's out here somewhere." [Laughter] Where is she? Good for you. Thank you.

Just hearing Tito Puente's name makes you want to get up and dance. With his finger on the pulse of the Latin American musical tradition and his hands on the timbales, he has probably gotten more people out of their seats and onto the dance floor than any other living artist. For 50 years now, the irrepressible joy of his irreplaceable music has won him four Grammy Awards, countless honors, and a wide world of fans.

Ladies and gentlemen, Tito Puente.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. Puente.]

If anyone has actually given a voice to American dramatic arts, it is Jason Robards. In the great works of our greatest playwrights, Eugene O'Neill, Lillian Hellman, Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, and in Academy

Award performances in great movies like "All The President's Men," he has brought the American experience to life with characters that animate history and illuminate the human condition. And every one of us who has ever had to give a significant number of public speeches has wished at some moment in his life that he had a voice like Jason Robards. [Laughter]

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. Robards.]

Edward Villella, quite literally, leapt onto the world stage of ballet and changed it forever with the stunning grace and muscular athleticism that are his signature style. As principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, he collaborated with the men who defined 20th century ballet, George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins. And as artistic director of the Miami City Ballet, he is attracting the ballet audience of the 21st century.

Ladies and gentlemen, the remarkable Edward Villella.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. Villella.]

There may not be a serious, committed baby boomer alive who didn't at some point in his or her youth try to spend a few minutes at least trying to learn to pick a guitar like Doc Watson. A guitar virtuoso whose unique style merges many musical traditions, he started his remarkable career at age 13, armed with a $12 guitar and a deep love of mountain music. Five Grammy Awards and a lifetime of achievement later, he still lives in the land his great-great grandaddy homesteaded, and he's still making that old-time mountain music.

Ladies and gentlemen, Doc Watson.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. Watson.]

For our artists to create the kind of works we're here to celebrate, they have to have three things: time, space, and inspiration. For nearly half a century, that is what more than 4,500 artists have found at the MacDowell Colony. On this 450-acre farm in rural New Hampshire, Thornton Wilder wrote "Our Town;" Leonard Bernstein finished his great "Mass." Today, a new generation of artists thrives in the atmosphere created by composer Edward MacDowell and his wife, Marian.

Ladies and gentlemen, the award to the MacDowell Colony will be accepted by the chairman of the MacDowell Colony, a man we all know in other guises, Robert MacNeil.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. MacNeil.]

Now, I have the honor of introducing the recipients of the National Humanities Medal, men and women who keep the American memory alive and infuse the future with new ideas.

First, Nina Archabal. To those who know and work with her, she is a fireball who lets no one stand in the way of her mission to preserve Minnesota's history. To the State of Minnesota, she's a bridge-builder between native peoples and other Minnesotans, helping them share their stories. To America, she exemplifies how tradition informs everyday life and shapes history. And just this rooming she told the President that it was high time he high-tailed it out to Minnesota to see exactly what she was doing. [Laughter]

Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Nina Archabal.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Ms. Archabal.]

David Berry and I share a goal: to strengthen our Nation's 2-year community colleges so that more Americans can get the education they need to succeed in life, no matter how old they are or where they come from. As professor of history at Essex County College in Newark, New Jersey, he's broadened the horizons and expanded the dreams of his students. As director of the Community College Humanities Association, he's helping 2-year colleges all over the country to do the same.

Ladies and gentlemen, I don't know how many of you have ever spent any time in these 2-year institutions, but they are exhilarating in the opportunities they offer to people who not so long ago would never have been able to dream of them. And the fact that we are bringing the humanities into them and putting them front and center is a very important part of inspiring the Americans of the 21st century, because more and more of them will find their way to these remarkable institutions.

Ladies and gentlemen, David Berry.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. Berry.]

After a very, very successful career as chairman and CEO of an investment banking firm, Richard Franke could well have rested on his achievements. Instead, he made it his mission to advance the cause of

the humanities in everyday life. Through the Chicago Humanities Festival he founded in 1989, he's bringing the pleasures of art and ideas to the people of the great city of Chicago. And his commitment to the humanities extends to the entire Nation.

Ladies and gentlemen, Sir Richard

Franke.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. Franke.]

I doubt that there is a more revered force in American education today than Bill Friday. As president of the University of North Carolina, he devoted himself to improving education for all Americans. There is hardly an important educational task force he has not been a member of. He helped to found the National Humanities Center. He sat on the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education and the President's Task Force on Education. As executive director of the Kenan Charitable Trust, he continues his life of achievement.

I can tell you that in all the years that I served as Governor and Hillary and I worked to improve education for our children from kindergarten through higher education and to change the horizons of the South in ways that would bring people together and elevate their conditions, no one was more respected or had more influence on how we all thought and what we tried to do than the remarkable Bill Friday.

Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Friday.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. Friday.]

I think I should say that our next awardee, Don Henley, is not in the wrong category. [Laughter] He has already won so many awards for his wonderful, wonderful music, he may think that he doesn't need another. But today we honor him not for another hit record but instead for 7 years of relentless effort to protect a vital part of America's history, the woods that inspired Henry David Thoreau to write his greatest work, "Walden." Through his support of the Thoreau Institute, Don is also keeping Thoreau's great legacy alive for the 21st century.

I've known Don for many years, and I told him today right before we came out here that if I had a nickel for every time he has hit on me to preserve the woods around Walden Pond, I would indeed be a wealthy man. [Laughter] He has done his job to preserve a profoundly significant part of our legacy as a larger part of his passionate commitment to preserving our environment and our natural heritage.

Ladies and gentlemen, Don Henley.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. Henley.]

Great writers reveal a world we've never seen but instantly recognize a authentic. Maxine Hong Kingston is such a writer. In her groundbreaking book, "The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of Girlhood Among Ghosts," she brought the Asian-American experience to life for millions of readers and inspired a new generation of writers to make their own unique voices and experiences heard.

Ladies and gentlemen, Maxine Hong Kingston.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Ms. Hong Kingston.]

The great chorus of American voices has also been immeasurably enlarged by the work of Luis Leal. For 50 years he has told the story of the Chicano people, here in America and all over the Latin world. In 16 books he has revealed the unique voice of Latin literature. In 1995, in recognition of his great contributions, the University of California created the Luis Leal Endowed Chair in Chicano Studies, the only one of its kind in our Nation.

Ladies and gentlemen, Luis Leal.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. Leal.]

As we approach the millennium, many Americans are examining their own and our Nation's spirituality, faith, and the role of religion in our Nation's life. No one has thought more deeply about these questions than Martin Marty, a renowned scholar of religious history, the author of 50 books, the director of the Public Religion Project at the University of Chicago which finds common ground in our diverse communities of faith.

Among many things to which he is faithful, he is faithful to his teaching, and he told me he is missing class today, one of the very few times in a very long career of teaching. We have all been enriched by his work, and we thank him for it.

Ladies and gentlemen, Martin Marty.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. Marty.]

Paul Mellon has elevated the great tradition of American philanthropy to an art form. His gifts have immeasurably strengthened the cultural institutions that are at the very heart of our civil society, including, of course, the National Gallery here in Washington. With his sister, he established the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Nation's largest private funder of the humanities. And through his exceptional generosity, he has enriched the libraries of our Nation with precious' collections of the world's greatest works.

Ladies and gentlemen, Robert Smith of the National Gallery of Art will accept the award on behalf of Paul Mellon.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal to Mr. Smith.]

No one has done more to expand the American library of voices than Studs Terkel. He has quite literally defined the art of the oral history, bringing the stories of ordinary people to life in his unique style, and letting the everyday experiences that deepen our history speak for themselves. That is why I am very pleased he has agreed to advise the White House Millennium Program on the best way to collect family and community histories, a project we will launch with the NEH this spring.

Ladies and gentlemen, a true American original, Mr. Studs Terkel.

[The President and the First Lady presented the medal and congratulated Mr. Terkel.]

He just thanked me for coordinating the medal with his trademark shirt, tie, and socks. [Laughter] The rest of our honorees will just have to abide it. We were trying to get the wardrobe right.

Let me again thank all of you for coming and say a special word of thanks to Senator Pell and to Congressman and Mrs. Capps, to Congressman Horn, Congresswoman Maloney, Congresswoman Pelosi, Congressman Serrano, and Congressman Burr. And I thank them. We have talked a lot about all the fights that exist between the President and Congress over the NEH and the NEA. It's important to recognize we've got some good supporters there, too.

Let me invite you to enjoy the Marine Orchestra, to enjoy each other, to enjoy this beautiful day and the rich gifts our honorees have given us.

Thank you very much for coming.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:45 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Lois Capps, wife of Representative Walter Capps.