



The Power of Ideas

BY MICHAEL WATERS

“Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five . . .”

It sounds like a countdown to blastoff—a burst of energy that propels the mind into a realm of fascinating discovery.

In a sense, it is.

The technician, banked by the equipment panels of a television studio control room, speaks again. “Cue him!”

In the adjoining, sparsely furnished studio, another voice rings out. “Hello, I’m Robert Con Davis, and this is “The Power of Ideas’ . . .”

PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR

A dynamic new television program is expanding the audience for prominent speakers who visit the Sooner state.

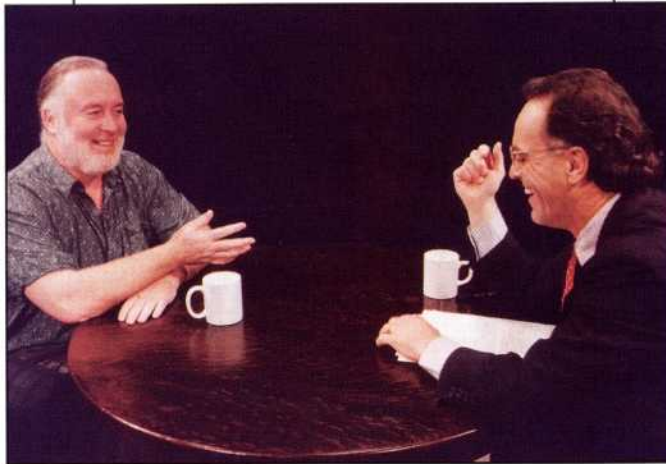
And so begins another 30-minute journey into the insights of a prominent scholar or public figure. The guest might be Motion Picture Association of America President Jack Valenti, noted paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey, pioneer feminist Gloria Steinem, famed comet-hunter David Levy, former Washington, D.C., Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly, novelist E.L. Doctorow or Yale professor and author Stephen Carter. Or some 40 others.

"The Power of Ideas" offers a friendly and erudite forum to the many scholars who visit the Sooner state, some of them participants in Oklahoma Scholar-Leadership Enrichment Program (OSLEP), a statewide enterprise headquartered at the University of Oklahoma. "Ideas," aired weekly on Oklahoma public television outlets since September 1997, has numerous other connections to OU as well.

The show's producers, OSLEP Director Helen DeBolt and Assistant Director Elaine Kumin, oversee the OSLEP program from OU's Norman campus. DeBolt, who has OU undergraduate and law degrees, says with pride that her father, Calvin Thayer, served as an OU English professor. Kumin's husband, Hillel J. Kumin, is associate dean of the College of Engineering.

In addition, OU's Television and Satellite Services, along with studios in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, provide locations used in taping the weekly series.

And Davis, an affable and informal host whose "day job" is a professorship in the OU English Department, finds speaking with prominent figures of science, politics and culture to be "very, very exciting. We've had a lot of science guests on who are on the cutting edge of their fields, political people who have an intensity about them and cultural figures, such as



"The Power of Ideas" host, Robert Con Davis, right, depends on a 10-minute pre-taping warm-up session to establish the ground rules for the interview and to develop a bond with his guest, Laurance Doyle.

Steinem, who've changed people's lives."

The program, Davis says, has traveled far from its origins as a cable-access program he previously hosted called "Professors at Large." The two women who took it that distance, DeBolt and Kumin, had a larger stage in mind for Davis and the scholars on his interview list.

"We always thought it could be a broader show and deserved a larger audience," Kumin says. "So we saw a lot of possibilities."

One possibility the embryonic production team foresaw was to develop a television program that would allow a larger audience—literally, the entire state—to see OSLEP scholars and other prominent figures who lectured in Oklahoma.

"It grew out of the fact that we were bringing wonderful people here to do Scholar-Leadership seminars and give lectures—and maybe 125 people would attend," DeBolt recalls. "And 125 other people would see a newspaper story about the lecture a week later and say to themselves, 'Damn! I wish I'd known about that!'"

"Not only would you miss it, but also there would be no record that it ever happened," Kumin adds. "So we saw the show as being, among other things, a repository of what these scholars had to say on their visits."

Kumin and DeBolt took their idea for "Ideas" to the Oklahoma Regents for Higher Education. The proposal met with an enthusiastic response, and the State Regents remain "big moral and financial supporters of the show," DeBolt says.

In addition to funding from the State Regents, the production is being underwritten by the Oklahoma Humanities Council, EPSCoR, Harold's Clothing Stores, OG&E, John Massey, Julian Rothbaum and Stanton L. Young, as well as OU and OSLEP.

After receiving the State Regents' endorsement, DeBolt recalls, the producers gained the backing of the Oklahoma Educational Television Authority (OETA), which slotted the show on Oklahoma City's OETA-owned Literacy Channel.

The program premiered on September 3, 1997, and moved

OPPOSITE: A technician checks the image NASA investigator Laurance Doyle is projecting on "The Power of Ideas."



Producers Elaine Kumin and Helen DeBolt, visit with host Robert Con Davis, left, and guest Laurance Doyle, right, before the taping of another edition of "The Power of Ideas."

to statewide OETA airings in April 1998. A November segment, Davis' interview with Gloria Steinem, received an Award of Distinction in the Broadcast/Information division of the national 1998 Communicator Awards.

A total of 40 shows were taped in the first year, and another 40 are being taped in 1998-99 as well, DeBolt says. "That gives us a summer of reruns.

"We started off Saturday mornings, and now we're on Monday nights—which is really a great place for us," she adds. "It's the old 'Charlie Rose' slot [i.e., 11 p.m.]"

Guests and viewers alike appreciate the show's engaging atmosphere, which is thoroughly professional without being slick. What comes across is, in Davis' words, something like "a conversation in a cafe."

For example, a recent taping with Laurance Doyle, principal investigator for the SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) project at the NASA Ames Research Center, sticks to no-nonsense scientific fact. But the format is freewheeling enough to allow the discussion to veer into UFO phenomena and for Davis to pose a tongue-in-cheek question such as, "Now does all this explain Area 51 and Roswell?"

But that half hour of off-the-cuff talk is distilled from weeks of thoughtful planning. For Davis' part, he says he works hard on "getting it planned ahead of time and getting it spontaneous at the moment."

The work is hard, and the pace sometimes hectic. The schedule of tapings depends on the availability of guests. Sometimes two or three shows are in some stage of preparation simultaneously.

"I made a deal with myself that I don't add up the hours—because it adds up to so many," Davis says. "I talk to a minimum of two, often three, consultants for each show. I generally read the equivalent of two books for each show. And the preparation time has lengthened as we've gotten more ambitious."

On the production side, DeBolt and Kumin devote time to keeping a sharp eye out for potential guests. While OSLEP scholars occupy some of the show's spotlight, the producers welcome other prominent figures who speak at, say, Tulsa and Oklahoma City's Town Hall lecture series, the Oklahoma Summer Arts Institute or at festivities to honor scholars with one of several state awards.

"One of the major things we've worked on since the show began," Kumin says, "is to establish a network of organizations to let us know when these folks are coming—and use the show to expand the audience for their guests' ideas."

DeBolt and Kumin provide background reading for Davis and locate consultants for each taping—"people familiar with the work of the guest, or something they've written, or their field in general," DeBolt says. Conferring with consultants gives Davis a chance to "test his questions, to find out what the current 'hot button' issues, controversies or schools of thought are in a particular area."

For example, Davis prepared for the Laurance Doyle show by reading a book edited by Doyle, *Circumstellar Habitable Zones*, and pored over "a bunch of articles." Additionally, Davis talked extensively with OU professors of physics and astronomy Richard C. Henry and Tibor Herczeg.

Characteristically, Davis meets DeBolt and Kumin for a

pre-production talk about interview structure, what points Davis wants to cover and what points can be put aside if need be. "By the time he meets the interview subject in the studio," DeBolt says, "he has a really good idea of what will go into the interview."

The final and "absolutely essential" element, Davis says, is a warm-up session with the guest for about 10 minutes before the show tapes. It is the first opportunity Davis has to speak with the show's "star" for that week.

The warm-up gives Davis a chance to "go over the game plan" of that week's show with the guest, to give the guest leeway to clarify any off-limits subject matter and, critically, to "establish a bond."

"I make a point as soon as guests come into the studio to make eye contact, to be reassuring and to make it clear that they can trust me—that I'm not here to fool them or act adversarial," Davis says. "If they don't trust me, the show's not going to happen in an interesting way."

Another aspect of preparation involves getting Davis' best possible "performance" before the camera. DeBolt and Kumin have assisted Davis in this regard by hiring acting coaches—first, OU drama professor Christia Ward, and more recently OU adjunct drama professor Darryl Cox.

Cox, who teaches on-camera acting and is a professional film actor in his own right, notes that "people get intimidated by the camera. They think they have to project a formal persona and need to know that you don't have to behave a different way because you're talking on camera as opposed to talking to someone over lunch."

Cox adds that Davis "just needed some confidence in allowing himself to come through on camera—his natural smile, his engagement with the interviewee."

The coaching "has helped a lot to get me focused on how I come across," Davis says. His producers agree and give him high marks in general.

"He's been fabulous," Kumin says of Davis. "He has a lot of curiosity about everything, and it shows. You can see that he wants to do the best job he can."

DeBolt adds, "A lot of the guests notice it also—that they're getting an opportunity to talk to somebody who's interested in what they're saying. He's read their books. It's very flattering to them."

Laurance Doyle, NASA's extra-terrestrial investigator, is prepared for "The Power of Ideas" cameras by the show's husband-and-wife television production team, Debra and Michael Ketchersid.

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More scholars will have that opportunity. DeBolt and Kumin look forward to visits from, among others, former Food and Drug Administration Director David Kessler, Human Genome Project leader Francis Collins, scholar and author Cornel West, the National Geographic Society's Gilbert Grosvenor and TV and Public Radio commentator Steven V. Roberts.

Subjects such as Russia in transition, the Mars space station, the continuing impact of slavery and "the evolution of evolution" will be probed by scholars who visit the "Ideas" set, the producers say.

Looking further ahead, DeBolt wants the team to "do more of what we are doing"—with help from more groups state-

wide in locating distinguished visitors for the show's electronic podium. "We are always reaching out to community organizations," she adds.

DeBolt and Kumin also note the show has a website (<http://ou.edu/powerofideas>), which offers transcripts, bibliographies and extensive links to other materials on program subjects.

These efforts give "The Power of Ideas" all the more "power." Thanks to the program, scholars now get maximum mileage for their views when they visit the state. And thanks to a hard-working handful of people at OU—and help from the State Regents—Sooner viewers may explore with enhanced understanding the vast regions of intellect, analysis and theory.

