

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE

Oklahoma Symposium

The Greeks had a word for it;
now a gathering of perspicacious Oklahomans
are putting into practice
the art of discussion for discussion's sake.

continued

As Plato tells the story in *The Symposium*, when Socrates, Aristophanes and other Greeks of note gathered in Athens in the mid-4th century B.C.E. to toss around ideas about the nature of love and its place in the study of philosophy, everyone spoke an insightful λεξι¹ or two, had a little διασκεδαση², and left with more σοφια³ than he came with.

These ancients find their modern manifestations in the engaged men and women who gather at Quartz Mountain Lodge each April for Oklahoma Symposium, a three-day idea fest created in 2000 by a group of significant Sooners, including the state's own Plato of the Plains, Robert Henry—judge on the U.S. 10th Circuit Court of Appeals since 1994 and a former state representative and attorney general. The other creators—many of whom have deep state roots and ties to the University of Oklahoma—include Oklahoma City dentist Jan Ralls Henry; Linda Lambert, Oklahoma City businesswoman; Jenny Hendrick, community volunteer and former associate dean of the OU College of Medicine; BancFirst Corp. Chairman Gene Rainbolt and Jeannine Rainbolt, community volunteer; Full Circle Bookstore owners Jim and Beth Tolbert; and Penny Williams, former Oklahoma state senator.

How this group pulled together what is now an annual capacity crowd of about 150 deserves if not a Socratic dialogue, then at least a short discourse.

"The co-founders of Oklahoma Symposium felt the lack of an entity to support getting together to discuss ideas for the sake of discussing ideas," Henry says. "We have—and we need—organizations with causes and goals and talking points

and white papers and initiatives and campaigns; the Symposium—intentionally—isn't one of those."

Gene Rainbolt says that the chemistry among intelligent people sharing insights and passions defines the event, which marked its sixth year in April 2006.



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"We thought that in Oklahoma we needed to celebrate intellect rather than diminishing it," he says. "We needed to bring together people who didn't necessarily know each other but *should* know each other. We wouldn't talk about policy or politics, but about the ideas that matter and about ourselves so that we can become acquainted. In the process, per-

haps we would establish a network that will be active outside our annual gatherings. That's what has happened."

The co-founders had been casually discussing such a plan at private and public gatherings before several attended Renaissance Weekend, a national retreat the organization's Web site defines as seeking to "build bridges across traditional divides of professions and politics, geography and generations, religions and philosophies . . . simply to encourage personal and national renewal." Phillip Lader, former U.S. ambassador to the Court of St. James, and Linda LeSourd Lader, his wife, founded Renaissance Weekend in 1981. Henry says the Renaissance Weekend concept inspired the Oklahoma group to act.

They considered several names: *Prytaneum*—a Greek public hall and marketplace of ideas; *Chautauqua*—an Iroquois word that has come to mean an assembly combining education with entertainment; and *Chukka Hata*—a Choctaw council house. They agreed upon Symposium—a convivial meeting involving food, wine and intellectual discussion. That choice had great resonance, Henry says, given the title of what many scholars consider Plato's finest work.

"A lot of the underlying impetus for me evolved from the kind of education I

¹word
²fun
³wisdom

PREVIOUS PAGE/ABOVE: Artistry of famed landscape photographer Yousef Khanfar, an Oklahoma Symposium participant, records the beauty of the Quartz Mountain site.

received at the University of Oklahoma," he says. "As a University Scholar, I was directed to a course in the history of science department taught by Dr. Duane Roller, the first curator of the History of Science Collections. Dr. Roller was a Platonist who influenced me strongly in the belief that ideas are more important than observation and that discussing ideas is of the utmost value to a culture.

"I remember vividly a story about a woman who once approached Dr. Robert Hutchens, a great scholar and former president of the University of Chicago who believed that any significant idea is worth discussing. She asked with clear disapproval, 'Dr. Hutchens, are you still teaching communism at the University of Chicago?' And he replied, 'Yes, and cancer at the medical school.'"

While all of this idea talk may sound boringly solemn, the weekends are anything but. Participants do not imbibe excessively or revel with abandon as guests at Greek symposia often did, but they do have a good time. Participants speak—with fairly short time limits to forestall pontificating—on panels with titles like these 2006 options: "Gonna Take a Centennial Journey: Who or What Should Really Be on the Oklahoma Quarter and Why;" "Bubba, Bubble, Oil and Trouble: Energy's Future in Oklahoma and the World;" and "Who Am I and How Did I Get Here?: Oklahoma Transplants on Why They Came and Why They Stay." A repeated favorite at this spa-for-the-mind is "Oops! Mistakes I've Made and What I've Learned from Them . . ." in which some of the best-known people in Oklahoma 'fess up with a fair degree of candor.

"One of the best qualities of the event is that there's an awful lot of laughter," says Jim Tolbert. "The dynamic is that people are willing to laugh at and with each other all weekend. I think the humor has some serious benefits for the state. Occasionally, we do come up with insights that individuals might be in a position to translate into something useful. More importantly, we develop a network of concerned, engaged individu-

als from a range of experience and background that any of us could call on through the year."

The panels are popular, but the Saturday afternoon activities are hot tickets for limited numbers of participants. In 2006, these included "Hike and Shoot with Photographer Yousef Khanfar," a photo op with this internationally known camera artist; "Brush Up Your Art Skills with Jean Richardson," a crash course on canvas with one of the state's most well-known and successful artists; and "True Brew: Beer Tasting Social with Jeremy Tubb," an event in which a suds scholar treats fine beer like fine wine and teaches students to distinguish their lager from their pilsner.

Each year, David Miller, OU Wilkonson Chair Professor in the School of Aerospace and Mechanical Engineering, sets up a telescope to explore the wonder of the stars in Quartz Mountain's pure sky, and Arlene Johnson, judge on the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals, shows that beneath her judicial robes beats the heart of an English major as the organizer of "Afterglow," a late-night poetry fest.

Boldface names with Oklahoma roots or ties who have attended include Ret. Adm. William Crowe Jr., former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Donna Shirley, former manager of NASA's Mars Exploration Program among many other accomplishments; N. Scott Momaday, Pulitzer Prize-winning author; Oklahoma Gov. Brad Henry and First Lady Kim Henry; former U.S. Ambassador Edward J. Perkins, William J. Crowe Chair and executive director of the University's International Programs Center; Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson; and Wilson S. Dillon, senior scholar emeritus of the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History.

"The Oklahoma Symposium brings together some of the best and brightest minds in Oklahoma, a group that is marked by diversity and intellectual curiosity," says Gov. Henry. "Having had the opportunity to participate in the Symposium for a number of years, I am always struck by the range and depth of ideas

that are discussed. Many of the discussions from the Symposium have ended up informing policy debates at the State Capitol and elsewhere. Most of all, the Oklahoma Symposium is simply fun. It can be challenging, but it is also filled with humor and fellowship."

With that encomium, we turn to the words of those who know of what they speak.

"The Symposium Symposium"

Persons of the Dialogue

Robert Henry

Jenny Hendrick

Jeanne Hoffman Smith, clinical social worker and philanthropist

Arlene Johnson

Catheryn Koss, attorney and manager of Symposium from 2002-2006

Linda Lambert

Andy Lester, Oklahoma City attorney

Louisa McCune, editor in chief of *Oklahoma Today* magazine

Marilyn Ogilvie, professor and curator of OU History of Science Collections

Penny Williams

Scene

[Quartz Mountain Lodge]

Concerning the things about which you ask to be informed, I believe I am not ill prepared with an answer having attended two Oklahoma Symposia myself. Who, if not I, the author of this article, should be the reporter of the words of Oklahoma's friends, among them many OU alumni and alumnae, seeking to generate excitement about ideas and celebrate the creative life of the mind while breaking bread together and finding veritas in a modicum of vino?

Reporter: *As the year winds through its seasons, the makers meet several times to plan this annual banquet of bon mots, a challenging task with more than 20 panels and the many participants. Tell us of the task.*

Henry: This is all made harder by the fact that intelligent people do not follow directions well.

Reporter: *And, I have heard it said,*

busy people cannot always do as they might wish.

Koss: Once Kim Henry had to cancel at the last minute, and Linda Lambert called me four days before. "We need a woman, and we need you to be funny," she said. I was to be on a panel *with* Adm. William Crowe as a replacement for Kim Henry. Great. This was on mistakes we have made and what we learned from them. I told a kind of risqué story about being in France and trying to say something clever and ending

up saying something truly obscene. I was very nervous, but everyone appreciated the story, I think.

Reporter: *Was this because everyone attending was of one mind on all issues?*

Koss: Some of my most interesting conversations have been with people I completely disagree with, and I value those more than a situation in which everyone's just nodding their heads. Here you can get beyond the rhetoric and down to fundamental differences in beliefs so you can really listen to one another. This setting leads to more tolerance.

Lester: I was one of two more conservative voices on a panel called "Between Iraq and a Hard Place: Where Do We Go From Here?" Being able to have those types of discussions in a place where no one needs to prove a point is important. We speak from the heart, and people treat differences with respect. Frankly, one of the things I love about Oklahoma and that allows me to brag on the state elsewhere is that we haven't reached that state of divisiveness and lack of civility that is on the march everywhere.

Johnson: I remember one clear, lovely night outside looking at the skies stand-



Earl Mitchell

Inspired by the national Renaissance Weekend, Oklahoma Symposium brings together a diverse group of the state's brightest and most talented individuals for three days of sharing insights and passions, exchanging ideas and forming the sort of personal networks that can reap benefits throughout the year and beyond.

ing between photographer Yousef Khanfar and engineer Donna Shirley. Yousef was looking at the moon and talking about how one must "Wait, wait, wait until the moon is exactly right to shoot the picture," and Donna was talking about the rate that the Earth is turning and the moon is going around the Earth. I was just there in the middle with my mouth open between these two great talents seeing the same things with such different eyes.

Lambert: We looked for a diverse group of people in every way: age, race, ethnic background, the spectrum of religious beliefs and political philosophy. Sometimes Oklahoma gets put in a box labeling it a pretty homogenous group of folks. Symposium shows what not everyone understands: This is a diverse, rich, fertile state intellectually.

Reporter: *But wait, do we agree that Oklahoma, indeed, does have somewhat of a statewide self-esteem issue, a negative self-perception syndrome?*

Ogilvie: In Oklahoma we can tend toward thinking we aren't as good as the rest of the world, that the East Coast has all this intellectual excitement, and we don't. Although only a few attend Sym-

posium, it has an impact in producing a kind of optimism about the state. I always feel energized for many weeks afterward.

Reporter: *And why, pray tell, does it take a planned event to disclose this intellectual wealth and stimulate the populace?*

McCune: It's so easy to go to work, come home and isolate yourself because of personal projects or family responsibilities. Symposium creates a statewide network based on enlightened, intellectualized friendship that makes you feel as if you're part of something larger.

Hendrick: To get a bunch of rigid, compulsive overachievers together for a weekend with no external objective makes Symposium unique. The extent to which we all remember and can quote people is the extent to which they have all spoken *personally* about their experiences. This is a phenomenally inefficient experience for information exchange. If you want to find out a lot about actual life, then spend the weekend at your computer.

Reporter: *Tell me, good men and women of Oklahoma, is this but a personal infusion? Is there any good to the commonwealth to come from it?*

Johnson: What I hear and talk about

“Symposium is one of the most important ongoing conversations in Oklahoma. The people who are involved in this are mostly doers.”

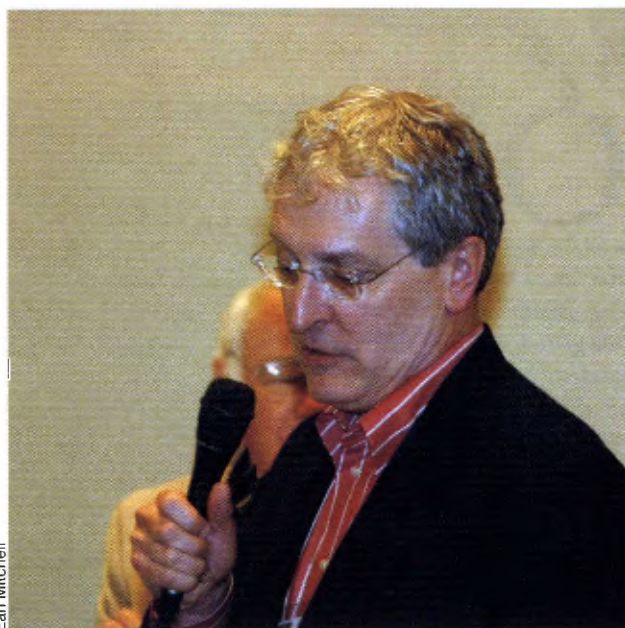
at Symposium keeps me re-evaluating my work and my thoughts on all kinds of issues. It makes me aware of what I owe to Oklahoma. I think everyone walks out with a sense of pride, saying, “What a wonderful future we have, and I want to be part of it.”

Reporter: *All concur that what happens at Symposium doesn't stay at Symposium. One participant values the creative process so much that she has created the Creativity in Motion/Thatcher Hoffman*

Smith Prize to reward those who best engage in it.

Hoffman Smith: Realistically, everyone has an agenda, but in a setting like Oklahoma Symposium with all these people from so many fields talking about their creative ideas, we manage to transcend those agendas. When you get a group of people together to share thoughts, the creative juices start to flow. When people go home, they take that energy with them.

Williams: Symposium is one of the most important ongoing conversations in Oklahoma. The people who are in-



Earl Mitchell

Oklahoma Symposium's guiding spirit is U.S. Federal Judge Robert Henry, who credits his OU education with suggesting that “ideas are more important than observation and that discussing ideas is of the utmost value to a culture.”

volved in this are mostly doers. This isn't supposed to be an action-oriented event, but people who care about Oklahoma progressing discuss that at these meetings, and their ideas get put into practice in the state. You can actually trace to these informal issues discussions ideas that turn into positive policy.

Reporter: *And are all these creative, action-oriented people ripe with the wisdom of age?*

Koss: We include many 30-somethings who are the state's future. I think of it as a camp for state leaders present and future.

Having put this ἀφηγησι¹ to bed, I rise to depart from you. I will take a bath, as did Socrates after Plato's Symposium, and spend the day in ἀνασκοπή² at the πανεπιστήμιον,³ my Lyceum. In the evening, I will retire and rest at my own home.

¹story

²contemplation

³University

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Earl Mitchell

One of the symposium's co-founders is OU alumnus and state business leader Gene Rainbolt, here with Deborah Wyant at the 2005 gathering at Quartz Mountain.