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St. Barnabas Founder's Day A Big Success

Retired General Alexander Haig receives the 2003 Hance Award

by John Fries

About 350 people packed the Omni William Penn Hotel's Grand Ballroom on the evening of April 24 in anticipation of what would be an evening to remember. Just a few weeks before, thousands of miles away in Iraq, swift and precise military action on the part of the United States and its allies successfully toppled a dictator's longstanding regime. The evening's honoree would surely have much to say about it.

Sometime between 7 and 7:30 p.m., a follow-spot clicked on, directing the audience's attention to the doorway just left of the dais. The room grew hushed. Anticipation grew as the 911th Airlift Wing Honor Guard took its position. Then, loud applause and a standing ovation greeted the appearance of evening's honoree, whose entrance was befitting of his status as a military hero.

Alexander M. Haig--retired four-star general, former secretary of state, successful businessman, author and television host, and expert on foreign affairs--was in town to accept the Hance Award from William V. Day, president of St. Barnabas Health System. The prestigious award, established in 1980 and named for St. Barnabas founder Gouverneur P. Hance, is presented to a distinguished recipient every year as part of Founder's Day, now in its 103rd year.

The Founder's Day program, hosted by WPXI-TV's David Johnson and Peggy Finnegan, opened with a stirring rendition of the National Anthem by vocalist Tonya Link. The Rev. Dr. Richard A. Morledge, pastor emeritus of the First Presbyterian Church of Bakerstown, offered an invocation, and comments were provided by Allegheny County Chief Executive Jim Roddey and John J. Curran, chairman of the St. Barnabas Health System board of trustees. Day then presented Haig with the Hance Award. The evening also featured a silent auction.

As expected, Haig's speech was compelling, playing the role--as noted by David Johnson--of the history teacher we wish we'd had in school. Haig began by addressing current events in the Middle East and saluting the bravery of American troops in Iraq. He praised President George W. Bush for his leadership, noting the events of September 11, 2001 as among the many challenges he's had to deal with during his first term. "President Bush cut through the ambiguity to get to the heart of the problem in Iraq," he said, adding that, "the most impressive characteristic of the modern presidency is character. Bush acted when others disagreed."

Haig, who graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1947 and served both at the Pentagon and in Vietnam during the 1960s, offered a detailed discussion about the United States' history of foreign affairs, including our relationships with several countries, from Germany and France to those in the Middle East. He talked about his own experiences in Washington and abroad, sprinkling his speech with interesting anecdotes about "good friends" like Dr. Henry Kissinger, with whom he began working as senior military advisor in 1969.

Underscoring his longevity in Washington, and illustrating his place in American history, Haig spoke about several of the presidents with whom he worked. They included Richard Nixon (whose historic visit to China he coordinated); Gerald Ford (who recalled Haig from retirement to active duty as Commander-in-Chief, U.S. European and, soon after, as supreme allied commander for NATO forces in Europe); and Ronald Reagan (under whom he served as secretary of state). He briefly discussed President Bush and Operation Desert Storm.

One touching highlight of the evening took place during a news conference held just prior to the dinner. St. Barnabas Nursing Home patient Chester Frydryck was one of two patients who presented Haig with a commemorative flight jacket. Frydryck, a World War II veteran and Bronze Star recipient, was one of the soldiers whose division landed at Utah Beach in Normandy on D-Day. His regiment also assisted in the liberation of Paris, and helped lead the U.S. to a decisive victory over the Germans at the Battle of the Bulge.

The St. Barnabas Founder's Day Dinner takes a year to plan and coordinate, and involves a wide range of responsibilities that includes selecting a committee, choosing a keynote speaker, sending invitations, and more. Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North was originally announced as the 2003 Honoree recipient, but his reporting duties for the Fox News Channel kept him in Iraq during this year's dinner. Haig, who had been chosen as the 2004 honoree, graciously agreed to accept his award a year early.

About \$80,000 was grossed through this year's event (\$10,000 of which came from the silent auction) to benefit the St. Barnabas Free Care Fund. Each year, the St. Barnabas Charitable Foundation provides more than \$4 million in free care, which includes support from individuals, corporations, foundations, and annual events. These include the Founder's Day Dinner, the St. Barnabas Charitable Golf Open (June 2) St. Barnabas Medical Center 5K Run and Walk (August 2), and Presents for Patients in December. Since 1900, this support has ensured that no patient would ever be turned away because of his or her ability to pay.

St. Barnabas continues to grow. Last year, it opened the elegant, 300-seat Kean Theatre, which hosts an ongoing schedule of plays and musical performances, proceeds from which benefit the Free Care Fund. On September 12, the theatre will celebrate the first year of its grand opening with a concert performance by Shirley Jones.