



Structural engineering legends

By Richard G. Weingardt, P.E.

At actor Gregory Peck's recent memorial services, more than 3,000 Hollywood celebrities and movie fans — along with media from around the globe — hailed his greatness as a superstar and as a legend in his own time. Unfortunately, the media is less likely to rave about our country's true legends.

Our country's true producers and wealth creators — those who reach greatness in non-entertainment venues — are the true legends.

Don't misunderstand me. I do not lament entertainers, such as Peck, being praised by their peers and the public for their talents. But for the public and the media to bequeath legend status on him, and on others like him,

implies that these entertainers have been major contributors to advancing our civilization. That is a bit much. Our standard of living, for example, is not better because of an actor's skill on the silver screen or an athlete's performance on a sports-field — stellar as it may be. Societal improvements come as

the result of real-world achievements — such as creative inventions and innovations, pragmatic vision, and hard work.

Alas, it's not a perfect world. If only engineers were in charge. I am sure we would correct many wrongs and see that credit is given where it is due. We would ensure true legendhood is bestowed on only those justly deserving of it.

As "kings-for-the-day" — because we engineers are fair-minded — we would not insist on standards merely to elevate accomplished engineers into the spotlight. No, our actions would be driven by noble purposes. For one, to continue improving the human condition, more of our best and brightest

citizens must get involved in meaningful, productive careers — those beyond the worlds of make-believe entertainment and sports. Only careers that add value to society, contribute to the progress of humanity, and help enlarge of the economic pie for others fit these criteria.

Today, when bright, young people who

have the talent to become anything they want consider their life's direction, they look for role models to help make their choices. While selecting a profession, they seek heroes and heroines with whom they can look up to and connect.

As it stands, these young people are

inundated by movies and television shows featuring antics of entertainment celebrities. Imagine how much better off we would be if America's youth were also exposed to diverse role models — and legends — such as a modern-day Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, John Roebing, Fazlar Khan, and similar engineering stars.

It is unlikely that what the media reports on will change any time soon, or that any of us will become the king-for-a-day. That, though, need not discourage (or prevent) us from doing our part to show our country's youth a broader range of hero mentors.

Taking the cue from Hollywood — and from the architectural profession that

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publicizes the works of Frank Lloyd Wright, I.M. Pei, and Cesar Pelli — let's instigate some practices of our own: a legends and star system for structural engineers. That way, we can identify, showcase, and celebrate our superstars while promoting stories of structural engineering feats to America's youngsters — both nationally and locally. What a concept! Let's single out and praise those from our own ranks.

In fact, there is no shortage of structural engineering masters. In a national survey I conducted in June 2003, I asked engineering leaders to name the most influential and/or powerful, living, American structural engineers in the following categories: education, design, innovation, public awareness, and politics. Countless names were submitted in each category, except for politics. The following were the top vote winners for engineering stars:

• **Education:** Louis Geschwinder, Frieder Seible, Lynn Beedle, David Billington, Jack McCormack, and William Hall.

• **Design:** Leslie Robertson, Charles Thornton, William LeMessurier, Matthys Levy, Man-Chung Tang, Lawrence Griffis, and Nabih Youssef.

• **Innovation:** John Fisher, Tung-Yen Lin, Omer Blodgett, Shankar Nair, Horst Berger, and George Housner.

• **Public Awareness:** Richard Weingardt, Gene Corley, Ronald Hamburger, and Robert Johnson.

• **Politics:** Andrew Card.

You can expand on this list by adding outstanding engineers from your area. Then produce an attractive, "Engineering Legends" document (which includes photos and contact information) that you — and/or your local professional engineering association — can distribute to the media, libraries, and schools. Do it with flair and follow up! Your personal call will go a long way in capturing attention and getting information to as many young Americans as possible.

The most important result that a successful structural legends system will reap is to increase awareness of structural engineering among young people. And when struggling students have role models other than entertainers to look up to, they may be inspired to excel, to go to college, and to become future engineering legends themselves. ■

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