

press release

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St. Nicholas Society

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Ladies and gentlemen, officers and members of the Saint Nicholas Society, friends and distinguished guests, thank you for this extraordinary honor. It is truly a privilege to be here this evening among such illustrious company, and to be part of this esteemed New York tradition.

I must admit that I am somewhat humbled to join the ranks of the luminaries who have received the Saint Nicholas Society Medal of Merit before me. Justices and statesmen, legendary journalists and visionary philanthropists, artists, educators and spiritual leaders. I don't know if I rightly belong among them . . . but perhaps my mother was right after all.

If there is one thing I do believe I share with the honorees who have preceded me, it is surely that most precious of gifts – a deep sense of purpose, a mission to which I rededicate myself every day.

I was very lucky to find my calling early on as a young man in Cleveland. I entered into broadcasting at a time when television was really becoming the focus of information and entertainment in America and was able to ride that wave deep into the world of commercial broadcasting. And I have been even more fortunate that my belief in the positive potential of television led me to the helm of the flagship public television station in the greatest city in the world.

Television and New York City go together like the proverbial horse and carriage – though it's often tough to figure out which one is leading. Television, of course, was introduced to the public at the 1939 New York World's Fair. The first sit-com was broadcast live from New York in the late 1940s. Many argue that television news was born in New York when an NBC technician turned his camera on a fire. Television drama grew out of Broadway. From talk shows to police thrillers to Sesame Street, New York has shaped the sensibility of the medium.

And when you think about it, it makes perfect sense. This is a city built on images as



much as it is on bricks and steel. People here, more than anywhere else in the world, know the power of the media to change the world. They know it in their hearts. They feel it in their bones. Visitors to New York often look around and gasp with surprise, "Just like on television!" People who live here know that the television is always, in some sense, on. It's always looking at us and to us.

It's an interesting dynamic, as precarious as it is energizing. And it's certainly made my work immensely satisfying and extremely exciting. To be here where this powerful medium resonates so fully; where the fuel that makes the engine run is drilled and refined; where people respond so enthusiastically to new ideas and innovations – it's all that a television professional could ask for.

But, of course, there's television and there's television. The medium that is so central to our lives is also the source of highly mixed emotions and radically opposed appraisals. The instrument that can show us the world we would never otherwise see, that introduces us to our heroes, and helps us understand the forces shaping our lives is the same one that frequently earns the monikers "boob tube" and "idiot box."

That dramatic contradiction in some way underscores the history of television. A few years ago, in a book called "Down the Tube: An Inside Account of the Failure of American Television," which I co-wrote, I tried to dissect the causes and nature of those opposing trends in television by looking at the history and development of the medium's guiding forces. What it boiled down to was a dialectic between the profit motive and an obligation to public service; in other words, a historical debate between self-interest and what might be called "higher ideals." The debate continues today.

Interestingly, when I consider the history of New York, it's not hard to see a similar struggle of impulses. After all, this city is the home of the down-and-dirty, make-a-quick-buck ethos. And it's also the home of the greatest cultural exponents of America. As countless writers and artists have shown us, New York is the home of the crudest and the finest that life has to offer.

That, of course, is what makes life so interesting for us here in this wonderful, impossible city. Those two currents, so difficult to reconcile, so often the crux of disappointment and dispute, also breathe life into our community and fan the fires of innovation, imagination and progress.

And I can't help but think that there is something in that shared paradigm that binds New York to television and television to New York.

Whether that is mere conceit or something more, I cannot say for certain. What I do know, however, is that public television – in the form of Thirteen/WNET – thrives here as it does nowhere else.

I've just written an introduction to a book that is coming out in a few weeks. It's a collection of New Yorker cartoons about public television over the years. The majority of them are about Channel Thirteen, or programs produced by WNET. Cartoons may seem an unlikely measure of an organization's value. But when you look at this collection, you see that, in fact, they really say something about the impression Thirteen has made in the minds of a whole class of people. Well, a whole class of cartoonists anyway. But it's really notable that Channel Thirteen has been such a constant presence in the New Yorker cartoons for four decades. That tells me that it's been an enduring and resonant feature of our community as well.

On the occasion of Thirteen's 40th birthday, Walter Cronkite, also a recipient of this great honor, and a long-time friend of public television, noted that "Thirteen and its loyal supporters together have fulfilled the promise made four decades ago of proving in practice that television can be an invaluable educational tool and a protector of our culture."

I am hesitant to speak of Thirteen's history before a society that has such a long one of its own. Compared to the Saint Nicholas Society, Channel Thirteen is just an infant. But things move fast in the world of television and in forty short years, and against many odds, the station has indeed made some indelible contributions to a medium in constant flux.

It was Thirteen, for example, that created a unique place on the airwaves for dance, opera, orchestral music, and theater. That place is a unique program called "Great Performances," – television's longest-running performing arts series, and, for all intents and purposes, its only one. We calculate that the national audience for a single episode of "Great Performances" could fill the Metropolitan Opera House nearly 400 times. Of course, that calculation is just based on the people who watch it. It's freely available through the Public Broadcasting Service to every American family with a television. Who knows how many Met Opera Houses would be filled if everyone tuned in? Of course, the important thing is not that everyone tune in, but that the program be there for those who do wish to see it.

Or consider wildlife programs, which these days are found in swarms on any given cable box. But not too long ago, Thirteen's "Nature" series earned an award from the Sierra Club. It is the only television series ever to be so honored. That perfectly illustrates Thirteen's difference. Our programming is created with a goal of touching the world beyond the screen, of being a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. The Sierra Club recognized that, as have many others across America.

Here's another excellent example of Thirteen's mission-driven brand of television. In September of 2000, Thirteen brought America "On Our Own Terms," a six-part series by journalist Bill Moyers that offered an intense and necessary look at end-of-life issues. Thirteen backed the series with a national outreach campaign that reached millions, inspiring a national conversation about how to prepare for the last stage of life and improve care for the dying. It

was television put to its highest purpose – helping people. And that's not an isolated case, by the way. Thirteen regularly takes its important series beyond the screen and into people's lives. So, Thirteen has done much to pioneer the medium, to change it, and to offer models for how television can serve the public as a whole.

But it is in New York, and for New York, that Thirteen has made its most consequential and lasting mark. During the past 40 years, Thirteen has forged deep ties with the New York metropolitan community. Through its productions about New York's history, culture and inhabitants, it has served as a window onto this most vibrant of cities. From television monuments, like Ric Burns' "New York: A Documentary Film," to our ongoing series of Neighborhood Walking Tours with David Hartman and Historian Barry Lewis, Thirteen has invited New Yorkers to understand, explore and appreciate their amazing home.

Thirteen has also directed the power of public television toward the success of our city's offerings, partnering with the museums, theaters, concert halls, universities, and service organizations of New York to promote culture, learning, health, hope, and opportunity in our community.

Of course, I can think of no keener example of Thirteen's inextricable ties to the community than the September 11th attacks, which destroyed Thirteen's antenna atop the North Tower of the World Trade Center, and killed our young transmitter engineer stationed there. In the wake of the attacks, Thirteen opened its doors to the Red Cross and the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management. They used our phone banks to operate a 24-hour emergency response center to assist families of the victims with counseling services and information. We also provided temporary workspace to Port Authority staff members who lost nearly 200 of their colleagues in the attack, and to WNYC staff. And we produced and presented special programming to provide information and analysis, as well as perspective and reflection.

That tragedy changed us all, of course. Everyone in this city learned to take each day a little less for granted. And for us at Thirteen, every day since has been a little bit more difficult, but also a lot more precious.

Public television is always something of a struggle, even at the best of times. We do what we do with a lot less money and far fewer resources than our commercial colleagues. Losing our transmitter was devastating. But out of that loss, we found something extraordinary. When we were off the air, and, later, when we were back at lower power, we heard from our viewers about how much they missed us. In letters and calls and emails, they let us know that they felt the absence of Channel Thirteen and were waiting with great anticipation for our return. We saw then in no uncertain terms just how much a part of this community we were, that we were a member of the family.

Needless to say, we've long been back on the air in pretty good fashion, though we still

have far to go. Along with our commercial counterparts, we plan to build a new antenna tower to get back to where we were before the towers fell.

But, despite the setbacks, the sadness and the frustration, that unforgettable day put our everyday struggle into perspective and gave it new meaning. We always knew, deep down, that our mission was necessary and worthwhile. We always believed that television could be more than just a way to make money or kill time. In the face of increased competition and challenges to our funding, it was inevitable that the occasional doubt would cross our minds. Were we still relevant? Did we still have something unique to offer?

Since September 11th, all doubts have vanished. Our mission is as bright as a lighthouse beacon before us. Everyday, it remains as sharp and as brilliant as the day Thirteen first signed on the air. And I take this marvelous award as confirmation of that.

On that note, let me close. I'm sure I won't be the first to paraphrase your founder, Washington Irving, in saying, if the speech I have furnished has proven to be bad, at least it was short. Well, at least I hope it was.

Thank you, again, for this wonderful honor.