OREHOUSE COLLEGE’S MISSION TO TRAIN YOUNG MEN FOR EXCELLENCE CAME FULL CIRCLE AT THE 16TH ANNUAL “A CANDLE IN THE DARK” GALA, CELEBRATING THE 137TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE COLLEGE’S FOUNDING. THE BLACK-TIE AFFAIR, HELD THIS FEBRUARY AT THE HYATT REGENCY ATLANTA’S CENTENNIAL BALLROOM, BROUGHT TOGETHER STUDENTS, ALUMNI AND FRIENDS OF THE COLLEGE TO HONOR SEVERAL NOTED INDIVIDUALS FOR THEIR OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENTS.

The College raised a record-breaking $5.5 million at this year’s Gala, thanks to substantial contributions from alumni, sponsors and a surprise $5 million donation from Oprah Winfrey Hon. ’89, who received the first ever Candle Award for Lifetime Achievement in Humanitarian Service.

“My dream was—when I first started making money—to pass it on, and I wanted to put 100 men through Morehouse,” said Winfrey whose contribution to the College totals $12 million to date. “Right now we’re at 250 and I want to make it a thousand. Before I leave here tonight, I want to leave another $5 million check.”

President Walter E. Massey ’58
was visibly overjoyed by Winfrey’s unexpected announcement. “I think Oprah Winfrey expressed it best when she said: ‘When you empower a Morehouse man, you empower the world,’” Dr. Massey said. “We are grateful that Ms. Winfrey not only shares our passion for educating these young men, but also generously shares her resources to help us make their education possible.”

The Gala is the College's largest annual fundraiser, and is a key component of the College's Campaign for a New Century. The College embarked upon this ambitious $105- million campaign in 1997 to raise funds for faculty and curriculum development, infrastructure improvements, facilities upgrades, and permanent endowments for student scholarships. The Campaign has raised $84.6 million to date, including this year's Gala proceeds of $5.5 million, a big jump from $255,700 and $305,900 in 2002 and 2003, respectively. In its first 14 years, the Gala raised $2.5 million for student scholarships. The College awards scholarships from Gala proceeds twice annually to numerous ‘Candle Scholars’ based on need and merit.

Training for Excellence
Each year, attendees get to witness their donations at work as Morehouse students take the stage to present the evening's awards. The Gala's tradition of selecting talented students to present the evening's awards brings budding educators, financiers and civic leaders face to face with accomplished medical doctors, CEOs and journalists. The students serve as ambassadors for the College, escorting their respective honorees throughout the evening and, in turn, getting a mentor for the day.

“Dr. [Isaac] Willis told a great story about receiving an award from the International Biographical Centre in Cambridge, England, and the [surprised] reaction he received there,” said Michael Weaver Jr. ’04, Dr. Willis' award presenter. “He said they weren’t expecting an African American to have done the great things he had done. I found that to be a testament to our recognizing him as a trailblazer.”

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Troy Causey ’04 said that his experience presenting Winfrey’s award taught him a lesson in humility. “I couldn’t believe that this first black female billionaire was [emotional] because I just presented her,” said Causey. “I didn’t realize the magnitude of my speech.”

Causey says Winfrey took him under her wing and chatted passionately about her 2002 trip to Africa. “I told her I’d like to go to Africa with her the next time she goes, and she said, ‘The next time I go, you’re there!’ I couldn’t believe it!”

These incredible connections between students and honoree are the hallmarks of the Gala. Henry M. Goodgame Jr. ’84, director of Alumni Relations and Gala chairman, says it is important that Morehouse students have up-close and personal contact with some of the nation’s most influential leaders. “If we place in front of our students those achievers who look like them, it will hopefully encourage them to [one day] look beyond the glass-ceiling level,” he said.

“The more we do that, the more consistent we are with our mission to be the center for African American male excellence.”

Each year, student presenters are chosen from a competitive pool of candidates. They train under speech coach Dr. Anne W. Watts, who arms them with effective oratorical skills. “It’s very important for people to see the Morehouse product to understand why we need to continue supporting it financially,” said Watts, associate vice president for Academic Affairs. “These men to become ambassadors for the institution send a powerful, needed message.”

A Busy Day
Morehouse’s big night capped off a busy day for the honorees. That morning, they gathered on campus to reflect on their achievements and share insight on their chosen fields at Reflections of Excellence. The public forum gave students and members of the community the opportunity to tap into the honorees’
vast knowledge on topics like choosing the best medical school, plotting a road map for success, and climbing the corporate ladder versus starting a business.

Actor Ossie Davis encouraged students to always remain rooted in their black communities. “Black folk may not make you rich, but they’ll never let you starve,” he said. Davis said that he and wife, actress Ruby Dee, took gigs at funerals and weddings in the black community when roles were scarce in the entertainment industry. “It was working out a way to belong to our own group and ultimately to express the thing that our own group wanted us to express that enabled us to survive.”

The Gala of Gala’s
Later that afternoon, as the honorees dined at the Davidson House, home of President and Mrs. Massey, final preparations for the evening’s Gala were in full swing. The Hyatt ballroom buzzed with hotel staff decorating elaborate tables. The drone of student presenters rehearsing “My name is...” competed with the sounds of the Morehouse College Jazz Ensemble tuning up on stage. Amidst the ballroom bustle, gala co-creator and consultant Robert H. Bolton ’86 intently checked table assignments.

Bolton was there for the first gala in 1989. As one of the College’s public relations staffers, he and former Alumni Affairs director Hardy R. Franklin Jr. ’83 wanted an event that would honor alumni and other noted achievers, as well as showcase students and raise funds for student scholarships. Former President Leroy Keith ’61 green-lighted the idea and, in a few short months, the first Gala was held.

Franklin remembers it well. “That first Gala was awe-inspiring. Spirits were high. It was just something so brand new to everybody that it was just really a great thing.”

The Gala was named after the title of the College’s official history book written by Edward A. Jones ’26. Like the Essence Awards, the Trumpet Awards and the NAACP Image Awards, the Gala has become one of the nation’s premier events that celebrates African American achievement.

“Whoever develops something, you have the belief that it’s going to be successful,” said Bolton. “But it’s icing on the cake when it blows up and becomes a household name for events in the city and across the country.”

The event has honored more than 100 individuals, including noted plastic surgeon Dr. Peter Chatard Jr. ’56; actors Denzel Washington, Samuel L. Jackson ’72 and Danny Glover; renowned historian and educator John Hope Franklin; legendary sports figures Henry “Hank” Aaron, Muhammad Ali and Arthur Ashe; retired New York Transit Authority worker Clarence “Kappa” Brown ’40; civil rights leaders Andrew Young and H. Julian Bond ’71; former Postal Rate Commission Chairman George Haley ’49; former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher ’63 and noted scholar and professor Cornel West.

A Homecoming Experience
Although the Gala has grown in national appeal, it is steadily drawing alumni back to the House. Some come to reconnect with college buddies; others to take advantage of the Gala’s incredible networking opportunity. Regardless of what attracts them to the Gala, they all take pride in the event and what it accomplishes for the College.

“There really is no other event, other than Homecoming, that has such a unifying affect,” Franklin said. “This is our signature event.”

Michael Pierce ’94 was happy to have the chance to sing the college hymn again. “Singing ‘Dear Old Morehouse’ with my old roommate, other classmates, and older brothers was just a good homecoming experience.”

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Julius Pryor III '79 says he has gotten every company he has worked for over the past eight years to serve as a Gala sponsor, including his current employer Johnson & Johnson Consumer Companies, Inc. “We are building a partnership that is going to be beneficial to the company and the College,” said Pryor. “Morehouse is an American institution, and this event reflects what Morehouse is all about.” He also cites the Gala’s reputation as “an unbelievable networking event for alumni and the business community” as an attraction for attendees, regardless of their relationship to the College.

“We’re the only institution in the world that can do something like this,” said Euclid Walker ’94, an investment banker with Morgan Stanley who recently pledged $100,000 to the College’s campaign. “This is a unique Morehouse experience—people coming out, paying tribute to leaders in the community, and paying homage to the history and tradition that Morehouse has built.”

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Dr. Anne Watts, associate vice president for Academic Affairs, coaches the Men of Morehouse who introduce the Bennie and Candle award recipients, as well as the master and mistress of ceremonies. This year’s presenters were Jason Leon Miles ’04, Kevin John Peters ’04, Brian DeQuincey Newman ’05, Michael John Weaver Jr. ’04, Christopher Edward Carter ’04, Gene Anthony Gibbs ’04, Reginald Hayes Wilborn Jr. ’05, Julian Michael DeShazer ’05, Beryl Monroe Whipple ’04, Edwin Troy Causey Jr. ’04. Alternate presenters were Darren Hicks and Shyboyd Cannon.

See a photo of Watts and the presenters in the table of contents.