

THE GALLANT ERUDITE

A STORY OF A THORNY BEGINNING WITH A FAIRYTALE ENDING

Who delivers your daily newspaper? Do you know? I suggest that you take the time to find out. There have been quite a few delivery boys who later in their lives changed the face of this world – Walt Disney, Bob Hope, John Wayne, Bing Crosby, Herbert Hoover, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ed Sullivan, Wayne Gretzky, Jackie Robinson, and Doctor Vartan Gregorian.

text ANI GARIBYAN
photos courtesy of DR. VARTAN GREGORIAN



Named after fifth century Armenian hero, Vartan Mamigonian, Dr. Vartan Gregorian was born and raised in Tabriz, Iran and lived with his sister Ojik and their grandmother, Voski, in near poverty. His mother Shoushik passed away when he was six-and-a-half years old. His father Samuel, worked in a different city, Abadan, for the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The loss of his mother at a young age played a great role in his life and when his father remarried and brought his new wife home, the relationship between her, young Vartan, his sister and grandmother, was tense. This caused many arguments between him and his father. He began to rebel and tried to spend as little time at home as possible.

The local library was his escape and safe haven from the harsh and confusing world around him. He spent hours in the library imagining himself to be the characters from the novels he read. He was especially inspired by the character of Jean Valjean of *Les Misérables*, and Dumas' the Count of Monte Cristo. He told me that he used to dream "of one day having enemies to take revenge on," much like the characters did in the fiction world. As a teenager, he loved Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* because Werther was in love with an engaged woman — it was as he stated, "an impossible love." Books were sometimes the only means of fantasy because Tabriz had only three movie houses. A new movie would take six months to get to Tabriz. Sometimes, as the plot thickened, the movie would stop and they would announce that in order to see the second half, you would have to come back. To Dr. Gregorian, this was "absolutely sadistic because to be able see the second half, you would again have to wait for another six months." Most of the movies that were shown were in English and were neither dubbed nor subtitled. Vartan and his friends saw movies like *The Mask of Zorro*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Mystery of the Hooded Horseman*, *The Man of the Frontier* and *The Outlaw*. He especially enjoyed and continues to enjoy watching movies that as he put it, "deal

with sacrifice, duty and patriotism" such as *Casablanca* and *High Noon*. He spoke of one scene in particular in *Casablanca* that takes place in Rick's cafe where the German officer and his comrades sing a German patriotic song "Die Wacht am Rhein" and the French patriots sing the French National Anthem, "La Marseilles." He said, "This was a moving scene because the occupier and the occupied both rose to the occasion."

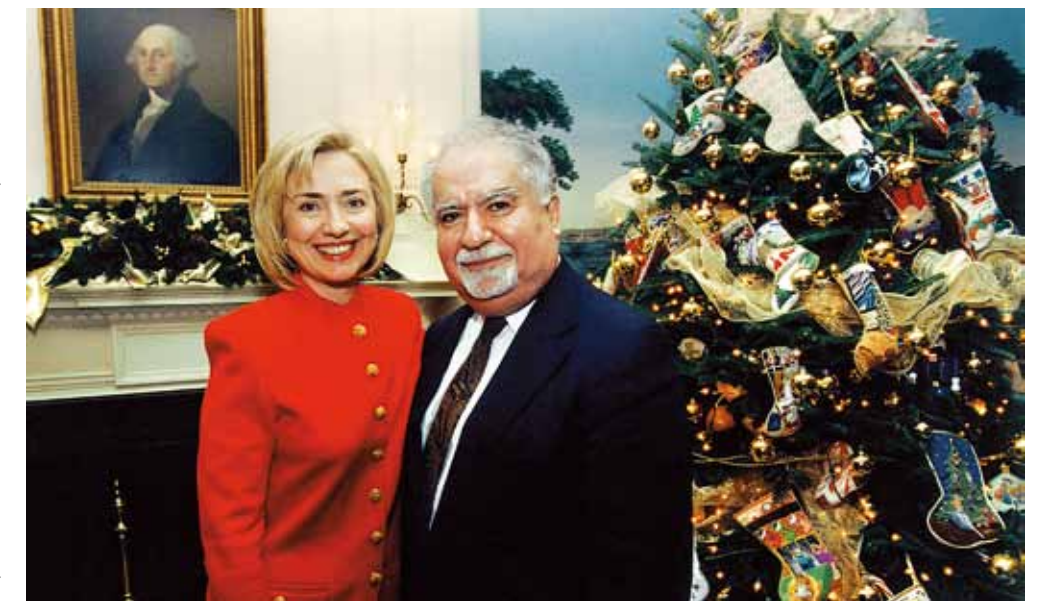
With guidance and encouragement from his grandmother and teachers, Vartan was a good student and for the most part stayed out of trouble. On Sundays he would attend church as one of the alter boys. He also delivered newspapers for Hrayr Stepanian, a leader in the Armenian community, a pharmacist and optometrist. Though the job was unpaid, this, as he writes in his book, *The Road to Home: My Life and Times*, "gave me yet another wonderful outlet to the world, this time through the Armenian Diaspora and its publication." Stepanian became his mentor and would play a great role in the shaping of his life. Through Stepanian, Vartan met Edgar Maloyan who was visiting Iran to open a French consulate. In one of their conversations, Maloyan told Vartan that he should not stay in Tabriz, but should instead go to Beirut, "le petit Paris, and get a real education." Vartan did not speak French, Arabic, or English, nor did he have the financial security to go to Beirut. With the help of Maloyan and Stepanian, Vartan was on his way to Beirut to study at College Armenien (*Jemaran*). Before his departure, his grandmother said with great emotion, "Go, my son, and become a man."

In the 1950s, Beirut was a metropolitan city full of people with various backgrounds and cultures and was the banking center of the Middle East. With a letter from Maloyan, a former French official in Lebanon, Vartan was granted permission to stay and study in Lebanon. He had another letter; this one was addressed to Garo Sassouni who taught Armenian literature and history at the College. Vartan then met with renowned Armenian author Levon Shant, the director of the College. After much hesitation and misgivings on the part of the school administrators, Vartan was admitted and with the help of the Armenian Red Cross and Lola Sassouni, wife of Garo Sassoui, he was given a place to stay and eat. The eatery only served lunch and dinner, and as he elaborates in his book, it consisted of "two thin sliced pieces of bread, a small cube of butter, two small sardines, a slice of ham, or else a small bowl of soup." The eatery was closed on Saturdays and Sundays and Vartan would have to wait until Monday to eat again.

His first year at the College was not easy. Many people in Tabriz, especially his step-mother, thought that he would not survive in Beirut and would return home. With great perseverance, hard work, the consistent encouragement from his teachers, and even help from strangers, such as free instruction in French, he thrived in

school. In regard to his teachers, Dr. Gregorian said, "it's so fascinating when teachers have faith in you and you don't want to disappoint them." In 1951, Levon Shant died and soon after his death, Simon Vratzian took his place. For years, Vartan served as Vratzian's assistant. Vratzian had terrible eyesight, thus Vartan began to read his mail, worked on several of his books and manuscripts, conducted research and proofread. Dr. Gregorian writes in his book that "within the span of four years, he had become a surrogate father to me, as well as a teacher, mentor and friend." Though academics were his main focus in Beirut, he also made many friends, went out and experienced his first real love and heartbreak. He had fallen in love with a girl who was engaged (although Vartan did not know this), and exchanged

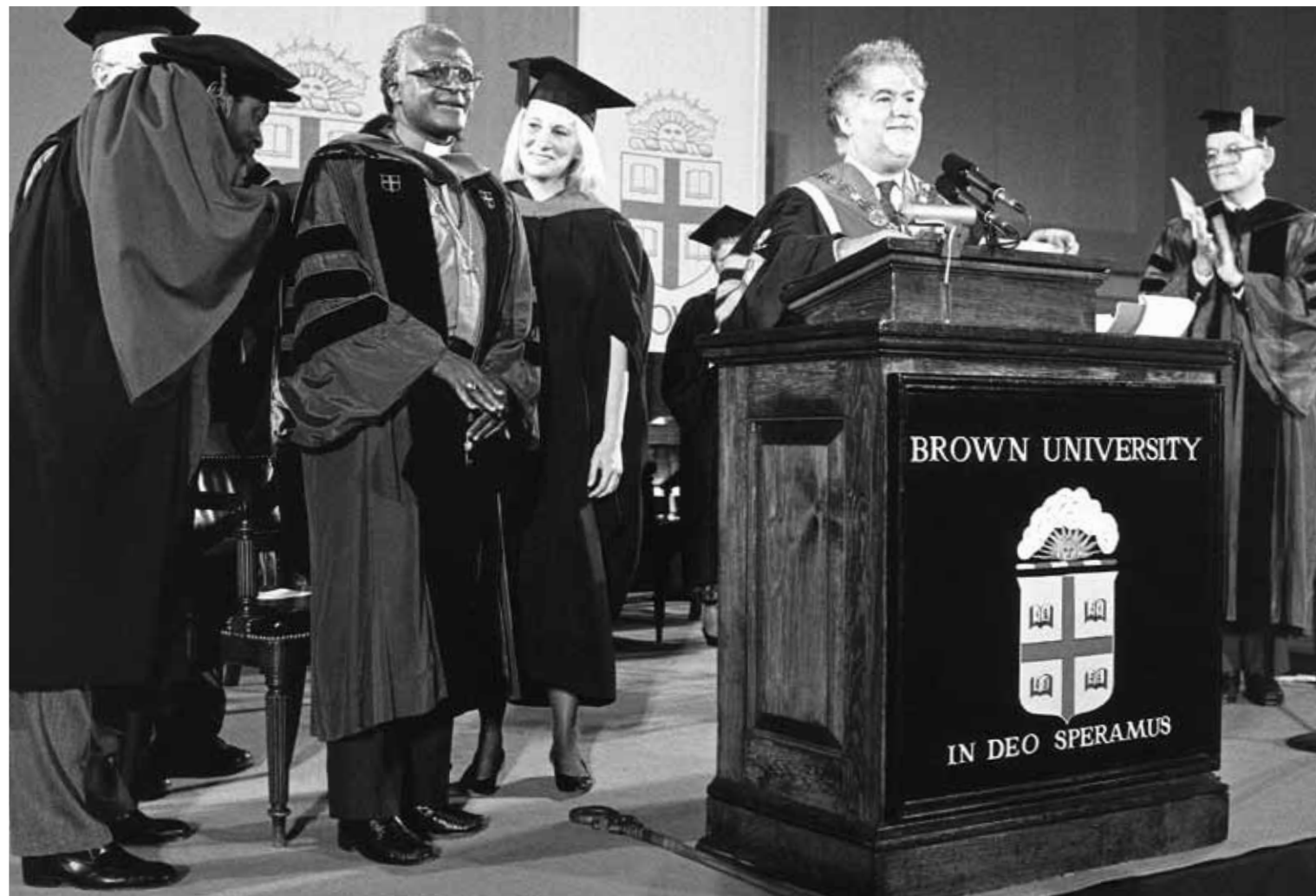
three faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. She was not taking any chances. He was also given blue beads to protect him from the "evil eye." In August of 1956, Vartan landed in New York and from there, he flew to San Francisco. Classes at Stanford began on September 26. There were about 8,000 students and a faculty of about 350. He stayed off campus with other foreign students and would often skip breakfast in order to save money. Though he had to share a bathroom, he was happy to finally have his own room. He cherished his privacy. Vartan was four years older than most of the freshmen and would wear a jacket and tie, hoping that they would think he was a graduate student. He was faced with many cultural differences and writes about one in particular on his first day at Stanford: as the



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many love letters. In the end, however, the girl married her fiancé — an impossible love. In 1955 he graduated from College Armenien with honors and by 1956, he had obtained an advanced degree in Armenian Studies and was on his way to Stanford University in the United States. Before his departure to America, Vartan, along with Vratzian, took a trip to Iran. He visited his family and friends and proved to them that he in fact did not fail, but was on his way to one of the best universities in America. He again bid farewell to his grandmother, and again, as she did prior to his journey to Beirut, gave him prayer shields from

professor walked into the classroom, he stood up as a sign of respect. Nobody else stood up, and some giggled. He understood that the habits he inherited from abroad had to go. "After all, when in Rome..." At Stanford he studied History and Humanities. He received his Bachelor's degree with honors in two years. Vartan was accepted as a graduate student and earned his Ph.D. in 1964 from Stanford. During the interview, I asked him what his grandmother would say to him knowing that he has a Doctorate degree. He said, she would ask, "Great, can you cure this headache of mine now?" ▶



He had two major life changing experiences while he was a student at Stanford. The first was when he bargained for a used Ford. He did not always have enough money to buy gas and would loan his car to other foreign students. They were obligated to return the car with a full tank of gas. The second life altering experience was when he met his future wife, Clare Russell. Once he invited Clare to go with him to a gala being held to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the publication of Edward Fitzgerald's classic translation of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, where Vartan had been asked to represent Stanford University. At the event, the Consul General of Iran in San Francisco asked Vartan, in Farsi, "Who is this beautiful blonde with you?" Vartan told him that he loved her and perhaps they would soon marry. The Consul then turned to Clare and said, "Congratulations! When are you getting married?" Vartan was flabbergasted. On their way back from the party, Clare asked Vartan what they were talking about and Vartan told her, "Well, one of these days, when I finish my Ph.D. exams and dissertation, and get a job, I may ask you to marry me." Her answer to that was, "If you ask, the answer is yes." They were engaged on May 28, 1959 and married on March 25, 1960.

A major turning point in Vartan's career took place in 1960 when, as a graduate student, he received a Ford Foreign Area Training Fellowship. The grant allowed him to do research for his dissertation, which dealt with the modernization of Afghanistan. He and his wife Clare traveled to Beirut. Their first son Vahe was born a little over a year after their arrival. Later, he would bid his wife and newborn son farewell and headed for Kabul, Afghanistan. The topic for his dissertation was "Modernization of Islam." He said, "I wanted to do something original. At the time, there was not much research done on Afghanistan. I knew that my Persian language skills would come in handy and so, I picked Afghanistan." However, it was a difficult subject to tackle and took a number of months to even do the preliminary research, not to mention the difficulty of creating a bibliography of materials written in several different languages. About that experience Vartan said, smiling, "These days, I sometimes resent researchers because, with computers and databases available to them, all this is so much easier now." I asked him if he knew then that Afghanistan would be in the state it is today. He wrote an article in November 2001 that appeared in *The New York Times* describing the importance of the Pashtuns

and ethnic and tribal relations in Afghanistan. The tribes that have been around for centuries, Vartan notes, are not going to allow outsiders or other ethnic groups to rule them. He and his family returned to San Francisco from the Middle East in 1962 and Vartan — now Dr. Gregorian — began his lectures at San Francisco State College. The 1960s brought forth many civil and human rights movements in the United States. The Hippie movement took off in San Francisco and many students — both native-born Americans and immigrants from abroad — created movements based among student organizations. As a professor at San Francisco State College, Dr. Gregorian witnessed many protests, rallies and threats. He writes in his book that one day the leader of the Progressive Labor Party called him at home and told him to notify the police, to take his family and get out because Argentine radicals were heading to his house to 'take care of him'. This was not an idle threat: an office of a professor had already been bombed and Gregorian's office was on the same floor. Of course, there were also some humorous moments. Gregorian spoke about one particular incident when a few members of the Black Panthers barged into his room told him that he had to

dismiss the class. He said, "I can't, I've been hired to teach. I still have 20 minutes." The leader of the group continued to demand that he dismiss his class, and Dr. Gregorian continued to say no. The leader then said that the police were coming to campus to cause trouble and that's when Dr. Gregorian went up to him and shook his hand and said, "Thank you for protecting us from the police." Then the leader said, "You've got the whole thing wrong man!" and left the classroom. Relieved that nobody got hurt, Dr. Gregorian dismissed his class, but a student asked him if he was going to leave too, and when he said no, all of his students remained in the classroom as a sign of solidarity.

Another transformational point for Dr. Gregorian came in 1968, when he received the prestigious E.H. Harbison Award for Distinguished Teaching, given by the Danforth Foundation. Prior to receiving the award, Dr. Gregorian and his family were preparing to move to Los Angeles because he had taken on a guest lecturer position at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). With help from his wife, a farewell dinner was organized. Most of his students were in attendance — many from opposing sides. As he writes in his book, "There were many familiar faces — Young Democrats, Young Americans for Freedom, Republicans, Socialists, Trotskyites, Jews, Arabs, Iranians, Armenians, an anarchist or two, several members of the Progressive Labor Party, a Saudi prince, several Zionists, and two members of the Black Students' Union. They had declared their own temporary, unilateral moratorium. Some of them had even cooked the meal together." He said that, "I cared a lot about all of my students. I corrected all of their exams myself — 25,000 of them. I had a different style of teaching. I would have students think about and argue for the side of the opposition.

After a brief stint at UCLA, Dr. Gregorian headed to Texas to the University of Texas at Austin. His friends teased him about his accent and said, "They will not understand you." He replied, "Don't worry, they will." He had a large class and on his first day of class he began by saying, "I understand you have a problem with your accent. I'll try to do my best to understand you." After an initial silence, the entire class burst into laughter. For some time Dr. Gregorian did not know he had an accent. It wasn't until he heard a recording of his voice when he finally realized that he did actually have an accent. After Texas, he was on his way to Philadelphia to the University of Pennsylvania where he was appointed to an endowed chair, becoming Tarzian Professor of Armenian and Caucasian History as well as professor of history and professor of South Asian History. In 1974 he became the Founding Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of the University of Pennsylvania and four years later became its 23rd Provost. Prior to these positions, Dr. Gregorian had made his first trip to Armenia in 1966 with the assistance of a fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies/Social Science Research

Council. He said, "I was so transported. I felt like I was in the midst of the entire history of Armenia. Here I am seeing Ararat, Yerevan, the Matenadaran — the whole spectrum of Armenian cultural heritage." He also observed that the distinguished writers of the time would meet at Hotel Armenia (presently the Marriott Hotel) for lunch. Armenian hospitality does not allow one to eat alone, so when Dr. Gregorian purposely showed up alone at the hotel to have lunch in the afternoon, the writers invited him to their table and he was able to dine and speak with those who authored the books he read. He met Dashdents, Hovannes Shiraz, Ghukasyan, Nairi Zarian, etc.

asked them to be quiet. Two of them turned to him and said, "Forgive us, we do not know how to attend church."

Throughout his career, Dr. Gregorian has compiled extensive data on the history of Armenia. He is determined to write a modern history of Armenia, which will include a focus on intellectual history as well as the history of the Armenian Diaspora. He said, "Armenia has two lungs: one is the nation of Armenia and the other is its Diaspora. One has to work harder until the other can gain strength." After the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Gregorian's next challenge came in 1981, when he



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Dr. Gregorian also related an incident when Tchekijian was conducting at the Opera. Many seminar-ians including the Catholicos Vazken I of Armenia were present at the concert and sat in a balcony. "When the Catholicos came in, I stood up when the majority didn't. I thought that was very disrespectful." We need to understand that at the time, in 1966, religion did not exist in a communist country. He continued the story and said "At the end, the audience chanted *Sourp, Sourp* (Komitas' 'Holy, Holy') in unison. Tchekijian conducted everything except for *Sourp, Sourp*. Finally, they played *Sourp, Sourp* and the entire audience turned toward the Catholicos and nodded their heads, honoring him." He also paid a visit to Etchmiadzin where children were being baptized. During the precession, people were talking, so Gregorian turned around and

became president and chief executive officer of The New York Public Library. The library was hit hard financially because at the time, New York City was on the brink of bankruptcy. The building was in horrible condition and the floors were so filthy and brown, you would not have known that they were made of marble. He visited all 83 branches, four research libraries and met with the librarians and staff and listened to their frustrations, needs, and concerns. His message was that the New York Public Library was a national treasure. Philip Hamburger once wrote in *The New Yorker* magazine, "The New York Library houses many treasures, but few are as complex, enigmatic, civilized, and stimulating as Vartan Gregorian, its president chief executive officer." Dr. Gregorian met with



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New York's society: those who had money and loved their state. With the help of the library's Board of Trustees, wealthy members of New York society, and citizens from every part of the city, \$327 million was eventually raised to support the renaissance of this great institution. A long time ago, the libraries of Tabriz saved young Vartan and allowed him to escape into fantasy. With the dedication and hard work of Dr. Gregorian, the New York Public Libraries can now serve as the same escape for many children and young adults of New York. The next chapter in Dr. Gregorian's life began in 1989 when he became president of Brown University. Brown was the poorest of the Ivy League Universities and as president of the institution, he had many challenges ahead of him. He said, "I approached Brown University the same way I approached the New York Library. I saw Brown as Japan: we had no natural resources but we had human resources." He helped the university collect

\$570 million with its first large scale campaign and left it with an endowment of \$1.1 billion. After nine years at Brown University, Dr. Gregorian became the 12th president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, having served in that post since 1997. The grant-making corporation was created by Andrew Carnegie in 1911 "to promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding." Education has always been important to him and as president, among the foundation's efforts that he takes great pride in, is providing scholarships for some 5,000 women in selected countries of sub-Saharan Africa and supporting education in post-Yeltsin-era Russia as well as in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. He said, "This is my revenge for my illiterate grandmother." He then elaborated, noting, "When you educate a woman, you sow the seeds of civilization." I asked him what his life would be like if people like Maloyan and Stepanian were not so gener-

ous in helping him. He said, "I would probably still be in Tabriz, maybe an Armenian language teacher. Or else I would have been a great thief like my friend who was such a great thief that when the police arrested him, he pick pocketed them. My horizon overall would have been very limited." Some of his childhood friends have died, one of them went to prison, and most of them dispersed. But he is quick to note that he is very proud of his high school classmates from College Armenien. Out of a graduating class of nine individuals, including himself, three became professors, two became teachers, one is a naval architect and one is a pilot. Many people have asked him for the ingredients to success and what they should do when opportunity knocks. To that he said, "First, you must find the door, or else you will never hear the knocking." He also said, "If you cannot afford your dream, someone who is fascinated by your dream will help you. This has been my life story." ©

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Dr. Vartan Gregorian has been awarded over 100 medals, honors and recognitions, not including his over 60 honorary Doctorate degrees. A Phi Beta Kappa and a Ford Foundation Foreign Area Training Fellow, he is a recipient of numerous fellowships, including those from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Social Science Research Council and the American Philosophical Society. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts of Sciences, and the American Philosophical Society. In 1969, he received the Danforth Foundation's E.H. Harbison Distinguished Teaching Award. In 1986, Gregorian was awarded the Ellis Island Medal of Honor and in 1989 the American Academy of the Institute of Arts and Letters' Gold Medal for Service to the Arts. In 1998, President Clinton awarded him the National Humanities Medal. In 2004, President Bush awarded him the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civil award. However, to him, the most rewarding honor was having an elementary school in Rhode Island named after him.

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