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A Cool Cat

Ralph Hauenstein Honored by the Grand Rapids Economic Club

Hauenstein Center founding benefactor Ralph Hauenstein was awarded the 2006 Slykhouse Lifetime Achievement Award by the Economic Club of Grand Rapids on May 4. Hauenstein Center Director Gleaves Whitney introduced Mr. Hauenstein, who was honored for his long term dedication to the community's prosperity, and U2's Bono gave the keynote address. Following are Mr. Whitney's introduction and Mr. Hauenstein's thanks.

Gleaves Whitney: It is my honor to introduce Ralph Hauenstein: a heroic military man, a brilliantly successful entrepreneur, a generous philanthropist ... and, without doubt, the youngest 94-year-old on the planet. In fact, when Ralph was recently asked what it felt like to turn 94, he said, with characteristic wit, "It beats the alternative."

[+ Click to Enlarge](#)



Now, I should alert you that I am going to give the full, unedited version of Ralph's introduction. You are going to hear both the good and the bad. For example, I'll bet you didn't know that, during the Second World War, Ralph was the most unpopular American in Europe. Why? Because after the Allies successfully re-took Paris from the Nazis, then-Colonel Hauenstein, as chief of intelligence, closed all the bordellos in France.

True story.

The serious point here is that one of Ralph's great strengths is that he has never worried about popularity. He has just always tried to do the right thing. For example, he was a pioneer in combating racism. Back in the 1930s Ralph was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Army, and what second lieutenants did in the '30s was head up units in the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Ralph's CCC unit, which was north of Grand Rapids, happened to be all African American, and Ralph would supervise their work all week. Then Saturday afternoon would come around and Ralph would want to take the men into town to see a movie. But the owner of the movie palace in this particular town was white, and he carried with him the prejudices of his day, and he didn't want African Americans in his theater.

Ralph regarded this as unacceptable, a moral outrage. And to his everlasting credit, he prevailed upon the owner to let the African American workers into the movie theater. They had been improving and beautifying the countryside everybody enjoyed, so they were as entitled to the cultural amenities of the area as anyone. Ralph understood this much earlier than the nation as a whole and did something about it.

A decade later, during the war, Ralph's most moving and significant experience occurred when he was among the first Americans into the newly liberated Dachau Concentration Camp. If you look at [Ralph's right hand](#), you will see a scar, and that scar was caused by a Jewish woman, a prisoner who squeezed his hand with all her fading might, thanking him and the American GIs for liberating the victims of totalitarianism.

[+ Click to Enlarge](#)



A decade later, after the war, Ralph was on his way to becoming an extraordinarily successful entrepreneur. One of the products he brought to the marketplace -- and to the floor of many a car (especially for those of us with kids) -- is Goldfish Crackers!

Ralph was always combining work and philanthropy -- a sense of noblesse oblige -- even from the start. He built a biscuit factory in Haiti that helped more than 5,000 individuals become self-supporting entrepreneurs.

He founded a bakery school in Florida to provide training for people from all over Latin America and the developing world -- changing lives in the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Peru, Columbia, Haiti, Cuba (before Castro), and even India. Hey, think of Ralph as the Bono of the 1950s!

Hauenstein Center Director Gleaves Whitney introduces Ralph Hauenstein.

But you don't have to look far afield to see the impact Ralph and his wonderful family have had on others. If you seek a monument to this extraordinary man, just look around you. We who live or work in Grand Rapids see his handprint on many of our buildings, our institutions, and our hearts. Through St. Mary's Neurological Center, his compassion is bringing healing to the sick. Through the Grace Hauenstein Library at Aquinas College, named after his beautiful wife of 73 years, his generosity is bringing insight to the young. Through the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at Grand Valley, his dedication to public service is inspiring the leaders of tomorrow.

Ralph Hauenstein is the kind of man who puts the "Great" in the Greatest Generation.

No Grand Raptidian is more suited to receiving this special honor.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Ralph Hauenstein.

Ralph Hauenstein: Thank you, Gleaves, for those kind words.

When they invited Bono to be featured at tonight's event, the host committee apparently needed to find somebody with a connection to the lead singer of U2. I suppose the reason they chose me is because, in all of my intelligence work, I also had to deal with the U2. So Bono and I have more in common than most people realize.

People came this evening expecting Bono to sing and me to speak. Turns out he is going to be speaking. But I'm not going to be singing. I was worried my singing would empty the ballroom.

I know that one of the famous lyrics of Bono's song "One" is, "Have you come to raise the dead?" Looking at me, Bono might think he has, but I've got news for him -- I'm not standing down yet.

Seriously, I am honored to stand before you -- my family, friends of many years, and colleagues in many endeavors -- and receive the Slykhouse Lifetime Achievement Award. To be in the pantheon of past

winners humbles me.

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It's been said that no man is an island unto himself, and I realize how true that is when I look out at you, because any achievements attached to my name in this life reflect the many good men and women who have put their faith in a simple man from Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Whether it was my years as a newspaperman or in the military service, or building up my various business and charitable concerns, I was always supported by wonderful people.

My greatest debt is to my dear wife of more than 70 years, Grace. Would that every man could have a life partner like her. She and I have been blessed with many children, grandchildren, great grandchildren. As I said in the Foreword of my book, *Intelligence Was My Line*,

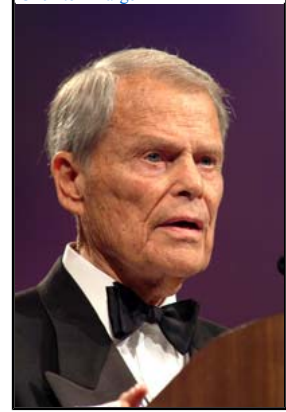
This book is dedicated to my family, whose love and devotion to me far exceeds, to the fullest measure, those services I performed during the war years.

I also reflect on the many good friends I have made in this community over four score years I've called Grand Rapids home -- Peter Cook, Jerry Ford, Peter Wege, and David Van Anandel, and a good number who have passed on -- Jay Van Anandel.... It's been a privilege to call these fine men and women friends, and it's a group that has really made Grand Rapids an extraordinary place to call home.

I also was fortunate to find outstanding individuals who helped in my business and charitable endeavors - Saint Mary's Neurological Center, the Grace Hauenstein Library at Aquinas College, the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at Grand Valley, and the Van Anandel trusteeship.

To all of you, and the many others that time does not permit me to name, I shall be eternally grateful, and I thank you.

Photographs Courtesy of John Corriveau Photography



Ralph Hauenstein thanks family, friends, and colleagues.