

Common Wealth honorees offer insight

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It didn't take long for the recipients of this year's Common Wealth Awards to start talking about solving the world's biggest problems.

Gathered for a question-and-answer session before collecting their \$50,000 awards at a Hotel du Pont ceremony Saturday night, they spoke passionately about what it's going to take.

"Kids today have to have the best, broadest education they can if they're going to adapt to the future," said retired Sen. John Glenn, 84. The former astronaut was honored for a lifetime of service to the military, space exploration and government.

"One of the biggest problems we have is 'Who's going to be in the ascendancy, my god or your god?' " Glenn said. "If we could solve our religious differences around the world and get the religions working together instead of at each other's throats, we'd solve a lot of problems."

With Glenn were movie and stage director Mike Nichols, poet Rita Dove and CNN journalist Anderson Cooper. The fifth honoree, Queen Noor of Jordan, missed the Q&A but arrived in time for the dinner and awards presentation.

The annual awards were first presented in 1979 by the Common Wealth Trust, created in the will of business executive and philanthropist Ralph Hayes. Since then, the program has honored 157 people and awarded more than \$3.5 million.

The honorees talked about people who inspired them, and several mentioned teachers. Dove, a Pulitzer Prize winner and two-term poet laureate of the United States, said her 11th-grade teacher in Akron, Ohio, was one of her biggest influences.



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Common Wealth Award winners (front) TV journalist Anderson Cooper and poet Rita Dove and (rear, from left) director Mike Nichols, Jordan's Queen Noor and former astronaut and U.S. Sen. John Glenn were honored at the Hotel du Pont in Wilmington.

"She took a group of us to see a living author, just a book signing," Dove said. "But that's really all it took to get me started on realizing my dream."

Poetry, Dove said, is anything but irrelevant in the fast-paced world of Internet communications. In fact, it can help people cut through the clutter and noise of modern society, she said. Web logs, or blogs, are evidence that people want and need to communicate and connect with others.

"If we're going to solve the problems of the world, we have to learn how to talk to one another," Dove said. "Poetry is the language at its essence. It's the bones and the skeleton of the language. It teaches you, if nothing else, how to choose your words."

Cooper, host of CNN's "Anderson Cooper 360," has risen to prominence in the past year by picking the right words. His coverage of Hurricane Katrina last year attracted attention after he expressed frustration with the government's slow response to the disaster. Cooper said Saturday that he never intended to get emotional, but he doesn't regret his aggressive attempt at getting answers.

"You do what's in your gut," Cooper said. "If you've been doing it long enough, what's in your gut will be appropriate."