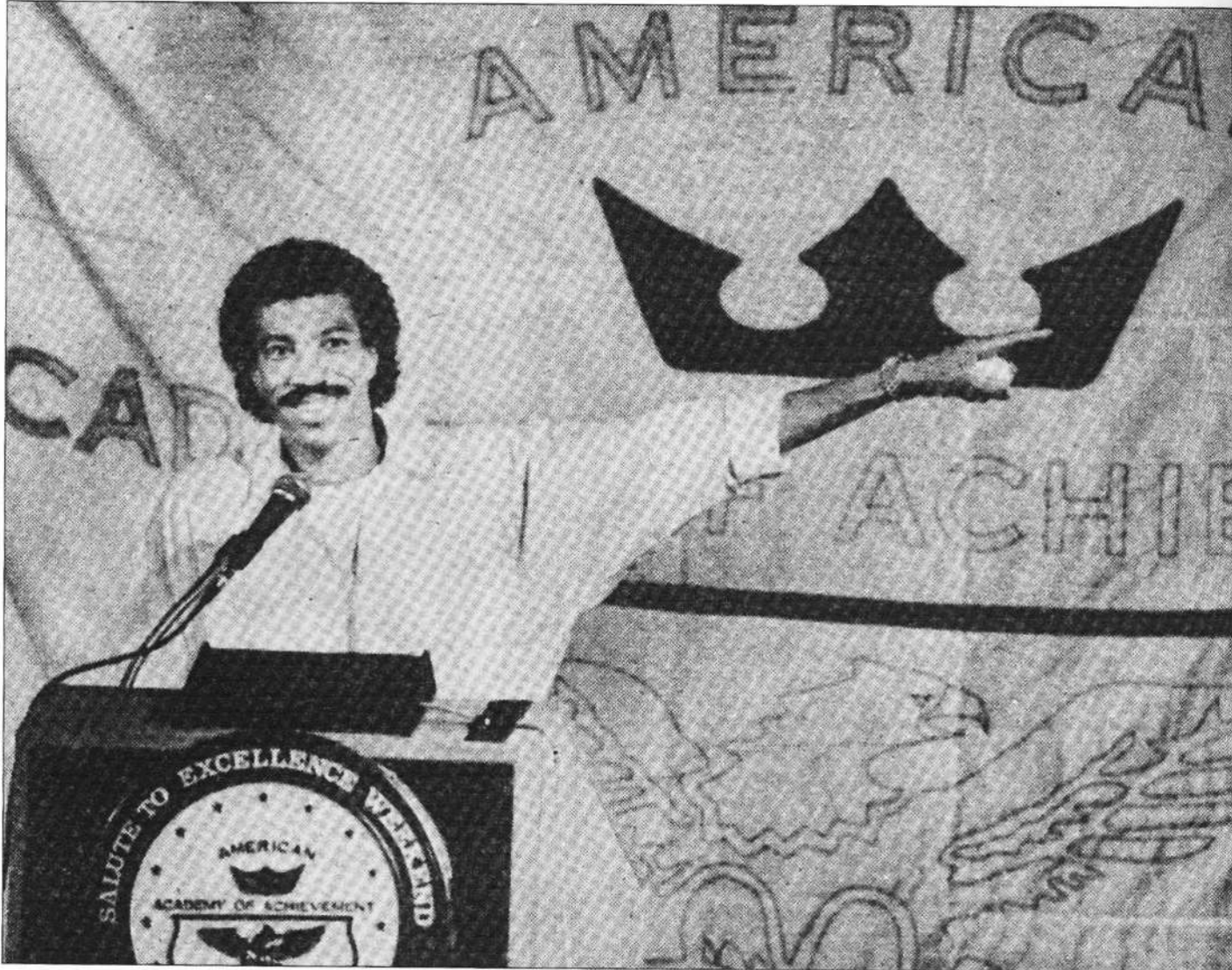




AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ACHIEVEMENT



DEBRA REINGOLD/Rocky Mountain News

Lionel Richie speaks to 350 students, superachievers of all kinds, at their Denver gathering where they met with adults who made it big.

Whiz kids rub elbows with right stuff

By **REBECCA JONES**
/Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

While 9-year-old Alkes Price quizzed renowned mathematician Narendra Karmarkar Saturday in Denver about the implications of Karmarkar's new algo-

rithm, 18-year-old Michael Province scratched his head in puzzlement.

And Province is no academic slouch.

"I read that article in Time magazine (about Karmarkar's mathematical breakthrough), and I still don't understand it," said Province, who was a co-valedictorian at Central High School in Pueblo and

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plans to start his study in aerospace engineering this fall. "Some of these people are just amazing."

Province and Price, a math prodigy from Naperville, Ill., are among 350 of America's smartest youths who are meeting at Denver's Marriott City Center Hotel this weekend for the 24th convention of the American Academy of Achievement.

The Academy students who have taken the Scholastic Aptitude Test, a college entrance exam, score an average 1,400 - 500 points more than the national average and just 200 points shy of perfection. Only 1 percent of college-bound youth score that high.

Those invited to the three-day event include the elite of the country's young athletes, musicians and artists, and more than a few geniuses. They were mingling with test pilot Gen. Chuck Yeager; Olympic gymnast Mary Lou Retton; Dr. William DeVries, heart-implant surgeon; FBI director William Webster; entertainers Elizabeth Taylor and Lionel Richie; and about four dozen other top achievers from business, science and the arts.

"Who IS this Lionel Richie?" asked 11-year-old Morgan Price, Alkes Price's brother. "Is he some kind of singer?"

The Price boys, who will both attend the University of Chicago next fall, were most impressed with Karmakar, a researcher for AT&T Bell Laboratories.

Alkes is the youngest participant at the conference. He and his brother are certified math prodigies - each scored a nearly perfect score on the math section of the SAT.

Alkes wants to follow in Morgan's footsteps and start attending the University of Chicago full-time next year. He'll begin taking math classes there in the fall.

"I'm not scared," said the diminutive boy in shorts and eyeglasses. "Fifth grade would probably be a bore, anyway."

Morgan, who is studying "a very extensive form of linear algebra" at the Chicago school, downplays his SAT score.

"It doesn't mean a thing, the SAT," he said. "I'll give you an example of how useless the SAT is. I got 650 on the verbal portion (800 is a perfect score), but the top person in my ancient Greek class at school got only 510. It makes no sense."

No, I don't think so, Morgan," Alkes said, interrupting his brother. "It's not generally true, but sometimes there are cases where younger people score lower on the test, yet it's easier for younger people to study language."

Such disagreements were the norm Saturday, as the young people exchanged ideas with each other and the adults.

"What's pleased me most is, you can often get a group of greats together like this, but it's not often you get

them to share and be so warm," said Todd Ellis, 18, of Greensboro, N.C.

Starting quarterback for three years in a row at Greensboro's Page High School, Ellis was chosen the nation's top prep football player by Parade magazine.

Ellis racked up 13,323 yards in offense on the football field during his high school years, a national record. At the same time, he managed to graduate with a 3.7 grade point average on a 4.0 scale.

Amy Ratterman, 17, of Lakewood, is Denver's Young Achiever of the year. She talked to historian David McCullough, author of "The Great Bridge", a book about the history of the Brooklyn Bridge, for 15 minutes before getting the courage to ask for his autograph.

"You feel kind of strange asking for their autographs," she said. "But it's wonderful."

One who drew great praise was Yeager, high priest of the test pilots and subject of the book and movie "The Right Stuff."

"I had breakfast with Chuck Yeager. I couldn't believe it," said Elisa Colalancia, 18, of Pueblo. "He just sat at our table. He told us all about his accomplishments and told us how the movie was made."

Yeager said he is as impressed with the young people as with the adults at the conference.

"They're all interesting," he said. "You've got warmongers, you've got peaceniks. You can detect it in their talks. They say what they stand for."



Philip F. Anschutz, center, billionaire Denver entrepreneur, talks with Stephen and Laurel Bechtel. Anschutz attended by virtue of his business success.