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Simons Raise \$3 Million for School Fitness Program

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Merv Griffin's old joint, the Beverly Hills Hilton, became ground zero for the nexus of California's educational community and world-class sports last Friday, when Palisadians Bill and Cindy Simon hosted a '50 Schools Celebration' gala fundraiser for their physical-fitness program, Sound Body, Sound Mind.

Honored at the \$500-a-plate banquet was retired 10 NCAA championships remain unmatched.

At a time of diminishing school budgets, the alive and well in LAUSD schools. Cindy told the enjoyed 'taking an idea and growing it to 50 high and we want to take it to the middle schools

'We don't just buy equipment and drop it off,' she continued, explaining the various components of their physical education program, which also includes after-school activities, gym equipment, and guidance teachers. 'We never thought when we launched the program nine years ago from our hometown school, Pacific Palisades High School, that it would become so successful.'

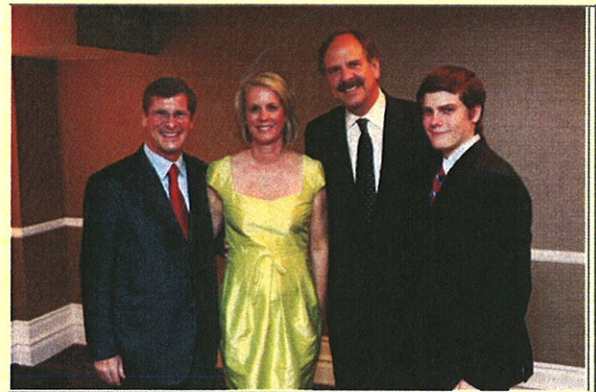
At the podium, Bill Simon told the audience, 'Exercise is the difference between a good school and a not-so-good school,' and he noted that 'the possibilities are quite literally endless' with his initiative's 'pipeline' to 45,000 L.A. students.

Simon, the son of former Treasury Secretary Bill Simon, Sr., ran for governor in 2002, and his opponent, Gray Davis, were in the audience.

Ubiquitous as the yellow roses at every table were numerous Olympic athletes past and present, including swimmers John Naber, who won four gold medals at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, and Donna de Varona, who competed in the 1960 (Rome) and 1964 (Tokyo) Games.

'We're facing a nation where we have morbid obesity in our schools and sports, fitness and the arts are being cut out,' said de Varona, explaining why she's on Sound Body, Sound Mind's advisory board. 'The Greeks understood that you have to have balance. Bill is putting it back in the schools. Since the government won't do it, we have to do it.'

Now a resident of Connecticut, de Varona knows Los Angeles well; her sisters are actresses Joanna and



Rich Schmitt / Staff Photographer

Bill Simon with his wife Cindy (whose lime dress was the talk of the event), Olympic swimmer John Naber, and the Simons

UCLA men's basketball coach John Wooden, whose

Simons' program strives to keep physical education Palisadian-Post that she and her husband have schools. We've raised \$3 million at tonight's gala, [including Paul Revere].

Sandra Kerns.

During the cocktail hour, de Varona socialized with legendary diver Sammy Lee, a Korean-American who overcame much discrimination to become the first Asian to win an Olympic gold medal for the United States. Lee also became the first man to win back-to-back gold medals in platform diving, achieving this in London (1948) and Helsinki (1952).

At 87, Lee is a spirited, good-humored ball of energy. He told the Post about a candid conversation he had with the early television fitness icon Jack LaLanne. 'I said, 'Jack, you look good!' He said, 'Sammy, if I didn't, I'd be on radio!''

Meanwhile, Lee's wife, Roz, chatted up State Board of Equalization member Michelle Steel, the nation's highest elected Korean-American official.

When asked why they had come all the way from their Huntington Beach residence, Sammy Lee said, 'How many times do you get to see John Wooden? It's for a good person and a good cause. He's like the Pope. There's something about him that brings out the good in you.'

Alas, Wooden, 98, was unable to attend. He sent in a message via video in which he expressed his appreciation for the honor.

In addition to the Simons, Palisades-related attendees included 2003 Citizen of the Year winner Mike Skinner and Calvary Christian Church youth pastor Shawn Gendall and his wife, Kelly. Among those seated at the Post's table: Kristen Odermatt, the Simons' graphic artist of 15 years, who designed the Sound Body, Sound Mind logo; and her husband, Jason Lee (who joked that he is not to be confused with the skateboarder/actor star of 'My Name is Earl').

Host Roy Firestone kept the evening moving with his spot-on impressions of singers Tony Bennett, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Neil Diamond.





Rich Schmitt / Staff Photographer

Olympic diving champion Sammy Lee and his wife Roz. Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer