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## Distinguished Americans flock to North Idaho

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*Terry Giroux, executive director of the Horatio Alger Association, talks Friday about how impressed the organization's board is with North Idaho. (SHAWN GUST/HNN)*

Their private jets touched down in Missoula on Wednesday. They boarded a special train for Sandpoint, where they received a hero's welcome with red carpet and a boisterous band. They were ushered into three brand new buses. With a police escort, they made their way to The Coeur d'Alene Resort.

Under cobalt blue skies, some of them played golf that afternoon at the Resort course. They gathered for a private dinner party where Kenny Rogers, Class of '90, entertained them, wrapping up by singing "The Gambler" while scenes from the movie played.

Thursday was a day of meetings arranged by a local businessman who serves on the organization's board of directors. And that evening, in a warm tent under a cold drizzle on the shores of Lake Coeur d'Alene, the group clapped their hands and raised their glasses to the rousing patriotic songs of 4Troops, the popular quartet of former U.S. combat soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the visitors began to head for two Resort boats that would take them back to the hotel, fireworks erupted out on the lake, 1,000 red, white and blue shells exploding in a four-minute sensory frenzy, a star-spangled nightcap to an evening that honored all defenders of our nation.

Coeur d'Alene has never seen the like before.

And it'll never see its like again.

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The Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans is comprised of self-made billionaires, diplomats, celebrities, Pulitzer Prize winners, world-famous physicians and other titans in their fields.

Home run hitter Henry Aaron is the first smiling face you see when you check out the roster on [horatioalger.org](http://horatioalger.org). Following him in the batting order is astronaut Buzz Aldrin. The last name on the alphabetical list is former Paramount Pictures Corporation Chairman Adolph Zukor, and in between you'll find people like Colin Powell, Maya Angelou, Tom Brokaw, Carol Burnett, Alex Spanos, Harvey Mackay, Ross Perot, T. Boone Pickens, Julius Erving, Charles Yeager and Duane Hagadone.

Hagadone, Class of 2004, hosted the North Idaho meetings of the association's board of directors and guests. Planning the annual event for months with association Executive Director Terrence J. Giroux, Hagadone ensured that the region's best foot was thrust firmly forward.

"We have never had an event that was as well directed and managed as this one, from arrival to departure," said Giroux, the organization's top executive since 1988. "First rate."

Thursday night, while Resort food and beverage boss John Little looked over his 100 or so dinner guests in the tent, he confided that his marching orders from Hagadone had been plainly stated. "He said, 'I want the best buffet in the world,'" Little said, "and then I want you to add 10 percent."

That 110 percent effort dazzled the attendees. As they filed toward those boats with fireworks still shaking the heavens behind them, well-wishers hugged Duane and Lola, thanked them effusively and used the word "unbelievable" 11 times.

"One of the greatest evenings ever," a U.S. ambassador to Finland said.

"You certainly know how to throw one hell of a party," said another guest.

"Nobody in the whole world will ever want to host one of these again," said yet another, laughing.

Paul "Tony" Novelly, a big man from humble beginnings in St. Louis who flew to the annual meeting direct from France, glanced over his shoulder at a resplendent fireworks blast and then grinned at Hagadone.

"You're still a kid," he declared.

"Damn right I am," said Hagadone.

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It's hard to call a billionaire "poor," but Novelly happens to be the poor sucker who has to follow Hagadone by hosting next year's Horatio Alger Association board meeting. It will take some doing.

"The beauty of this area is first rate," said executive director Giroux over breakfast Friday at Dockside restaurant. "But I think the thing that has overwhelmed everybody is the friendliness, the kindness, the genuine warmth of the people here."

Giroux said many of the members had never visited North Idaho before and may have underestimated it.

That chamber of commerce moment wasn't lost on Todd Christensen, president of the Coeur d'Alene Chamber of Commerce. The more he learned about the group, the more impressed he became.

“Coeur d’Alene is very honored to have hosted members of the Horatio Alger Association,” Christensen said. “Their membership is truly distinguished individuals who exemplify the entrepreneurial spirit that has made America and our communities so strong and vibrant.”

Steve Griffiths, president of Jobs Plus, Inc., the region’s economic development arm, said the long-term impact of the visit is inestimable.

“It will pay dividends for years to come,” he said. “It always does.”

But Griffiths admitted that his pride for the region was equaled by what he felt for Hagadone.

“To have one of our own be a part of such esteemed company makes us proud and grateful,” he said.

Christensen echoed similar thoughts.

“Mr. Hagadone’s membership in the association is shared by others who came from modest means and reached life goals through hard work, education and living life with great passion,” he said. “The life stories of their membership inspire and highlight that the ‘American Dream’ is still very much available to all who work hard.”

Membership in the association is a rare privilege. Since its inception in 1947, 623 Americans have been honored as members. Of that group 243 are still alive. The association inducts 10 members each year.

This isn’t a country club dining room full of rich and famous people partying in the spotlight, either. Giroux said they shun publicity at their annual April membership meetings in Washington, D.C., routinely denying all media access.

“They don’t seek the press,” said Giroux. “They want to focus on the kids.”

And that’s just what the big kid, Hagadone, has been doing.

According to Giroux, since 2005 Hagadone has donated more than \$700,000 in undergraduate college scholarships to 196 students from 30 high schools in six North Idaho counties. Also through the association, Hagadone has given another \$100,000-plus to graduate school awardees at Idaho State University in Pocatello.

But those are just numbers.

People tell an even more compelling story.

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Right there at breakfast Friday, with the sun trying to break through weakening morning clouds, Giroux was fighting back tears. He was telling the story of an evening in August when a woman and her partner recognized Duane and Lola Hagadone on the dock at Cedars Floating Restaurant, where Giroux and the Hagadones were about to have dinner and further plan the annual meeting.

The mother stepped forward and said, “You’re Duane and Lola Hagadone, aren’t you?”

Giroux, standing nearby, admits he was prepared for the worst.

Instead, he got the best.

"You changed everything," the woman said, hugging the startled Duane and Lola. "You changed my daughter's life. She can go to college now."

The woman is the mother of Alycia Barrowcliff, Lake City High School Class of 2010. Hers was one of 50,393 applications received by the association, and one of 104 selected.

"It was one of those defining moments," Giroux said of the experience on the dock that summer evening. He paused, gathering his emotions.

"It's been a distinct honor for me on a personal level to get to know Duane and Lola," he said.

"Look at the kids they've helped. To me that defines the person."