



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

The Spirit of California

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Every year, The Commonwealth Club honors several individuals at our annual gala. While raising funds to help support The Club's mission, at the dinner we also dwell on a theme we regard as important to the community.

This year, the theme of the dinner on April 29th is The Spirit of California. We are celebrating individuals who have helped California become the world's eighth-largest economy, leading the way in biotech, outdoor sports, entertainment and other endeavors in which California has excelled. Largely as a result of national events and trends, California's economy and society are experiencing something of a low period right now, and The Club wants to highlight the great creativity and leadership that have made us strong in the past and will take our state forward into an equally bright future.

Studying the biographies of our honorees impresses one with the amazing accomplishments of California's pioneering individuals, who have revolutionized the fields in which they work.

Take Dr. Bill Rutter. A biochemist with an interest in genetics, he came to UCSF in 1968 as a research scientist. In 1981, he co-founded the Emeryville biotech company Chiron Corporation. His own research resulted in development with Chiron and Merck of the vaccine for hepatitis B, the first recombinant vaccine. Also at Chiron, he worked on the first sequencing of the HIV genome in 1984 and discovered, sequenced and cloned the hepatitis C virus in 1987. This opened the way for the development of diagnostic tests, therapeutic drugs and vaccines against these viruses, and he pioneered other projects aimed at therapy of cancer and metabolic disease.

Then there is Jack O'Neill. Most people don't understand the greater significance of what they are accomplishing while they are working on it, and that certainly was the case with Mr. O'Neill. After serving in the Army Air Corps, he worked at many jobs, but in his

One of the many things I miss as a result of the diminishing size and coverage of the newspapers I read is profiles of interesting and accomplished individuals. Biographies

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spare time in the late 1940s and early 1950s, he loved to body surf off Ocean Beach in San Francisco. Tired of freezing in the water, he began experimenting with lining bathing trunks with insulating materials, like poly-vinyl chloride. Finally laminating elastic nylon jersey to the surface of closed-cell neoprene foam, Jack created the first functional wetsuit. This invention not only made the sport of surfing possible in cold-water regions, but enabled marine biology and ocean research as well. Moving down the coast to Santa Cruz in 1959, timed perfectly to coincide with the California surfing boom of the early 1960s, the O'Neill Company expanded to produce surfboards, surf fashions and the surfboard leash, invented by Jack's son Pat. Ironically, while the leash created greater safety for the sport at large, the snap-back from an early leash damaged one of Jack's eyes, forcing him to wear an eye patch for the rest of his life.

At age 92, Jack is still going strong, sponsoring the O'Neill World Cup of Surfing on the North Shore of Oahu, as well as the O'Neill Sea Odyssey, which uses the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary as a classroom to educate disadvantaged fourth- to sixth-graders about marine habitat.

The Club's other 2010 honorees – former Secretary of State George Shultz, California State and San Francisco City Chief of Protocol Charlotte Shultz, and Pixar's two-time Academy Award Winner Brad Bird – have similarly unique stories, all involving major contributions to California and the world.

Fortunately for our future, these individuals are not resting on their laurels. Bill Rutter, for example, has now founded Synergenics, a consortium of 11 commonly owned but independent biotechnology firms, creating a new and cost-effective model for start-ups in the life sciences industry. Working in shared laboratory facilities, the firms within Synergenics all benefit from a collaborative environment and managerial guidance from Dr. Rutter. The first of these companies to market and to profitability then support the earlier-stage companies, in a cycle moving forward with constant development.

If we look below the surface of California's current recession and high unemployment, many individuals with similar creativity and drive are working on promising projects. If they have access to the right environment – including venture capital and other investment funds, a workforce trained for tomorrow's needs, a regulatory process with appropriate but not bureaucratically sclerotic or corrupt controls – then these individuals and others like them will carry our state forward on a new wave of innovation and prosperity. Ω