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Role models join hall of fame

Eclectic group of Californians show diverse range of fields and talents.

Jack Nicholson and Dr. Seuss. Linus Pauling and Dave Brubeck. Dorothea Lange and Jack LaLanne. Add Quincy Jones, Alice Waters, Julia Morgan, Leland Stanford, Jane Fonda and Robert Graham.

An eclectic group, with little in common, perhaps, except that all are Californians, all have made extraordinary contributions and as of Tuesday, all are enshrined in the California Hall of Fame.

Their fields of endeavor span the California experience: Stanford, builder of railroads and a major university; Nicholson and Fonda from the movies; Jones and Brubeck from music. Exercise guru LaLanne and restaurateur Waters; architect Morgan and scientist Pauling; Lange the photographer and Graham the sculptor. And Theodor Geisel, the beloved "Dr. Seuss."

Such people literally create the physical and social environment we inhabit, and when they do it with the skill and the vision exhibited by this luminous dozen, they very much deserve to be commemorated.

These are not leaders who occupy high offices — although Stanford was California's governor from 1862 to 1863. Their contributions are characterized more by the power of example than by the exercise of power.

Not all are popular choices: Fonda is still the bete noire of many Vietnam veterans for her youthful foolishness as an anti-war protester. And those objections are reasonable.

But Fonda's body of work spans a lifetime, as

with all the inductees, and their work deserves to be seen as a whole. In the examples of their lives are powerful lessons for the generations to come.

They aren't presidents or great generals, and few if any statues will ever be built to honor them. But in their work, they touched all our lives, from Pauling's work in chemistry to Morgan's graceful buildings (one of which is the Marjaree Mason Center in downtown Fresno). Waters, in her Berkeley restaurant, Chez Panisse, has taught a couple of generations of Californians how to eat better; Graham designed the Spirit of California medal given to Hall of Fame inductees, among his other important works.

The fact that these people, and others to come in the years ahead, are honored in the Hall of Fame has everything to do with Maria Shriver, California's first lady, who founded the institution in 2006 and forced it into being past many obstacles.

She deserves our thanks for understanding how these special individuals can be powerful symbols for all of us, and especially the young.

We frequently hear complaints that our only heroes — and particularly the heroes of our children — are marginally talented pop stars or self-centered professional athletes. Well, here's a group of heroes who don't fit that description.

Need some role models whose lives provide examples of hard work, vision and contributions to the larger society? Sacramento's not that far away. Get the kids up there and introduce them to a real Hall of Fame.

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