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Mrs. Reagan shines amid 'family'

By Kevin Chaffee

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

THE EVENT: A Nation Honors Nancy Reagan, a dinner benefiting the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Foundation, at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center.

THE SCENE: "An amazingly glamorous and cosy evening," Vanity Fair scribe Dominick Dunne said of the not-to-be-missed affair, which gathered 600 rich and powerful pals of the former first lady for drinks, dinner and a tribute to her Wednesday night.

"Everyone is going to be here ...," Mary Ourisman exclaimed. "... Or they have to have a good excuse," Marlene Malek added with a laugh as triple-A-list guests from Washington, New York, Los Angeles, Texas and other locales made their way into the pre-dinner VIP reception.

If there were jostling and squeezing, or even a bit of discreet rubbernecking, no one seemed to notice, perhaps because, as Mary Jane Wick put it, "We're all family here."

"We've all come to support Nancy," Houston-based international socialite Lynn Wyatt declared. I didn't care how long I had to fly; it was worth every mile."

WHO WAS THERE: Mrs. Reagan is as close

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as it gets to being American royalty these days,

so it was hardly surprising that the turnout was as spectacular as the flowers (her favorite peonies), food (tasty low-cal asparagus salad, well-done beef tenderloin, fruit sorbet) and entertainment (by legendary crooner Tony Bennett).

Watching the odd groupings at any given moment was well worth the \$1,500-a-pop (minimum) ticket price: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, for example, laughingly protesting that she wasn't too young to have worked in the Reagan administration (she was a Pentagon fellow) while chatting at the head table between banker Joe Allbritton and philanthropist Lily Safra with Eunice and Sargent Shriver just across the way; Sen. John McCain arriving with a glamorous "date" on his arm (his mother, Roberta McCain); White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card and Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales making way for Justice Sandra Day O'Connor; Jeane Kirkpatrick, Jack Kemp and Paul Wolfowitz clustering in one corner as Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, entertainment mogul Merv Griffin and designer Carolina Herrera dominated another.

"I haven't seen some of these people in years," marveled Reagan-era protocol chief Lucky Roosevelt as former U.S. Information Agency chief Charles Wick hugged former Sens. Howard Baker and Nancy Landon Kassebaum Baker nearby.

"I haven't seen some of them in so long that I've forgotten their names," Betsey Bloomingdale joked.

THE INNER SANCTUM: Support for the Reagans was hardly an issue in the majority-Republican crowd, though just who did what — and when — is still important as far as their oldest supporters are concerned. As former Sen. Paul Laxalt noted, "These Reagan meetings are sure a lot bigger now than they were in '76."

MAKING NICE: Emcee Diane Sawyer of ABC News enjoyed pointing out the bipartisan nature of the tribute to Mrs. Reagan. "Sometimes the lion can lie down with the lamb, even though the lamb doesn't get much sleep," she kidded before introducing Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, Speaker of the House J. Dennis Hastert and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi.

All four lauded Mrs. Reagan's steadfast affection and support of her husband throughout 52 years of marriage. "She gave her husband such happiness as comes to few men," Mr. Frist said. "She not only promoted his legacy," Mr. Reid noted, "she added to it with her incredible vision and grace."

Mrs. Reagan's support of drug-abuse prevention ("Just say no"), foster grandparents programs and Alzheimer's disease research were widely praised, especially by Mrs. Pelosi, who couldn't resist mentioning that the former first lady is a vocal supporter of stem-cell research programs opposed by many Republicans.

VEEP HITS THE SPOT: Mrs. Reagan is known to be a great admirer of the late Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, so she surely was pleased when Vice President Dick Cheney described her as an "equally stunning lady in red" after comparing White House portraits of the two women by Aaron Shikler. Mrs. Reagan, he said, "also defined the beauty and style of an entire era with

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graciousness and good taste. ... She is one of the most admired women of our time."

MOST MOVING MOMENT: After a video tribute devoted to her childhood, marriage and careers as an actress and political wife, Mrs. Reagan came onstage to a prolonged standing ovation.

"It's hard to believe I did all that," she said before mentioning how "honored" she was that both Democrats and Republicans were there. "It makes me feel so special — perhaps we should do this more often."

Mrs. Reagan thanked President and Mrs. Bush for inviting her to stay at the White House on what was her first trip to Washington since her husband's funeral last year.

"So many memories, so many people," she said, her voice wavering. "Anwar Sadat in the Rose Garden, Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail Gorbachev, Mother Teresa. They all come back to me when I'm in that house."

MOUNTAINTOP SHRINE: The event raised \$2.5 million for the latest addition to the 100-acre Reagan library site overlooking the Simi Valley and Pacific Ocean: a 90,000-square-foot pavilion for an incarnation of Air Force One, the "flying White House" used by every president from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush. The Reagans flew 211 missions, or 631,640 miles, on the now-retired 707 jet, which will be mounted on three pillars in front of a massive glass wall to give visitors the effect that they are flying on it themselves.

"The library is a place [where] the sun will never set on the principles that Ronnie believed in so deeply," his widow said at evening's end, "a place where we'll never forget the ideals he cherished, the optimism he symbolized or the America he loved."

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