

Years ago, when my oldest daughter was little, she came into my bedroom one morning and woke me with something very serious on her mind. “Dad,” she said, “are you famous? Because my friend Abby’s mom says you’re famous.” She was too young to really understand what being famous is about, and we had a discussion where ultimately I let her know that I wasn’t famous and had no interest in becoming famous, I just had a job that happened to be visible. It was really no different from anyone else’s job, except that people saw or heard the results of my work in their newspaper or sometimes on television and radio. In short, fame is NOT something I am particularly comfortable with.

On one of my first dates with my wife Susan, we went to see the movie “Continental Divide,” starring John Belushi as a writer in a storyline that would have been completely forgettable to me were it not for this one line: “Maybe journalists are so interested in other people because they’re so damned boring themselves.” That’s me in a nutshell.

So I’m a bit stunned at the idea of being inducted into a Hall of Fame, because I feel certain I am the most boring guy who will ever receive this honor. Look at some of the people Livingston High School produced ... in a span of about 15 years, it gave the world George Costanza, The Tea Party’s dream presidential candidate, Obama’s economic guy, and Chelsea Lately, not to mention countless others. If you want to know where I rank among Hall of Fame inductees, consider that a CNN producer called me out of the blue recently. “I understand you went to high school with Alan Krueger,” he said, “What can you tell me about him from high school?” I didn’t know Alan well enough to give him anything – though I might have been able to help if he had been asking about Chris Christie.

In my career, I have written some influential articles and columns that have helped shape policies, and I’m always in demand when the market is acting up... but I’ll bet you that no one who found out I was going into the Hall of Fame with Alan called HIM to breathlessly ask about ME. That’s okay ... but it makes me worry that my “fame” could actually be “celebrity.” A celebrity is someone who is famous for being known. It is the Kardashians, whose only talent seems to be that they can get Americans to watch a bunch of people with no obvious talent.

So when Eli Gorelick contacted me about the Hall of Fame, I was shocked, surprised but also somewhat apprehensive. My job exposes me to a lot of very smart people, and I know what real fame looks like. I’m the last person to think I qualify in any way. I love doing my job – I have always said I get paid to play – and love the influence my columns sometimes carry, but I could not care less if makes me famous. So before I agreed to accept this honor, I was wondering if I was truly deserving.

Ken Wolfe, my classmate who was also the best man at my wedding, convinced me. He pointed out that I have exposed Ponzi schemes, stopped consumer frauds and kept people from making

horrible financial mistakes. He pointed to columns I wrote last year when my brother died, or the column I wrote last fall after I suffered a heart attack and talked about how they changed lives. "It's not just that your work is visible," he said, "it's the impact of what you say. You're being recognized for what you have done, not for being recognizable." And I was sold.

But I couldn't help but think of being a kid, staying up late with my dad to watch the Dean Martin Celebrity Roasts, where one of my favorite bits involved comedian Red Buttons, whose shtick was that the honoree might have done something great, but think of all of the other deserving people who "never got a dinner." My brother Rob – LHS Class of 1971 -- who died in July 2010 from a rare disease called primary amyloidosis. He had been director of the California State Summer School for the Arts for nearly a quarter century, and touched the lives of all kinds of famous people, actors like James Franco and Zac Efron to American Idol contenders like Katherine McPhee to countless others. He changed people's lives, but he never got a dinner. Or my sister Carole, LHS Class of 1974. A University of Chicago MBA, she left the corporate world and bought into a franchise business a few years back. That move created employment opportunities for about 30 people. The CEO of Eastman Kodak – he's famous -- got onto Obama's jobs council, and not only didn't create 30 jobs over the four years Carole has had her business, he killed off 7,000 jobs in that span. In this economy, created 30 jobs ... hasn't yet had a dinner. Beyond my family, I thought about the teachers in my life. My mother-in-law was a phenomenal teacher in upstate New York for four decades. The tributes at her memorial service from "kids" – now grandparents – made it abundantly clear that anyone who teaches for 30 years or more with distinction and without losing their zest for it deserves, if not a spot in a Hall of Fame, then a special place in heaven. Or, at the very least, a dinner. My high school journalism teacher, Carleton Rehr – who taught 34 years, 31 of them at LHS -- deserves that honor too. She encouraged me to find my voice and state my opinions. I have the same journalistic instincts and ethics today that she instilled while I was running the Livingston Lance. From the Livingston High School Class of 1980, well, Harlan Coben was inducted into the Hall of Fame last year. And there's New Jersey's governor.

But Ken Wolfe is a doctor, who spends every day helping people live more comfortably and without pain. Or Lynne Fletcher, whose desire to make sure some summer leftovers did not go to waste, led her to start Pantry Partners, a food bank that now operates in more than a dozen communities on Cape Cod. Jim Mignone just this week received an award as outstanding volunteer of the year for Employment Horizons, a non-profit group that provides jobs and a purpose for adults with special needs.

And then there's the friend I cannot name, because his achievements defy fame. He's been sober for more than 20 years, and has helped many, many others regain their way over that time. As he puts it, "People come in broken, battered, all but dead ... The joy I have gotten from

seeing a newcomer flourish after having worked with him for a short time is something I can barely describe.” Yup, but he will never get a dinner. There’s also Doug Harte, who joined me here tonight. Doug is doing his dream job. He is an orthodontist in Livingston. He has held office in some national dental groups, and gives lectures around the country. Truthfully, it sounds a lot like me – I work my dream job, I give talks all over the place and was head of the Society of American Business Editors & Writers – but you don’t get into the Hall of Fame for being the town’s orthodontist. Maybe, the criteria for fame are wrong. As someone who was on a table having a heart attack 51 weeks ago today, the thing I most wanted to live to see again was my girls smiling at me. I know that the very best money I will ever spend in my lifetime went to pay for my kids’ braces. The man fixes smiles; think about that for a moment. Awesome in life, not enough for a Hall of Fame.

There are too many stories to tell here, and every honoree tonight would have them from their own class, but the point is this: While the Livingston High School Hall of Fame is a small group of people who are mostly recognizable, the Livingston High School Hall of Accomplishment is large, growing and thriving, fueled by people who will not get any tangible recognition but who are in their own ways leading Hall of Fame lives. I feel like I represent those folks here tonight; I could not be happier to have that chance. It is humbling; I am truly honored to share my award with them.

Finally, a few words of thanks. I wish my father could be here tonight, but his health would not allow it. I write my column as if only one person is reading it, because the size of my audience doesn’t matter so much as making sure the work impacts the audience, whether it’s a crowd of one or one million. Well, my dad is the one person who, for the last 20-plus years, I knew would read every word, so while I don’t write as if he is my audience, I have always known that he was the one. My mom is here tonight; she’s actually the one who got me involved and interested in investing. She can read a balance sheet with the best of them, and her instincts for where the story is – for where the issues are -- are spot on. I’m not sure if those traits can be inherited, but I know most of my competitors ... and I know my mom can take their moms on this stuff. My children could not be here tonight, one is starring in her first collegiate play and the other is starring on her high school field hockey team. What I told my girls about fame all those years ago applies today; I’d like nothing more than to be known for having produced two children who helped make their part of the world a better place. They may never become famous, but I have no doubt they will be accomplished. Lastly, my wife Susan; any time she’s mentioned in my work, she’s described as the most patient and understanding woman in America. That’s not the half of it. My accomplishments are no big deal to her, because she has the unsinkable, unfailing belief that everything I have ever wanted to achieve – or still want to achieve – is within my reach. I have a hard time believing I could have reached out and grabbed any of those things without her.

David Elefant, another classmate who is here tonight, swapped a message with me the other day about his life since high school, and the challenges still ahead: "If I can carry myself with dignity through the toughest of times and admit that my life contained moments that were far from perfect," he said, "it humanizes the experience and makes the true success stories more real and tangible."

Thank you to the Livingston Education Foundation for helping me recognize that my success stories are real and tangible. I cannot tell you how grateful I am that -- of all the accomplished people this high school has produced -- you chose to recognize me with this outstanding group of individuals tonight. Thank you.

- *Chuck Jaffe's speech at the 2011 LHS Alumni Hall of Fame Dinner*