You'd think very little would surprise him. After all, he’s a legend. Internationally known. Beloved. For more than four decades, he has brought millions to tears of laughter because of his comedic genius. He knows other legends. Hangs out with them. Not much surprises him.

But on that April night this past spring, sitting on the front row in the packed 600-seat theatre at the Directors Guild of America (the one on Sunset Blvd. in Hollywood), Tim Conway was about to be surprised. He thought he was there to receive a lifetime achievement honor from Regent University’s School of Communication & the Arts (Com/Arts). That’s why he had been invited by the school to attend its 2008 Candlelight Forum. He was right, but there would be a twist. There would be a big surprise. Com/Arts Dean Michael Patrick had seen to that.

Along with the rest of the audience, Conway watched as master impressionist Louise DuArt began the tribute to Conway by doing her spot-on impression of Carol Burnett, including that legendary comedienne’s famous Tarzan yell. He’d heard that yell so many times during his years as a regular on The Carol Burnett Show, for which he earned five Emmy
Awards and a Golden Globe. The memory made him smile.

But just seconds into DuArt’s version, another one could be heard off stage. It was loud. Even better than DuArt’s. It sounded, well, perfect, as though it might have been coming from Burnett herself. Ohmigosh—it was. The great Carol Burnett, elegantly dressed in a simple black suit, was indeed walking onto the stage! Everyone in the shocked audience, including Conway—probably the most shocked among them—jumped to their feet wildly applauding one of America’s most adored comics. There were tears streaming down Conway’s face. It was an unforgettable moment, one legendary star surprising another. For the Regent Com/Arts students, faculty and staff who were there, who were part of it, it was one very special moment among others they experienced as part of this trip to Hollywood.

It is the purpose of The Candlelight Forum to celebrate film and television writers, directors and producers of quality and life-affirming entertainment projects that leave a lasting and positive impact on the world. “Our goal for the evening is to gather like-minded people who are striving to use their talents and craft to make a difference in the lives of others through film, television...
and other forms of entertainment,” explains Patrick. “It’s a critical component of a year-round dialogue that draws industry leaders as well as students, alumni and friends from throughout the entertainment industry to the yearly gathering.”

Hollywood. That glitzy, glamorous place where aspiring actors, writers, directors and producers want to be. To be called, called back, photographed, quoted. To have their dreams come true. For Regent students, The Candlelight Forum was the perfect place to start.

Mentoring the students through the networking process that takes place at the event was a great assignment for Wendy King, director of Regent’s Communication & Performing Arts Center. “Many of them just needed a gentle nudge of encouragement before they went off to rub elbows with Hollywood’s elite,” King says, who also had what she calls the “thoroughly enjoyable” assignment of greeting Burnett when she arrived at the theatre and sneaking her backstage. “She was everything I expected her to be,” King explains, “easygoing, extremely professional and just as beautiful in person as she is on television.”

Hosted by singer/actress Kathie Lee Gifford and author/TV executive SQuire Rushnell, this year’s Candlelight Forum paid its Candlelight Honors tribute to the independent film Bella. There to receive the honor, which recognizes a film or entertainment industry leader whose projects and personal contributions exemplify the finest in positive-value and redemptive entertainment and whose work and example encourage others, was its producer and star Eduardo Verástegui, along with actor Manny Perez and producers Sean Wolfington, Leo Severino and Alejandro Monteverde from Metanoia Films.

Tony Hale ’95 (Communication & the Arts)—best known for his role as Buster in Arrested Development—received the Alumnus of the Year Award. For Tony CeCe ’08 (Communication & the Arts), meeting Hale was a highlight of the trip. “He’s very down to earth,” says CeCe, “and more than willing to share his insights about the business and offer us his encouragement.”

Though CeCe, whose degree concentration was in cinematography, doesn’t have plans to move to Hollywood, getting the behind-the-scenes tour of the CBS studios was another highlight. “Because I want to be a filmmaker,” CeCe explains, “seeing how they do the lighting and everything on the sets was great!”

Jennifer Bittinger is a journalism student at Regent. Meeting Karen Covell, director of the Hollywood Prayer Network, along with David and Michelle Cook, directors of Hollywood Connect, was Bittinger’s highlight experience. “Knowing there are people already in Hollywood who are set up to help us when we get there is wonderful,” Bittinger says. “Their resources are just what we need to stay strong in our faith while we’re trying to launch our careers.”

Sarah Purnell had dreamt of leaving England to attend Regent since 2002. “I wanted to be trained to work in Hollywood,” says Purnell, who will graduate in 2010 with an MFA in Producing for Cinema-Television. Purnell, along with CeCe, Bittinger and several dozen other Com/Arts students, did more than just mix and mingle with industry professionals during the whirlwind weekend that was The Candlelight Forum. They worked long, hard hours assisting with production and stage management, setting up and decorating for two formal dinners, ushering, arranging transportation for some of the VIPs, and just generally helping to make sure everything that was supposed to happen did—when it was supposed to. Then, of course, everything had to be taken down.

For Purnell and her fellow students, it was a pleasure. “We not only had the chance to build relationships with industry professionals who can help us with our careers,” she says, “but we also got the chance to serve them. It was a privilege.”

The Candlelight Forum is sponsored by Regent University’s School of Communication & the Arts; Christian Broadcasting Network; InterMission, Hollywood; Plymouth Rock Studios; David and Darrellyn Melilli; and Daniel and Cynthia Burleson.