By Henry DeVries

What would you ask the world’s great thinkers if you had the chance? Imagine asking Al Gore about global warming. Or getting the views about divisive presidential politics from Evan Thomas of Newsweek. Perhaps you would ask Muhammad Yunus, Nobel Peace Prize winner, about what microlending has accomplished among poor people.

Thanks to a remarkable free public lecture series at UC San Diego, many San Diegans get the chance to participate in such thought-provoking dialogues.

In the past year, lectures by Gore, Thomas and Yunus were sponsored all or in part by UC San Diego Extension through its Helen Edison Lecture Series. Attended annually by thousands, speakers over the past two decades have included such notables as Pulitzer Prize winner Samantha Power, former secretary of defense Robert McNamara, presidential economic advisor John Kenneth Galbraith, and Nobel Prize in Literature winner Toni Morrison, just to name a few.

Some of the lectures slated for the coming year will feature Donald Kennedy, former president of Stanford University and editor of Science magazine, in the fall of 2008; Richard M. Daley, the mayor of Chicago, in the winter of 2009; and in celebration of Darwin’s 200th birthday, science writer Michael Shermer, author of Why Darwin Matters: The Case Against Intelligent Design, in the spring of 2009.

**Talk Among Yourselves**

“The goal is not to tell people what to think about the important issues, but to get people to think deeply about them,” says Edie Munk, director of the lecture series. “If the public is grappling with an issue, then the Helen Edison Lecture Series is eager to serve as a catalyst by being an honest broker providing the best information that is available.”

The mind opening conversations are not limited to those in the lecture halls of the university. Many of the Helen Edison lectures are broadcast to one million San Diego homes via UCSD-TV, the campus television station that is part of UC San Diego’s public outreach efforts. The lectures are then available to download on the Web site and YouTube.

During former Vice President Gore’s talk, which was made possible by a number of generous donors including the San Diego Foundation and the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, he addressed the technical points regarding global warming, as well as the human and fiscal implications in a manner that connected directly with San Diegans.

Gore challenged the audience that the global warming argument presented in his book and film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, is no longer a political issue but rather, the biggest moral challenge facing our global civilization. In the lecture, Gore made reference to the local pioneering global warming research conducted by Scripps scientist Charles David Keeling and the role of UC San Diego founder Roger Revelle in introducing Gore to climate change research when he was a Harvard student.

To sustain our ever-increasing numbers we are using technology that is harming Earth, Gore said. “This is not a political issue,” he said of global warming. “It’s an ethical issue, it’s a moral issue.” And another 1000 lecture listeners had much to discuss, debate and share with their communities.

**The goal is to get people to think deeply**

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Giving Credit Where It’s Due

Amid growing controversy over U.S. lending practices that center on race and gender, the lecture of Bangladeshi economist Dr. Yunus provided a stark contrast in views.

The 2006 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Grameen Bank and its founder, Dr. Yunus, for pioneering microcredit — using collateral-free loans of tiny amounts to lift millions of women and their families out of poverty. During the lecture he discussed how similar models can help close the gap between the rich and poor in the United States.

In a compelling speech, Yunus explained that borrowers receive modest amounts of cash, often as little as $20, to start or grow a small business. Since its creation in 1983, Grameen has made a total of $6.44 billion in such small loans to 7.27 million borrowers, 97 percent of whom are women, and has turned a profit in all but three years. To date almost 99 percent of the loans have been repaid.

The success of the Grameen Bank has inspired many imitators, and encouraged commercial banks in many developing countries to take up microcredit lending as well. Microcredit financing is estimated to have helped some 17 million people worldwide.

The recently launched Grameen America will provide loans and savings programs to foster entrepreneurship among the poor and immigrants throughout the United States.

The Helen Edison Lecture Series partnered on this event with the Graduate School of International Relations and Pacific Studies at UC San Diego, the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies at the University of San Diego and San Diego State University.

Talk the Talk, Walk the Walk

Self-confidence. Humility. The willingness to listen to those who disagree with you. These are the key traits that Newsweek assistant managing editor Evan Thomas said he is looking for in this year’s crop of presidential candidates. He evaluated leading contenders for the presidential nomination in front of a packed audience at the Price Center Ballroom.

“More important than their position on the issues, is my sense of their character,” he said.

A history graduate of Harvard University, Thomas sprinkled his 90-minute talk with historical references, from the Roman Empire, to the Civil War, to the end of the Cold War. The United States, he argued, must avoid the arrogance that doomed the Roman Empire. The next president will play an important role in leading the country away from hubris, he said.

Thomas first went through the field of Democratic candidates. Hillary Clinton essentially has been promising a restoration of her husband’s presidency and of the 1990s, he said. She has stressed her experience and sought to reassure voters. But Thomas pointed out that other accounts have portrayed Clinton as strident and secretive during her years in the White House.

By contrast, Barack Obama has offered a renewal of hope, Thomas said. “To me, it is terribly appealing,” he added. But Obama also has been vague in some of his speeches, Thomas said. “He has the potential for self-awareness,” the editor said of Obama. “But without question, he would be a roll of the dice.”

Thomas said that John McCain seems to have more integrity than most other candidates. “He really was a prisoner of war,” Thomas said. “He has the capacity to forgive that real suffering brings about.” But McCain also has a temper, Thomas added.

Ioana Patringenaru also contributed to this article. For more information visit helenedison.ucsd.edu

Helen Edison Lecture Series – How It All Began

The lecture series began in 1987 with a $500,000 endowment from Helen Edison in honor of the 25th anniversary of UC San Diego. A San Diego philanthropist with a great love for the arts and humanities, she spent much of her early life in St. Louis with her husband Simon, who founded the successful Edison Shoe chain.

Before she passed away in 1990, her wish was that the endowment be used to support free ongoing lectures at UC San Diego for “the benefit of the university campus as well as for the larger San Diego community.”

This was not her first major act of generosity. Following the 1978 arson fire that destroyed the Old Globe Theatre in Balboa Park, she stepped forward to make a leadership gift in honor of her husband. The Old Globe donation, by stock, was the single largest gift ever made to a San Diego institution at that time.

Those who knew her said she was imbued with an uncommon but fetching mixture of rascal wit and social grace.

“Helen loved to entertain, bringing friends together around a piano or a dinner table,” notes UC San Diego’s Associate Vice Chancellor for Public Programs, Mary Walshok, a friend of Mrs. Edison. “It is no surprise her legacy gifts were made to a treasured theatre and a bold lecture series, two forums that bring the public together for entertaining and enlightening evenings.”