Remarks by Paul Tash, delivered July 1, 2007
Leadership Florida annual meeting, the Breakers, Palm Beach

Today we honor an outstanding member of Leadership Florida whose example may both humble and inspire the rest of us. He is a man of rather ordinary origins – a small-town boy from Alabama. But by squeezing the full potential from life’s possibilities, he is now widely recognized as an extraordinary physician, scholar and teacher, and he has become a citizen of the world.

John T. Sinnott is familiar to some of you as a member of Class 21 of Leadership Florida, and to others among you as one of Florida’s leading physicians. In 1978, John graduated from the School of Medicine at the University of South Alabama in Mobile, and turned up as a resident at the University of South Florida, where he took root. Through the years, he has steadily taken on broader and greater responsibilities, and now ranks among the most senior and respected members of the USF medical school and the Tampa Bay medical community, including Tampa General Hospital.

John’s specialty is infectious diseases, a practice that stands between our good health and the myriad microscopic menaces that lurk within and around us: tuberculosis, meningitis, HIV, sepsis, et cetera, et cetera. He is editor-in-chief of the medical journal, Infections in Medicine, and he has been inducted into the Infectious Disease Institute Hall of Fame. (One does wonder about the exhibits in a place like that; probably not somewhere you want to visit on a delicate stomach.)

Infectious Disease is a realm of medicine where the mundane can turn deadly, when the affectionate lick of a pet beagle on an open cut blooms into an infection that kills his master, and where time is of the essence.

More times than you can count, Doctor Sinnott has put aside his own comfort or convenience to re-direct the course of nature, sometimes when other physicians have missed signs of something serious.

Kaeley Hamilton was 8 years old when she woke up one morning with a sore throat, upset stomach and the chills. Her regular physician thought Kaeley had a virus, told her to take some Tylenol and check back with him later. Kaeley’s mother decided to consult with Dr. Sinnott, a family friend, who recognized that Kaeley was coming down with meningitis and ordered her to the closest hospital. Every year, meningitis kills thousands of children. This year, Kaeley turns 18.

Doug Holt, the public health director for Hillsborough County, recalls John’s courage in the early days of AIDS, before the scourge even had a name. While many doctors were afraid to treat patients, John would sit on their hospital beds, talk with them ... and hold their hands.

Those strains of brilliance and devotion in John’s character are well known to his medical students. For six years in a row, John received the award for outstanding clinical professor at the USF medical school – until they finally retired the prize and re-named it for Professor Sinnott.

Moreover, the ranks of his students and protégés extend far beyond his formal teaching relationships to medical schools and universities as far-flung as Asia. I have
witnessed up-close John’s generous support for young people who have no particular claim on John’s attention except that they are eager to learn, and he is eager to teach. One of those students is my daughter. In two months, she will start medical school at Harvard University, thanks in no small part to John’s support.

The threats from infectious diseases figure prominently in matters of public health – especially in this age of global migration and terrorists who would use germs as weapons – and John has repeatedly loaned his expertise to public understanding and policy. He founded the Florida Infectious Diseases Institute, and has served as an adviser to various government agencies and officials, including Governor Charlie Crist. One of John’s contributions was a plan to provide nutritional supplements to poor women, so their babies would be born without birth defects.

These days, John has steadily broadened his own and his university’s horizons beyond Florida and the United States to the rest of the world, to the point that his division of USF’s medical school has been re-named to include “International Medicine.” He has helped create medical education and public health programs in various countries, with a particular focus on India, where he visits frequently … and where he personally sponsors a brilliant young medical student who would have had to drop out of school without John’s support.

Somehow, John finds time and energy for various other recreational and intellectual pursuits. He is an accomplished pilot, and keeps an airplane in Clearwater. The Coast Guard has designated him a “master mariner,” and he keeps a boat in Key West. With so many options and such wide-ranging interests, it is hard to tell where the good doctor will turn up next.

But today, it is our very good fortune to find him in our midst – just back, in fact, from India. And it is my distinct honor and great pleasure to present the Leadership Florida Distinguished Member Award to my friend, Dr. John T. Sinnott.