

An Authentic Voice

LEVAR BURTON
actor and literary advocate

LeVar Burton's career has strong ties to Winter Park. He cites Rollins College alumnus Fred Rogers as the mentor who helped catapult him to PBS fame as host and executive producer of the award-winning children's series "Reading Rainbow." A modest feat for the man who also immortalized the roles of Kunte Kinte in the landmark television series *Roots* and Chief Engineer Geordi La Forge in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

Refer to Burton as an icon and he emits a humble giggle. The 58-year-old entrepreneurial success exudes a purity akin to his "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" friend. "He was my friend, role model and a mentor," says Burton. "Before we met, I couldn't believe anyone could be authentically the person that [Fred] presented on his show. When we met, I was floored. He absolutely aligned with who he was."

Burton—an award-winning actor, writer, producer, director and literacy advocate—will speak at the Rollins College Winter Park Institute on Nov. 5 at 7:30 p.m. to share his life's narrative and highlight all of his mentors, including author

Alex Haley and *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry. "I am the inheritor of a great and a noble tradition of storytelling," Burton shares. "From all three I learned the importance of discovering and delivering the authentic voice."

The digital age has also spoken: This year, Burton introduced Reading Rainbow EDU, a digital-tablet tool that includes enhanced books and field trips through a "Sky-library." To fund it, Burton launched the most successful crowdfunding campaign to date, boasting 105,000 backers who raised \$6.4 million. "I am grateful to be part of the solution of America's education crisis," says Burton. "Reading Rainbow educates children, and I've proven that a former television show can have a presence in the digital realm."

Burton's lecture takes place at the Knowles Memorial Chapel; admission is free. Call 407.691.1995 or log onto winterparkinstitute.org to learn more. —Penny Dickerson



PHILAN M. EBENHACK

Giving the Gift of Music

ELAINE PANCAKE
president, Messiah Choral Society

Elaine Pancake was born in Dayton, Ohio, but has spent most of her life in Florida. When she attended the Messiah Choral Society's annual production of Handel's *Messiah*, she was moved. "I had sung the 'Hallelujah Chorus' in high school, and knew I wanted to be in this group."

In 1980, Pancake joined as a chorus member and then took on the role of vice president. Years later, she was asked to step up and take the helm. Even with her duties as president, she continues to sing in the chorus.

This year marks the society's 43rd performance of Handel's masterpiece—making it the area's longest-running free cultural performance—with an all-volunteer chorus giving a free gift to the

Central Florida community. But the group's philanthropic efforts don't stop there. One of Pancake's favorite aspects of the society is its open-door policy: There are no auditions, and anyone from high-school students to senior citizens can join the chorus. The society also urges concert goers to bring food for the Second Harvest Food Bank.

What keeps Pancake coming back year after year? "I absolutely love the music and being able to give it as a gift to the Orlando community," she says. "Every year, I'm reminded of how much the music means to me."

Handel's *Messiah* will be performed on Nov. 29 at the Mayor Bob Carr Theater. Visit messiahchoralsociety.com to learn more. —Julia Tilford **oam**