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FSC Christens Archives Center

Named for McKays, it will contain several collections of significance.

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LAKELAND | For an hour or so, Florida Southern College was the scene of something like a family reunion Friday. As many of the most influential families in Lakeland over the past half-century assembled under a bright, cool sky, there were hugs, handshakes, cries of recognition and lots of picture-taking.

Completing the festive scene were balloons, businessmen, bishops, a brass band, professors and politicians that included a United States senator.

The occasion that brought them together was the dedication of a gleaming concrete and glass building at the college, the Sarah D. and L. Kirk McKay, Jr., Archives Center. The center will house several important collections, including the Gov. Lawton M. Chiles, Jr. Center for Florida History, the Florida Citrus Archives, the college's Frank Lloyd Wright papers and drawings, the college's archives, and the archives of the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church.

\$1 MILLION DONATION

The two-story building was named for FSC trustee Sarah McKay, who contributed more than \$1 million toward the \$3.5 million project, and her late husband. Many of those present came to pay tribute to the soft-spoken McKay.

Among the speakers at the dedication ceremony were Rhea Chiles, widow of Lakeland native Gov. Lawton Chiles, and U.S. Sen. Kay Hagan, D-N.C., Chiles' niece and also a native Lakelander.

In her opening remarks, FSC President Anne B. Kerr praised McKay, the first woman to chair the college's board of trustees, as a leader in business, church and civic affairs.

"Dr. McKay's intelligence and insightfulness, combined with her contagious spirit of collaboration, respect for others and overwhelming generosity has greatly contributed to the success of our mission to provide us leaders with an unparalleled education, so that they can go into the world and make a consequential impact on society," she said. "The five collections housed in the McKay Archives Center tell the comprehensive story of the spiritual, academic, cultural, social and economic history and development of the state of Florida."

Addressing the audience, Rhea Chiles said, "Lawton would be so tickled with this. ... I know how happy he would be that his name would be on collections of old memories, history and how we came to be who we are. ... Our family is deeply grateful to our dear friend Sarah McKay, as well as to all those at Florida Southern College who have provided a safe haven for the history of our shared heritage."

COLLEGE-CHURCH COLLABORATION

The 10,100 square-foot building was the result of a partnership between the college and the United Methodist Florida Conference, which is headquartered a few blocks away. The conference had been searching for a location for its archives for several years. McKay offered to contribute to a new building, and the college proposed building a center that would house them as well as its own collections.

Florida Southern was originally founded as a Methodist high school and seminary in 1882 and has maintained a close relationship with the United Methodist Florida Conference.

In a second-floor reading area overlooking the Water Dome and Annie Pfeiffer Chapel on campus, Florida Conference Bishop Timothy Whitaker said it was "a tremendous offer" on the part of McKay and the college.

"We were struggling to locate our archives. A lot of the plans we had were more expensive than we could afford. I think (the college) really extended themselves to create this archive center and invite us to be a part of it," he said.



RICK RUNION | LEDGER PHOTOS
Rhea Chiles, widow of the late Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles, and their son, Ed Chiles, attend Friday's dedication.

Hagan, making her first public appearance in Lakeland since her election as senator, made it clear she had a personal reason for coming to honor McKay, whom she called "this most gracious and caring lady." Hagan recalled that after her mother, Jeanette Chiles Ruthven, suffered a stroke, McKay volunteered to coordinate visitors and activities to aid her recovery.

"The final years of her life were truly blessed by the loving care and support of this wonderful woman. The 'love your neighbor' attitude forms the core of Sarah's character, for which the Ruthven family and the city of Lakeland are grateful," she said.

In an interview after the ceremony, McKay said the building was much grander than she originally imagined.

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