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Large crowd on hand for dedication of Jeanne and Bill Heller Scholars' Lounge

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Cutting the ribbon at the Jeanne and Bill Heller Scholars' Lounge are (left to right) Regional Chancellor Sophia Wisniewska, Poynter Library Dean Carol Hixson, Jeanne Heller, Campus Board Member Judy Mitchell, Bill Heller, Campus Board Chair Debbie Sembler, Campus Board member Roy Binger and USF System President Judy Genshaft.

College of Education Dean Bill Heller and his wife, Jeanne, love libraries. They also love USF St. Petersburg.

That combination prompted the Hellers to provide support for the new Jeanne and Bill Heller Scholars' Lounge at the USFSP Nelson Poynter Memorial Library.

More than 100 people turned out Tuesday for a formal dedication and ribbon cutting ceremony at the new study area, where students already were cramming for final presentations and exams.

Regional Chancellor Sophia Wisniewska thanked the Hellers for their dedication to the library and commitment to USFSP. "Bill Heller is beloved in this community," she said. "We are very fortunate to work with him."

USF System President Judy Genshaft pointed out that the Scholars' Lounge is just one of many donations the Hellers have made to USFSP over 21 years, including a scholarship fund for education students. "Giving is just so important," she said. "As the saying goes, first you learn, then you earn and then you return. Thank you for doing all of the above."

Poynter Library Dean Carol Hixson said the lounge, which looks out over Bayboro Harbor and Poynter Park and features modern furnishings enclosed by glass walls, is "already highly coveted by students." And that was exactly what the Hellers wanted.

"Bill and Jeanne Heller have lived their lives together in service to others," Hixson said. The lounge is designed to be an oasis from the busy group study areas of the library's first floor. An inscription on one glass wall, she said, is so appropriate: "Our gift to students and the USFSP Community. Study, relax and enjoy!"

Dean Heller thanked everyone for attending the ceremony and for all that he and his wife have received from USFSP. "You contributed an awful lot to us," he said. "I love this place."

He also asked audience members to do their part [to support the library](#). "It has always been the academic heart of the campus and you need to keep that heart healthy by supporting the good work this library is doing," he said.

Dr. Heller recalls many hours in the college library pursuing his doctorate in special education. "When I wasn't home," he says, "I was at the library."

Mrs. Heller, a retired elementary school librarian, loves modern libraries. "I started going to libraries when I was 6 years old," Mrs. Heller says. "Back then all you could do was read and borrow books. Nowadays you can do almost anything in a library."

That is especially true at the USFSP library, which has been reimagined for the digital age by Dean Hixson. Dr. Heller sees the Scholars' Lounge as another step in the library's evolution.

“This library has really become a gathering place for students and the university community,” Dr. Heller explains. “They can study, read, work in groups or alone and have access to the latest technology. I just love to see the library buzzing.”

And the place was really buzzing Tuesday during the final run-up to exam week. Senior accounting major Alex Wilson was among a group of students preparing a presentation for a business class. He appreciated all the the new lounge has to offer. “It’s actually pretty quiet in here,” he said. Gesturing toward the waterfront, he added, “And you have the scenery.”

The Hellers, married for 59 years, have given generously to the USF System for over 21 years, with gifts to the library, athletics, Latino Scholarship and the USF St. Petersburg College of Education. The H. William Heller Scholarship in Special Education is special to them.

“I know how much scholarships meant to me,” says Dr. Heller, whose family could not afford college. “And I know how much it means to students today trying to make ends meet.”

Toi Basso is one who benefited from the Heller Scholarship. “If I had not received this scholarship my education would have stopped,” she said. Instead, she graduated magna cum laude in May of 2013 and begins teaching this fall at Deltona Elementary in Spring Hill. “I am so grateful for that scholarship.”

Regional Chancellor Sophia Wisniewska praised the Hellers for their dedication to USFSP. “Their generosity is inspiring,” she said. “The entire university community, and particularly our students, will benefit for years to come thanks to the contributions they have made.”



College of Education Dean Bill Heller and Jeanne Heller

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