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WKU celebrates historic donation

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Western Kentucky University alumnus Jim Martens speaks at a rededication ceremony for the WKU alumni center under the name of the Eva and Jim Martens Alumni Center in honor of the couple's \$5 million donation to the university in the center's Grand Ballroom on Friday, April 22, 2022. (Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Grace Ramey

Western Kentucky University on Friday commemorated Eva and Jim Martens' philanthropic work after the school recently rededicated the alumni center in the couple's honor.

A large crowd of current and past Hilltoppers along with state and local officials looked on as the couple was recognized for their recent \$5 million commitment to benefit the alumni center and the Hilltopper Athletic Foundation.

In March, the WKU Board of Regents approved the center's name change from the Augenstein Alumni Center to the Eva and Jim Martens Alumni Center.

“Eva and I are grateful for the blessings that God and WKU and Bowling Green have given to us and to our family,” said Jim Martens, a 1972 WKU graduate. “That’s why making these gifts was so important. It’s a humbling honor to have our name enshrined along with so many of our WKU heroes. They personify that the spirit makes the master.”

To her surprise, Eva Martens was also given the rare distinction of honorary alumna during the ceremony.

WKU President Timothy Caboni said the couple has provided “unwavering support to the university’s alumni initiatives, athletics programs and student scholarships for more than 50 years.”

Caboni said their latest gift of \$5 million was among the largest individual donations ever given to WKU.

“As we look upon Jim and Eva’s names for generations to come, may we all be reminded of their generosity, of their dedication, of their passion and of their spirit,” Caboni said.



“Your gift forever changes our institution. ... You are a light in a sometimes dark world,” Caboni told the couple. “Thank you for your leadership and for your generosity.”

Jim Martens told his own story at the ceremony of how he came to WKU from Bellevue, Mich.

After graduation, he went on to become a commercial real estate developer with properties in Kentucky, Indiana and Tennessee.

A current member of the WKU Foundation Board of Trustees, the Hilltopper Athletic Foundation and the WKU Real Estate Corp., Jim Martens is also a past member of the football endowment committee. He has also served on several local boards and civic organizations in Bowling Green.

The couple have four children, all of whom are WKU graduates. Additionally, three of their children’s spouses and one granddaughter are WKU graduates.

“It’s an honor for our family, for Eva and I and also for our WKU family,” Jim Martens said. “We look at it as a celebration of all of us together. It’s been a team effort, and I couldn’t do it without my wonderful team in my business, in my church or serving here at WKU and other places in this community.

“As you know, as President Caboni said, all WKU campus tours start right here in this building,” he said of the alumni center. “It’s a welcome place for all people from around the world regardless of their race, color, creed or country of origin. WKU offers a chance to build a foundation for a better life. I came here because of WKU, and I stayed here because of WKU. It’s not about where you start – It’s about where you finish.”

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