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WKU cuts ribbon on new program for adults with autism

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com

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Gary A. Ransdell speaks Thursday at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for LifeWorks at Western Kentucky University's Julie Ransdell Living and Learning Community. For additional photos, go to [bgdailynews.com](https://www.bgdailynews.com).

Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com

MORE INFORMATION

Former Western Kentucky University President Gary Ransdell and his wife, Julie, shared an earnest moment of gratitude Thursday when they celebrated the opening of the new Julie and Gary Ransdell Living and Learning Community at LifeWorks – a WKU program for adults with autism.

Speaking at a ribbon-cutting event held on a crisp autumn day, Ransdell at one point turned to address a camera, which was recording the celebration for the donor who made the program possible: Bill Gatton. It was Gatton, Ransdell said,

For young adults with autism, LifeWorks at WKU offers community

who wanted the couple's names to be on the facility, a request he conveyed to Ransdell back in 2017 during the project's conceptual phase.

"A good speaker never looks away from his audience, but I'm going to look directly at the camera," Ransdell said, adding that Gatton was unable to attend because he was under medical care in Tennessee.

"He's not in good health, but that friendship remains deep. To Bill, I want to say thank you from every member of the WKU family, particularly those students whose lives have been changed over the last several years and will be changed in the future. From all of us involved in this program and throughout this campus community, thank you for your generosity, your vision, your friendship and for making important things happen on the campus of Western Kentucky University," Ransdell said.

"It was Bill who said he wanted our names to be on this facility," Ransdell said, conveying a phone call he had with Gatton back in 2017 during the project's conceptual phase.

Ransdell said it was Gatton's \$5 million gift that made the new living and learning community possible, including allowing program organizers to renovate an apartment complex just behind the Suzanne Vitale Clinical Education Complex (which houses the Kelly Autism Program).

Gatton is a long-time donor to WKU, gifting an initial \$4 million to create the Gatton Academy that bears his name and then another \$10 million to significantly expand the academy, Ransdell said.

Along with their own apartments, participating adults with autism take part in coursework that aims to build up the education and skills necessary for independent living, including how to navigate the workplace and their place in the community. LifeWorks focuses on helping each participant assess and develop their vocational skills and find employment in the community.

In addition, they're also paired with mentors who help them along the way. Mentors help participants get involved in the community in ways that interest them, along with planning and executing their own group activity once a semester, a news release about the program said.

Jacob Brennenstuhl, a participant in the program, said the living and learning community has helped him grow essential independent living skills and social skills.

“This program takes in people of all different skill levels,” said Brennenstuhl, who previously worked for Kids on the Block as a grant writer. “However, even when I had my career skills, I didn’t really know how to live on my own ... Opportunities to learn those skills were missed a lot.”

“It gives you a taste of independent living,” without leaving you to fend for yourself, Brennenstuhl said of LifeWorks at WKU.

WKU President Timothy Caboni also spoke at Thursday’s ribbon-cutting, describing the living and learning community as an extension of the university’s mission in the community.

“At WKU, it’s not only our responsibility to guide our Hilltoppers toward earning college degrees. It’s also our responsibility to guide those from our community and beyond,” whose needs look a little different, Caboni said. “And through this living and learning community, we engage students in an even more powerful and transformative experience.”

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Aaron Mudd

Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.