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WKU's Garrett Plaza dedicated

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Sep 6, 2024

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Pete Garrett, the grandson of the late Western Kentucky State Teacher's College President Timothy Caboni's hand as he finishes the Garrett Plaza greenspace near The Commons at Helm Library and the Commons on Thursday, Sept. 5, 2024. Garrett served as the second President of Western Kentucky University, from 1937 to 1955 through the Great Depression and World War II. A dedicated gardener and horticulture enthusiast, helped lead many campus beautification projects. (Photo by Grace Ramey/mcdowell/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com)

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SLIDE SHOW:
WKU dedicates
new
greenspace
honoring late
Western
Kentucky State
Teacher's
College
President

Western Kentucky University on Thursday named its newly completed plaza after the university's second president, Paul Garrett, and his wife, Virginia Garrett.

At the just-named Garrett Plaza, their grandson Peter Garrett recalled to numerous event attendees, along with nine relatives, being a student decades ago at the site – previously, the Garrett Conference Center – and seeing a bronze portrait of his late grandfather.

“The pride that I felt was immense – it was kind of a pride that was silent with me, but boy, did I feel it,” Pete Garrett said. “Our sincere gratitude to (WKU President Timothy) Caboni, his staff and WKU for honoring the Garrett legacy with this amazing plaza as a gathering place for all. It combines my grandfather's passion for students with my grandmother's passion for nature and both of their pride for the campus.”

The open plaza is the main hub and final piece of WKU's hilltop restoration initiatives, better known as the Hilltop Restoration Project. In 2021, WKU demolished its 1951-built Garrett Conference Center to make way for the plaza, planning to add pedestrian walkways and green space, among other upgrades.

“Removing that conference center gave us a chance to really go back to what President (Henry) Cherry and those founding architects originally wanted – which is truly an oval academical village,” WKU President Timothy Caboni said.

The new Garrett Plaza comprises a swathe of green space, pathways and aesthetic additions on the hill between Cherry Hall and the Hilltop Lot.

Walkways and smoothed-out grading make the site more accessible and compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. It features a fountain at the bottom, a photography-suitable gazebo at the top, and a spanning hilltop view of the southeast.

“When you walk through Cherry Hall out the back and you see this amazing vista, Bowling Green falls away, and you can focus on your studies in the community, and it’s so peaceful,” Caboni said. “And that’s what I want our students to have: places to reflect, to pause, to think, to ponder, to be immersed in thinking and learning – and this just enhances that for our university.”

Pete Garrett recalled feeling emotional when the conference center was demolished as well as some apprehension about the site’s future plans until he saw the plaza in person.

“They couldn’t have done it better,” he said.

Paul Garrett served at WKU – then, the Western Kentucky State Teachers College – from 1937 to 1955, a tenure that spanned the Great Depression through post-World War II.

He secured federal support to meet campus needs, managed a post-war enrollment surge and had construction begin for the McLean,

East and North residence halls, Caboni said. Paul Garrett also had temporary campus housing arranged for veterans who arrived on campus post war. He died in 1955.

Under the guidance of Virginia Garrett, the university planted more than a thousand shrubs in spring 1955 and, in the following years, more than 100 trees, Caboni said. Her work at the university continued until she died in 1961.

The university had named Virginia Garrett Loop in her honor.

As community members walked through the plaza Thursday, WKU math professor Mark Robinson said he appreciated the landscaping, the fountain and the gazebo columns.

“It’s a very picturesque and nice place to walk through,” Robinson said. He agreed it can allow people to study and relax between classes.

“It’s nice to have that available.”

David Horowitz

