

Celebrating a Blue and Golden Anniversary: 50 years of Kent State University in East Liverpool

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Kent State University in East Liverpool...or does it? Could it be that the campus, like any aging beauty, is lying about her age?

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THE EARLY YEARS

Fifty years ago, in the fall of 1965, Kent State University began classes in the International Brotherhood of Operative Potters (IBOP) Building on West Fifth Street. The site was the seventh "Academic Center" opened by the Division of Academic Centers of Kent State University. The "center concept" was developed by Kent in the mid-1950s to extend college courses to outlying regions.

But these weren't the first Kent courses to be offered to the citizens of East Liverpool and surrounding areas. As early as 1959, the "East Liverpool Center of Kent State University," sponsored by the East Liverpool Board of Education and The Eastern Ohio Council for Higher Education, opened in the East Liverpool High School Building, now known as Purinton Hall. The Center offered "college courses applying towards a Baccalaureate degree as well as college courses of interest for cultural reasons or for vocational improvement." The university was on the quarter system and the first fall quarter for East Liverpool opened September 24, 1959. The success of this early initiative is uncertain because another document indicates that the Center was opened (or re-opened) in 1961, only to close a year later for lack of interest.

But the 1965 opening was a true success, perhaps because of the strong community support. Frank A. Dawson was relentless, spearheading the efforts and serving the campus in numerous ways in the years to come. His early efforts were supported by E. Wheatly, president of the IBOP. The IBOP not only provided the site, but they paid the electrical bills, painted classrooms, revised union meeting

schedules to accommodate classes and even published the school newspaper.

Wheatly stated that the union members knew the value of education and fully supported the Kent State presence. An editorial in the *East Liverpool Review* (1968) praised Wheatly and the IBOP and stated, "the record of help and cooperation of the past three years, guided by Frank A. Dawson, promises great things for KSU here in the years to come."

The first director of the Center was John Hedrick who began on July 1, 1965. In 1968, Jacob Urchek became director but he served only one year. He left to take a position in the Division of University Relations and Development at the Kent campus, a position that paid better than the \$13,300 annual salary he was receiving in East Liverpool. It was also in 1968 that the classes were moved to the "old high school building" and the site became a "branch" of Kent State. Richard King was hired to replace Urchek and served as director and later, dean, until 1987.

The move to the high school building was another initiative of Dawson's and other citizens. When the East Liverpool City Schools decided to build a new high school, the buildings that were being replaced were viewed as ideal for relocation and expansion of the Kent presence. There was a main classroom building and a gymnasium known at the MA, or Memorial Auditorium. The citizens' efforts resulted in a deed, created on October 17, 1966, that sold the building to Kent State University for \$1. The purchase was approved



by Ohio Board of Trustees on February 7, 1967. Little did anyone know at the time, what distress this deed would later cause!

Capital monies were released to renovate the building in two phases. One amusing anecdote of the early renovations is revealed in a memo from Dean of Regional Campuses, William Stepfens. He stated "The East Liverpool architect has misjudged the cost of several essentials to the renovation project...we found ourselves with an expensive elevator shaft but no elevator." He was requesting an additional \$30,000 to complete the project and the money was allotted.

But trouble was brewing. In 1967, the Point Pleasant Bridge in West Virginia collapsed, killing 46 people and sending ripples of concern regarding the safety of aging bridges that spanned the Ohio River. The nearby Chester Bridge was condemned in 1969 and later torn down. In the spring of 1969, the governors of West Virginia and Ohio announced their plans for a new bridge, with on-ramps on the Ohio side that would eliminate the two Kent State buildings. City officials and Kent moved quickly to request that the highway be moved 50 feet closer to the river to save the buildings. The State Highway Department was not interested. And complicating matters was the "deed." The deed had a reversionary clause stating that if the buildings were no longer to be used for education they were to revert to the East Liverpool City Schools. This meant, most likely, that any money received from the state for the purchase of the buildings would go to the city school system, not to Kent.

Over the next few months, correspondence between the dean of Regional Campuses, Kent State university president and other Kent administrators sheds light on the despair, urgency, and frustration that was felt at the time. Dawson and King were "quietly seeking

out suitable sites" in Ohio in case they were forced to relocate. Wadsworth and Orrville were listed as possible sites with the Board of Regents being in favor of Orrville, and the East Liverpool Advisory Board advocating for Wadsworth. Ed Mobley, chair of the Kent East Liverpool Advisory Board referred to it as a "political football" and threatened to take the dispute to the media. Simultaneously, Kent affiliates were looking into creating a revised deed that would eliminate the reversionary clause. Attorneys advised against it, stating it was "thin ice" and they would be "subject to a taxpayer's suit." Obviously, over time, meetings between high-level state highway officials in Columbus and Kent supporters, including strong support from Sen. Robert Stockdale, resulted in adjustments to the access highway, and the Kent East Liverpool Campus, as well as the historic Thompson House, was saved.

STUDENT LIFE

Most of the political activity went on behind the scenes and the students went about their college careers oblivious to the threats to their campus. With a physical building of their own, it felt like a "real" campus to students. From the beginning, there was a student council and social activities, in addition to course offerings. Activities included men's basketball (the Bridgers), music and art events, theater productions and dances in the student lounge, lovingly known as "the Pit." The dances were called (S)o (H)appy (I)t's (T)hursday dances because of the lack of Friday classes. Students studied, they joined campus activities, and they frequented the local bars. John Paine, class of 1969 stated, "The local pubs realized additional patronage after evening classes, especially on Thursday, as no classes were scheduled for Friday." The EL Kent Branch, especially "the Pit," was the place to be and be seen in the

evenings. In the mid 80's, the Pit was renovated and students felt it no longer deserved the derogatory name. A naming contest was held and student Amy Williams' entry won; the Pit was now the SLAK SHAK. SLAK stands for Student Lounge At Kent.

The Ohio River Arts Festival was formed in 1973 by Kent employees and was one of the two largest events in the city. The Festival was a weeklong celebration including a community art show, concerts, children's activities and other cultural activities. After the opening of a permanent art gallery in the Mary Patterson Building, the Arts Festival changed from a festival to a council and became The Ohio Valley Regional Arts Council. Now, art shows and cultural events are held all year long. Other campus initiatives include Welcome Back Fest (a celebration to welcome new and returning students), Holocaust Remembrance Day, MUSE Group (a reading discussion group), Wall of Fame, 100 Club, and miscellaneous lectures and classes for public and student enjoyment.

Enrollment has fluctuated over the decades. Prior to 1965, enrollment in the academic center peaked at 100 part-time students. In 1966, the enrollment was 223 and by 1972, full time equivalent students reached 410. When area steel mills laid off employees, many of the displaced workers enrolled in classes to start new careers. Campus enrollment has often followed economic trends, but like a mirror, the trend is the reverse. Around 2000, when the U.S. was experiencing healthy financial conditions, enrollment dropped below 500 students, including part-timers. But in the years following the recession of 2008, enrollment steadily increased and peaked at nearly 1,500 in 2013-14.

Courses in the early years were offered to provide the first two years of a bachelors'

degree with an emphasis on teacher education. The first associate degree offered at Kent East Liverpool was criminal justice and today the justice studies program is still strong. In 1968, Kent State entered into a one year agreement with East Liverpool City Hospital to "instruct 15 student nurses," thus beginning a long tradition of health care instruction at the East Liverpool Campus. The Associate Degree in Nursing program began in 1973, corresponding with the closing of East Liverpool hospital's diploma program. Occupational Therapy Assistant Technology and Physical Therapist Assistant programs were added in the late 1980's. Together with the Kent State Salem campus, the Columbiana County campuses' curriculum has now grown to include over 27 degrees, including 13 bachelor's degrees, and 14 associate degrees.

There came a time of sorrow for the East Liverpool students as well. The killing of four students on May 4, 1971, at Kent State's central campus left the student body stunned, angry and confused. The East Liverpool Campus, as well as all Kent campuses, closed immediately and did not resume until summer session. East Liverpool students returned to classes wearing black arm bands, each embroidered with a gold letter K, to show their support for the slain students. Some students participated in a peaceful city march protesting the Vietnam War and the invasion of Cambodia. The campus today continues to honor the slain students with a yearly program commemorating the tragic event. The need to prevent violence and promote democratic values from public service to civil discourse is emphasized.

FACILITIES

In 1984, the Mary Patterson Building, a former dormitory for women, closed its doors. Four years later, the East Liverpool Campus Advisory

Board asked Patterson's heirs to donate it to the university for the creation of an allied health building. Through the Board's efforts and financial contributions, the building was gifted to Kent on New Year's Eve 1989. Renovations in 1993 created offices, a nursing lab, classrooms, and an art studio on the first floor and the Nursing Department moved in. In 1996-97, the campus embarked on a community capital campaign, "Opening Doors to Opportunity," to raise money for completion of the remaining three floors. Sid and Sally Porter chaired the campaign, the first of its kind among regional campuses, with a goal of \$750,000. An issue of *Kent Alumni Inside* called the effort "communiversity" as the community's support for the campus quickly met and surpassed the goal garnering \$956,000 to support the \$4 million renovation. The newly refurbished "Mary Pat" opened May of 2000 and featured a state of the art teleconferencing room, the Brown Room (a board room named after donor Sam Brown), art gallery, classrooms, offices, health labs, and student lounge areas.

Other facility changes included the purchase and demolition of the Smith Building in 2011. The building sat next to Purinton Hall on Fourth Street, on the opposite side of Broadway. The gross disrepair of the building made it a hazard to students as they walked to and from classes, so it was demolished to create additional parking and outdoor seating. An agreement with the YMCA in the 200 academic year gave the Memorial Auditorium to the Y with the agreement that Kent be able to use it for physical education classes, storage of maintenance vehicles, and graduation ceremonies. Recently, through donations from the Purinton family and the descendants of James and Margaret Locke, Kent acquired the former Locke residence and is currently

renovating it for use by the Occupational Therapy Assisting Program.

LEADERSHIP

Following Dean King's administration, Suzanne Fitzgerald, Director of Nursing, assumed the role of dean and served until 2001. Larry Froehlich served as dean from 2002 to 2004. Jeffrey Nolte, Dean of Salem campus, then assumed the responsibility for both campuses. It was during his tenure, that the East Liverpool and Salem campuses merged in strategic ways to become the Columbiana County Campuses. Each campus continues to retain its own unique identity while sharing resources. Nolte served until 2011 and was replaced by the current dean, Dr. Steve Nameth.

Throughout the history of the campus, the deans have been guided by the East Liverpool Advisory Board. The board is comprised of community members who work to serve and promote Kent State, as well as raise money for scholarships and other worthy projects. Without the strong support of these community leaders, Kent State, East Liverpool would not exist.

The campus today employs about 100 workers including staff, administrators and faculty.

For 50 years, Kent State at East Liverpool has served the community well beyond its academic mission. Dean Nameth foresees a campus that continues to be the mainstay of the town and region. "Over the next 50 years, this campus will only get better and I for one am happy to be here as we take that next step into year 51."

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