

NIU dedicates campus life building to John Peters



Camden Lazenby – clazenby@shawmedia.com Former NIU President John Peters and his wife, Barbara, smile Thursday after he gave an acceptance speech for the dedication of a campus building named after him.

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DeKALB – The Peters Campus Life Building was dedicated Thursday to honor former Northern Illinois University President John Peters in a ceremony that highlighted the way his social skills impacted and helped the school.

Peters, 77, was NIU’s 11th school president and was known for his leadership, steering the university through 2008’s Valentine’s Day mass shooting when a gunman killed five students and injured almost two dozen others.

“This is an honor that I did not anticipate nor expect, but it’s certainly much appreciated,” Peters said.

During his speech, Peters said when he thinks about the Peters Campus Life Building and NIU, he’s going to think about the colleagues, staff and students with whom he fostered relationships.

Peters – who was known as the students’ president, according NIU documents – increased the research profile of the NIU, got the school admitted to the Association of Public and Land grant Universities, and superintended over the university’s recognition as a high research activity university in the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education.

Scott Peska, who worked as the director of the Office of Support and

Advocacy during Peter's tenure at NIU, spoke at the building dedication. Now assistant vice president of student services and alumni relations at Waubesa Community College, Peska said he employed the same public speaking strategy he witnessed Peters utilize "so many times" when he spoke to the during his Thursday address.

Peska recanted a story of Peters coming in to connect with students – something he did twice a semester.

"He took time in those sessions to listen to students, to gain feedback from students," Peska said. "I still remember one student asking 'Is the job of president hard?,' and he was asking like he was contemplating maybe doing it someday. Dr. Peters said – he had a big grin on his face and he paused for a moment – 'No, it's easy for the most part. I get to talk to students. I get to work with you.' "

However, Peska's memories of Peters were not all lighthearted.

Peska said in the aftermath of the 2008 campus shooting – during which Catalina Garcia, 20, Daniel Parmenter, 20, Ryanne Mace, 19, Julianna Gehant, 32, and Gayle Dubowski, 20, were killed – Peters met with him daily. The meetings, Peska said in recollection, were because Peters wanted to know about the victims, how they were recovering, and what support the campus community needed from him.

Peska said Peters made "near impossible decisions," like how to bring students back to campus and mourned with fellow Huskies during yearly remembrances.

"President Peters stood with students in the freezing cold, year in and year out, during candlelight vigils," Peska said.

Peters, who left the office in 2013, said there were "bad days" after the shooting while speaking Thursday.

"But we all came together, I remember that," Peters said.