

A “thrilled and grateful” Sam Bell accepts USF alumni award

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The Honorable Samuel P. Bell, III, the “father” of the USF College of Public Health, accepted USF’s prestigious Class of ’56 Award at an alumni celebration held Thursday, Oct. 18, in conjunction with Homecoming Week.

The award, which recognizes a non-USF alumnus who has “rendered distinguished service to the university and its community,” is presented by the USF Alumni Association and commemorates the year the school was founded. It was one of five USF Alumni Awards considered the University’s highest alumni honors.

Considered “the father” of USF’s College of Public Health

(now ranked No. 1 in Florida and No. 16 in the nation by *US News & World Report*), Sam Bell was a staunch friend of the university long before he met and married former USF President Betty Castor.

In 1984, then-state Rep. Bell used his considerable sway to deliver Florida’s first public health college to USF. He has been an ardent supporter ever since. The first and only chair of the dean’s advisory board, he works with students as a senior fellow and endowed a scholarship fund for them.

Bell has been a familiar face throughout USF, serving on the WUSF Advisory board, enthusiastically cheering the USF Women’s Basketball team (for which he and Castor endowed a scholarship), volunteering his leadership on USF Advancement initiatives and giving generous financial support throughout.

Beyond USF, he and Castor support a number of charities and non-profits, including the Children’s Home Society of Florida, the Institute for Educational Advancement, and Duke University School of Law.

Bell, who retired as a partner at Pennington, Moore, Wilkinson, Bell & Dunbar PA, represented Volusia County from 1974-88 in the state House and received the *Miami Herald’s* Outstanding Member of the House Award. He received an honorary doctorate of public health from USF in 2009. He and Castor’s blended family includes six children.

“To be recognized by a college other than the one you attended is a great honor,” said Bell, a Dartmouth College and Duke University School of Law graduate who, while now retired, worked as a lawyer, lobbyist and legislator. “I’ve been involved in a lot of endeavors at USF, and this award brings all those together. I am most definitely a proud Bull.”

Bell says that one of his most meaningful USF endeavors was helping found the school’s College of Public Health, the first in the state of Florida.

“I hope that by honoring me, USF is really honoring the COPH. It’s my main claim to fame,” Bell said.

Bell saw the need for a college of public health when he was serving in the Florida Legislature.



Portrait of Florida Legislator Samuel P. Bell III. Circa 1978

“I could see there were public health issues that were affecting our communities—things like infant mortality, tuberculosis and the need for clean drinking water,” said Bell, who also happens to be the husband of former USF President Betty Castor. “And I could also see that a lot of people in the state’s county health departments were aging, with no one in line to continue their work. It was clear we needed a college to train a new generation of public health professionals.”

To that end Bell and his colleagues lobbied to bring Florida’s first college of public health to USF.

“I knew it had to be at a public university, so that eliminated the University of Miami,” said Bell. “It had to be in an urban area, so that ruled out the University of Florida. And it had to

be at a university that also had a medical school. Once we used that criteria, there was only one place for it—and that was USF.” Nearly 35 years since its founding, the USF COPH is now ranked #1 in the state and #16 among the nation’s top public health colleges.

“I had no particular connection to the college when we embarked on bringing a school of public health to Florida,” commented Bell. “But the decision to bring it to USF turned out to be a great choice in every way. At USF, the COPH is seen as an equal partner in the health system.”



Sam Bell, with his wife and former USF President Betty Castor, after accepting his Class of '56 Award. (Photo by Matt May/USF Alumni Association)

While the COPH may be Bell’s first baby, it’s not his only child. He’s bullish on pretty much all things USF.

An avid public radio listener, Bell has sat on the board of directors for WUSF. He’s helped bring prominent international speakers to campus through his involvement with the USF World Center for Strategic and Diplomatic Studies. And he’s endowed

scholarships to the USF School of Music, the COPH (which bestowed upon him an honorary doctorate in 2009) and USF women's basketball.

"Sam Bell is a brilliant man with a huge heart whose work has benefitted untold numbers of people all around the world," Donna Petersen, dean of the COPH, said. "I can't think of a person who better exemplifies USF's highest ideals."



L to R: Tom Gates, Rhea Law, Head of USF Alumni, Sam Bell, and President of Alumni Association
Gates, Law and Bell were Alumni Award Winners

Story by Donna Campisano, USF College of Public Health

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