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Cedar Key welcomes University of Florida IFAS Nature Coast Biological Station



Michael Smith, a 10th grade student at Cedar Key School (left), and his friend and classmate Zander Stanley, also a CKS sophomore, help provide a perspective on the size of the centerpiece table of a conference room on the second floor of the Nature Coast Biological Station facility in Cedar Key on Saturday morning (Sept. 23). Smith a CKS Sharks Basketball player and Stanley, who intends to play on the CKS Sharks Baseball Team this season, are among the many young people in the community who help this island town. These two young men are active in civic projects in their school and in their community. There is more about the table and its connection to the community and history, further in this story.

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © Sept. 24, 2017 at 4:07 p.m.

CEDAR KEY – The people of Cedar Key welcomed the continuation of research by the University of Florida as the leaders of the Nature Coast Biological Station facility conducted a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Friday (Sept. 22) and gave tours on Saturday (Sept. 23).

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Dennis Gill (left) of Steamer's Clam Bar and Grill (located on the west side of Dock Street overlooking the Gulf of Mexico) and David Sharp, the husband of Crystal Sharp, who spearheaded the effort to have hamburgers and hotdogs as a fundraiser for Cedar Key School at this event, cook hotdogs and hamburgers.



Among the helpers of the Cedar Key School's Middle School grades are (from left, front row) Cadence Girdler, Allie Brown, Kylie Plemmons, Alexis Lipscomb and Makalynn Bowling, and (back row, from left) Connor Slump (sporting a 'shark hat' that is fashioned to show a shark chomping onto the top of his head), Lane Sharp and Levi Brinkman. CKS Middle School



teacher and CKS Athletic Director Kim Bishop said the middle school students are selling baked goods on Saturday as part of the fundraising efforts for two field trips. One trip will be to see Encore in Gainesville as they perform from some of Edgar Allen Poe's works, and the second field trip will

be to Walt Disney's Animal Kingdom. Another fundraiser at the same set of tables was for uniforms for the boys and girls CKS Sharks Basketball teams.

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Flanking 10 of the 23 Cedar Key School Safety Patrol members seen here are CKS Safety Patrol Advisor Tevin Mills (left) and CKS Principal Josh Slemp. The other CKS Safety Patrol members showed up Saturday as another shift to sell soft drinks as a fundraiser to help pay for their trip to Washington, D.C., after this school year ends.



Among the many scientists at the event Saturday is Travis Thomas, 37, a doctoral student from the University of Florida College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. He is studying wildlife ecology and conservation. Here he is holding an Alligator Snapping Turtle - with its mouth open and ready to snap shut. (This turtle is in the family Chelydridae. *M. temminckii* and is one of the heaviest freshwater turtles in the world. It is often associated with, but not closely related to, the common snapping turtle, which is in the

genus *Chelydra*.) The co-advisors for this UF doctoral candidate are Dr. Mike Allen and Dr. Steve Johnson.

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Here a Diamondback Terrapin is held by researcher Travis Thomas.



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There were plenty of learning opportunities Saturday at the event.

The Saturday events included fundraisers by Cedar Key School's basketball teams, the middle school students and the fifth grade Safety Patrol members. This action says volumes about the community-oriented theme of research from day one.

This new research facility is part of part of the UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

Speeches by Jack Payne, UF senior vice president of agriculture and natural resources; Mike Allen, director of the Nature Coast Biological Station; Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks and Cedar Key Vice Mayor Sue Colson on Saturday reflected a spirit of grace and community that shows great promise for the near and distant future of this small island community.

Likewise, the thoughts shared Saturday show all parties are ready, willing and able to share insight with one another from scientific instruments and from historic experience in the Gulf of Mexico, the Suwannee River, the estuaries and island and with all of the creatures on the land, in the water and in the air.

Hamburgers, hotdogs, tours to Seahorse Key, booth exhibiting research programs, music, touch tanks and even games for children were available at the event.

Don Austin of High Springs played the harp as one of the musicians on Saturday.

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This is a view of the dock looking toward the three-story biological station in the background. Station Director Mike Allen is standing in the foreground. Allen helped all of the residents and visitors feel welcome to visit the facility, and he invited input from the community if people see a manner in which UF/IFAS can help.

THE FACILITY

The Nature Coast Biological Station is located at 552 First St. in Cedar Key.

The main structure is three stories tall, and there is a wing that is a remodeled remnant of the motel that once sat there.

The dock is not yet boat-friendly. The third floor is not ready for use yet. The aquarium for the community needs filters, pumps, water and marine life.

In regard to the third floor, when it is funded for completion, there is a plan to have a community meeting room where 40 to 50 people can gather on the Gulf side of the structure. The plan includes a small kitchenette up there as well to help with conducting events there.

All of things that are absent, though, are bound to come to fruition with time and effort.

The Nature Coast Biological Station is the only modern marine laboratory for 259 miles on the Gulf Coast.

It is roughly a 5,200-square-foot facility. It features a wet lab, a proposed aquarium, offices, teaching space and a dock for UF and Santa Fe College research vessels.

As UF science writer Samantha Grenrock has noted Savanna Barry, UF/IFAS Extension Sea Grant agent based at the Nature Coast Biological Station has said partnerships are a key in helping UF educate the next generation of scientists.

In 2017, the NCBS internship program included 13 UF undergraduates, up from six last year, said Barry, who coordinates the program. Interns are paired with researchers from UF/IFAS and partnering agencies, and spend the summer learning how to do fieldwork on the Nature Coast — sometimes underwater or waist-deep in mud.

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“Our interns all push themselves to explore new things and their sense of adventure is contagious,” Grenrock previously noted that Barry said. “There’s really no substitute for the hands-on experience and life lessons you learn out in the field, and I’m excited that the NCBS and our partners can offer these opportunities.”

Some of these interns were among those staffing booths at the Saturday open house. Visitors saw exhibits on oyster restoration, manatee-human interactions, seagrass ecology and other displays.



SUE COLSON

Cedar Key Vice Mayor Sue Colson gave a heartwarming speech during the program on Saturday.

Afterward, she shared another thought about the table that was built by Rod Hunt.

“When the committee was sitting at the table for its first meeting yesterday at the biological station,” Colson said, “when you put your hands on the table, it grounded you to the history of yesterday and it linked you with the science of today.”

Colson has a passion for Cedar Key and the people who are residents and visitors on the island.

“The duty of these scientists at this facility is to coordinate and respect the local people who actually gather the seafood, and work on the water,” Colson said. “The local people can go out with their naked eye and look at the bay, and know how to get from ‘Point A’ to ‘Point B’ by sliding around oyster bars that are submerged and not visible.

“They don’t use GPS,” she continued. “They don’t use depth finders. They can just do it. The other thing (about the local mariners) is that they taste the water. They don’t use the tool that the scientists use to find salinity.”

Colson said she is greatly pleased to see the scientists interacting with local people, and showing respect to the people of Cedar Key.

“That builds a trust between the two,” Colson said. “The scientists have to be able to listen to us, and they have to be able to share their knowledge on our level and their level. Then, no one is over anyone else. We are equal.

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“I think that’s the beauty,” Colson continued, “because we have Peter Frederick and we have Bill Pine, and we have Leslie (Sturmer). And we have so many people here that respect the energy of these people who have done this for generations.”

Colson said she sees the Nature Coast Biological Station as being different than so many other labs, because those other labs have closed doors and there is no interaction with the people.

“I see this as an opportunity to have seafood in an abundant, clean environment for generations,” Colson said. “Don’t forget. We’ve been doing this for thousands of years here. This is the shellfish capital. We just want to keep it that way.”

In regard to the thousands of years, this was not hyperbole. Colson was referring to the Native Americans (or first nationers) who first fished and gathered shellfish from the Gulf of Mexico on the shores of what became named Cedar Key.



JACK PAYNE, Ph.D.

Jack M. Payne is the senior vice president for Agriculture and Natural Resources at IFAS, and he has been a leader there since 2010.

In the last five years, he’s kept the organization strong despite lean state budgets and is now coming off a year in which IFAS brought in more than \$100 million in research grants and \$23 million in private donations and pledges.

He has worked at Penn State, Texas A&M, Utah State and Iowa State. He also spent 10 years leading conservation efforts for Ducks Unlimited.

He oversees the Extension Service, which has offices in all 67 Florida counties. Likewise, he is over the 13 research and education centers from Pensacola to Homestead. He travels the state frequently to visit with growers, land managers, association leaders, legislators and employees.

For the past three years, he has made Cedar Key his home after spending about five

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years in Gainesville.

On Saturday, Dr. Payne said he was glad to participate in the ribbon-cutting the day before.

He explained a little bit about the UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, which includes the College of Veterinary Medicine. There are 4,000 people who comprise the faculty and staff of UF/IFAS, he said.

The School of Forestry, the School of Natural Resources and world class educators and researchers in biology and other scientific venues are not really captured in the name “IFAS,” he said.

The Sea Grant classes with coastal development and commercial fishing also may not come to mind when a person hears “Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences,” he said.

“Of those 13 research stations I mentioned to you,” Dr. Payne said, “they are all related to the production of agriculture. Some are dedicated to cattle. Some are dedicated to sugar cane; some to citrus; some to vegetable production; some to small grains.

“This is the first one – now we have 14,” he continued, “that is dedicated to natural resources.”

UF/IFAS faculty members have been coming to Cedar Key to research for 30 years, but they always returned to Gainesville to complete their work.

Dr. Payne said he is very happy that now UF researchers now “can spend more time diving instead of driving.”

Working with many state and national partner agencies, UF/IFAS hopes to help “keep the Nature Coast – the Nature Coast” an unspoiled, undeveloped natural resource.

“The most important partners, and I mean this with all my heart, is our community,” Payne said. “The citizens of Cedar Key, the Nature Coast, we see them as essential. We all live here because we like the natural resources that this area offers. We like our way of life.”

Therefore, he said, researchers strive to maintain that same culture that everyone loves as they experience it.

Protecting and conserving the natural fisheries, the magnificent migratory bird populations, resident wildlife populations, and the saltwater and freshwater wetlands are among the missions the researchers face, he said.

This station is a biological station rather than simply a marine station, he said, because the scientists are looking at the complete biodiversity of the area.

“We are very proud that this is a working waterfront community,” Payne said. “We see you as our partners. We’re not going to be – we will never be – a bunch of pointy-head scientists – not listening to what the public wants. There’s a lot to say for experience.”

Dr. Payne said he looks forward to many years of cooperation with the people of Cedar Key as everyone strives to keep the Nature Coast as the Nature Coast.

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MIKE ALLEN, Ph.D.

Dr. Allen is a professor of Fisheries and Aquatic Science in the School of Forest Resources and Conservation at the University of Florida.

He has been at UF for 21 years.

His research has focused on population dynamics and ecology of fishes. He uses field studies and computer models to explore population dynamics of fishes that support important recreational fisheries.

Dr. Allen said UF has been studying marine life around Cedar Key for 30 years now on everything from hard clam aquaculture, to seagrass ecology, to freshwater flow and forestry.

“This is one of the last undeveloped shorelines in the continental United States,” he said. “It’s one of the most pristine estuaries left in the United States.”

The Suwannee River has no dams and its unimpeded flow is significant, Allen said, in comparison with most rivers that have dams that impact marine life.

The university never before this facility had “a home” where faculty could work, where graduate students could reside, and there is a wet lab for people to see. Allen conceded the Seahorse Key Marine Laboratory will be operated from the Nature Coast Biological Station.

Seahorse Key has been among the valuable assets for research by UF, he said, and it has served as a fantastic teaching facility. Its propane-generator power and other aspects of its isolation as an island make it less inviting than the new station.

When the motel property went on the market for sale, UF saw this initially as a launching point to reach Seahorse Key, Allen said.

As UF/IFAS Senior Vice President Jack Payne spoke with faculty, Allen said, the potential of a wet lab for clam research, oyster reef restoration research, and to have offices and shared space for meetings was discussed.

“This is a home for UF/IFAS to do work on natural resources,” Allen said. “The emphasis of the lab is to improve conservation and management of natural resources. And that is all natural resources – clam aquaculture, oyster reefs, seabirds, fisheries,

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wildlife, et cetera.”

UF/IFAS has found working with other agencies in partnership has been productive for all concerned. Among the partners he mentioned are Cedar Key School, the City of Cedar Key, the Levy County Board of County Commissioners, the Levy County School Board, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (especially at the Senator George Kirkpatrick Marine Laboratory), the Lower Suwannee U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Suwannee River Water Management District, and every city, county, state and federal agency with an interest in this part of the coast of Florida.

“It has been two years completing the facility out here,” Allen said, “and now we are looking forward to watching it grow.”

There are five permanent faculty members in the main building, Allen said. There is also open day-use space for faculty from the Gainesville campus of the University of Florida. Those folks can conduct fieldwork and then sit down with their laptops and complete their mission for the day, Allen said.

The wet lab will allow researchers to create tanks to conduct experiments and the like, he said.

Public outreach is another aspect of this facility, he said. On the ground floor in the front glassed in section, there are plans for an aquarium for people to visit.

“We are working with Levy County to develop funding to improve this aquarium more,” Allen said. “The tank that is in there was donated by the Florida Aquarium. That’s a really nice tank, but we’ve got to get additional funding for the filtration, and pump system to actually get it going.”

His wife Mendy Allen works for the development office of UF and they are among the people working to raise money for the improvements for that public education element, Dr. Allen said.

Mendy Allen played a significant part in organizing the trips to Seahorse Key that day, as well as in coordinating the presenters for the two days and much more.

“She did a great job in organizing this,” Dr. Allen said. “That is part of her job in development, and community engagement in the Nature Coast.”

IFAS Extension, Allen said, is about reaching out into the community. This aquarium will include volunteers to help people learn about marine life in the region. It will be open to the public.

Savanna Barry, UF/IFAS Extension Sea Grant agent based at the Nature Coast Biological Station, will be very involved in the public outreach and public education missions, Allen said.

During his speech on Saturday, Allen spoke about building the structure to be compliant with the latest FEMA regulations. During Hurricane Hermine last year, the bottom five feet of the structure was underwater, he said, and that caused no issue because the structure is built for that eventuality.

At the conclusion of the speaking portion of Saturday’s event, Dr. Allen mentioned his appreciation for all of the people and groups who helped make the start of this facility such a great success during its first two days.

College of Agriculture and Life Sciences ambassadors aided in helping assure the program went well. Among those ambassadors was Lyndsey Harris, the daughter of Chiefland Fire Chief James Harris and his wife Susan Harris.

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THE TABLE

Dr. Allen spoke about the table in the conference room of the second floor of the main building.

Rod Hunt, a boat captain, built the table.

The heart pine timbers for the table were donated by Bob and Jeri Treat. That wood came from a house built in Cedar Key and it was bought for \$4,500 by Eugenia and Beth Johnson's family in 1948. It was estimated to be older than 100 years when it was demolished.

In 1950, Hurricane Easy went inshore near Cedar Key as a major hurricane, and the house survived. In 2001, the house was sold. It was disassembled by Mack McCain and he sold some of the timber to the Treats. The couple wanted to assure some of the timber stayed in Cedar Key and they donated it to the UF/IFAS Nature Coast Biological Station.

Lumber from those timbers was milled by Mark Clark, and then Hunt built the table and a receptionist's desk.

This piece of history is what Sue Colson was referring to when she said "When you put your hands on the table, it grounded you to the history of yesterday and it linked you with the science of today."



JOHN MEEKS

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Here Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks applies a hammer to a thumb tack after seeing a student attempting to bang the tack into the wall with a cell phone (that was in a protective hard-cover case).

Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks marked his second day at the facility on Saturday, after joining commissioners Lilly Rooks and Matt Brooks for the ribbon-cutting ceremony on Friday.

During his speech on Saturday, Chairman Meeks reminded listeners of the Levy County Extension Office in Bronson, where staff members help people with several other aspects of life in Levy County, including the Levy County 4-H Program.

“We are really blessed to have the University of Florida, Shands, and their research, everything that is involved with that in the next county over, right up the road.”

Meeks said the connection to UF has allowed Levy County government to excel in its services to the people of this county.

In his travels all over Florida, Meeks finds people ask him about Levy County, and when he mentioned Cedar Key, everyone says they know where that is located. He said Cedar Key is a destination for tourists, who all enjoy their time there.

Meeks thanks the Lord and all of the people involved with the clam-raising program that helped net fishermen have a means to earn money after the net ban wiped out an entire Florida industry that had been a cornerstone for generations.

After the net ban years ago, the state of Florida and UF helped interested fishermen learn about raising clams.

The clammers and oystermen keep Cedar Key as a thriving commercial fishery, Meeks said.

Now Cedar Key clams are renowned from coast-to-coast. Meeks shared a story about a visit to the California coastal community of Santa Barbara in 2013.

His friend ordered clams, and after Meeks first learned from the waitress that “the clams came from the kitchen,” his further research unveiled that they were eating Cedar Key clams in California.