**'If you build it they will come'**

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Right now, more than 30 years later, it seems like a no-brainer: a marine science program at what is sometimes called “the university by the sea.”

After all, Savannah State University, the 121-year-old historically black school, nestles right up to Country Club Creek, which leads to the Herb River, which empties into the Atlantic Ocean. The campus practically sits on water. But it took some fancy finagling and fast thinking by a Savannah State University visionary — Margaret C. Robinson — to match the marsh with the school.

Now, Savannah State has a top-notch marine science program backed by all kinds of statistics and a new vessel named after Robinson to honor the foresight of the woman.

Matthew Gilligan, who’s about to retire as the coordinator of the program, has been there from the beginning.

“It’s quite amazing how it happened,” he said.

And it was.

“Back in 1979 when Armstrong and Savannah State were under pressure to desegregate their campuses, the state decided to move the education major from Savannah State to Armstrong and the business program from Armstrong to Savannah Sate.

“That’s when Margaret, who is African-American, knew she had a window of opportunity to bring marine biology to the school.

“As chairwoman of the department of biology and life sciences, she’d been trying for years to get a boat and some instruction to the campus, except she couldn’t breath any life into the idea. But when the state was under the gun to integrate the campuses, she had her strategy.

“All she had to do was convince the state that the program would attract more whites than African-Americans, which wasn’t so preposterous because, at the time, there were very few African-Americans interested in marine and ocean science,” Gilligan said.

Robinson attended Savannah State as an undergraduate. She earned her doctorate from the University of Michigan.

Her maneuvering worked, except the numbers weren’t as Robinson and others expected. Then — and now — the racial breakdown of students interested in marine sciences was and still is 50-50.

For Gilligan, who got his doctorate in ecology and evolutionary biology from the University of Arizona, the new program meant a dream job — and his first real job. It did not come without pressure. He knew how important it was to attract students to the marine biology major. He knew something else, too.

“Not everyone wanted the school to integrate,” said Gilligan, who is white. “It was rough. There were very few white students at the time. But Margaret is a force of nature. She’s very strong-willed. I knew when I interviewed that, with her vision and leadership, I was in good hands.”

Now, he says, he would put Savannah State’s program against any in the country.

“I’ve been to dozens of campuses, and I can say we’re one of the best. Of the 3,000 or so colleges in the country, roughly speaking, there might be 300 with a curriculum like ours, and most are operating out of a remote lab.”

Which is kind of how the state expected Savannah State to operate.

“It took eight years for us to get our building,” Gilligan said. “Not because the university didn’t want one. The state just kept saying it didn’t have any money. Meanwhile, they expected us to bus our students to the Skidaway Institute of Oceanography, which was some 45 minutes to an hour away, to do lab work.

“Well, one day when some folks from the Justice Department and some reporters came down to see how the integration was coming, I insisted we all take the bus to Skidaway so they could see what we were up against. It just so happened that day the drawbridge was up, so there we sat and sat and sat.

“Not long after that, someone from the state showed up with a permit to construct a building and a dock, somewhere we could keep our boats.”

In the 1990s enrollment in the program jumped   
30 percent.

“I always said, if we build it they will come,” Gilligan said.

But now they need a new building. Again. The roof leaks. The porous concrete block cannot keep out moisture. And of the eight faculty members, all of whom are engaged in eternally funded research, only three have offices and labs in the marine science building. The rest are scattered throughout the campus.

The good news is this: The program itself is healthy. In 2001 the school started offering a master’s program. This semester there are 103 undergraduate students and   
25 graduate students. There is a marine biology class for non-biology majors.

The statistics are impressive. Nineteen percent of undergraduates go on to master’s programs. Thirty percent of the master’s degree graduates enter doctoral programs. Thirty-three percent of all the master’s degrees in marine/ocean sciences earned by African-Americans in the U.S. between 2004 and 2007 came from SSU.

“I like what I see in the freshmen class,” Gilligan said. “They have saltwater and freshwater in their veins, just like I did. They like all the weirdness about the ocean. And that is a good thing.”

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