It is a pleasure to join with Helen Crawford and many former students, colleagues, and friends in remembering Vernon and Helen’s time here at Georgia Tech and celebrating the Vernon and Helen Crawford Student Recreation Pool, which will be part of the renovated and expanded Student Athletic Complex.

Vernon Crawford grew up in Nova Scotia and came to the United States to get his Ph.D. at the University of Virginia. He came to Georgia Tech from Virginia in 1949, and he once described his decision to come to Tech like this: “In order to meet the expenses of my graduate education, I worked as a janitor’s assistant. I was pretty good at it, and when I had completed my doctorate in physics, I was offered the opportunity to remain in the same line of work, with the promise that if I could continue to live up to my early form, I could look forward to dropping the ‘assistant’ and become a full-fledged janitor. At the same time Georgia Tech offered me a position on the physics faculty of that institution. After carefully weighing the pros and cons, I finally decided on the academic career, reasoning that what I lost in income I would more than make up for in challenge.”

In addition to a marvelous sense of humor, he also brought with him a wonderful wife. He said he asked her to marry him not because of the ego boost he got from her complete trust and admiration, but because he “had never before met anyone who saw the truth so clearly.”

I was a student in the mid-60s when Vernon Crawford was teaching, and I can testify to the fact that he was one of the most admired and loved members of the Tech faculty. He was the chair of the School of Physics during those days, and he engineered a complete overhaul of the physics curriculum that not only attracted a lot of bright students, but also pioneered an era of reform to modernize and streamline the entire curriculum at Georgia Tech.

But curriculum reform is not why students loved him. As his former students will testify tonight, Vernon and Helen genuinely cared about them and went out of their way to help them with personal problems and needs. Vernon never forgot a student’s face. He once recognized a former student in an airport, but couldn’t think of her name. So he went up to her and said, “Georgia Tech, fall quarter, 1965, Physics 207, third seat from the aisle, fourth row from the front. Right?” “Yes,” said the amazed student. “And who are you?”
He was also a friend to his faculty colleagues. As a naturalized citizen who was originally from Canada, he took a special interest in international faculty, and helped to ease the transition for many of them when they arrived on campus. He and Helen especially adopted C.S. Kiang when he arrived as a young man from China. Helen had been raised in Asia, so she and C.S. naturally took to each other. As for Vernon, he said that given the Chinese furniture and art that Helen collected, C.S. fit right in because he matched the décor of their home.

Vernon was on the Georgia Tech faculty for 30 years, from 1949 until 1979. During this time he held a variety of jobs, including physics professor; chair of the School of Physics; head of the physics research at the Engineering Experiment Station, which is what GTRI was called at the time; dean of the “General College”; academic vice president; and acting president.

He said that being a dean made him feel like a rooster who was locked by mistake in a stable full of horses. The rooster decided that the best course of action was to appeal the horses’ good judgement, so he said, ‘Gentlemen, let us be very careful lest we should step on each other.’”

He described his job as academic vice president as “managing the affairs of the Tech faculty,” adding that “having met some of our faculty, you realize that any affairs they are having must be truly academic, and you can quickly understand how busy I am kept managing them.”

When he left Georgia Tech in 1979 after 30 years, it was on an auspicious note. He was chosen to be chancellor of the University System of Georgia, and when the news of his appointment reached the campus, a prolonged, window-rattling blast was blown on the whistle. Unfortunately it was spring and Atlanta was at that moment under a tornado alert. So when they heard the whistle blow, everyone in the Tech Tower immediately evacuated the building.

Vernon and Helen touched the lives of so many students with so much good humor and genuine caring during their 30 years at Tech. They not only gave us many, many memories that form a rich and wonderful part of the Georgia Tech’s story, but you can still see the positive impact of their time here, continuing to make a difference in the lives of the students and faculty they touched.

The naming of the student recreation pool in the new SAC facility is a fitting tribute to their genuine devotion and incredible engagement with Georgia Tech students. And I want to thank the former students who contributed to this effort to make it possible.