INTRODUCE LESSIE SMITHGALL

Nineteen years ago in the spring of 1988, my predecessor, Dr. John P. Crecine, received a letter from a member of the class of 1933 promising a major gift to Georgia Tech in exchange for naming the new college that was being created for his classmate, Ivan Allen. But, the letter stipulated, “It is of utmost importance to me that there be no public or private acknowledgement.”

For nearly two decades, Georgia Tech honored the writer’s wish to keep his gift secret from his friend and classmate of 1933. And Ivan Allen passed away in 2003 without ever knowing of the extraordinary act of friendship and generosity that led to the naming of a college in his honor.

It is now several years since both the letter writer and the honoree passed away, and we decided the appropriate time had finally come to give credit where credit is due. So, as we celebrate the birthday of Ivan Allen, Georgia Tech and the Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts are proud to publicly acknowledge this special gift by awarding its donors, Charles and Lessie Smithgall, with the Ivan Allen Prize for Progress and Service.

Charles Smithgall passed away in 2002, so he is the first recipient to receive the prize posthumously. But Lessie Smithgall is still very much alive, and we are honored to have her with us to accept it today. The Ivan Allen Prize recognizes progress and service, and both have been a hallmark in the lives of Charles and Lessie Smithgall. They not only contributed to society through the development and furtherance of many newspapers and radio stations, but also through a long list of philanthropic gifts to causes and organizations they cared about, including Georgia Tech.

Charles Smithgall got his start in radio as a student at Georgia Tech. Radio was in its early days, and Tech wanted to be there on the leading edge. So we started a radio station called WGST, which was an acronym for Georgia School of Technology – it is still around today, but under private ownership. Charlie started as a student announcer. Then, after he graduated, he was hired as a staff announcer. He soon took notice of a striking young copy writer from the journalism school at the University of Georgia.

Charles Smithgall and Celestia Bailey were married in 1934, and two years later they were jointly recruited to WSB radio, which in those days was located at the top of the Biltmore Hotel where we are today. Charlie became Atlanta’s first drive-time radio personality. His side-kick was an imaginary cow named “Daisy” whom he milked every morning with the assistance of a sound-effects man.

Lessie worked for the station manager doing promotional activities, and in the course of her job, she introduced him to the dean of the journalism school at UGA. The result of that introduction
was the creation of the Peabody Awards, broadcast journalism’s most prestigious recognition. And until recently, she was a regular guest at the Peabody Award ceremony in New York.

Charles and Lessie soon began to think about raising a family, and Charles did not want his children to grow up in the city. So they moved to his hometown of Gainesville. They started a radio station, WGGA, and purchased the weekly newspaper, which they renamed the Gainesville Times and built into the well-regarded daily paper. They made maximum use of the printing operation at the time by also starting two newspapers for the poultry industry.

But they didn’t stop there. They formed Georgia Community Papers, Inc., which published the Gwinnett Daily News and several North Georgia weekly papers. Charlie also continued to expand his radio holdings, serving as an executive with Storer Broadcasting, which had stations in Atlanta and Miami, and acquiring other radio stations in Rome, Georgia, and Gadsden, Alabama. In the late 1960s, he pioneered “talk radio” in Atlanta by starting WRNG, known as “ring radio.” It was the South’s first all-talk radio station and launched the careers of many radio notables. During this time, Charlie also got into cable TV, and owned several franchises that served the Chattanooga area, parts of Northwest Georgia, and DeKalb County.

As they entered retirement, Charles and Lessie gradually sold their many media outlets and turned their attention toward philanthropy and serving the causes they loved. Georgia Tech was one of those causes, and we are the grateful beneficiary of their generosity. In addition to funding an endowment to name the Ivan Allen College, Charles and Lessie made gifts in support of our academic mission and student life. In recognition of these, the Student Services Building, which houses our support activities for our students, was named in their honor. Their gifts also endowed three faculty chairs here at Tech:

- Two Smithgall Institute Chairs, which are greatly valued because they can be awarded anywhere across Georgia Tech’s colleges to attract and hold outstanding scholars.
- And the Elizabeth Smithgall Watts Chair in Behavioral and Animal Conservation, named for their daughter who was a professor of anthropology at Tulane University and died of cancer.

They also honored Lessie’s alma mater and her role in creating the Peabody Awards by endowing the Lambdin Kay Chair for the Peabodys at the University of Georgia, which is held by the director of these prestigious broadcasting awards. Incidentally, Lessie is the only UGA alum that I know who has a full regalia Tech outfit she wears in public.

But Charlie and Lessie’s philanthropy goes well beyond universities and reflects their deep love for the natural environment. Charlie’s biggest retirement project was the amassing of more than 5,500 acres along Duke’s Creek in rural White County, Georgia. This area had been in the bull’s eye of Georgia’s gold rush, and hydraulic mining was introduced in the 1850s, devastating the environment. The miners were followed by timber interests who stripped the trees from the beautiful mountainsides.

Charles and Lessie Smithgall spent millions of dollars to restore Smithgall Woods to pristine natural beauty and develop Duke’s Creek into a healthy mountain trout stream. Describing his love for this beautiful natural area, Charles commented, “I’m trying to take it with me, but I
haven’t figured out a way to do it.” Instead, he and Lessie sold Smithgall Woods to the state of Georgia for just half of its appraised value, and it is now preserved as a conservation area.

The Smithgalls also donated a 168-acre property in Hall County to the Atlanta Botanical Garden for an arboretum. Twice the state legislature has voted unanimously to recognize the Smithgalls’ service on behalf of the citizens of Georgia. And Lessie was honored in her own right with the 2004 Global Conservation Award from the Diane Fossey Gorilla Fund International.

They also supported the arts in their hometown of Gainesville. Shortly before Charlie passed away, they purchased, repaired, and donated a former Methodist Church building in downtown Gainesville to the local Arts Council, and announced a $1 million challenge grant to spur local support for the Council.

Those are their known and acknowledged gifts, and I think that all of you will agree with me that they are remarkable. But based on Georgia Tech’s experience with Charles and Lessie and the naming of the Ivan Allen College, it may be only the tip of the iceberg. Who knows how many more generous gifts have been given by the Smithgalls with the expressed wish to remain anonymous and unrecognized! Lessie knows, but I don’t think she is telling.

Charles and Lessie Smithgall were the donors of the gift that resulted in the naming of the Ivan Allen College, but making that gift involved a number of other players. Most of them have now passed away, but Harvey Hill, who was a partner at Alston Bird and Charlie Smithgall’s personal attorney at the time, is present with us today. Now that this extraordinary gift is finally being acknowledged publicly, I’d like to ask Harvey to give us a firsthand account of how it came about.

(HARVEY HILL speaks)

Thank you, Harvey, for that wonderful story.

And now, for providing such an extraordinary example of philanthropy and support for higher education; for the preservation and conservation of natural land and wildlife; for the enhancement of the arts; and, in particular, for the remarkable anonymous gift that led to the naming of the Ivan Allen College, it is with immense pleasure and great pride that the Georgia Institute of Technology and the Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts present the 2007 Ivan Allen Jr. Prize for Progress and Service to Charles and Celestia Bailey Smithgall.

At this time I would ask Dean Sue Rosser and Lessie Smithgall to join me at the podium for the presentation of the award.
INTRODUCTION OF CAROL COUCH

In recognition of Charles and Lessie Smithgall’s lifelong love for the environment, we invited Dr. Carol Couch, a Georgia Tech alumna and proponent of environmental policy in Georgia, to help us celebrate the Smithgalls’ legacy. As Dean McGuire mentioned, Dr. Couch is the director of the Environmental Protection Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. The division has about 850 employees, and it is responsible for implementing and enforcing 26 state and 4 federal laws designed to conserve and protect natural resources.

Here at Georgia Tech, environmental ethics and policy form an area of special emphasis for our School of Public Policy, which is part of the Ivan Allen College. So there is also a natural affinity between the work of Dr. Couch and work that is underway in the college whose founding we commemorate.

Carol Couch was born in Hamburg, Germany, into an American military family. When her father retired, the family moved to Columbus, Georgia, so it was natural for her to begin her educational career at Georgia Tech. After receiving her B.S. here, she completed a master’s degree at the University of South Carolina, and earned a Ph.D. in ecology from the University of Georgia.

Her graduate studies focused on the ecology of coastal rivers and estuaries, and she began her career as a hydrologist in the Georgia District of the U.S. Geological Survey. She moved up through the ranks of the USGS, becoming a biologist for the Southeastern Region. And just prior to being named head of the State Environmental Protection Division, she was chief of the Ecological Synthesis Program for the National Water Quality Assessment Program. In this capacity, she supervised multidisciplinary teams of engineers, hydrologists, chemists, and biologists, who were dispersed across the nation to design and conduct water resource investigations and report their findings.

Today, in addition to overseeing the enforcement of environmental protection laws in Georgia, she also chairs the state’s Water Council, which is charged with developing a comprehensive state water plan. She serves on the board of directors of the Clean Air Campaign and the board of trustees of the Livable Communities Coalition.

The goal of all of her efforts is to help provide Georgia’s citizens with clean air, clean water, healthy lives, and productive land. It is a goal that Georgia Tech shares, and an emphasis on environmental sustainability increasingly permeates our educational curricula, our research, and the way we operate our campus.

When he appointed her director of the Environmental Protection Division, Governor Sonny Perdue said, “Dr. Couch has an extensive knowledge of environmental issues, and she has a strong passion for protecting the environment.” A love for the environment was also the touchstone for Charles and Lessie Smithgall’s extensive philanthropy. And today, as we celebrate their generosity, it is especially fitting that Carol Couch will speak to us about “The Challenges of Georgia’s Changing Landscape.”