

Stockton Unveils Portraits of First Four University Presidents at Fifth President Harvey Kesselman's Inauguration Reception

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Contact: Christina Butterfield
News and Media Relations
Galloway, N.J. 08205
Christina.Butterfield@Stockton.edu
(609) 626-3845
www.stockton.edu/media

Galloway, N.J. – Stockton University unveiled portraits of the first four university presidents at a reception following the Sept. 23 presidential inauguration of fifth president Harvey Kesselman.

Stockton alumnus James Raczkowski, a New York-based artist, painted portraits of Richard E. Bjork, Peter M. Mitchell, Vera King Farris and Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr., at the request of Kesselman, who wanted to honor the contributions of each of his predecessors.

Madeleine Deininger, chair of the Stockton University Board of Trustees and a 1980 alumna, welcomed honorees, their families, and guests during the unveiling ceremony, and introduced President Kesselman.

"Stockton's past is important to me," Kesselman said. "Our past is the bedrock on which our present is realized and our future is built. Today, we celebrate Stockton's history by presenting portraits of my predecessors.

"What you are about to see is the work of artist James Raczkowski," he continued. "Mr. Raczkowski came to Stockton after serving in the military where he was trained as a tanker, infantryman and later in specialized security. He was deployed overseas and much of his work is influenced by those experiences."

Kesselman shared the history of Bjork, Stockton's founding president, represented at the ceremony by his wife, Joan Bjork, and daughter, Alison Bjork.

"Dr. Richard E. Bjork and the team he assembled were the architects of Stockton's values and its innovative curriculum," said Kesselman. "He was an astute administrator who recruited an outstanding faculty, build the campus and created a financially sound institution. He served as Stockton's president from 1969 through 1978."

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Joan and Alison Bjork then unveiled the portrait of Richard E. Bjork.

Kesselman then spoke of Mitchell, Stockton's second president, before unveiling his portrait with assistance from Deininger.

"I am sorry that Dr. Peter Mitchell could not be here today. I remember Peter with great fondness, and not just because he was the first Stockton president to hire me," he said.

"As president, he improved and expanded educational offerings for students, enhanced student services and continued the tradition of hiring and retaining quality staff – not an easy task given the growing casino industry at that time," Kesselman said of Mitchell, who served as president from 1979 through 1983. "He advocated for Stockton's general studies program, and he believed strongly that the institution had an obligation to engage with the surrounding community."

After unveiling Mitchell's portrait, Kesselman invited Farris' sister, Norma Briscoe; niece, Stephanie Roberts; and grand-niece, Heather Roberts-Williams, to the stage.

"What can I say about Dr. Vera King Farris? She was a force," Kesselman said. "She was a mentor to me and to so many others. She was deeply committed to Stockton and infused the institution with so much of what we know and appreciate about the place today.

"She cared about students and made the student experience a priority," he continued. "She served as president from 1983 until 2003, making her by far Stockton's longest-serving president."

Kesselman described Farris' leadership, noting the "impressive academic strides" including increased enrollment and expanding diverse student populations. During Farris' tenure, Stockton added its first six graduate programs, he explained, including the first master's degree in Holocaust and Genocide Studies program in the United States.

The group unveiled Farris' portrait, as rumblings of "my mentor" rippled through the crowd.

Kesselman and Deininger unveiled the final portrait of Saatkamp, who served as Stockton's fourth president from 2003 through 2015.

"As with all my predecessors, Herman had an important impact on my career and on Stockton," Kesselman said. "Under Dr. Saatkamp's presidency, Stockton more than doubled its funded assets and endowed funding, and ascended in the ranks of the nation's top public colleges and universities."

Kesselman described the growth of Stockton's facilities, including new student residences, and important renovations to existing spaces, under Saatkamp's leadership.

"Stockton purchased the Seaview Hotel and Golf Club, opened this magnificent Campus Center, and completed the Unified Science Center. Instructional sites were established in Hammonton, Manahawkin, and Woodbine," he said. "In February 2015, Stockton received approval to change its name and official designation from college to university."

The four portraits were on display throughout the remainder of the reception and will find their permanent home on the outside of the Campus Center Event Room, visible from the bridge that leads from the Grand Hall to the Board of Trustees Room.

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Raczkowski grew up in Brigantine and attended Atlantic City High School before joining the military. He graduated from Stockton in 2011 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts and went on to earn a Masters of Fine Arts degree at the New York Academy of Art in 2015.

He said that painting the presidents from old black and white photos “was both challenging and extremely satisfying.”

“By the end of the project I felt as if I have known each of them personally, as if we were old friends,” he said.

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