



COURTESY PHOTO

First courthouse for Lee County.



COURTESY PHOTO

Hendry family.



COURTESY PHOTO

Heitman Building.

boundaries come together, there will be a lot more of that.”

At Florida Gulf Coast University, which owns land in Naples that will one day become a Collier campus, news of 1 million permanent residents in the two counties comes with another important milestone: This is the first semester in which the university has enrolled 10,000 students — just under half of its estimated build-out of about 22,000, says Susan Evans, a chief of staff and spokeswoman for the university.

“The good part of it is, we’re in a

region where there’s plenty of student demand,” she notes. “The flip side: We’re no different than any other universities or agencies in the state — the tough budget times make it difficult to keep pace with growth.”

Notably, however, budget cutbacks have trimmed operating budgets, not money for expansion.

“We came from 760 acres of raw land in 1993, and only 2,584 students enrolled our first year (1997), and now we have 65 buildings with more planned,” says Ms. Evans. “But the rising cost of steel and concrete, and

other costs, means now we can build less square footage for the dollar.”

The university’s 10,000 students and 1,000 employees bring significant economic muscle to the region. But more important, perhaps, is the fact that “now the best and brightest here do not have to go away,” Ms. Evans says.

“Students from here can come to FGCU, and spend careers here, and the university plays a critical role in economic and workforce development. We work closely with the region and the business community, health care,

school systems, law enforcement and criminal justice, to get their input in what we need to offer.”

After steady requests from both Collier and Lee county companies, she adds, the university shaped an engineering program that now has 135 engineering-degree students enrolled, and 260 engaged in pre-engineering studies.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all, however, is the simple human one: How do we live together peacefully?

“We’re made up of a lot of new people from all over, and we’ve become sort of a melting pot — I guess I can call it a melting pot, at least for the Americas,” says Bruce Strayhorn, a Fort Myers lawyer and, like Hank Hendry, a son of a long-time ranching and lawyering family in Lee County.

“Between Central and South Americans and our winter friends who are now permanent — the North Americans — we now have the job of becoming all one,” Mr. Strayhorn says. “We have an amalgamation here, and after only about 10 years or so, anybody can call themselves ‘crackers.’”

“We don’t always do things like in they did back in Kenosha or on Long Island or somewhere, and here we have to be assimilated into one big homogeneous family. Usually that comes with aches and pains. We’re not always proud of our families, but we’re all in the community together, and we’re now a family.

“So whether it’s clean air, or cleaning the Caloosahatchee River, or making sure we take care of trash and throwaways, we have to try to meld this into a community.” ■

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