





*College of the Florida Keys President Jonathan Gueverra leads a champagne toast on the Upper Keys Center's patio.*

Built by Thornton Construction Company, the \$20-million facility features nursing labs, biochemical lab, auditorium, testing center and library. In addition to learning spaces, lounges allow students and employees a comfortable place to learn and work. It also features a student activities room and a patio deck.

**Construction began roughly a year ago** with the goal to have the building complete by the start of school later this month. Despite a COVID-19 pandemic and material shortages, the project was completed ahead of schedule. Dagoberto Diaz, executive vice president for Thornton Construction, said construction crews worked some 18-20 hours in three shifts for the past two months.



*Community leaders gather to celebrate the College of the Florida Keys' Upper Keys Center.*

Private and public donations, as well as a \$16-million grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce helped fund the Upper Keys Center. Bobby Stoky, chair of the college's foundation board, said finishing the project was aided by the Ocean Reef community.

"We needed \$2.5 to \$3 million and Ocean Reef came in," he said. "I'd love to say this is done, with the building done, but the real work begins. Bring on the students and the future of the College of the Florida Keys."



*Bobby Stoky, chair of the college's foundation board, addresses attendees.*

Former state Rep. Holly Raschein worked diligently in Tallahassee to change the college's name from Florida Keys Community College to the College of the Florida Keys. Raschein praised the work of Gueverra and the college for bringing an "exemplary" building to the Upper Keys.

Building a new college center in the Upper Keys goes back several years, when Gueverra spoke to community clubs up and down the Keys regarding a bigger and better facility. It kicked into motion in August 2018 when the college purchased commercial property in the

old Shell World. A deal the college could afford was inked between Gueverra and owners Jim and Cyrie Waterman.

The new facility replaces the college's former home at Coral Shores High School.

"Over seven, eight years ago, we started this conversation. And I have one regret: We should have made a deal such that everyone who said to me, 'When are we going to get the Upper Keys Center,' you would have to hand me \$1,000,'" Gueverra joked.

A majority of the men and women within the Monroe County Sheriff's Office received training through the college, including Sheriff Rick Ramsay. In a time where employers are struggling to find personnel, Ramsay said the sheriff's office will be able to attract those from the Upper Keys and the South Florida region.

"I'm excited about this campus," Ramsay said. "It's going to be an opportunity for citizens, for future jobs, to have better paying jobs and hopefully to stay local and be a part of the community."

A nursing program at the Upper Keys Center will look to bolster the local hospital system. Jay Hershoff, chairman of the board of trustees for Mariners and Fishermen's hospitals, said the need for nurses is "incredible."

"We'd like to grow our own nurses here and grow our own medical support teams and keep them here," he said. "At the same time, if they get a degree and skills and go somewhere else, Baptist will make sure there's an opportunity somewhere within the system to use the skills they learned here."

Hershoff added that the Baptist health system is looking at possibly providing faculty to teach at the Upper Keys Center and give up and coming nurses an "even better chance to get skills."

Open houses are set for Wednesday, Aug. 11 and Thursday, Aug.12 from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. for the public and prospective students. Visitors will be able to tour the new center and learn about the expanded academic and workforce training opportunities.

Fall classes start Aug. 19.

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Frank Wood, vice president of advancement for the College of the Florida Keys, leads the ceremony.



College's Upper Keys Center holds 'topping out' ceremony  
March 12, 2021



COLLEGE CONSTRUCTION PROGRESSES WITH FALL OPENING NOT FAR OFF  
March 23, 2021



Work underway at college's new Upper Keys Center  
September 16, 2019

**JIM MCCARTHY**

Jim McCarthy believes in community reporting, giving back and life on the water. A workout fanatic, diver and a bogey-golfer, Jim loves chicken wings, Marvel movies and sports.