

Margaret Corbet and Katharine Kemp Statue Unveiled

'Keep the Doors Open': Former Faculty Credited with Saving Centralia College During Depression, World War II

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Margaret Corbet and Katharine Kemp Statue Unveiled By Christopher Brewer / cbrewer@chronline.com | 0 comments

Two women who are widely credited with keeping Centralia College running during one of the darkest times in American history were honored with the unveiling of a sculpture known as "Keep the Doors Open" Thursday afternoon.

Despite a heavy downpour, college staff, faculty members, students and former students converged in a tight space under a large tent to unveil a life-sized bronze sculpture of Margaret Corbet, the college's first principal, and Katharine Kemp, the former dean of students.

The late Gordon Aadland, a longtime Centralia College faculty member and publicist, had wanted for years to see a monument to Kemp and Corbet installed on the campus. His daughter Carrie spoke in his stead Thursday, remembering her father's admiration for the two who made a distinct impression on him.

"He certainly would be excited that the statue banks the Aadland Esplanade," Carrie Aadland said. "To all who brought this statue into reality, on behalf of my father I say, 'Splendidly done.'"

Tove Burhen, a student at Centralia College during the World War II era, remembered how her class only graduated three people — all women. In those days, the college utilized the third floor of Centralia High School and was known as Centralia Junior College. Burhen herself would go on to become a teacher, greatly influenced by what she described as a strict yet caring teaching style employed by both Corbet and Kemp.

"I went to the University of Washington and received my teaching certificate," Burhen said. "I modeled my teaching style after them."

Burhen also noted Corbet's penchant for theater, directing plays even with very few students to participate in them. As such, the Corbet Theatre is named after the woman who directed several productions.

"(Corbet) directed a play at the college each year, and all of us could take part in it," Burhen reflected.

College President Jim Walton shared the story of the failure of the bank the college kept its money in during the Great Depression, severely depleting the college's funds and forcing the faculty to make tough decisions.

"The faculty only took what money they needed to survive at the time," Walton said. "The college did not close, not just because of Margaret Corbet and Katharine Kemp, but because of the faculty as well. The community also rallied."

Walton said Centralia College maintains the title of the oldest continuously-operating junior college in Washington state primarily due to the efforts of Corbet and Kemp, who had many titles and served students the best they could during times of great difficulty.

“They did it. They kept the college open and it never shut down,” Walton said. “What a phenomenal history, and what great leadership.”