

Remembering Elson Floyd: WSU president's passion honored

Chad Sokol/SR

PULLMAN – Some called him a giant in higher education, a dynamic force who could influence lawmakers and business leaders one day and cheerfully welcome students to his home the next.

Many knew him for his Southern hospitality, his ever-present grin and his unwavering passion for Washington State University.

At a ceremony Wednesday afternoon at WSU's Beasley Coliseum, thousands gathered to celebrate the university's 10th president, Elson Floyd, who died of colon cancer June 20 at the age of 59. The long-awaited ceremony drew students, faculty and staff who recently arrived or returned to campus after the summer break.

Speakers included Floyd's colleagues and friends, members of his fraternity, several politicians and his wife, Carmento, who thanked the audience for sending a wave of support on social media after the late president announced June 5 he was taking a leave of absence to confront his illness.

"I can't even begin to say how difficult this time has been for our family. It's taken our breath away, and it's changed our lives," she said. "But the one thing that has been constant, through this whole ordeal, has been your love and support."

Carmento Floyd said her husband, who led three universities during his 37-year career, had a special fondness for WSU, where he became president in 2007. He often referred to WSU students as his "28,000 children" and had "great expectations" for each of them, his wife said.

Gov. Jay Inslee called Floyd's influence vast. In the months leading up to his death, Floyd made frequent trips to Olympia to urge the Legislature to approve a WSU medical school in Spokane.

"For years to come, when we see doctors improving the health of our communities, we'll be seeing his legacy," U.S. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers said.

"He really took us to the next level" by concentrating health sciences research at WSU Spokane, Mayor David Condon added after the ceremony.

State Sen. Mark Schoesler, whose district includes Pullman, said he considered Floyd a close friend.

Schoesler recalled one day in late 2008, after Floyd asked the WSU regents to reduce his salary in light of budget constraints during the recession: "The man I knew walked into my office in the Newhouse Building in Olympia, and he flopped himself on my couch and said, 'I feel good.' I said, 'Why do you feel good?' and he said, 'I just cut my pay \$100,000.'"

WSU Regent Scott Carson said Floyd was instrumental in garnering more than \$1 billion in donations for capital projects as well as drawing the highest enrollment in university history. Floyd also established the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication and a major new research center with the Paul G. Allen School for Global Animal Health. And he hired football coach Mike Leach, a controversial move that sparked new excitement among Cougar fans.

“He was as at home in Seattle dealing with business leaders as he was at home showing students the president’s mansion – and even dealing with our government, which is never an easy thing to do,” Carson said.

Floyd, the first black WSU president, grew up in segregated Henderson, North Carolina, on an unpaved street. His family was poor, and he frequently credited his mother, Dorothy, with inspiring him and his three younger brothers to pursue higher education.

He began his career in 1978 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he served until 1990 and again from 1995 to 1998 in various administrative posts. He arrived at Eastern Washington University in 1990 to become vice president for student services and then vice president for administration and executive vice president. He left EWU in 1993 to become the executive director of the Washington State Higher Education Coordinating Board.

Provost Daniel Bernardo is serving as interim president while the WSU regents seek someone to replace Floyd.

Floyd also worked closely with those in student government.

“He always listened attentively, and he really cared about each of the issues we brought to him,” said LaKecia Farmer, a former student senator and vice president. Floyd helped students achieve a smoking ban on campus, approved a university program that rates housing options in Pullman and approved extended library hours following student demands.

“He was not only a student’s president,” said Kevin Massimino, a former student regent. “He was the students’ president.”