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Bryant University dedicates Interfaith Center

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By Talia Buford

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Tricia Kordalski and Donald Quattrucci, both members of the Bryant University Board of Trustees and the Class of '83, walk by the reflecting pool at the entrance to the new Interfaith Center at Bryant University in Smithfield. A dedication ceremony was held Friday.

The Providence Journal / Bob Thayer

SMITHFIELD — Faith at Bryant University used to be a little bit, well, transient.

The tiny room in the Bryant Center designated for religious services only held about 20 people. So the university chaplains and student groups held services wherever they could find space: in another room in the Bryant Center, the dining hall, the university rotunda or even the technology center.

But Friday, the newly built 10,000-square-foot Interfaith Center at the university was officially dedicated, although students have been able to use the facility since the beginning of the school year. It's still something that Protestant chaplain the Rev. Philip Devens said he has to get used to.

"It's a dream come true," he said. "To see it finally come to fruition, it's one of those times where I just feel shivers. I'm excited. This is happening. This is now real."

Where the university always had buildings that stimulated students' minds through studies, or their bodies through athletics, now, the center fills the spiritual needs of students on campus, he said.

That's exactly what President Ronald K. Machtley wanted, he said during the dedication ceremony.

"I'm hoping this facility can bring an understanding among those seeking their own spirituality," he said, "so we can send out into the world graduates who are better at promoting a peaceful world. We've had this idea for some time, the question was how do we incorporate a forum in which we could respect all religions and all would be comfortable in the same space?"

They turned to Gwathmey, Siegel & Associates Architects, the New York-based firm that also designed the university's George E. Bello Center for Information and Technology. Construction on the \$10-million facility began in May 2008 and was paid for through donations and university funds.

"We wanted a space that was spiritual when you walked in," said Machtley. "One in which you knew you weren't in a physics lab or study space, but that you were in a space that had a soul."

The building incorporates three symbols common to most, if not all religions — light, water and the eternal circle. The words "In the Beginning" are spelled out in five different languages — Hebrew, Latin, English, Sanskrit and Arabic — providing a circular border in the main worship area.

The main worship area is a circular area with retractable walls to accommodate up to 200 people. Water flows down two stone walls -- one outside the building and the other in the main worship area -- providing a tranquil background noise. The main hallway boasts floor to ceiling windows to allow light into the space and provide a view of the campus. While the sanctuary -- a small room to one side of the main hall -- has windows along the bottom of the wall, providing a view of a small reflecting pool.

Already, the facility is getting use, Devens said. The university chaplains provide Protestant, Jewish and Catholic services once a week and students are using the facility for their own

groups as well.

“It’s all brand new,” he said. “I get the feeling that there’s a sense of centering as far as the spiritual life on campus. There’s a sense of wholeness.”

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