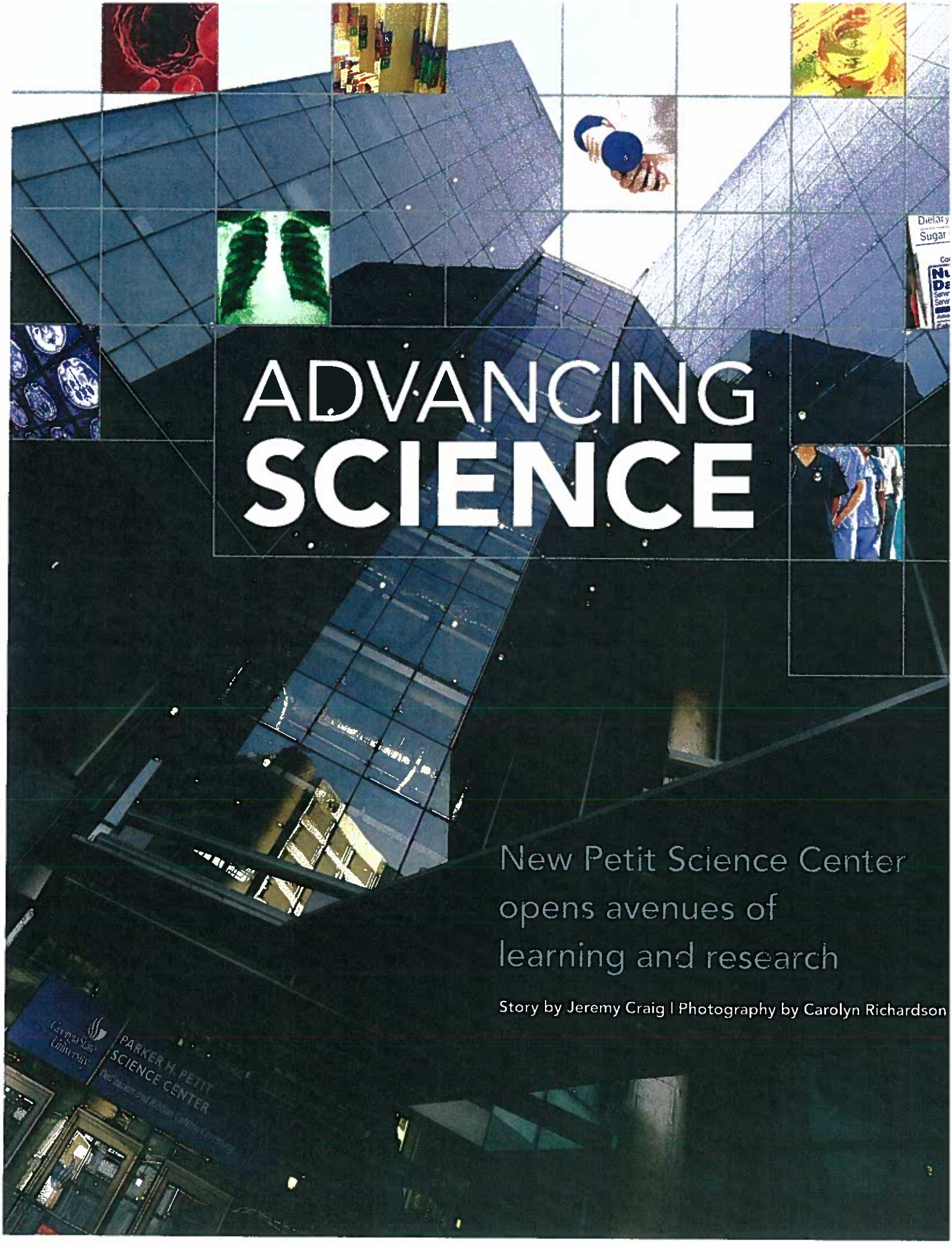


ADVANCING SCIENCE

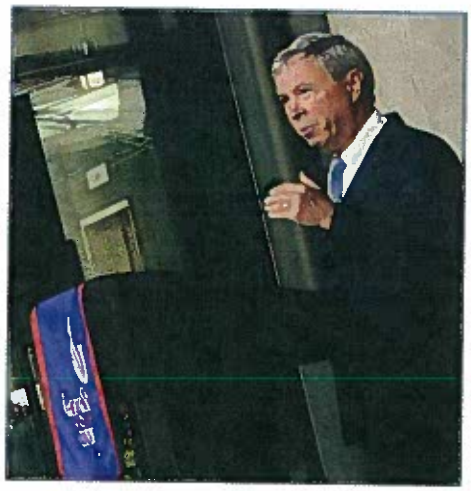
New Petit Science Center opens avenues of learning and research

Story by Jeremy Craig | Photography by Carolyn Richardson

On a blustery day early this spring, Parker H. "Pete" Petit returned to the place that 37 years ago prepared him for business success in the health care industry.

With the snip of a ribbon, the Georgia State alumnus officially dedicated the new state-of-the-art science center that bears his name – the Parker H. Petit Science Center — and, at the same time, widened the doors of opportunity for the university's next generation of students, scientists and health professionals.

"I have just one thought for our students who will use this new center," Petit said at the March 29 celebration. "Embrace science… science that will add value, create wealth and improve the quality of life in our country, as well as globally. You can make a difference, and I challenge you to do so."



PARKER H. "PETE" PETIT

Georgia State faculty and students are now set to meet these challenges as never before at the new 350,000 square-foot, $150 million center. The building, located on the corner of Decatur Street and Piedmont Avenue, is home to laboratories, offices and classrooms for biology, chemistry, nursing, nutrition, physical and respiratory therapies and public health, as well as the Neuroscience Institute.

Here, once classes begin in the fall, faculty will nurture and train the next generation of health care professionals as they learn about nursing, and physical and respiratory therapy. Public health students will learn about tracking dangerous diseases. And faculty research scientists — already setting up shop — will explore new frontiers in biology and chemistry, find new treatments for cancer and other diseases and work to better understand post-traumatic stress disorder and autism among other conditions.

It all moves forward with the center's simple but profound contribution — space.

RIBBON CUTTING CEREMONY FROM LEFT: COLLEGE OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SCIENCES DEAN SUSAN KELLEY, REGENT FELTON JENKINS, TOMMY HILLS REPRESENTING GOV. SONNY PERDUE, VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH ROBIN MORRIS, COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES DEAN LAUREN ADAMSON, PRESIDENT MARK BECKER, PARKER H. "PETE" PETIT, U.S. REP. PHIL GINGREY, UNIVERSITY SYSTEM CHANCELLOR ERROLL DAVIS, PROVOST RISA PALM, MARISA SIMPSON REPRESENTING U.S. SEN. SAXBY CHAMBLISS AND CHRIS CARR REPRESENTING U.S. SEN. JOHNNY ISAKSON.

EXPANDING RESEARCH

Professor of medicinal chemistry and Georgia Research Alliance Eminent Scholar in Drug Discovery Binghe Wang is just one of many scientists who, along with their lab members and graduate students, are making the Petit Science Center their new home for research.

BINGHE WANG

Wang is currently working on a new prostate cancer detector that will help more accurately diagnose the disease.

"GSU's biomedical-related areas are on the upswing right now, and have been attracting a lot of attention," Wang said. "This new science center gives us a strong push to keep the momentum going and move us to the next level."

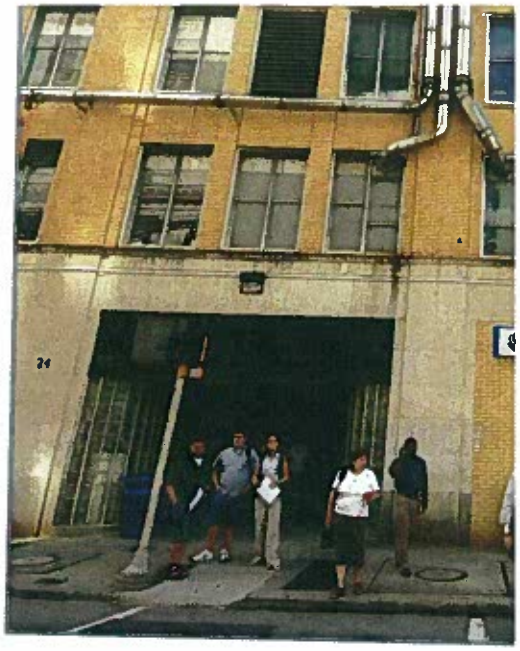
The new center is also creating a meeting of the minds with the university's Neuroscience Institute.

"It promotes unity among the neuroscientists so that we can increase the exchange of ideas, and also increase the cohesiveness of us as a group by interacting with one another on a daily basis," said Anne Murphy, associate professor of neuroscience and associate director of the institute.

Critical scientific facilities at the center feature, for example, confocal and electron microscopes that can detect the tiniest processes of cells. There is also a "visualization wall" — a huge, 200-million pixel array of computer screens that researchers can use to view large amounts of data for different purposes. Using the array, a public health scientist could map how disease spreads in an urban area, for example.

The building is home to a new public health laboratory for epidemiology research. The building also houses the university's Bio-Safety Level 4 laboratory — one of only two university-based BSL-4 labs in the country — where researchers investigate the deadly Herpes B virus.

What happens to Kell?



When picturing a modern, 21st century university facility, Kell Hall by all accounts wouldn't necessarily come to mind. Its unusual origin as a parking deck is a source of humor for those who encounter it for the first time.

"I was upset that I left my rollerblades in California, because I thought I could get around the building much more quickly if I could rolle blade around the ramps," joked Kyle Frantz, associate professor of neuroscience

Kell Hall's spaces served as teaching and research labs for decades until th Natural Science Center opened in the 1990s.

The new Petit Science Center offers more than twice the square footage o Kell's 180,000, but even with a new building, space is still a premium at this fast-growing university.

Labs currently in Kell Hall move to the Petit Science Center and the Natura Science Center, opening up space in Kell, where offices and teaching labs will remain.

Once classes begin at the center, more than 2,000 students will pass through the public areas of the building every day. On a lower floor in the building, a 100-seat auditorium will serve as a lecture hall. The building contains six general and 32 department-specific teaching labs and classrooms

New teaching labs also provide rooms and equipment specifically set up to help students to learn their trades. For example, students of the Byrdine F. Lewis School of Nursing will have a simulated hospital ward and primary care practices in which to train using interactive patient simulators.

"The skills and simulation lab was housed in the basement of Kell Hall, but the new facility is vastly improved with newer equipment," said Barbara C. Woodring, director of the school of nursing.

LIKE CLOCKWORK

It's rare to hear that a project is on time and on budget, but that's exactly how the Petit Science Center project has proceeded.

The venture was incredibly complex however. Project directors led more than 2,000 workers during construction. Miles of wiring and piping were run through the facility. Yards upon yards of carpet were rolled throughout, and numerous benches for teaching labs were assembled. "Green" features were built in to conserve water, energy and money.

The move to the new building itself has also been an undertaking. The first departments began moving in during the beginning of May in preparation for the summer semester. Researchers had to wrap up certain experiments by the end of April. Thousands of chemi-

cals, some of them hazardous, required special handling and permits in order to be moved.

"It has been like moving a small army," said Robin Morris, vice president for research.

ROBIN MORRIS

GIVING BACK

Without the generosity of many, this transition could never have happened. Support and donations came from a range of sources, including the Board of Regents, Gov. Sonny Perdue, Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle and members of the General Assembly. Senators Johnny Isakson and Saxby Chambliss, Congressman John Lewis and other members of the Georgia Delegation were instrumental in garnering federal support.

But it was Petit's contributions — both financial and otherwise — that ultimately made the new science center possible.

"He's been the lynchpin for the whole project," Morris said. "Just like a domino, his support has helped everything to fall into place and to make it happen. I really wonder where we would be today if it weren't for him."

Petit attended Georgia State in the early 1970s while working during the day at his start-up company, Healthdyne. The firm grew and prospered, and Petit went on to become the CEO of Matria Healthcare Inc., one of three companies that resulted from Healthdyne's 1995 split. Now retired from Matria (which became part of Alere Medical), he has founded The Petit Group, an investment management venture. He also serves as the CEO of MiMedx Group, a company that develops, manufactures and markets biomaterial-based products.

"Georgia State gave me an opportunity to go to school at night while I was working on getting my company off of the ground," Petit said at the dedication ceremony. "I'm very grateful for what was made available to me, and I also feel strongly about giving back."

Petit commended the entrepreneurial spirit of GSU's leaders who helped it evolve into a leading research university — and he identified with it.

"I enjoy taking the risk associated with starting something new, and being a catalyst for change," he said. "There needed to be a catalyst here to initiate a lot of action that came together from a lot of sources [in creating the science center]. It's a role I enjoy playing."

It's a role he plays very well, said friend and U.S. Congressman Phil Gingrey, who joined Petit and spoke during the center's dedication.

"Throughout the years, the only thing that has surpassed Pete's success has been his generosity," Gingrey said.

ENHANCING STATURE

Seeking to significantly enhance its profile and reputation as a leading research university, Georgia State needed more space for current top-notch faculty and space to attract accomplished faculty from the outside, as well.

"Over the last few years, we haven't been able to hire lab scientists because we've had no labs to put them in," Morris said.

The visibility of the center — located just down the street from the state capitol and near major transportation links — helps put Georgia State at the top of the mind when it comes to thinking about premier research universities, Morris said.

"One of the problems we had is that some people don't really know what we're doing," he said. "This is going to concentrate what we're doing in a way that will allow more people to see it and be part of it."

The Petit Science Center was in the works for well over 10 years. Looking forward over the next 10, Morris envisions the center as a nucleus for the best and brightest minds, where scientists can connect with one another to spur new ideas and a new vigor for inquiry.

"There's a critical mass of intellectual capital that you've got to have to really have an impact," he said, "and that's what we're trying to build."