Arthur Jaffe, FAU donor and lover of books, dies at 93

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Sun Sentinel

JANUARY 26, 2015, 10:50 PM

For Arthur Jaffe, books weren’t just to be read. They were to be treasured as works of art.

Jaffe, who donated a lot of money and his vast collection of hand-crafted books to Florida Atlantic University, died Sunday. He was 93.

His legacy will live on through the Arthur and Mata Jaffe Center for Book Arts at FAU’s Wimberly Library, where he spent 13 years as curator before retiring in 2011. The collection has grown from Jaffe’s original donation of 2,800 handmade books to 12,000 today.

"His legacy touches so many people," said John Cutrone, director of the Jaffe Center. "He's responsible for establishing the book arts in South Florida."

Jaffe, who lived in Delray Beach, started collecting unique books as a young boy in Pennsylvania.

"It was a passion, just like some people collect stamps. Some collect Coca-Cola tops. These books are very important to me," Jaffe said in 2007. "I could look at them again and again."

When he served in Army intelligence during World War II, Jaffe traded cigarettes and chocolate for books. The written word served him well during wartime in another way, as propaganda. He created leaflets that ridiculed Nazis, which were packed into artillery shells and fired into German camps, according to a 2011 interview with the Palm Beach Forum.

He took part in the Normandy Invasion and received the Bronze Star and France’s Legion of Honor.

"To us he was a living legend who personified the highest and best values of his generation – the greatest generation,"" FAU President John Kelly said.

After the war, he studied at Hebrew University in Tel Aviv and helped establish the nation of Israel as a member of the Haganah Jewish defense force.

He returned to Pennsylvania to join his family’s small town department store chain business and later became a successful fundraiser for the Carnegie Institute and Jewish organizations. He founded the Jewish Community Foundation of Pittsburgh in 1979.

He had four children with first wife, Lois, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh. After she died, he met his second wife, Mata, a speech pathologist.

The Jaffes moved to South Florida in 1984, and he became the founding director of the Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County Foundation.

His relationship with FAU started in 1994 as a library volunteer. In 1998, he chose FAU over two other
universities for his book collection. When Mata died in 2001, she bequeathed $250,000 - doubled through a state matching program – to build a larger space in the library to house his books.

The Jaffe collection includes children’s pop-ups, wood cuts and lithographs. There are several versions of the Bible, classics like ”Moby Dick” and ”Hamlet,” and more unusual volumes, such as ”Ghost Diary” by Maureen Cummins, a rare book made of glass.

Even after retiring in 2011, he continued to visit the center on a regular basis. In 2012, he launched a project that seemed unusual for the book arts center: a documentary on the tattoos of FAU students.

"Here was a 91-year-old looking at all these tattooed kids and saying, 'they're all walking books,'" Cutrone said. "Sometimes you think of older people as being set in their ways, but that was not Arthur. He was willing to see the other side of things."

Funeral services will be held in Jaffe's hometown of Butler, Pa. FAU is planning a celebration of his life, tentatively set for Feb. 14.

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