Leaders of the old school

Take a look at the student body presidents of FAU's first 25 years, then and now

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What do a convicted felon, a treasure diver, a florist, a Realtor and a millionaire lobbyist have in common? They were all student body presidents at FAU.

The following pages contain not only information on the current candidates for student body president, but also the result of about four months of research, which began as mere curiosity. I covered Student Government for two years, and every day on the way to the UP's office — right across the hall from SG, on the second floor of the Student Union — I'd pass a wall lined with plaques and photos of past student body presidents.

This tribute to tradition was marked by a long series of empty photo frames, gaps in FAU's history that suggested to me an embarrassing period of administrative indifference. Nowadays, as FAU approaches its 50th anniversary and we're finally on the cusp of having our own football stadium, we're all about tradition. Back then? Apparently not.

That wasn't the only curious thing about the wall of presidents. Four gold-engraved plates all marked with the year of each president's term revealed a time of instability — what happened to all these presidents? Were they assassinated? Impeached? Kicked out for low GPA's? I looked at all the strange names, and stranger faces, and had more questions — did people really have hair that thick back then? Who's that hippie? Why isn't Chip Ruther wearing a shirt, and who names their kid "Chip", anyway?

I had to know: What were these people like? Did they do anything interesting? Were they any better or worse than our current crop of leaders? More importantly, did they make anything of themselves after graduating — does being a student leader matter in the real world?

FAU didn't provide a lot of answers. None of this history is on SG's website, or FAU's. Some students in SG had heard rumors about past presidents, but not enough to satisfy me. And when I requested a batch of records from FAU's department of media relations, they only had photos of 17 presidents — out of over 50. And it took over a month to get those — in the words of associate director Lisa Metcalf, "all the ones we have on file, and all the ones that have been archived in the library." FAU's other information on the presidents also had gaps, but at least it was in much better shape — although it took almost a second full month to cobble together.

After asking around some more, I found out about the only other source that might hold the answers, the only way I could know what happened — short of tracking down all these people down myself, anyway. The answer was locked away in a corner of the fifth floor in the Boca campus library — the floor you can't access without special clearance.

That floor is home to most of FAU's history, among a lot of other interesting things — rare books, phonograph records, and other unique collections. With the help of FAU archivist Vicenta Thur and Leslie Siegel — who accommodated my bizarre requests week after week without complaint — I found and went through decades of the archives of The Atlantic Sun, the original student newspaper of FAU.

There were still gaps in the Sun's coverage, of course — they did an especially poor job of covering early female presidents, for example. I didn't find as much as I wanted, but it's more than you'll find anywhere else.

Between the archives, what FAU provided me, and some Internet sleuthing of my own, this is what I pieced together about FAU's first 30 student body presidents. I also had the amazing opportunity to speak with Dan Mario, the president who started it all — and who remains one of the most successful presidents we've ever had. He's a former U.S. Congressman and a self-made millionaire who's done everything from dancing with the late Princess Diana to outwitting Russian spies with an Etch A Sketch.

I hope you enjoy reading it all — FAU has a rich (and often amusing) history that most of us simply have no other way to learn about, and if you enjoy this, I'm sharing some of the other weird stuff I've read about in The Atlantic Sun on my UP blog. From the Archives. Check it out at sunarchives.wordpress.com.