Rare book collector to receive honorary degree

By David A. Schwartz
Staff Writer

When students receive their diplomas Friday during graduation ceremonies at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, 89-year-old Arthur Jaffe will receive an honorary doctorate of humane letters.

The honorary degree will be a tribute to a man whose interests led him to collect rare books for more than 80 years, donate the entire collection to FAU and then nurture and expand the Arthur and Mata Jaffe Center for Book Arts at the university described as “one of the nation’s most prominent centers for books handmade by artists.”

Jaffe, who will celebrate his 90th birthday the next day at a party thrown by FAU, said his father sparked his interest in books when he was growing up in Butler, Penn.

“If you asked me to paint a mental picture of my dad, he would be reading. That got me started,” said Jaffe of Delray Beach.

As a U.S. Army captain in Germany at the end of World War II, Jaffe bartered cigarettes for rare books in classical Greek.

Rare books became his passion, Jaffe said. “Just anything that was beautiful. I didn’t care. It wasn’t the subject matter alone that interested me.”

It was the art, Jaffe said. And he still is attracted to a book by the way it looks and functions.

Jaffe recalled that on his first date with the woman who would become his first wife, he bought her a book that a Jewish Russian artist wrote about his wife.

His first wife Lois and second wife Mata, both university professors, shared his love of books, Jaffe said. “They backed up the passion.”

He jokingly referred to himself as a “book addict,” a description he will share with the audience Friday when he receives the honorary degree. Jaffe said he will add, “My daily prayer is, ‘Give me each day my daily book.’”

“Luxurious” books make up about half of the 12,000 books in the collection at FAU but “books with printed illustrations like lithographs and woodcuts” predominate, he said.

The most expensive book he bought, Jaffe said, is a $5,000 book about Shakespeare that he purchased from a collector in Oregon. The more than 80-year-old book has references in French and English, Jaffe said, and took the artist 17 years to illustrate.

Jaffe said the collection contains a “small

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but choice collection of Hebraica.” Haggadot and limited edition ketubbot make up most of it, he said.

During a reporter’s recent visit to Jaffe’s office he excitedly opened a package that contained a thin book with rich illustrations of the boxer Joe Louis.

“I don’t think Arthur has ever seen a piece of art or a book he didn’t like,” said retiree Joan Chodorkoff, who with her husband Bernard reviews books on Wednesdays at the Center.

John Cutrone, a book artist who met Jaffe in 2000 shortly after the book collection opened to the public and soon will succeed him as director when Jaffe retires, called him an “enthusiastic, wonderful supporter of the book arts.”

“Every once in a while,” Jaffe said, “I pull [a book] out that I haven’t seen in 40 years and I say, ‘Where have you been?’ I’m excited when I see it again. And I say to John, ‘We have to talk about this next tour.’”