University honors rare-book collector

By David A. Schwartz
STAFF WRITER

During its recent graduation ceremony, Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton awarded an honorary doctorate of humane letters to 90-year-old Delray Beach resident Arthur Jaffe.

The degree is a tribute to a man whose interests led him to collect rare books for more than 50 years, donate the entire collection to FAU, and then nurture and expand the Arthur and Mata Jaffe Center for Book Arts on the Wimberly Library's third floor into what the university described as "one of the nation's most prominent centers for books handmade by artists."

Jaffe, who celebrated his 90th birthday at a party thrown by FAU the day after the graduation, 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," Jaffe said.

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.

"Just anything that was beautiful," he said. "I didn't care. It wasn't the subject matter alone that interested me."

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, he said. "They backed up the passion."

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

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

Jaffe recently opened a package that contained a thin book with rich illustrations of legendary 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 Chodoroff, who with her husband, Bernard, reviews books on Wednesdays at the Jaffe Center.

John Cutrone is 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 he retires.

He described Jaffe as an "enthusiastic, wonderful supporter of the book arts."