Delray man turned his early love of reading into book collection

By JODIE WAGNER
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Arthur Jaffe developed a passion for books early in childhood.

The third of six children raised in Butler, Pa., he and his siblings eagerly awaited nightly bedtime stories read by their father, Max.

"I have a mental picture of my father reading entire stories," the 90-year-old Delray Beach resident said. "We refused to go to sleep until he had told us a story."

Jaffe, an avid reader who served in the US Army during World War II and in the Israeli Army from 1946-48, began collecting rare books more than 50 years ago.

His collection of books grew into the thousands over the years, and in 1998, he and his late wife, Mata, made a donation of 2,800 to Florida Atlantic University's Wimberly Library.

The collection, subtitled "Books as Aesthetic Objects," covers many topics with no central theme, but does celebrate books as works of art.

"I did not think of what I was doing as a collection, because a collection has a focus," said Jaffe, who was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters May 6 in the school's spring commencement ceremonies. "This collection does not have a focus, or didn't have a focus."

The books, which now number more than 12,000, are housed in the Arthur and Mata Jaffe Center for Book Arts, which hosts exhibitions, gallery talks, concerts, film screenings, workshops and classes.

The Jaffe Center also features a Book Arts Studio, which holds teaching workshops and classes in bookbinding, book structures and paper decoration, and the Letterpress Studio, which features 19th- and 20th-century printing press equipment.

Jaffe, who recently retired as the center's curator but will continue to advise staff, is proud of the collection and what it has meant to FAU.

"I've gotten letters from professors saying that this collection has changed the whole library," he said. "It's opened up the fact that a book is a book."

Q&A

What are your hobbies?
'I loved to play tennis, but I can't do it anymore. I have a new hobby, which is here (the Jaffe Center).'

What event in history would you like to have witnessed?
'I think I would have loved to have lived in the time of the great Renaissance bookmakers.'

What is your biggest accomplishment?
'I'm proud that I participated in the second World War to defeat those who were treating people so miserably, and the creation of new state. You don't get an opportunity very often in life to create a new state.'

Who is your hero or someone who inspired you?
His father, Max Jaffe. 'He came here as a child immigrant all by himself. He was 11, 12 years old and traveled all the way. He didn't speak English.'

What do you do to get away from it all?
'Like to go to interesting things.'

What is your favorite childhood memory?
Playing horseshoes with friends.