Brown* (BSBA ’73, JD ’78) has witnessed — and influenced — some of the most pivotal milestones in UF’s march to achieve national prominence. He joined the Board of Trustees in 2004, the same year Bernie Machen took the helm of UF as president, and, he says, “did a phenomenal job of assembling a team” that would lead the school over the next decade. Brown served as board chairman from 2012-14, with his term ending six months before Machen retired. Machen remains with UF as president emeritus and as a senior adviser to his successor, President Kent Fuchs*.

“The university was changing rapidly,” Brown recalls of those early years on the board. “It was going from the University of Florida in Florida to the University of Florida nationally.”

Brown points to the state’s decision in 2013 to support Machen’s ambitious Preeminence Plan as a game changer. Billed as UF’s road map to becoming one of the nation’s best research universities, the plan restored funding that would support UF’s move to recruit accomplished, mostly tenured faculty who could lead high-profile, university-backed research initiatives and help raise the school’s standing as a national leader in such fields as cybersecurity, life sciences and Latin America development.

“That was probably the single biggest thing we worked on every year,” he says.

Also coming to fruition during this period was a new scholarship program introduced by Machen in 2005 and launched in 2006 to help “the best and brightest” attend UF despite their economic circumstances. And in 2014, there was UF’s commitment and the state’s support to construct a new chemistry building while in the throes of a recession. When the $67 million project broke ground that year it represented — in Brown’s view — another vital building block that would elevate UF’s reputation.

Attracting the Best

How the University of Florida is Setting the Stage for Florida and Innovation

By Mike Boslet

The way David Brown sees it, the state of Florida’s economic future and the University of Florida’s national reputation are inextricably intertwined. Brown’s vision zooms in on a mental picture of UF as a catalyst for the state’s ability to attract intellectual capital. He says his alma mater has taken steps to make this happen, and he would know as the immediate past chairman of UF’s governing body, the Board of Trustees.

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Art by Kelli May-Krenz  Photography by Eric Zamora
Brown connects the Preeminence Plan, the scholarship program and the new chemistry building to a long-term view of his home state: “I think Florida right now is probably the most exciting state in the country,” he says. “If you’re an investor, you go long in Florida. And one of the key elements to make Florida successful over the next 50 years is going to be … a top 10 university.”

Brown is an investor, and so is his wife, Wanda *(JD ’74). Real estate attorneys who built immensely successful careers in Orlando, the Browns share a passion for supporting UF and its relationship to the state’s quality of life. Whether through Machen’s involvement in UF’s governing or the couple’s support for the scholarship program, the Browns have a stake in the future of their school, some of the students who attend it and the state.

Machen expresses admiration for the Browns, saying: “What drives the Browns is not only the impact they can make on UF but also the impact on the state of Florida. I believe this is why David gets involved. He knows that Florida’s success and UF’s success are very linked.”

David repays the compliment, saying one of Machen’s admirable character traits is how he works through complex problems. “Whenever Bernie heard a problem he’d go off, and in two weeks he’d have worked it out,” says Brown, recalling when Machen collaborated with state leaders to find a way to make UF more accessible to Florida students who came from families with no history of pursuing higher education.

When ‘Opportunity’ Knocks

In 2005, Machen unveiled the Florida Opportunity Scholars Program, an all-expenses-paid financial aid package that had a unique twist to it. Eligibility was limited to Florida residents who were first-generation-in-college freshmen from families with incomes under $40,000 a year. Initially funded with $2 million, the program began offering scholarships the following year.

“Bernie did such a great job of promoting it,” Brown says of Machen’s enthusiasm for ensuring that the nascent program would succeed. “He put the full weight of the president’s office behind it. And when we started to raise money, we were able to attract money. [The program] just resonates with people.”

Brown also extends credit to Tom Mitchell, UF’s vice president for development and alumni affairs, for growing the FOS Program. “Tom Mitchell has been remarkable as far as broadening [the program],” he says.

Wanda chimes in, saying the program hit a soft spot with the couple. “When this program came up,” she says, “we felt this is just wonderful to be able to help with kids who don’t have what we had in terms of going to college.”

By terms, Wanda is referring to the affordability of college in the 90s and ’70s, when she and David earned degrees. Both came from middle-class families, but neither faced the prospect of piling up debt to pay for college, a scenario that can confront today’s students from similar backgrounds.

“Student debt is a real challenge, and it’s not going to get any better,” says David, who recalls holding some $175-per-hour jobs as a means to cover some of his college expenses.

“The Browns believe in opportunity, and they want to ensure that all of Florida has opportunities,” says Mitchell. “They are successful, driven people who built their lives around timeless values. They have an unwavering dedication to seeing the university and state of Florida at the top.”

Wanda and David say meeting Opportunity Scholars helped them see the impact the program has on first-generation college students’ lives. “If you ever go to one of these dinners, you have no choice,” says David. “You’ll cry.”

FOS recipients Dayme Sanchez *(BA ’14) and Dakeendrick Murray *(BSA ’14), remember getting choked up when they found out about the program. Too, Sanchez, a Cuban-born immigrant whose parents worked minimum-wage jobs in Miami, graduated in the top 1 percent of her high school class. Murray grew up in a household of six children, including three cousins, supported by his single working mother. He graduated in the top five of his class in rural Quinn, northwest of Tallahassee. Both he and Sanchez received acceptance letters from UF as well as from other in- and out-of-state colleges. Some offered partial scholarships, leaving economics and political science. After UF, she went to Harvard, graduating in spring 2015 with a law degree that left her $120,000 in debt. She returned to Miami, passed the Florida Bar exam and “interviewed with a lot of Gators” while job hunting. Sanchez landed with Holland & Knight in Miami as a litigation associate. She says she will take a yearlong sabbatical in 2016 to serve as a law clerk to a U.S. district court judge for the Southern District of Florida.

While Murray became the first in his family to pursue higher education, he certainly wasn’t the last. His mother enrolled in a private college in Tallahassee and eventually earned a master’s in public administration last May. A sister and cousin also attended college at Florida A&M, and Murray says he expects more family members to follow his lead.

“TOM MITCHELL”

**“I think Florida right now is probably the most exciting state in the country. If you’re an investor, you go long in Florida. And one of the key elements to make Florida successful over the next 50 years is going to be … a top 10 university.” — David Brown**
The program has helped boost UF’s income of an Opportunity Scholar student.”

Opportunity Scholar is tomorrow’s parent because college cultures where higher education hasn’t been part of their DNA because college has been such an important part of their family history. I think this is evidence of a lifestyle. They aren’t just dog people; they are Lab people.

The takeaway of the conversation with Wanda is that the Browns are a family — even when they’re off doing their own things.

How David became a Gator makes for an interesting story in itself. The son of a career Air Force pilot and World War II prisoner of war, David gave the U.S. Air Force Academy strong consideration — public or private — at helping low-income students gain college education by The New York Times, which ranked UF no. 6 in its 2015 College Access Index. As the Browns do, Fuchs gives his predecessor much credit. “President Emeritus Machen had remarkable vision when he created the Florida Opportunity Scholars program,” says Fuchs.

David feels strongly that every deserving high school graduate in Florida should have the opportunity to attend UF, and he’s confident that Fuchs will continue this road of opportunities for deserving students. “I had the benefit of being able to go, and I think other people should have the same benefit,” he explains. “I believe that President Fuchs has the same mindset that a land-grant university like the University of Florida, which has achieved what it has achieved as far as innovation, should include the best and the brightest kids regardless of their economic circumstances.

“We need to continue to raise the abilities of the state to attract businesses and institutions,” he continues. “We have all the great things: no state income taxes and warm weather. You take a state like this that is so diverse and has so many opportunities, but we don’t have great natural resources, such as oil, so we’re going to have to do it with intellectual capital.”

Looking back on his partnership with UF, David says he was always guided by his concern for UF’s role in the state’s future. Their relationship is symbiotic in his view, with UF and the state sharing a common goal to make Florida — the state and the university — more attractive for innovation.

Wanda and David Brown: Impacting the Future of UF

By Mike Boslet

The Browns believe in opportunity, and they want to ensure that all of Florida has opportunities. They are successful, driven people who built their lives around timeless values. They have an unwavering dedication to seeing the university and state of Florida at the top.”

— Tom Mitchell

Murray says his UF scholarship experience inspired him to give back to the disadvantaged. With a degree in family, youth and community sciences, Murray says he made a commitment to teaching in low-income communities and now teaches sixth-grade math in a Jacksonville-area public school. “Getting the FOS scholarship, that was amazing because it allowed me not to take out loans,” says Murray. “I truly think it’s one of the best things that could happen to a student from a first-generation background.”

David and Wanda have heard similar stories from Opportunity Scholars. “These people are becoming the best salespeople for the university,” David says.

Renamed in 2012 as Machen Florida Opportunity Scholars in honor of its founder, the program goes beyond the financial aid. It also provides participants with peer mentoring as well as workshops that teach financial literacy, career planning and interviewing skills. The program claims 1,500 UF graduates and currently supports 1,200 students, with 300 freshmen a year entering the program. The average annual family income of an Opportunity Scholar is $18,292.

“The Machen Opportunity Scholars Program represents a paradigm shift in student aid,” says Leslie Pendleton (SED), director of the program. “It’s a creative way of trying to change family cultures where higher education hasn’t been part of their DNA because college is out of their reach financially. Today’s Opportunity Scholar is tomorrow’s parent of a University of Florida-bound student.”

The program has helped boost UF’s rankings, too. UF was recently recognized as one of the best schools in the country — public or private — at helping low-income students gain college education by The New York Times, which ranked UF no. 6 in its 2015 College Access Index. As the Browns do, Fuchs gives his predecessor much credit. “President Emeritus Machen had remarkable vision when he created the Florida Opportunity Scholars program,” says Fuchs.

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I felt, if I did that, hopefully over time things would fall into place. For me, that worked.”

David describes Wanda as a “lawyer’s lawyer,” a tribute to his wife’s intellectual prowess in the demanding i’s-dotted-and-t’s-crossed arena of real estate law. Wanda, in turn, describes David as a visionary.

Ken Bishop (BSBA ’62, JD ’72) remembers the favorable impression a young David made on him. David had been with an Orlando firm for about a year when Bishop and he met over a real estate deal. Bishop recognized a budding hotshot lawyer and lured David to Broad and Cassel, where the two formed a mentor-protégé relationship and lifelong friendship. In 2000, David succeeded Bishop as the firm’s chairman. Wanda had joined the firm a few years earlier. She retired in 2007.

“David is without a doubt the greatest guy I’ve ever met in my life,” says Bishop, who’s retired. “He’s 100 percent trustworthy.”

In the last decade, David’s law career segued into appointments on UF’s governing body, the Board of Trustees. He presided over the board as chairman from 2012-14, a term that began with the trustees facing a $38 million budget cut and a tuition increase. If all that wasn’t enough stress, then-UF President Bernie Machen, a close friend of the Browns, announced his retirement effective the end of 2013. Machen eventually delayed retirement until the end of 2014.

But David’s time as board chairman also saw UF take some major steps to enhance its academic reputation. He says the groundwork has been laid for UF to reach a recently established goal of becoming one of the best research universities in the country.

Since leaving the UF board, David has turned his attention to more personal interests, including his and Wanda’s support for the Machen Florida Opportunity Scholars Program and a desire to transition to a slower-paced life in the future. He wants to eventually enjoy a lifestyle that allows for more time with Wanda, the couple’s two Labs and his two adult daughters and their families.

Looking ahead to the next decade, David says he doesn’t want it to go by in a blur: “I want to accomplish balance in my life. The front end of my life was career-heavy,” he says. “I want to spend more time with family and search out new things we want to do.”

Still, David and Wanda are sticking with their daily habit of making lists of things to do, even when they will have less to do — by choice. The practice has suited the Type A personalities well during their careers, keeping each focused on what needs to be done. But, David explains, the key to a good marriage between list makers “is to not give each other a list.”