

Who was James Popovich?

And why do we have an award named in his honor?

Each year we give the “Popovich Award” to the outstanding master’s student in the department. But very few students or faculty know much about the man for whom the award was named. Exhaustive research in the departmental archives and an interview with Dr. Helen Popovich allows us some insight into this question.

Jim Popovich died on April 21, 1976, after a full day of teaching. He was extremely popular among his colleagues on campus and students, and when he died suddenly of a heart attack, people asked to be able to do something in his memory. His wife, Dr. Helen Popovich, established the endowed scholarship that bears his name, and many people from all over the country contributed to it—friends, colleagues, and former students.

Popovich received his doctorate in speech in 1955 from one of the top programs in the country, Northwestern University. His BA was from the University of Pennsylvania and his MA from University of Minnesota. He had a primary emphasis in oral interpretation and a secondary emphasis in children’s theater. Prior to coming to USF in 1962, he taught at the University of Georgia. He was the youngest faculty member ever to be promoted to full professor at Georgia. He was also the advisor to the first two black students ever admitted to the University. Feelings ran so high that the students needed to be escorted to class, and Popovich’s tires were slashed as the result of his active role in ending segregation there.

At USF he taught oral interpretation and directed many readers’ theater presentations. He loved the performing arts. When he was at Georgia, he traveled each

year to Atlanta for the week when the Metropolitan Opera performed there. At USF, he and Helen used to spend a week in Daytona Beach each summer while the London Philharmonic played there. And during Christmas breaks, after the Speech Association of America and Modern Language Association annual conventions, which in those days were both held between Christmas and New Years, he and Helen would meet in New York and see plays, opera, and ballet each day until they had to fly back to Tampa for class.

Popovich became chair in 1964, and served in that role until 1973. He was president of the Faculty Senate at USF and served on a number of faculty and university committees. One year he sponsored and directed USF’s College Bowl team, which took second place nationally. He was named USF’s outstanding professor in 1974-75.

He was also active professionally, serving as President of Florida Speech Association, and as Vice President and President-elect of Southern Speech Association. He served as a member of the Legislative Assembly of SAA (now NCA), and was also a member of a number of theatre associations.

How Popovich chose to pursue a career in speech is unclear. His father was an immigrant from Croatia who had two sons. He wanted them to get good educations and to go into respectable professions. His brother went into law and eventually became the Chief Justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court. So, his father thought that James should go into medicine. Obviously not cut out for that profession, he dropped out of school and joined the military, serving in army intelligence. When he left the service, he went to the University of Pennsylvania and majored in international relations. His language was Bengali. Although seemingly destined for diplomatic service, he decided to go to Northwestern and do his doctorate

in speech. His mother, who died when he was about 11 years old, had been a teacher, and perhaps her profession ultimately influenced his own.

One of his contemporaries at USF said that the graduate program was "a particular source of pride" for him and that "above all [he was] interested in his students." One alumnus of the program wrote, "He cared for students and placed their needs above his own. He gave his valuable time and effort to helping students, and he helped my brother and sister make it through graduate school when the going was tough. He made the college life a little bit easier to experience, and he was an incentive to go on when quitting seemed the only answer."

Helen Popovich described her late husband as "the most people-oriented person I have ever known." She said that he seemed to remember every student he ever taught. He would see one of them years later and remember the person's name, the class, and a host of information about the student. "It was remarkable."

The Popovich Award was created shortly after his death. The award was first given the next year, 1977, and has been awarded every year since. Forty-two students have received the award over the 33 years (occasionally we've had co-winners); at least a dozen of those have gone on to receive doctorates and themselves become university professors. "Nothing would have made Jim happier," said Helen, than knowing the award was still going on and helping students. "He was extremely proud of the Speech Department's masters program."

Dr. Helen Popovich, now retired, was Associate Chair of English at the time of her husband's death. Seven years later, in 1983, Dr. Helen Popovich became the first woman to serve as President of a public university in Florida, Florida Atlantic University. Prior to that, she had been acting President of Winona State University in Minnesota for a year and a half. In her six years at FAU, she added freshman and sophomore students (previously, it had been an upper level college only), greatly expanded the number of African American and Hispanic students,

and increased diversity among the faculty and administration. When the *St. Petersburg Times* in 2007 reported 19 "Key Dates on the Road to Diversity" in Florida, Dr. Helen Popovich becoming FAU President was the 11th of those key events.

In 1989, she left FAU and assumed the presidency of Ferris State University at Big Rapids, Michigan, where she served until her retirement in 1994. She has long been an active member of Delta Kappa Gamma, a professional honor society of women educators, serving state president in 1980. More recently, she's served as the state chairman in Michigan and on its international Educational Foundation Board. In 2006, she was elected to a four-year term as a Member-at-Large on its Administrative Board.