



Agriculture and equestrian center arena named for former Alachua County Commissioner



With the honoree looking on, Mayor Jordan Marlowe (left) and Alachua County Commission Chair Marihelen Wheeler unveil the dedication plaque for the Charles Lee Pinkoson Arena at the agricultural and equestrian center in Newberry. (Alex Moraski/WUFT News)

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By Alexander Moraski

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Lee Pinkoson had one last piece of business to finish before retiring from the Alachua County Commission in 2018: the Agriculture and Equestrian Center in Newberry.

Pinkoson, who served 16 years on the commission, made sure the county would purchase the center for \$3.9 million in 2019 and then invest another \$8.4 million for improvements.

On Friday, more than 100 people gathered in the open-air competition space within the center to see it renamed the Charles Lee Pinkoson Arena.

“Lee, thank you for supporting us,” Cynthia Sanders, director of the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences extension office in Newberry, said during a ceremony in the arena. “Thank you for supporting youth in our county, not only 4-H and FFA” – Future Farmers of America – “but all our youth, our leaders of tomorrow.”

Pinkoson was born in Gainesville and grew up in the Millhopper area. He attended high school in Virginia and graduated from the University of Florida with a degree in business administration. He retired in 2007 after a 31-year career as an optician.

The improvements to the agricultural and equestrian center included structural repairs and drainage as well as the new outdoor arena for competitive horse events, complete with new bleachers and landscaping, said Gina Peebles, chief of staff at the county manager’s office. The arena is 37,500 square feet and seats over 2,000 people, Peebles said.

Newberry leases to the county the 5 acres of land adjacent to the center that houses UF/IFAS offices and auditorium, she said. The lease is for 99 years at \$1 per year.

The center is used for a variety of events including trade shows, rodeos, festivals, banquets, barrel racing, roping, livestock auctions, pet shows, tractor pulls and concerts, etc.

“This is going to keep agriculture as the gateway to our city,” Newberry Mayor Jordan Marlowe said at the event. “It means the world to us, our city and to generations of kids that are behind us right now.”

Also saying city officials hope the center will be a tourist attraction, Marlowe added: “Lee’s help in preserving the fairgrounds and bringing the youth fairs out will help us preserve that legacy.”

The county initially purchased a different property for its fairgrounds, however, after damages from Hurricane Irma in 2017 ruined that plan, Newberry offered the equestrian center as alternative, Peebles said.

County Commission Chair Marihelen Wheeler joined Marlowe in praising Pinkoson for insisting the governing body not focus too much on the most populated areas of its jurisdiction.

“Lee pulled me aside and said to me please make sure that you’re taking care of the outlying municipalities,” Wheeler said at the ceremony.

When it was his turn to speak, Pinkoson thanked everyone for the dedication.

“This is an incredibly humbling experience,” he said. “I can’t say what an honor it is – how blessed, lucky and fortunate I am to be sharing this with my family.”

The honoree then told the crowd about a prior youth fair in which he and his wife Tina were called upon to milk animals in a competition. He said he practiced milking a goat before the fair, to avoid “looking like a fool.” He was able to get some milk out of a cow at that event, he said, but his wife didn’t know the first thing about milking an animal.

Not to be outdone, Pinkoson said, when his wife was positioned in front of a brown cow to milk, she pulled out a half-gallon of chocolate milk from a container, poured it into a pail, and showed it off to the crowd as if she had just won gold.

“Tina was permanently banned from future cow-milking competitions in the state of Florida,” Pinkoson said to the ceremony audience’s delight.

He then ended his remarks with a message to the youth attending the fair: “You are our future – and you make us so proud.”



His wife Tina Pinkoson (second from right) and other family members look on as Lee Pinkoson accepts the honor of having the arena named after him. (Alex Moraski/WUFT News)

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