

## Facility in Costa Rica Formally Opened

Friday, June 19, 2009

**SAN ISIDRO DE PEÑAS BLANCAS, COSTA RICA** — The Soltis Center for Research and Education is formally up and running in this lush Central American rain forest, providing classrooms and laboratories for Texas A&M University students and faculty in their quest to learn about the area’s unique ecological setting and devise ways to preserve it and similar forests elsewhere for future generations.



A Texas A&M delegation headed by Ambassador Eric M. Bost (center) (Ret.), the university’s vice president for global initiatives, was on hand for the formal opening and dedication of the facility located in a dense forest about a three-hour drive from Costa Rica’s capital, San Jose.

A key element of the dedicatory ceremonies centered on honoring Charles William “Bill” (right) and Wanda Soltis and their family for their gift of the 40-acre facility — including newly constructed classrooms, laboratories and other improvements — and for offering a long-term lease on the

adjacent 250 acres of rain forest.

Ambassador Bost said everyone associated with Texas A&M is appreciative to the Soltis family for providing the unique facility for the benefit of current and future students and faculty. “We owe a great debt of gratitude to Bill and Wanda Soltis for their role in making all of this happen,” he said.

“Mr. Soltis’s vision was to provide international experiences for Aggies while protecting the unique ecological setting around the center and creating awareness for preservation,” Bost explained. “The Soltis family has given a gift that will keep giving for years to come.”



As part of the dedicatory ceremonies, he announced that the center’s foremost facility will be named the “Bill and Wanda Soltis Academic Building.”

Bost said that, in addition to the opportunities for research and education, the Soltis Center for Research and Education allows students to engage in selfless service, one of the university’s core values. “Not only are Aggies gaining valuable academic skills at the

Soltis Center, but they are also learning and putting into practice skills in leadership and community service on a global level,” Bost said.

He highlighted one such service project, saying, “We have already had students from our Lohman Learning Community go to the center to give back to the community, teaching English and providing books for the library for the local school while increasing their own Spanish skills. We are also pleased that our students are learning about a new culture as they get to know the people of San Isidro.”



A Houston native, Soltis was the recipient of the first-ever Houston Mother’s Club Academic Scholarship, which provided him entry into the university he would come to love, officials noted. After graduating from Texas A&M in 1955 with a degree in mechanical engineering, he began a long and successful career in construction, with much of his business conducted in Costa Rica.

Soltis approached university officials in 2005 about the possibility of donating land adjacent to the Monteverde rain forest and building new facilities on it at his own expense to promote research and education. He said his vision was to provide Texas A&M students with international experiences, protect the area’s unique ecological setting and increase awareness that ultimately will protect that rain forest and others like it. Construction of the facility was completed in December 2008, and The Texas A&M University System Board of Regents formally authorized the university to move forward with plans for operation of the center to support academic, research and service programs.



“Wanda, our family and I are very happy to provide a facility in Costa Rica that will give future generations of Aggies an opportunity to understand and learn the importance of conserving the Mondeverde Rain Forest while living and working with the wonderful people of Costa Rica,” Soltis said.



Since the informal opening of the center in January, approximately 100 Texas A&M students have had the opportunity to study and participate in service-learning opportunities there. Two students from the Texas A&M chapter of Engineers Without Borders scouted the area in December and January, and five students will be returning to build a public restroom for the local school in the fall.

In addition to the Lohman Learning Community students, members of the freshman leadership group, MSC FISH, who volunteered their time and energy over spring break to build a playground and continued the teaching of English as a second language begun by an earlier group in the local school. They will return next spring break to

continue their work in the community. Another group took more than 500 pounds of books to start an English language library in the local school.



One student, who went to the center with a geography group, said the visit was a life-changing experience. “The Soltis Center was amazing,” she said. “Everything was so open and in touch with the surrounding environment. Meeting Mr. Soltis and his daughter, Kim, was a life-changing experience. His desire to help advance the lives of others truly was contagious; in fact, I am going to change my major to geosciences. [This trip] showed me that studying the earth and how its people interact with each other is my true passion in life.”



University officials said numerous possibilities exist at the center, including collaboration with Costa Rican partners. University officials, for example, are investigating new courses and research programs in ecosystem conservation, sustainable design in architecture, tropical hydrology, bio-geography research and mapping of the rain forest and an environmental studies track for the international studies undergraduate degree program.

The Soltis Center is Texas A&M’s fourth academic operation outside the United States. The university also operates Texas A&M University at Qatar, a four-year, engineering-oriented branch campus in Doha, Qatar; a study center in Castiglion Fiorentino, Italy, the Santa Chiara Study Center and a multi-purpose center in Mexico City.

For more information about the Texas A&M Soltis Center for Research and Education, visit the website at <http://soltiscentercostarica.tamu.edu> or contact the center’s director, Dr. Eugenio Gonzalez at [egonzalez@tamu.edu](mailto:egonzalez@tamu.edu).