'A true hometown hero': Lindenwood names building for Dixon

BY SCOTT WUERZ
News-Democrat

There's not much consensus in Washington, D.C., these days.

But everyone who attended the ribbon cutting of the U.S. Sen. Alan Dixon Student Center at Lindenwood University on Friday seemed to be in agreement that there wasn't a better person after whom the building could have been named.

"Sen. Dixon is a true hometown hero," university President James Evans said. "It's very appropriate this building will be named in honor of Belleville's favorite son."

The Belleville-based statesman, in addition to having the student center named in his honor, was also feted by having Belleville Mayor Mark Eckert, St. Clair County Chairman Mark Kern and State Rep. Tom Holbrook declare the date Alan Dixon day at the city, county and state level.

Dixon said it meant a lot to be remembered at the campus. He said his mother attended classes at the current Lindenwood-Belleville campus during World War I, when it was home to Belleville Township High School. Dixon said he and his children also attended high school there.

"This campus has been very good to me and very kind to my family," Dixon said. "It's very gratifying to be able to be a part of it."

Dixon, a Democrat from Belleville, represented Illinois residents in the U.S. Senate from 1981-1993.

He said one of his best memories about the Belleville campus was linked to his first Senate run. He campaigned against Republican Dave O'Neal and the pair held their first debate in Township Stadium just across the rear parking lot from the student center that now bears Dixon's name.

"There has never been a house so tight," Dixon remembered. "There wasn't a seat to be had. Even the aisles were full."

Dixon said it was a lively -- but civil -- discussion and it helped to propel him to a win by 600,000 votes even though Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan handily beat Democrat President Jimmy Carter by 400,000 votes in Illinois.

A World War II veteran who served in the Navy, Dixon graduated with a bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois and earned a law degree from Washington University in St. Louis. He served in the Illinois General Assembly as a representative from 1951-63 and as a state senator from 1963-71. He won election as Illinois state treasurer and held that office from 1971-77. He was Illinois secretary of state from 1977-81.

After his time in the U.S. Senate, Dixon was the chairman of the federal government's Base Realignment and Closure Commission from 1994-95. He currently is practicing law with the Bryan Cave law firm in St. Louis.
Dixon’s family pledged to raise $250,000 for Lindenwood in exchange for the student center being named after him. But so far they have already raised in excess of $375,000.

Evans said he’s amazed by how well the student center, stocked with a 48-station computer lab, a cafeteria, a library and a lounge with pool tables and air hockey games, turned out.

"When we started this project it was pretty rough," Evans said of the old Belleville West cafeteria. "The structure was sound, but it needed a lot of updating and renovations. I think it is going to serve its new purpose as the student center very well."

Lindenwood leaders said the extra money would go toward creating an endowed Alan J. Dixon scholarship. Contact reporter Scott Wuerz at swuerz@bnd.com or 239-2626.