One day in the late fall of 1968, local businessman and town father Les Brewer descended the steps from his second floor office on Cottage Street. Opening the door onto the street he was met by the smile of a friend he hadn't seen since his graduation from Bar Harbor High School. Jim Gower. Jim was now Father Jim, a progressive Catholic priest who had been recently assigned to his home parish at Holy Redeemer Church one street over on Mt. Desert Street. During the serendipitous stroll that followed that meeting, the two hatched a bold plan to promote a more vibrant year-round economy by starting an experimental college in their home town here on Mount Desert Island. This college wouldn't just be an engine for change on MDI, but would also trade in centuries of traditional, siloed learning in favor of an interdisciplinary, experiential approach, where students would create their own educational paths under the umbrella of one major called human ecology — the relationship of people to their natural, social, and built environments. These two friends drew others into their vision, raised funds relentlessly, acquired land and a president, a few faculty members, and a skeleton staff, and in the fall of 1972 — 50 years ago — College of the Atlantic welcomed its first class of 33 bold, pioneering students. Since the time of its founding and up through the present day, COA has sought to be more than just a college situated in a town. We are truly a place-based institution and, as such, we've sought to be a vital, collaborative, symbiotic part of the Mount Desert Island community. Across the decades, we've proudly partnered with area nonprofits, labs, businesses, school systems, towns and Acadia National Park to create a curriculum that regularly takes students off campus, outside of academia and into real world situations. We are who we are in large part due to where we are. Over the years, our alumni have brought the COA ethos of human ecology into many parts of the state, the country and the world. But most — about 250, in fact — made the decision to stay right here on Mount Desert Island, where we are entrepreneurs, scientists, gardeners, doctors, musicians, conservationists, friends, neighbors, active community members and so much more. This island has welcomed us with open arms. There are far too many people to thank for COA’s 50 years of success to mention everyone by name. It might take an entire page of this newspaper. But as the college stands on the cusp of its next 50 years, my heart is full with gratitude for all this place has meant for us. We like to say that COA is all about its people, but our success is really far greater than that. We are really all about all the people who are all around us — our staff and faculty, our alumni, our neighbors, supporters, business and friends. Thank you all so much for helping to make COA what it is today.

Darron Collins, COA president

Former librarians Sandra Modeen, Sandra Dworak and Marcia Dorr show off a new computer in the early 1990s.

A message from the COA president

An aerial view of campus taken this summer.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF COA

COA’s integration of sustainability into the curriculum helped make the school the Princeton Review’s number one green college from 2016 through 2020.

Students, above, work on an aquaculture lease the college maintains in Frenchman Bay, and below, create a project as part of a Visual Arts and Design course.

Students in a biology class dissect a fish.

Congratulations to the faculty, staff and students at College of the Atlantic.

Best wishes to the incoming 50th class!

Mount Desert Islander
Climate action is in our DNA

Experiential. Transformational. Sustainable.

Celebrating 50 years of improving our relationship to the environment, one student at a time.

Framed with regionally-sourced mass timber, insulated with wood-fiber panels made from Maine forest products, and powered by 350 rooftop solar panels — the Davis Center for Human Ecology propels Maine to the forefront of innovative green design.

#1 Green College • Carbon Neutral • Zero waste framework
Looking to the future, honoring the past

By Dick Broom

Bar Harbor — With about 350 students, College of the Atlantic is a small school that intends to stay that way.

"Being this size is part of what makes us truly excellent," said COA President Darron Collins. But staying small doesn't mean standing still.

One of COA's top priorities is increasing the diversity of the campus community if the school wants to have influence in the wider world, Collins said. "We've got to bring the wider world onto the campus. It should look more like the world does."

"That means a higher number of Black, Hispanic and Asian-American students and faculty. It's not just a politically correct thing to do, it's crucial to why we are as an institution."

Diverse and inclusive

The college has developed a strategic plan for fostering an environment that is diverse and inclusive and DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Access).

"The demographics in this country have changed so much in the last 50 years and even in the last 10 years," said Dr. Admission Heather Alpert-Keopke. "If you look at the kids in public schools around the country, the majority of students come from non-white students.

"So to do the fundamental work of the college, which is educating students who are going to be makers in their communities, we need to be thinking about how we can do that effectively in the more diverse communities that exist out there in the world."

"Diversity is something that we have been thinking about for years, with international students now making up about 23 percent of the student body, but students from this country who come to COA are still predominantly white."

A number of students are the first in their family to go to college. And about 30 percent of COA students are eligible for Pell Grants, which means their families have an annual income of less than $50,000.

"We have been working over the past couple of years to find better ways to serve students from different financial backgrounds, students of color and the first in their family to come to college," Alpert-Keopke said.

The DEI strategic plan calls for the college to take a number of actions such as recruiting a more diverse student body, making sure faculty searches are conducted in ways that attract more diverse candidates, reforming the process for responding to incidents of bias and harassment and making sure the campus is accessible for people with disabilities.

"In short, Alpert-Keopke said, the DEI initiatives aim "making sure that everyone in the college, from administrators to students, families and faculty and staff, can do their job without feeling marginalized."

She said there also is to be an even greater emphasis now on social justice, especially in relation to environmental issues.

"Things like climate change and toxins in the environment are also social justice issues and issues of race and power," she said. "Who is making policy decisions? How are they made? And how do they impact different people differently?"

Student housing

Year-round housing in Bar Harbor and all over Mount Desert Island has become scarce and very expensive. Students and faculty are lucky to find what housing is out there, but it is not always easy.

Building more student housing on the campus is the first order of magnitude for the college, according to COA President Darron Collins.

Two years ago, COA purchased six townhouse apartments just north of the campus and began renovating the year-round housing for 30 students. And the college put a huge construction project in Northeast Harbor that will include 55 on-campus student houses.

"We are also thinking about how we can meet the year-round housing needs for the future," Collins said. "We have to play a role in that, as well."

"The reimagining of the expansion and renovation of the Gates Auditorium (see accompanying story on page 5) was the first phase of what Collins calls "the strategic plan for the campus." It will include expansion of the Gates Auditorium to include an experiential learning space, renovation of the existing arts and science building and construction of a welcome center that will house the admissions office and a new art gallery.

"Wabanaki outreach

Strengthening the college's relationship with Maine's Wabanaki tribes — the Abenaki, Micmac, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot — is another of Collins' goals.

"We have always prided ourselves on being a place-based institution for higher education, but we haven't done enough programatically or otherwise with our Wabanaki partners," he said.

"I think there is a lot of room for growth in terms of attracting Wabanaki students, staff and faculty and also engaging programatically with the Wabanaki."

Honoring original values

The DEI looks ahead, planning to address the challenges of the future, it maintains a strong commitment to the values and principles on which it was founded a half-century ago.

"We are keeping our commitment to Mount Desert Island, Acadia National Park, the local community and relationships with the local, the national and the global," Collins said. "That is our abso- lutely core to who we are."

"We are College of the Atlantic in any other place, in any other role in terms of attracting students," Collins said. "It is something that we are proud of for and can do more of."

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COA alumni in the community

**Darrin Callins ’92, President of College of the Atlantic**

“I’m now in my 11th year as the president of COA. COA taught me humility and imparted on me a lifelong love for lifelong learning; these qualities led to the skills I needed to do international wildlife conservation and eventually return to the college as president.”

**Julia Walker Thomas ’12, Digital Media Manager for Friends of Acadia**

“Attending College of the Atlantic gave me a true interdisciplinary education — I was able to explore art, education, environmental science and documentary photography. Being encouraged to follow my curiosity to help educate and inspire others helped me develop the skills I needed for my career with Friends of Acadia.”

**Elise Flemings ’07, Executive Director of Healthy Acadia**

“My education at COA supported and cultivated my passion for community and environment, and for making a positive difference in our world. My COA education also gave me the skills, tools, knowledge and confidence to take action in creative, collaborative, interdisciplinary ways to address challenges we face and build stronger, healthier communities. It has also given me a lifelong community of friends, teachers, mentors and more!”

**Ben Macks ’00, MOES Teacher**

“COA provides both the framework and the support necessary for each student to explore andelsen their individual abilities. It teaches them how they are just one part of an interdependent global community and encourages and inspires students to observe, experience and understand how they interact with the larger living world. It teaches them to appreciate their own overlapping identities through the lenses of social justice, climate change, empathy and math.”

**Anna Durand ’86, Founder of Azica House Inn**

“My time at COA taught me to stay involved and work for positive change within the vibrant community at MDI. I try to bring the holistic framework I learned at COA to this work.”

**Dore Folger ’81, Co-Founder and Director of Willowed Therapeutic Riding Center**

“COA gave me many insights: appreciation of open systems, skills of dialogue and community, and an intense interest and awareness of our surroundings. Willowed development, and the service it provides to the greater MDI community, is a direct outcome of the human ecological perspective and education I received at the college.”

**Puranan Kaur ’05, Co-Founder of Open Table MDI**

“Graduating with a degree in human ecology is quite unique. I, one of the main-personalities who people always ask when they hear that you graduated from COA is “Are you using your degree?” I can answer this on a Single Day. Although my course of study was varied and my career path winding, what I learned from my time at COA is now who I am adaptive, how to think creatively, how to be a community builder, and how to approach each day with an awareness of my impact on the world around me. These are skills I can utilize everywhere, in any type of work and in my personal life.”

**Julianne Taylor ’06, Lead Naturalist and Guide at Bar Harbor Whale Watch**

“My education at COA taught me how to help people, including myself, connect with the natural world. It also helped me to learn the importance of community. Since graduating, my connections with the COA continue through working and living within the MDI community.”

**Christine Anastasio ’92, Public Affairs Specialist for Acadia National Park**

“This is my 31st year working as a social studies teacher after graduating from COAs with the Class of 1985. COA has made me a more flexible learner teacher and I am forever grateful to have worked, in particular, with Don Shumukols.”

**“COA was a transformative experience for me. I grew up in a concrete city and always longed for wide-open spaces. Finding COA, meeting Acadia National Park and becoming a park ranger with the privilege of protecting those spaces for everyone has been a gift. I’ll also never forget classes with Ken Clune asked a fire for preservation with a twist of human ecology that will stay with me and my kids forever.”

**Other notable alumni in the community also includes:**
- Anne Soler ’97, Corporate Engagement Coordinator, Maine Tourism Association
- Matt Gerard ’83, Michael Boland ’94, Jim Judd-McColl
- Anna Durand ’86, Founder of Azica House Inn

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A piece of advice that Ed Kaelber, the founding president of College of the Atlantic, gave Darron Collins, the current president, was this: "Only build a building when you absolutely must." Collins said COA has always been primarily about people, not buildings. "But we definitely needed the academic space," he said of the $13 million, 29,000-square-foot Davis Center for Human Ecology, which opened for classes this past spring and had its formal opening Sept. 10.

"Our arts and sciences building was built immediately after the fire of 1983 on campus, when we were less than half the size we are now," Collins said. "We are where we want to be in terms of our student population, so we could be very strategic about the teaching space we needed." The Davis Center houses science laboratories, classrooms, flexible lecture halls, faculty offices, art and design studios and a teaching greenhouse.

Collins said the design of the new building had to meet several criteria. "First, we wanted to fulfill our academic needs," he said. "Second, we wanted to embrace the ocean; we wanted the building to be a constant reminder of our connection to the Atlantic Ocean. And the building had to really push the boundaries of sustainability." A key to that was using wood as much as possible in the construction of the building including wood fiber for insulation.

The Davis Center is now the largest wood fiber-insulated building in the country. It is expected to use 80 percent less energy than a comparable code-compliant building.

Davis family philanthropy

Lead gifts for construction of the Davis Center for Human Ecology were made by trustees of the college and the Shelby Cullom Davis Charitable Fund, headed by Andrew Davis.

The Davis Center is far from the first building or program at College of the Atlantic to bear the Davis name. COA and its students have benefited from the generosity of three generations of the Davis family who, in Collins' words, "wholeheartedly supported medical research, environmental issues and global peace initiatives.

She had homes in Northeast Harbor, Tarrytown, N.Y., and Jupiter Island, Fla.

Kathryn Davis died in 2013 at age 106.

In 2000, COA opened the Kathryn W. Davis Center for International & Regional Studies. That same year, the college dedicated the Kathryn W. Davis Village, a residential complex on campus housing 51 students.

Also in 2000, the Davis United World College Scholars Program at COA welcomed its first students. (Read more about this program in an accompanying story.) Since 2010, COA's sustainable business incubator, the Diana Davis Spencer Hatchery, has provided eligible students academic credit, professional services and access to seed money to develop a for-profit or nonprofit business. COA describes the Hatchery as allowing students "to walk the entrepreneurial high wire with a safety net and support."
Congratulations!

It was a pleasure to work with you!

E.L. Shea
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TO COLLEGE OF THE ATLANTIC ON THE OPENING OF THE NEW DAVIS CENTER FOR HUMAN ECOLOGY

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