

ANNOUNCER: You've tuned in to another
edition of The Break Room, a

weekly conversation about how
the City of St Augustine

works from those who do the
work everyday. Hosted by the

City of St Augustine's
Communications Director, Melissa

Wissel. The Break Room offers a
closer look at the different

City departments and provides
updates on current and upcoming

projects and events. And now
your host, Melissa Wissel.

MELISSA: Welcome to The Break Room.

Thanks for tuning in. I'm

Melissa Wissel, Communications

Director for the City of St

Augustine. Every year, the City

Commission recognizes individuals for

outstanding service and
contributions to the City by

way of presenting awards. These
awards are the DeAviles Award,

the Adelaide Sanchez Award, and
the Order of La Florida. The

awards were created over many
years and each award carries

with it distinct criteria which
must be met by its recipients.

The individual is nominated by a
commissioner, confirmed by

unanimous vote of the entire
Commission, and then the awards

are presented at a time that
coincides with some special

occasion or a mile in the
City's history. This year,

Commissioner Barbara Blonder
nominated Dr Leslee Keys

for the 2023 Adelaide Sanchez
Award for Historic Preservation

and Restoration. So, coinciding
with Historic Preservation

Month, the City of St
Augustine Commission presented

Dr Keys with a
commemorative Marble Lions

Statue. In studio this week,
I've invited Doctor Keys to

join me and tell us about her
long standing and outstanding

career in historic
preservation. Dr Keys,

Welcome to The Break Room. LESLEE: Thank
you, Melissa Wissel. I'm glad

to be here. MELISSA: It's wonderful to
have you. You were with us a

couple of years ago talking
about History Above Water, which

was also a preservation
initiative. You've been doing

this a long time. Give me a
little bit of background. You

tell me about History Above
Water. How do we find ourselves

here? You've been doing
historic preservation your

entire life. Professional life.
Let's call it your professional

life. LELKEE: Yes. Yes. Believe it or
not, since I was 23 years old

and finished grad school at
Virginia Tech with a Masters in

History and one in Urban and
Regional Planning, focus on

Historic Preservation.

MELISSA: Excellent. LESLEE: So, yes. I've

been in St Augustine for

27 of those 45 years in

between. And this is certainly

home. As far as

keeping history above water,

which we actually did in 2019, I'm still very

excited about that because it

really did seem to help launch

the City and the region.

To understand how vulnerable

our historic and cultural

resources are to sea level

rise. I came to St

Augustine in 1981 for the first

time and saw the colonial

architecture, which was great,

and that was sort of my

assignment, since I was writing

my master's thesis and one of

my mentors said you have to go
and check it out. But, I

actually turned, looking west,
and saw the Hotel Ponce, which

was Flagler College, although in
a much younger form at that

point. And went wow and saw the
City Hall. And so the whole

compendium of architecture here
and history and culturists.

Amazing. MELISSA: Just sucked you in. LESLEE: It
did. MELISSA: Yes. Well okay. So let's

talk about Ponce De Leon.

You've written a book or two on the

hotel itself. People don't
realize it was a hotel. It is

now home to the, a dormitory, Flagler College.

Correct me where I'm wrong.

Well, Hotel Ponce. Yes, was a

hotel. It opened in 1888 and

then it was a hotel for 80
years. So, actually it's Swan

Song was in 1967, because they
knew they were going to turn it

into, at that time, a women's college. And
the importance of that is that

no one wanted a Gilded Age
Hotel in the 1950s.

They wanted the Holiday Inn
where they could drive their

cars right up in glass and
chrome and they didn't want all

that gilded age stuff. So, the
transition from, thanks to Henry

Flagler's great nephew, to the
college, was a little tenuous to

begin with, but very successful.

And yes, it's a residence hall.

The wings of it are. The
dining hall is still, to quote

several famous people, the most
opulent college cafeteria in

America, we just don't call it that.

But it's hosted several

presidents over the years, and
most recently 2015, the King

and Queen of Spain. MELISSA: And it's so
opulent because if folks don't

know, it has the largest
collection of Tiffany stained

glass windows in their original
location, I have to say that, in

the world. There are 79 credited
to Tiffany, he was the creator.

That doesn't mean he actually
made the windows. There was

the number of other artisans
that did. The electricity, Thomas

Edison. I think probably what
turns out to be the most

important part of the building is
a National Historic Landmark,

which is the upper most tier in
the United States. And there are

very few properties that are
recognized at that level. And

that is for the architects,
John Mervin Carrera and Thomas

Hastings, who were 26 and 25
years old, right out of college.

MELISSA: I heard somebody talking about
that the other day, as well,

talking about architecture.

They were 26 years old. LESLEE: Yeah. I

used to tell my students, you
you think you're ready to

design this 275,000 square.

No. No. Yeah. Yeah but yes. I,

our trustees at the College
wanted an architecture book in

2013 for the 500th of the
Explorer Ponce de Leon and the

125th of the Hotel. So, Dr
Tom Graham and I quickly wrote

and got printed an architecture
book. MELISSA: Beautiful book. LESLEE: And then we did in,

twenty, we had four years then
to do the College's 50th

anniversary, it's sort of a
two-volume set. We put the same

team of people back together
again. And then my dissertation

achieved, 10 years ago when I
was very much a non-traditional

student, is on the Hotel Ponce de Leon.

It's actually the preservation

story. MELISSA: So aside from doing your dissertation. What other, are

there any other highlights that you can think of? I mean, I'm

sure you have a lot of them. So give me one or two of your

highlights here either at the college or in the City? LESLEE: Okay,

I'll try to give you a couple of both. How's that? I think

probably the most exciting component to work on at the

College, I would have to say honestly is what was a campaign

called a crowning achievement.

And it was to rehabilitate the

solarium under the dome in the center of the Hotel Ponce de Leon.

So very visible section, from you look up from the rotunda

when you walk in. You see all
the gold leaf on the ceiling.

You look all the way up and
there's a little glass piece

nut. You don't realize that
above that there is this

fabulous domed room, which had
been in horrible condition,

because building code
required it couldn't be used.

And then hurricanes hit.
And literally shattered the

sliding glass wall that's at
the front of that in the

courtyard. And again, I'm saying
this so if you were

looking at it, you know exactly
what I'm talking about. Well,

in the midst of doing that

doctorate and writing the

dissertation, we knew we're
going to have royal visitors

come to St Augustine and was
time to put the Solarium back

together again. It's just that
the world happened to be in a

global recession. But
long story short, we reached

out. We couldn't even have
people come in and see the

space that we were asking them
to help fund for

preservation. MELISSA: Hey can you
give us some money? But you can't see where it's going. LESLEE: We can

show you some pictures of how
ugly it is and some pretty

drawings about what we think
it's going to look like. But

honestly, there were so many
alumni who are long time ago

students that remembered
sneaking up there or doing, you

know, whatever. It was the
College's First Library that we

really did have 24
corporations, foundations,

individuals. It was amazing. We
raised all the funds in 18

months, so we had it put
together early enough so that

the State of Florida could come
over and celebrate the 500, the

Quincentennial of the
Explorer Ponce De Leon in 2013,

and then again in 2015 we had
it for the King and Queen of Spain

for a special delegation lunch.

So I think that it was

my crowning.. MELISSA: The crowning achievement.

Sure. LESLEE: Yeah. It was a

really difficult project to do.

I would also tell you, I had

a student who was in graduate

school at Penn. She did the

paint analysis as one of her

projects. So we had people

volunteering to do some

research for us, so that we

didn't have to fund all of that,

too. It was very exciting. MELISSA: Well,

if you're just now tuning in,

you are listening to The Break

Room. I'm Melissa Wissel,

Communications Director for the

City. This week, I have the

honor of sharing the studio

with Dr Leslie Keys

Historic Preservationist,

author, recipient of the 2023

Adelaide Sanchez Award for

Historic Preservation and

Restoration. Lots of projects

that you've been involved with.

You and I have gone on walks

before. There's every every

corner and crevasse of this City

has a story to be told. And this,

give me a little bit of what

you, you know this the Adelaide

Sanchez Award. There's a lot of

folks that you know. I'm sure

you know every other

predecessor who came before you

who certainly who got the

award. Yes. So I actually this

is new... LESLEE: The Adelaide Sanchez

house, you know, when the City
got that. I was the state

employee that was responsible
for running the Regional Office

out of what was then called
Government House, to transfer

the 36 state-owned properties
to the City of St Augustine

to manage, and one of those was
the Adelaide Sanchez House. So,

I think we've come full circle.

MELISSA: I would say. LESLEE: Adelaide might be

hopefully happy about all this.

MELISSA: Absolutely. LESLEE: But yeah. And I

think some of the other
projects I would say that are

most important right now to
work and can hopefully continue

to partner with the City on are
Sea Level Rise Projects. But I'm

also working with the National
Park Service. Started about four

or five years ago on a project
for to reinterpret three

periods in this the history of
that building, and part of the

time the building changed, but
it was used as a prison for

Native Americans. MELISSA: Which
building? LESLEE: The Castillo de San Marcos. MELISSA: The Park

Service at the Castillo. Okay.

LESLEE: Yes and part of the timing for

that is that next year,
2024, the Castillo and

Fort Matanzas will both
celebrate their 100th

anniversary of being national
monuments, which is, so again, we

continue to have these

celebrations and we love that

part. MELISSA: And you've been involved
and work for the park service.

LESLEE: Well no. MELISSA: No didn't work for them.
But you were involved with them.

LESLEE: Yeah, as a consultant to them
for projects that park service

would not normally undertake,
but they know would be valuable

to have the information. So yes
actually, of those was to create

a bibliography that is about
700 sources for them.

To look at. So, I'm not sure
any of them have the time to

get. MELISSA: And you're and you're not
finished. LESLEE: No. Heavens no. No. More

anniversaries next year.

It's the 100th anniversary

of the Lions being
commissioned. It's also the

150th anniversary of the St
Augustine Lighthouse.

Construction concluded on that.

And one of my first

preservation projects locally
was when the Junior Service

League was finishing that, and
so it was the first

decommissioned to go from
public military installation to

what's owned by the County. And
so I went to that ceremony in

the year 2000, that was a
millennial event. And it's

also the 150 of the St
Augustine Yacht Club, which does

tie in ironically to the Fort,
because one of the military

officers and the fleet, and the
surgeon for the Fort were also

members founding members of the
Yacht Club. So it it does

continue. Dr Anderson who is
Mayor, as in the Lions, as in

Anderson at the Plaza. He
was the fleet surgeon and

joined the Yacht Club in
1875. So yes,

everything sort of going
together. MELISSA: It's a small world

that comes back full circle, and
I love, you know, you and I are

friends. I'm so excited for
you. You always, I'm amazed at

the wealth of knowledge that
you have in your head. I can't

imagine knowing all of that.

So, we're out of time. LESLEE: Thank you. MELISSA: Oh, it's

been a pleasure

having you. It's been a

pleasures talking to you,

sharing you sharing your story

and the history and what you

know, of the City, with our

listeners. LESLEE: Than you. MELISSA: So, congratulations on the Adelaide Sanchez Awards. It's

another accomplishment to add

to your many and we're very

proud and and honored to have

you in our City. LESLEE: I appreciate

it and thanks to the City

Commission and all people that

joined last Monday. It was

great fun. MELISSA: Wonderful. If you

missed part of this broadcast

and want to go back and listen

from the beginning, you can now

find us on your favorite

podcasting app. Look for us on

Spotify, Apple Podcast

Spreaker, and more. To find a

complete listing, check that

out at CityStAugRadio.com. We want to keep you

informed about what's happening

in and around the City, and most

importantly that you hear it

here from the people doing the

work and making it happen every

day. Follow us on all of our

social platforms. You can find

us on Facebook, Twitter, and

Instagram @CityStAug.

Until next time. Thanks for

tuning in. ANNOUNCER: You've been

listening to The Break Room, a

weekly program addressing

projects and programs offered

by the City of St Augustine.

Join us each week as the City's Communications

Director Melissa Wissel has

in-depth conversations with the

people who make our town work

to meet the needs of our

community. The Break Room is

produced by Communication

Specialist for the City of St.

Augustine, Cindy Walker. See you

at this time next week for

another edition of The

Break Room.