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Hotel celebrates 20th anniversary

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DULUTH — Gwinnett County's first full-service hotel, the Atlanta Marriott Gwinnett Place, will soon turn 20 years old.

To commemorate the occasion, an anniversary and rededication ceremony will be held Monday at the hotel.

County Commissioner Chairman Charles Bannister will lead the ceremony. The 17-story, 426-room luxury hotel is a historical building for Gwinnettians, and many remember it as the first step toward growth back in the mid-1980s, when the area was nothing more than fields and trees for miles. "They took me out to the boonies, and there I was thinking, 'What the heck am I going to do in the middle of farmland?" said Carol Simon, the hotel's first resident manager.

Simon, who now resides in Virginia, left her home in northern California to take the job at the hotel. And in her opinion, it was one of the best career decisions she has ever made, calling it "one of the best hotels" she's ever worked for.

"It was 1985 when I came to visit, then I moved there in January 1986," she said. "What we found 20 years ago was the acceptance from Gwinnett County to have a full-service hotel. We were going to be the gem, and we were and they hopefully still are.

"(The hotel) used to be the end of the world for Gwinnett County," she said. "Everything north of Jimmy Carter was excited to have a full-service hotel, because there never was anything like that unless they went into (Atlanta)." And as Simon said, the opening of the hotel was a pivotal point in Gwinnett's history.

The Gwinnett County song ("Gwinnett — Coming Together in Harmony") was written by Atlanta songwriter Jackie Daughtry and recorded by Billy Joe Royal in '86. It was a gift to the county and used by the hotel the same year it opened.

A hotel establishment, Buttons Lounge, was the meeting place for many local couples, and the ones who later married held their weddings there.

The Gwinnett County SWAT team also used the tower for training purposes,

and the referendum to change the blue laws concerning liquor to be served

on Sundays was spearheaded by a group from the hotel.

Additionally, the hotel has seen more than \$7 million in renovations since its opening two decades ago.

Dick Stormont, developer of the hotel, also remembers the communitywide response to the towering building.

Stormont had recently left the Marriott corporate office after 22 years, and soon met up with John Williams, the man behind Gwinnett Place.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

"This was an opportunity for me to have my first franchise," Stormont said of his relationship with Williams' personal investment company.

"It was the first high-rise in Gwinnett County and the first full-service hotel."
After the hotel's completion, it wasn't long before commercial development exploded on all sides, eventually culminating in what Gwinnett is today.
And there seems to be no sign of slowing down.

"We knew that Gwinnett was going to be quick to develop; we knew it had the potential of attracting high quality commercial developments," Stormont said. "It still to this day is Gwinnett's premiere destination for full-service hotels."

Three employees who were there when the doors opened are still a part of the hotel, and they are Donna Fowler, the laundry attendant; Derrick Boyd, engineering supervisor; and Kevin Thomas, group sales manager. The luncheon for the event is by invitation only, but the public is welcome to attend the rededication, which should be held around 1 p.m. The Marriott is located at 1775 Pleasant Hill Road in Duluth.

COUNTY SONG

"Gwinnett – Coming Together in Harmony" By Jackie Daughtry

Verse I
I have traveled many places,
But I have always come back home,
To a beautiful county, family and friends,
Where I never feel alone.
Gwinnett, you've come a long way,
From a place that was so small.
There is a new generation of people here.
So glad to be a part of it all.

Chorus

Now we're coming together

Growing together,

Living in harmony.

Coming together,

Working together,
Making dreams reality.
The eyes of Georgia shine on us,
Because we are the place to be.
(Yeah) Gwinnett County,
Home for you and me.

Verse II
Even though you are the country,
You are the city, too.
You have the best of all the world
Inside a part of you.
From Norcross to Lawrenceville,
From Suwanee to Duluth.
There's a magical feeling in the air,
Let it take a hold of you.