



## Dr. Thomas Gordon "Tommie" Wright

March 21, 1919 - May 8, 2014

By Gerald Ensley

Tommie Wright came to Florida State University to escape New York winters and teach piano.

He wound up becoming an icon.

Wright, who had been in declining health, died Thursday evening at Tallahassee Memorial Hospital. He was 95.

Wright taught music at FSU from 1949 to 2008 — with his 59-year tenure on the faculty the longest in school history. He was a wildly popular professor, who taught nearly 60,000 students.

But he made a particular mark by writing the FSU Fight Song.

Wright and Doug Alley wrote the fight song in 1950. Alley, then a student, had published the lyrics as an eight-line poem in the student newspaper and challenged someone to come up with the music. Wright famously churned out the music in just 20 minutes during his lunch break.

Wright also gave the song its popular signature, adding the F-L-O-R-I-D-A, S-T-A-T-E chant at the end of the song.

The song was first played at FSU's Homecoming football game in 1950. The stirring song has been played at every game since, various FSU events and even in space: Astronaut Norm Thagard, an FSU graduate, made it his wake-up song during a 1983 space flight. Alley, who went on to a long career as an English professor at Auburn University, died in 2008.

"I've written lots of songs," Wright said in 1996. "But the only thing this world

will remember me for is a 16-bar fight song (that) took me about 20 minutes (to write)."

Maybe the world will remember him that way, but at FSU he was cherished for his unflagging energy and passion for teaching.

"He was a legend," said T.K. Wetherell, the former FSU president. "The fight song is what most will remember him for. But he taught 60,000 kids, which has got to be a record. He was one of those who loved teaching and was committed to teaching. He was beloved by everyone."

Wright was an FSU "49er," one of 125 professors hired in fall 1949 by President Doak Campbell, as FSU began to beef up the academic programs of a school that only two years before (1947) had switched from a woman's college to a co-ed university.

Wright, a native of Indianapolis, had earned a master's degree from Indiana University and had worked toward but had not completed a Ph.D at Columbia. He had a busy career in New York as a pianist on television shows, providing background music for radio soap operas and composing jingles for radio advertising.

But he leaped at Campbell's invitation to join the faculty and teach piano because of the Florida weather.

"I figured I'd come down for a year and that would be that," Wright said in 2012. "I was ready to go a year without snow."

Though he specialized in piano instruction when he first came, he quickly expanded into teaching undergraduate music appreciation and music history classes, "for which he was beloved by thousands and thousands of students," said longtime FSU music professor Cliff Madsen. "He filled every classroom and lecture hall with positive energy and a bright disposition."

Wright charmed students with his impressive musical talent and knowledge — plus an impish personality. Former Leon County Commissioner Bob Rackleff took a class in the 1960s from Wright, in which he greeted students the first day from the piano, gaily singing, "Welcome to Music 210, ya-da-da-da, Welcome to Music 210 . . . "

"I learned a lot from that class even though I was a history major," Rackleff said. "He was a serious musician and added to my lifelong appreciation of classical music."

Indeed, Wright was a celebrated concert pianist, who became renowned for concerts featuring songs by composer George Gershwin ("Rhapsody In Blue" became Wright's signature). He was active in musical theater and music production and composed dozens of songs.

"He was an all-round musical person who had his hands in lots of different places," Madsen said.

Wright was not without ego. In 2008, after he reluctantly retired ("I love teaching more than anything else," he said in 2012), he told then-Dean of Music Don Gibson he was willing to come back at the drop of a hat.

"I want to remind you I'm here if you need me," Gibson recalled. "He said, 'I am a draw.' "

Wright was notorious for refusing to reveal his age. Only a check with the Leon County supervisor of elections uncovered his March 21, 1919 birth date. But his wife, Rosalinda, who was "sworn to secrecy," said it was not about trying to appear younger.

"The reason he wouldn't give his age was not necessarily vanity but because he felt sometimes people treated you differently because you were older," said Rosalinda Wright, his wife of 33 years. "He had an amazing zest for life. And he wanted people to 'see me for me, not for my age.' "

Since his 2008 retirement, Wright served as an ambassador for the FSU Alumni Association. He toured the nation playing alumni events, ceremonies and gatherings.

"Wherever we took him he was like a rock star; alumni realized they were in the midst of a living legend," said Scott Atwell, director of the FSU Alumni Association. "No one in history has touched the lives of more FSU alumni than Tommie Wright."

In August 2012, FSU presented Wright with an honorary doctorate, which

thoroughly delighted him. He also served as the commencement speaker, dispensing with a speech in favor of playing the piano, closing with the FSU fight song — which brought down the house.

"Professor Wright's most significant legacy is intangible — the love and admiration of thousands of FSU alumni," said Garnett Stokes, FSU's interim president. "Years after graduating, many still refer to his class as transformational."

Wright is survived by his wife of 33 years, Dr. Rosalinda Wright, head of the foreign languages department at Tallahassee Community College, five daughters, Candace Springer and her husband Ed Springer of Apalachicola, Florida, The Honorable Cynthia Wright of Atlanta, Georgia, Jessica Applegate and her husband Dr. Mark Applegate of Tallahassee, Florida, Desiree Bowen and her husband Chuck Bowen of Tallahassee, Florida, and Nicole Wright of Tallahassee, Florida and his eight grandchildren.

The family will receive friends Thursday, May 15, from 6 to 8 p.m. at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 312 Stadium Drive. The funeral will be Friday at 11 a.m. at the church. Bevis Funeral Home, 850-385-2193, [www.bevisfh.com](http://www.bevisfh.com), is assisting the family with their arrangements.

# Cemetery Details

## MeadowWood Memorial Park

700 Timberlane Rd.  
Tallahassee, FL 32312

# Previous Events

## Visitation

MAY 15. 6:00 PM - 8:00 PM (ET)

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints  
312 Stadium Drive  
Tallahassee, FL 32304

## Service

MAY 16. 11:00 AM (ET)

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints  
312 Stadium Drive  
Tallahassee, FL 32304

# Tribute Wall



“ *Bevis Funeral Home created a Tribute Video in memory of Dr. Thomas Gordon "Tommie" Wright*



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**Bevis Funeral Home** - May 15, 2014 at 10:01 AM



“ *Tommie would welcome me into his home during the holidays when I was growing up. During that time, I loved getting to know him and getting to hear him play a few tunes on the piano. He was so caring, and thoughtful towards me. His quiet dignity showed in the way that he smiled and the way that he listened to me. He cared so much about the happiness of his wife and daughters. I love him very much and always will. One day, I will see him in Heaven and thank him for all he did for me in my life.*

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**Sean Butler** - May 18, 2014 at 09:57 PM



“ *Rosy and family. Tommie's smile and the twinkle in his eye when I first met him. He just radiated good cheer. The way he honored and loved his Rosy. The example of such a good marriage and how to treat your spouse as a true partner. This has extended into your daughters lives. Rosy served so many as a Relief Society President and she could not have done the great job she did without Tommie's full support. Our thoughts and prayers will be with you in the coming months ahead. We love you.*

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**Vicky Evelo** - May 17, 2014 at 08:38 AM

EC

“ Dear Rosie,

*I thought you might want to see the article written up for the TCC website this week:*

*Title: Composer of TCC alma mater, FSU fight song dies*

*“Forever true to the blue and gold, our college colors we’ll uphold / Always for thee, we’ll ever be loyal to T.J.C.”*

*So wrote FSU Music Professor Thomas Wright in 1968, setting to music an alma mater for the young Tallahassee Junior College. Though the College officially changed its name to Tallahassee Community College in 1970, the musician’s melody endured.*

*Wright, 95, passed away Thursday, May 8, 2014, at Tallahassee Memorial Hospital. He is survived by his wife, Rosalinda, head of TCC’s Foreign Languages program. Also surviving are five daughters and eight grandchildren.*

*The composer of TCC’s alma mater is best known for writing the music for Florida State University’s Fight Song. In addition, Wright wrote the FSU Circus theme song “Flying High” and was known throughout Tallahassee for his Gershwin Festival piano concerts in the mid-20th century.*

*Wright continued his association with the College during his 59-year tenure at FSU, later presenting the inaugural performance in Turner Auditorium.*

*My prayers are with you and your lovely family -*

*Elain Carroll*

**Elain Carroll** - May 16, 2014 at 03:36 PM

SW

“ *To the wright family, I just wanted to tell ya'll how sorry I am that your husband, father, and grandfather has passed on. He was blessed with such great musical talent here on earth and I'm sure that will be utilized in the eternities. He was a wonderful man and will be missed. I'm praying ya'll may have peace and comfort through this time apart.*

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**shelley wonsch** - May 16, 2014 at 11:39 AM

ND

“ *My prayer goes out to the Wright family, I would like to express my condolence at this time to your family. The Bible is a great source of encouragement at times like this, a comforting thought is at Revelation 21:4 "And he will wipe out every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither will mourning nor outcry nor pain be anymore. The former things have passed away"*

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**Nikki Davis** - May 14, 2014 at 08:31 AM

LJ

“ Rosie,  
*I am so sorry to hear of the passing of Brother Wright. I always enjoyed his smile and kind words in the hallways at church. He will be missed by so many.*

*My heart goes out to you and your family at this difficult time. However, we know there is peace in knowing that "Families Are Forever".*

*Love & Hugs  
Lisa Johnson*

*(Formerly "Lisa Boyd")*

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**Lisa Johnson** - May 12, 2014 at 11:39 AM

MF

*Rosalinda, Jessica & Family,  
I was so very sorry to hear about your wonderful husband and Dad. I first met him at the Junior Miss Program when he played so beautifully for Jessica to sing. I got to know him much better through the years when he came into the bank at BB&T. He was always a joy and the light of our day when he came in - always with a smile and kind words.*

*You & Jessica were so very kind to allow Emily to borrow Jessica's white gown for her Florida Junior Miss Experience. Thank you so much. Every time I look at the pictures of Emily from the program, I think of all of you!*

*My thoughts & prayers are with you and your families.*

*Margie Fletcher*

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**Margie Fletcher** - May 14, 2014 at 12:03 PM