



MARK WALLHEISER/Democrat

"Lichgate on High Road," once owned by an FSU English professor, will be used as an education center.

Her wish is their command

Laura Jepsen's wish to have her High Road home preserved as an educational center has come true.

By Jan Pudlow
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

"I soon realized that although some persons live in the house of their dreams, my house lived in the dreams of other persons."

The late Florida State University English professor Laura Jepsen wrote those words in her 1981 memoir, "Lichgate on High Road." And they ring especially true when describing a group devoted to seeing to it that Jepsen's final wishes be carried out.

Finally, after more than a year of up-and-down negotiations, the Laura Jepsen Institute is celebrating success at owning her beloved 42-year-old Tudor-style cottage and giant patriarch oak on three acres at 1401 High Road.

Just as Jepsen had hoped, her beloved home will be preserved as an educational center and Walden-like oasis in the midst of the city, where Melrose Place and other student apartment complexes sprawl nearby.

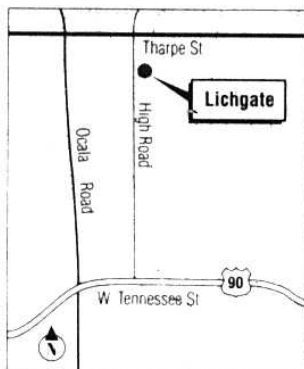
For Jody Taylor it has been nothing short of a spiritual journey. When she was asked to write a proposal to preserve Lichgate, she felt overwhelmed, because she's not a writer. She earnestly prayed.

"In the middle of the night, awakened as if a lightning bolt had struck me, charged and excited, I began to write, or more aptly stated, the words wrote themselves," Taylor remembered.

"As I looked across the room, a postcard caught my eye. Words leapt out: 'And love is stronger than death.'"

That mystical inspiration, Taylor said, marked the beginning of her awareness of "a woman's love for a tree, a home and life — in all its wonder and mystery" — a woman she had never actually met.

Taylor's proposal would reap



JOHN ROBERGE/Democrat

HOW TO HELP

If you would like to help the Laura Jepsen Institute pay its \$125,000 loan to purchase and preserve Lichgate on High Road, or donate services to help renovate the property:

- Call Karl Allen at 222-1920 (work) or 222-9089 (home).
- Write to the Laura Jepsen Institute Inc., P.O. Box 51305, Tallahassee 32302.

the support of many Tallahassee school principals, professors and politicians, including Gov. Lawton Chiles, who wrote: "The tranquility of Lichgate, the beauty of its surrounding acreage and the Institute's dedication to education represent the kind of community resource and support that will benefit all of Tallahassee's citizens."

Now, the hope is that Tallahassee's citizens will help the Institute pay off its \$125,000 mortgage (\$100,000 purchase price, plus \$25,000 for renovations).

When Jepsen died at 88 on Christmas Eve 1995, she willed Lichgate to The Nature Conservancy with the request that it be preserved for future generations. But the Conservancy is in the business of environmental, not historic, preservation.

"The market value is \$350,000,

and we had people banging on our doors to pay us that," said Deborah Keller, of The Nature Conservancy.

"We sold it for \$100,000. We didn't just sell it to sell it."

But Rick Kiser, a former student, admitted he got "real heartburn" that it took going into debt to carry out his old friend's wishes.

"I was very distressed they wanted \$100,000 to pass on an obligation," Kiser said. "But we just couldn't bear the thought of turning it over to commercial development. We were willing to stretch ourselves really thin. We are certainly looking for some help. I am very pleased the property is now in good hands."

Volunteers are planning to plant a memorial butterfly garden and to help fix up the cottage that has fallen victim to vandals.

"Almost anyone visiting the property, even without knowing her, becomes inspired. You get a sense of the way things should be, a feeling of being suspended in time," said Karl Allen, owner of Black Cat News Exchange and president of the Laura Jepsen Institute.

"There's just something about the place with that big tree and perfect little building made of stone and old boards," Allen said.

"She told me those floor boards were hundreds of years old and were finished by rubbing the boards with the backs of spoons"

Jon Johnson, of the St. Francis Wildlife Association, remembers the late '60s when he'd walk by her intriguing house on his way to class at FSU.

Years later, Johnson and Jepsen became friends after she learned he'd jumped through the window of the Old Capitol dome to rescue a great horned owl.

Last summer, Johnson was lining a hawk's cage with the Tallahassee Democrat when a story about Lichgate jumped off the page.

"I was just drawn to help," said Johnson, now a board member.

Call it another Lichgate mystical moment. Call it Laura Jepsen's dream come true.