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Department of Corrections engineer Larry Latimer leads Gov. Sonny Perdue and commissioner Brian Owens on a campus tour Friday. (Photo/Will Davis)

Perdue beams at Tift



Gov. Perdue signs "Big Daddy Loves Caroline" on the sling of Caroline Cole, daughter of State Rep. Jim Cole, after his speech Friday. Caroline broke her arm on the trampoline. Looking on are brother Lawson Cole, Rep. Cole and her grandmother Ruth Cole.



Tift College alumnae outside the Rutland Student Center gave hearty greetings to Gov. Sonny Perdue as he toured the campus on Friday.



A standing-room-only crowd inside Roberts Chapel listens as the Metro State Prison Choir, "Voices of Hope," performs after Perdue's remarks.

Gov. Sonny Perdue told a packed crowd at Tift College on Friday that the just-completed first phase of renovations is nothing short of a miracle.

"The word rehabilitation doesn't do it justice," Perdue said after touring the long-dormant campus for the first time in many months. "This is a renaissance."

Perdue spoke to a capacity crowd of more than 500 in the renovated Roberts Chapel. The speech was the main event of an Open House for the new Department of Corrections training academy that opened last week. Just five days prior, 150 training cadets had moved into the renovated dorms, which kept their names of Sewell, Monroe and Hubbard halls. They became the first to occupy the campus in nearly 14 years, since Ebon Academy abandoned the property in 1996.

The cadets are eating in the cafeteria at the Rutland Student Center and using classroom space inside Vinzant Hall as they undergo a month-long training session. The academy used to be held at the Georgia Public Safety Training Center.

On Friday, Perdue arrived on campus by helicopter and DOC commissioner Brian Owens led him on a brisk tour of the facilities with a large entourage, including State Rep. Jim Cole (RForsyth).

When Perdue met up with some of the 50+ Tift alumnae on hand inside the Rutland Student Center, he was quickly showered with hugs.

Shirley Foster Morgan said she lived in the dorms the year they were built, 1957.

She said the students then thought they were "uptown," but she's thrilled to see they're new again. Tift alumna Kay Bond of Forsyth (Class of 1965) agreed the state is doing a great job rescuing the beloved campus.

"This is exciting," said Bond. "I love it."

Over the past four years, Perdue has secured \$54 million from the legislature to buy and rehabilitate the dormant Baptist women's college.

"I feel like a new father," said Perdue. "With a four-year gestation."

Perdue's vision has been to consolidate all corrections operations, currently spread to leased offices around Atlanta, into one location that is closer to the state's prisons. Most of them are in South Georgia.

Perdue thanked Forsyth and Monroe County, saying it was heart-warming the way the town had opened its hands and hearts to the project. He said he also appreciated locals for being patient with the state (the ribbon cutting was in 2006). That patience will pay off, said Perdue, now that the campus will bring 12,000 cadets to Forsyth each year. He said it will be a great boost to the local economy.

"This is a great facility located in an outstanding community," said Perdue. The governor, who's in his last year in office, said he wished the skeptics and doubters who questioned the project could tour the campus with him. Perdue said it is unlike any other renovation project because the state has revered the history of the campus.

"We have polished this old rare piece of furniture and made it

"I feel like a new father -- with a four-year gestation."
- Gov. Sonny Perdue

good and useful again," he said. "It will be tremendous for Forsyth and for local jobs and bring in lots of economic activity."

Tift alumna Shelly Shuman of Forsyth (Class of 1965) said she appreciates what the state has done, and said the governor's use of the word "renaissance" was very appropriate.

During his visit, Perdue teased that he had some personal attachment to the campus as well.

"I have some good memories here too," Perdue joked of the all-girls college. While touring Vinzant Hall, site of the former Tift College pool, Perdue spotted a large 1960s photograph of three female students in their bathing suits.

"I think I remember her," he said, to guffaws from the entourage.

Asked later about his relationship to the school, Perdue smiled and said the statute of limitations had run out on those bygone days.

Corrections officials said Friday's open house was a mere warm-up for what's expected to be a grand event in October when the entire campus is opened as DOC headquarters. That will be one month before Perdue's successor is chosen in the November election.