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*Celebration honors grandest of governors*

*Museum exhibit, ceremonies mark 100th birthday of Rockefeller*

*By Paul Grondahl*

ALBANY — If Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller hadn't existed, the Empire State would have had to create him.

On Tuesday, many came to praise him at the opening of "Rockefeller at 100."

The State Museum exhibit honors the 100th anniversary of the birth of the dyslexic, Dartmouth-educated, art-collecting, impossibly wealthy, middle finger-flipping and titanic governor known as Rocky.

He was a man who arrived on Albany's political scene in the late 1950s like a double shot of espresso.

"What a rocket we were on," recalled John Egan, the Office of General Services commissioner now, as well as then.

Egan described the state taking 98 acres in the heart of the city by eminent domain just 19 days after it was announced in 1962 as part of Rockefeller's monumental vision for a state government complex. He directed crews who moved 3 million yards of excavated blue clay and drove thousands of supports into bedrock so that the complex — a still-controversial marble monolith some critics have likened to fascist architecture — didn't slide into the Hudson.

What's indisputable is that the master builder did more to change the landscape and cultural milieu of an old Dutch city than all the mayors and governors before or since combined.

The ceremonies and ribbon-cuttings — in keeping with Rocky's outsized persona, they were spread across four locations — stuck to safe ground and cel-

ebrated the governor's penchant for abstract expressionism and Modernist architecture. No mention was made of Rockefeller's Draconian drug laws that continue to divide the body politic, his obscene hand gesture to a heckler and sexual peccadilloes that titillate still.

**"He really loved government, he was dedicated to public service and he had an exuberance," said Richard Nathan, co-director of the Rockefeller Institute and former Rocky adviser. Nathan joined a cadre of old Rocky aides who call themselves "The Gang That's Still Around."**

Joseph Persico, the Guilderland author and historian, claimed he held the toughest job in state government. "I wrote speeches for 11 years for a man who was dyslexic," Persico said.

He recalled times that the four-term governor butchered his prose when delivering prepared remarks.

First Lady Michelle Paige Paterson said she's become a fan of the Empire State Plaza's architecture and the world-class modern art Rockefeller assembled for public viewing in the concourse.

Paterson told of a recent lunch with Happy Rockefeller, who was traveling and sent a letter to be read at the exhibit opening. The governor's widow said that her husband's tastes in the paintings that he personally hung in the Executive Mansion — by Matisse, Picasso and Miro, for starters — "raised a few eyebrows" among the stuffed shirts of the Legislature back in the day.

In addition to an Andy Warhol portrait of Rocky and other paintings of the governor's, the exhibit features political memorabilia and a head-turner on the concourse level: the governor's 1967 black Lincoln Continental limousine.

“I just hope one day David can have his hybrid SUV so prominently displayed,” quipped Paterson.

Perhaps a more realistic coda to the career of New York’s longest-tenured governor came from a

10-year-old boy walking with his family past a display of Rocky’s campaign memorabilia on the first floor of the State Museum.

“Who was Rockefeller, Dad? Is he dead?”