The red ribbon cutting signified the official opening of the student union, the first of many events planned as a larger “Opening Weekend” at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

Student Government Association President Kirsten Allen was given the honors of cutting the ribbon on Friday morning.

“On a more personal note, my parents both went to school here and they told me all of the great stories about the old union, so I’m extremely excited to start my own traditions,” said Allen at the opening ceremony. “I’m excited for all the new things that are going to come with this union and for all the stories I can tell my children, my grandchildren and my fellow students.”

Though the union opened to students in January, construction continued on a part of the union that includes Bayou Bijou and the forum. Opening Weekend included a dedication of the forum in the student union to Helma B. Constantine, one of the civil rights leaders who advocated for integration of UL Lafayette. UL Lafayette was the first desegregated four-year public university in the South, according to Patricia Cottonham, the vice president for student affairs.

Notable attendees to the ribbon-cutting ceremony on Friday were President Savoie, former student union directors, student government presidents and Scott Farmer, the athletic director.

“I feel so proud,” said Cottonham. “I guess you could say I had a personal point of privilege; I was a student here and I’ve had the honor to work here with students for 30 years, so I’ve seen the university through the years and I would say that because we are building on the leadership of others, right now the university is such a great place.

“We’ve got outstanding faculty, programs that are nationally known and accredited … we’re known as one of the colleges that supports low-income students, and I think that says a lot about who we are and that we value every student.”

Over the years, UL Lafayette has had four buildings serve as its student union, though this is the third building that has been built on campus, and the first building to be certified by Leadership in Environmental Engineering and Design.

“It sets us apart from all the universities in the state,” said Raymond “Coach” Blanco, who was an assistant football coach to the Ragin’ Cajuns in the ‘60s, as well as a former vice president for student affairs. “No one else has anything as beautiful as this new campus, and it will stand with any across the country.”

“When I was in college, we had a very, very small union on the far side of the lake,” said former Gov. Kathleen Blanco, a UL Lafayette graduate of 1964. “Then I saw the second union when it opened. So now we’re at the third union generation. But each union has been so much better than the one before and now the students are going to truly find great experiences here. It’s a good place to become family.”

During an economic time of struggle where most schools are cutting back on their expenses and construction, UL Lafayette has continued to undergo construction and expand the campus, though the funds for this expansion didn’t come from the state—a fact that former Gov. Blanco said she thought was important for students to understand.

“These are funds that are paid for by students,” Blanco said. “I think students need to be extremely aware that the state did not help to get this campus in this beautiful way that it is now. It was student fees that drove these projects.”

“It’s a great time to be a student, to be faculty member, to be (alumni) that’s not even talking athletics. I’m very happy and honored to be a part of this, to have been able to see how the work over the years has led us to where we are now,” said Cottonham.