Gift Is High Drama at Hunter
Hunter College Announces a Multimillion Gift From Jay and Patty Baker to Establish the Theater Department's Home.

By Melanie Grayce West
Jan. 23, 2014

Securing a new home for Hunter College's theater department required more than just good luck, timing and a generous donation. It needed approval from the Vatican.

On Monday, Hunter College gathered its board of trustees, theater students and some faculty to announce a multimillion gift from Jay and Patty Baker to establish the theater department's home at what is now the Kennedy Child Study Center, a school for children with disabilities that is owned by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York.

The archdiocese is selling the landmark building at 151 E. 67th St., which sits adjacent to one of Hunter's main buildings, for $18 million. The study center will move over the summer, said Msgr. Kevin Sullivan, the executive director of the archdiocesan Catholic Charities.

All sales of archdiocese property requires approval from various levels of the Church, said Msgr. Sullivan, and "this particular transaction does require the approval of the Vatican."

At Monday's meeting, Hunter President Jennifer J. Raab announced a $10 million gift from the Bakers. Then the Bakers added to the drama. They raised their hands and disclosed that they would increase the gift to $15 million. "I was completely surprised and almost cried," said Ms. Raab. The 26,000-square-foot building will be named Baker Hall in honor of the gift.

Ms. Baker, 67 years old, is a 1982 graduate of Hunter's theater department and a trustee for the college. She is a theater producer and her credits include the Broadway show "Beautiful," which opened on Sunday.

Mr. Baker, 79, is the former president of Kohl's Corp. and is widely credited with helping to build the department-store chain into a multibillion-dollar company. The couple, married for nearly 25 years, splits their time between New York City and Naples, Fla. In an interview last week, Ms. Baker said the gift is designed to help the college become a "leading school for theater." The timing of the gift is because "the opportunity presented itself," said Mr. Baker.

Ms. Baker's years at Hunter came after a career as a flight attendant and a time at Tiffany & Co. She started at the college by taking two classes and was then asked to join the honors program. With one theater course, Ms. Baker said she was "bitten" and wanted to become a director. As an older student, Ms. Baker said she caught the eye of her professors for being reliable and she was a mentor for younger students.

"I swear to God they kept me younger," she joked.
Ms. Baker has taken a hands-on role to develop career-related programming for Hunter students and she launched an advisory group for the theater department as well. She will have input into the design of Baker Hall with an awareness for student needs, including "oodles" of rehearsal space, she said. The gift to Hunter follows others the Bakers have made in support of higher education, including several scholarships and a $10 million gift made several years ago to the Fashion Institute of Technology. The retailing center at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School is named for Mr. Baker, a 1956 graduate.

The deal to acquire the building is a real estate windfall for Hunter, according to Ms. Raab. "It's so difficult to find any space, you almost don't think about it," she said. "We couldn't lose it."

The Kennedy Child Study Center will relocate to a newly renovated school building in East Harlem, closer to the families it serves. The study center had been looking to move for at least five years, Msgr. Sullivan said.

The new location, scheduled to open in the fall, will be better equipped to serve students with more critical needs and is in a neighborhood with lighter vehicle traffic for the school's buses to contend with. The study center's new home is also close to Hunter's Silberman School of Social Work. Ms. Raab and Msgr. Sullivan both expressed hope for greater collaboration between the schools by having Hunter students work at the study center.