Citation:

There are many fossil hunters, professional and amateur, in the State of Florida. But there are few who are the equals to the two people we honor here today.

Bill and Lelia Brayfield came to Florida from the midwest in the 1950s. Lelia had run her own auto parts business and Bill had been a surveyor and real estate salesman. They met while working at the same drugstore in Venice, Florida, in 1964. Their first date was to the famous shark tooth locality along Venice Beach where they spent the day collecting the small but beautiful shark teeth. They found that they enjoyed fossil hunting and each other so much that they married in 1969 and have been together ever since.

Primarily because of the excellent fossil collecting, in 1972 Lelia and Bill moved to the tiny town of El Jobean, which is located in the middle of an area riddled with canals dug by the now-defunct General Development Corporation. The spoil piles along the banks of these canals were littered with fossils, both vertebrate and invertebrate, and they accumulated a collection of more than 10,000 cataloged specimens.

So extensive were their collections that in 1977, with the assistance of the Royal Ontario Museum and its curator Gordon Edmund, the Brayfields build a 24-by-24-foot building on the back of their property. The Brayfield Research Lab has since served as a place to clean, catalog, store, study, and display their growing collections. Since 1985 alone, the Lab has been visited by more than 400 amateur and professional paleontologists from more than a dozen countries.

Perhaps the most spectacular and significant Brayfield fossil find was made in 1986 when in a quarry not far from their home, Lelia unearthed a large slab containing hundreds of complete sea stars of the species Helianthus microbrachius. Not only are sea stars in general relatively rare fossils, but this Pliocene discovery turned out to be the first record of the group outside the eastern Pacific and so has considerable importance for studies of the biogeographic consequences of the formation of the Central American Isthmus. Most of the specimens were deposited in the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville, and a paper describing the find was published by Museum scientists with ample acknowledgement of their debt to the Brayfields for bringing this extraordinary find to the attention of the scientific community.

Over the years, the Brayfields have donated important specimens to other institutions including the American Museum of Natural History, the Royal Ontario Museum, the University of South Florida, and Notre Dame University.

In 1986 the Brayfields wrote and printed a highly successful book entitled, “A Guide for Identifying Florida Fossil Shells and Other Invertebrates”. Now in its third edition with nearly 5000 copies sold, this book fills a unique niche as an accurate and user-friendly introduction to Florida’s spectacular Plio-Pleistocene fossil shell beds. In 1993, Bill and Lelia donated the copyright of their book to the Florida Paleontological Society, with all proceeds to be used to help publish additional works.

The Brayfields are frequent lecturers to schools, fossil clubs, scout groups and libraries. They were co-founders of the Southwest Florida Fossil Club, and were recipients of the 1990 Howard Converse Award, given by the Florida Paleontological Society to the state’s outstanding amateur fossil collector. Their lives are an excellent example of the contributions that non-professional paleontologists can make to our understanding of the history of life on Earth, and of the importance and value of a close relationship between non-professional and professional paleontologists in the search for that understanding. These were strongly held beliefs of Katherine Palmer’s, the second Director of the Paleontological Research Institution, and so it is with great pleasure, in this the 100th year since her birth, that the Paleontological Research Institution presents its third annual Katherine Palmer Award in recognition of outstanding contributions to the science by a non-professional to Lelia and Bill Brayfield.