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Built on memories, Edward M. Kennedy Institute takes shape

Center previews replicas of offices

By [Michael Levenson](#) |

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That's where Teddy's desk would have been, she said, pointing to a spot in the back row. That's where I would sit, she said, pointing to the family gallery on the second floor.

Victoria Reggie Kennedy was not walking through the actual United States Senate, but a scale replica of the chamber that is being built on Columbia Point in Dorchester.

With its ornate domed ceiling, decorative gold wallpaper, and Latin mottos etched on the walls, the replica of the historic chamber will be the centerpiece of The Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate, an educational center and tribute to the legendary Massachusetts Democrat that is slated to open to the public in March 2015.

On Tuesday, Kennedy, the senator's widow, donned a blue hard hat and showed off the chamber, as well as the rest of the 65,000-square-foot building, which she said will be packed with interactive exhibits about the Senate's history, the legislative process, and her husband's 47-year career. For her, it was an emotional tour.

"If this doesn't give you goose bumps, I don't know what does," she said, as she entered the soaring chamber, which was littered with scaffolding, ladders, and a wheelbarrow. "I half want to see the press up there because that's their spot," she said, gazing up at a second-floor balcony.

The senator, who was 77 when he died of brain cancer in 2009, envisioned the institute as a way to teach the public about the Senate, the importance of which he felt had been overshadowed by the many presidential libraries built across the country, Kennedy said.

Located next to the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, the institute is designed to use technology to illuminate the musty traditions of the Senate for schoolchildren, tourists, and history buffs. Visitors will be given Google handheld devices that will guide them through exhibits about how a bill becomes a law and historic milestones in health care, immigration, and civil rights, particular areas of interest for the late senator.

Classrooms will convert into caucus rooms, hearing rooms, and cloakrooms, allowing visitors to try their hand at wheedling, cajoling, and horse-trading.

Every day, there will be a vote on an issue, with visitors debating and then voting at one of the 100 desks in the chamber. "That's a pretty powerful thing, to feel that you are, for that moment, a United States senator and you can cast that vote," Kennedy said.

As she walked through the nearly \$80 million institute, designed by Rafael Viñoly, she pointed to a room that she called “our Teddy space.” She said it would house a re-creation of the senator’s Washington office, with his sofa, desk, and memorabilia.

“This is something he never envisioned, never thought of, never planned for,” Kennedy said. “But when we took down his office, we thought, ‘Oh gosh, it’s too rich and beautiful and wonderful not to preserve.’ ”

Institute officials said they have not set the price of admission yet. While most exhibits will focus on the 2,000 men and women who have served in the Senate, some will also highlight activists who have inspired legislative and social change, Kennedy said.

“It makes you feel really patriotic, like you want to do something that’s great for the country,” she said. “And I hope everybody has that feeling when they leave here.”

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