

Jerry Rankin Mission Center opens at Mississippi College

CLINTON, Miss. (Special) – Years ago, then-Mississippi College President Lee Royce approached native Mississippian Jerry A. Rankin, former president of the International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention, with a novel proposition: donating the bulk of his life's work to his alma mater to create an archive that would serve as an invaluable resource for missions scholars and inspire generations of students to follow in his footsteps.

Rankin grew up in Tupelo and Clinton. His career has long been entwined with MC, which is affiliated with the Mississippi Baptist Convention. As a student, he served as president of the Baptist Student Union (BSU) and accepted summer missions assignments to northern New York and the Philippines.

He obtained his B.A. *magna cum laude* from MC and earned his Master of Divinity degree at Southern Baptists' Southwestern Seminary in Ft. Worth. He was later awarded the honorary Doctor of Divinity Degree from Mississippi College.

Shortly after completing his master's degree, the Southern Baptist Convention Foreign Mission Board (known today as the International Mission Board) appointed him a missionary to Indonesia where he was a general evangelist in East Java and Surabaya.

He also served as an associate to the area director for South and Southeast Asia, administrator for Southern Baptist mission work in India, and area director for Southern Asia and the Pacific.

Throughout 23 years of service overseas, he always returned to Clinton for missionary furloughs. He worked with international students and was an adjunct mission professor in MC's

Department of Christian Studies for years.

Still, the MC Hall of Famer harbored some reservations about Royce's suggestion. "I wasn't really sure what Dr. Royce had in mind," the IMB president emeritus said. "I was still very active then, and I didn't have the time to sort through my things.

"I was honored by the request, but I wasn't enthusiastic about the possibility of having a bunch of boxes filled with my documents and things stacked in a remote corner of the library," he recalled.

Several months ago when Rankin toured the BSU Center on the Clinton campus and heard about MC's plans to renovate the space, he had a "light bulb" moment. MC's 2021 Alumnus of the Year discussed the archive with current MC President Blake Thompson and BSU Director Mandy Phillips, who were thrilled with the potential of making it a centerpiece feature of the renovation.

Despite offers from other churches and seminaries to house and display his voluminous work, Rankin agreed to let MC and the BSU Center be the selected location for the prized resources.

Far from a few boxes stacked in a corner, the Rankin Missions Center is a dynamic, interactive exhibit filled with displays, artifacts, and resources that delight historians and students interested in learning about international missions.

The Jerry Rankin Mission Center was officially dedicated Oct. 28 during an open house for the newly renovated BSU facility. "This center is a testament to a man who has a passion for education and a heart for Christ," Thompson said at the dedication.

Rankin said he was "absolutely thrilled" with the center. "I was overwhelmed," he said. "The design is an interactive display that will continue to be integral to future

generations of students. It is far beyond anything I could have ever conceptualized.”

The same could be said about the BSU House renovation. Phillips played an integral role in the project, helping raise funds and working with Rankin and CDFL architects and engineers to design the space.

She said the BSU House renovation is a major marker in the life of the BSU. “The enhancements enable us to spend more time with students in strategic ways. There’s more flexibility. We can do more strategic outreach and focused discussions in a place that is more conducive to deeper conversations.

“We have been enjoying the sounds of full rooms and laughter. We are thrilled by the variety of ministries we can now offer in one specific location.”

MC acquired the three-bedroom, private residence at 203 Monroe Street years ago. When the basement of the B.C. Rogers Student Center was remodeled in early 2020, the BSU moved into the small, unfinished building that featured a wraparound garage and an unfinished second floor.

An internal staircase sliced through the middle of the house, rendering it incapable of hosting large gatherings.

“In many ways, it was an upgrade for us because it was the first time the BSU had a freestanding facility,” Phillips said, “but the space was smaller and more choppy: 25 students couldn’t fit comfortably in any of the rooms. We often do many outreach projects that necessitate more space.”

While there wasn’t much money available to make significant changes to the house, MC administrators supported her efforts to raise funds for a major renovation. “They told me if we could raise the money, we could finish out the building and renovate it for our purposes,” she said.

“By God’s grace, that’s what we were able to do. We prayed about it and got the word out, and it was absolutely a movement of God that we were able to get it funded in the time that we did while still carrying out our ministry on campus.”

Phillips said funding for the extensive remodel came from MC, the Mississippi Baptist Education Commission, and significant donations from individuals and churches. Students were among the first to give, and Rankin helped raise a significant amount as well.

“Dr. Rankin saw the need for us to have a usable space where we could function in the best way possible, to be good stewards of what we had, and to share the Gospel on this campus and among the community,” Phillips said.

Church volunteers helped build and lengthen a deck that added exterior seating for outside events. CDFL, based in Jackson, was hired to develop a design that would make the best use of interior space.

The central staircase and a wall separating the kitchen were removed, opening up the main room. Front and back stairs and an Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible bathroom were added, and an attached garage was transformed into a casual living space complete with a ping pong table.

An extra storage room, sheetrock, and additional air-conditioning, heating, and lighting systems topped off the facelift.

Phillips said she has enjoyed watching returning students enter the upgraded building for the first time. “Their mouths literally drop when they see the renovation,” she said. “They are blown away by the usable nature of the space – the open feel, the lighting.

“They appreciate how comfortable and useful the house is, especially the massive upstairs room, where they can study and

host events.”

The crown jewel of the BSU House renovation is the Rankin Mission Center on the second floor.

Its central diorama features a map portraying Rankin’s travels to 157 countries and all 11 of his published books. The volumes are available for sale, with all proceeds donated to the BSU.

An impressive wall display contains many of the diplomas, plaques, and photos he garnered throughout his exceptional career.

The preponderance of the center showcases an expansive archive that boasts more than 500 volumes and thousands of documents, board reports, mission magazine columns, DVDs, and CDs.

Phillips said individuals could peruse the material for days and still not avail themselves of all its vast resources. “It is one of the largest missions-focused libraries on a college campus and perhaps the largest personal missions library in the world. His life’s legacy is ministry, and his work appeals to students, many of whom have taken missions courses from Dr. Rankin.”

Rankin’s personal testimony is at the heart of the mission center, which serves as a detailed account of his journey from the MC campus to mission fields in every corner of the Earth to his retirement in 2009. He and wife Bobbye, a Brookhaven native and also an MC graduate, returned to Clinton after he retired.

“It confirms my call, the values in my life, and what MC means to me,” Rankin said. “My hope is that it will serve as an inspiration for students to see someone who is obedient to God’s call, to look at what God has done in my life and think, ‘He can use me, too.’”

"I am happy to be involved with the MC campus, teaching missions courses, and enjoying all kinds of interaction with students, mentoring and influencing them. I realize that's going to come to an end, but I'm thrilled that something I leave behind can continue to influence the students."

As impressive as the renovated BSU House and Rankin Mission Center may be, Phillips cautions against becoming too comfortable in its plush, new surroundings. "This is a game-changer in so many ways. It's a modern, welcoming home, a most creative environment, that is one of a kind on this planet, and the students enjoy it.

"However, in ministry, we don't want to be 'come and see'-type people. We want to be 'go and tell' faithful servants.

"This building will not change our ministry. We will always be on campus, engaging students. Just like Jesus shared His life and walked with His disciples, we want to spend time talking about the Lord. This isn't a place that will keep us here, but it will enhance how we 'go and tell' about Christ on a regular basis."

Editor's note: Article and photograph submitted by the MC Communications Department. Edited for clarity and inclusion of additional information.