

HOBART HARDEJ HONORED BY CITY OF MEMPHIS

Richard A. “Hobart” Hardej, dean of admissions for the Exeter Summer School, was awarded the key to the city of Memphis in January by Mayor Willie Herenton, for his efforts to improve educational opportunities for Memphis students. He also received the Memphis Rotary Club’s Paul Harris Fellow Award, an award named for the founder of Rotary International that honors those who demonstrate “the spirit of service above self.”

Thanks to Hardej, said Memphis Rotary official Jules Wade, “hundreds of Memphis students who would otherwise never have been able to do so have experienced the glories of an Exeter summer—the excellent academics, the early morning trips to the ocean, the friends made from all over the world.”

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Mayor Willie Herenton (left) presented Hobart Hardej, dean of admissions at the Exeter Summer School, with the key to the city of Memphis in January, in recognition of Hardej’s efforts to bring Memphis high school students to Exeter. “It’s a thrill to see these students thrive here for a summer and go on to do so well,” says Hardej.

Hardej, who joined the Exeter faculty in 1987. In 1995, he became director of the summer school, a rotating position he held until 2001, when Doug Rogers became the director and Hardej became the dean of admissions. Over time, Hardej has significantly expanded the summer school’s partnership with Memphis PREP, a program created in 1968 after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., which provides academic enrichment opportunities to some of the poorest students in Memphis. Exeter now provides scholarships to an average of 18 Memphis students every summer. Over the past decade, the summer school has enrolled 179 Memphis PREP high school students and 12 middle school students from the Memphis Academy of Science and Mathematics, a charter school, providing approximately \$700,000 in financial aid to these students.

Hardej says Memphis PREP complements the Academy mission’s to educate “youth from every quarter,” adding that the summer school may actually enjoy greater latitude to pursue that mission. “The structure of the summer school allows us to accept students who might have trouble handling an entire academic year at Exeter,” he says, “but who are able to make quantum leaps in a five-week program.”

Many Memphis PREP students arrive at Exeter with no knowledge of boarding school life, says Hardej. “They experience a host of firsts when they attend the summer session: first time away from home, first time out of the South, first time on an airplane.” And however much the summer school experience gives to these Memphis teens, he adds, they give at least as much back, sharing their regional culture and perspectives with students from all over the country and the world. “They bring their personalities as African Americans from Memphis, which has a wonderful history. These students are all endlessly curious about where everyone comes from and how their lives compare.”

In addition to Memphis PREP, Hardej has also worked with similar initiatives in Little Rock, AR, and Jackson, MS, to bring students to Exeter. He has also overseen the summer school’s Native American Program, founded by the late DeWitt Fischman ’35, which brings more than two dozen Navajo, Hopi Pueblo, White Mountain and San Carlos Apache students to Exeter every summer.

Hardej’s awards come as he is winding down his work as dean of admissions with the summer school; Rosanna Salcedo, a member of the modern languages department and a summer school administrator, is succeeding him as dean of admissions. Hardej believes the practice of rotating the position ultimately enriches the summer school. “There is an opportunity in the summer school to experiment, to adjust and make changes without affecting the entire institution,” he says. Hardej hopes his legacy will be the greater access to the summer school that has been created for families from a range of incomes. Since 1995, the percentage of summer school students receiving financial aid has risen from 10 percent to 32 percent (a figure that is closer to 40 percent if you factor out international students, who do not receive financial aid).

Hardej calls his 12 years with Exeter Summer School “my most gratifying experience in independent schools, ever. We reach over 600 students every summer, as opposed to the 300 new students in the regular session. I’ve watched over 7,000 students attend the program. Working with kids who are just dying for the opportunity has been great.”