

Rupp strives for local economic development

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It wasn't until Jeffrey Rupp was elected mayor of Columbus that he truly became interested in economic development.

During his service to the city of Columbus, Rupp had the opportunity to visit with the late Congressman Sonny Montgomery.

"We weren't close but I always got the sense that he was in it for the people, not the party," Rupp said. "That type of mindset applies to economic and community development as well and I've always tried to be mindful of his desire to work for the common good."

Rupp has taken that spirit of community into his position as director of business outreach for Mississippi State University.

"When talking about economic development, we tend to focus on jobs but the real benefit is realized in the increased quality of life that comes when communities prosper," Rupp said.

The MSU Office of Business Outreach is designed to "stimulate and support economic development initiatives which it believes will create/sustain meaningful employment and improve the quality of life within Mississippi, and has long provided programs and assistance to both existing businesses and new ventures," according to the MSU website.

The outreach office works to provide up-to-date information, high-quality conferences, workshops, seminars and expert technical and organizational assistance, as well as custom-designed in-house training for organizations.

The office works through four distinct service units, including the Division of Business Research, the Division of Business Services, the Small Business Development Center and the Technology Resource Institute.

"President Keenum has emphasized outreach as a key mission of Mississippi State University," Rupp said. "Service, learning and research are the three missions on our university seal. MSU is heavily invested in service and outreach through our extension service and other resources. TRI is uniquely positioned to deliver the outreach component because of our existing network of business, community and political leaders and our access to top-notch faculty and staff at MSU."

Rupp's job is to leverage university resources to help in economic and community development efforts across the state. He said it can be as simple as helping a blackberry farmer establish a Web presence or doing market research on a new product for a large existing company that wants to add to or retain its current workforce.

"We track our clients for several years documenting the amount of investment and jobs created," Rupp said.

TRI has been around for several years and serves as one of 25 university centers sponsored by the Economic Development Administration.

Rupp said TRI has worked with about 50 clients this year across Mississippi.

"Many were established businesses looking to expand into new markets, some were entrepreneurs trying to get their businesses off the

ground,” Rupp said. “We use teams of MBA students to do extensive research collecting qualitative and quantitative data to help businesses stay competitive with the goal of adding new jobs. We also help entrepreneurs prepare business plans to present to their bankers and put some of them in front of angel investors. Again, the goal is investment and job creation.”

Rupp believes in the present economy the services of the MSU Office of Business Outreach are needed more than ever.

“This fall semester we have doubled the number of MBA teams working with statewide businesses,” Rupp said. “Our new dean in the College of Business comes from Auburn, a land-grant institution similar to MSU, and she is very aggressive in promoting our expertise and services.”

During his service as mayor of Columbus, Rupp developed a community-minded perspective that he brings into his position at MSU.

“Being mayor was perhaps the most challenging and rewarding job I’ve ever had. As mayor I developed an appreciation of the importance of creating a sense of community, a sense of place,” Rupp said. “I also learned a great deal about getting people with different opinions to agree upon things that were in the best interest of all.”

And while Rupp has a master’s degree in public policy and administration from MSU and completed programs of study at the Economic Development Institute at Oklahoma University and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, it was his bachelor’s degree that brought him to the Golden Triangle.

Rupp’s bachelor’s degree in radio-television and film from Temple University in Philadelphia, Penn., led him to work at WMUR-TV in New Hampshire, owned by the same corporation as WCBI-TV in Columbus. The New Hampshire-based television station sits in the home of the nation’s first presidential primary and every four years, the station would partner with CNN to produce the presidential debates.

Rupp said he loved his 15-year career in broadcast journalism. He became Vice President for News for the Imes Corporation’ stations, but is best known for his role as anchor at WCBI-TV.

“That’s where I developed my interest in politics,” Rupp said. “Both of those jobs gave me an appreciate that it’s everyday people who really make a difference. As a reporter I interviewed presidential candidates and celebrities but my most memorable stories were those that involved ordinary people doing extraordinary things.”

Today, Rupp said he continues to look up to small business people, working families and those working in financially strapped communities.

“These are the folks I look up to now,” Rupp said. “I admire my wife Donna. She’s juggling more and more responsibility at work and between us we’re doing our best to take care of our two young girls, like hundreds of other families in Starkville.”

Rupp’s wife, Donna, is the advertising and communications manager at Cadence Banking. They have two daughters: Taylor, who is in the fourth grade Henderson- Ward-Stewart, and Ellie who is in first grade at Sudduth Elementary. Rupp is quick to point out that his biggest accomplishment in life are his girls.

Donna Rupp said her husband is one of the most committed people she knows.

“Whether it is work, friends, family, music or just exercise, if he sets his mind to something he will work hard until he had reached his goal,” Donna Rupp said. “He has great focus and determination. I really admire that about him.”

Donna Rupp said Jeffrey is also a talented person with great skills as a musician and a public speaker. But probably his greatest accomplishment and one that she admires the most is his success at being a father.

“I am always amazed at his willingness to do whatever it takes to be there for his girls — he will sit and have his hair done, climb a tree to catch a lizard or help Taylor do her cheerleading stunts,” Donna Rupp said. “My most fond memory was when we went to Disney Land last year. The look on his face when our youngest, Ellie, saw her favorite Princess was priceless. He is truly a great person and a loving husband and father.”

The family belongs to First Presbyterian Church in Starkville, where Rupp will occasionally play guitar for the services or lead the children’s sermons. He can also be found performing at nursing homes and for charities or civic functions.

Rupp loves music and played the guitar to help pay for college. He even quit school for two years to play in a rock and roll band.

Now, playing music locally is his favorite hobby.

“I did not expect to still be playing live music at my advanced age of 51, but am blessed to part of a great musical fraternity in the Starkville area,” Rupp said.

While the Rups are enjoying life, the future is filled with positive expectations.

“I honestly don’t know what’s next, but I do know that I want to continue doing something that has a positive impact on my community and my state,” Rupp said.