

Mary Harper and Bertha Roddey receive state's highest civilian award

By Glenn Burkins – November 10, 2014



Dr. Mary Harper, left, and Dr. Bertha Roddey join in an official toast at a Gantt Center reception where they received North Carolina's highest civilian award, the Order of the Long Leaf Pine. Harper and Roddey were instructors at UNC Charlotte in 1974 when they began work to create the Afro-American Cultural and Service Center, predecessor to today's Harvey B. Gantt Center. (Photos: Glenn H. Burkins for Qcitymetro.com)



Mary Harper, left, and Bertha Roddey

Retired educators Dr. Mary Harper and Dr. Bertha Maxwell Roddey, who in 1974 co-founded the organization that would become the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African American Arts + Culture, on Saturday received the state's highest civilian award, the Order of the Long Leaf Pine.

To see more photos from this event, [click here](#).

Harper and Roddey were chosen for the award by Gov. Pat McCrory, who was not present at a Gantt Center reception where the women received their certificates.

Harper and Roddey were instructors at UNC Charlotte when they began working to create the Afro-American Cultural and Service Center. They envisioned the center as a place to preserve and promote the city's African American heritage, which was being threatened by urban renewal.

North Carolina Rep. Kelly Alexander Jr., who presented the awards, said success was not inevitable 40 years ago when Harper and Roddey began their work.

"There were so many skeptics," he said. "But yet, here we are, 40 years down the trail, and we're sitting in what was created based upon an idea."

Harper said she has been asked many times whether she envisioned the center as it is today.

"I think we both envisioned a center that would serve the people, all the people, and meet the needs of the people," she said. "I am proud of its growth, and I'm sure we will continue to grow in years to come and serve many generations to come."

Formerly located in a building that once housed Little Rock AME Zion Church, the center in 2009 opened in its current location as part of the Levine Center for the Arts. It was renamed the Harvey B. Gantt Center in honor of the city's first African American mayor.

The Gantt Center is in the midst of a year-long celebration to commemorate the past four decades.