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Remembering his roots...



Brian Loden/SDN

Oakland Raiders wide receiver and National Football League record-holder Jerry Rice, right, looks over plans for an outdoor classroom and landscape improvements at his alma mater, East Oktibbeha High School (formerly B.L. Moor High) with 1974 alumna Jackie Ellis of Atlanta, who has helped spearhead a group called the Education Association for East Oktibbeha County Schools to generate support for projects to bolster the school. Rice spoke during an EAEOCS alumni banquet Friday night and made a \$30,000 gift to the outdoor classroom project.

NFL star Jerry Rice gives \$30,000 for project

By BRIAN HAWKINS
Starkville Daily News

East Oktibbeha High School's most famous alumnus made a return trip home to help his fellow alumni and school supporters celebrate an ongoing project to improve the school grounds, as well as give it a financial boost.

Oakland Raiders wide receiver Jerry Rice, who graduated from then-B.L. Moor High School in 1981, joined members of the Education Association East Oktibbeha County Schools during an alumni banquet Friday night as they celebrated continuing efforts to develop an outdoor classroom, student courtyard and improve the landscaping at the school.



Rice also made a \$30,000 gift to the EAEOCS-sponsored project.

Visiting the school where he used run sprints down the central hallway was enjoyable, said Rice, who was in town just for Friday night.

"I get chills even now just walking up the hallway," said

Rice, who has broken multiple National Football League records and played in multiple Super Bowls. "I never knew what I would end up doing in life, but this place gave me the foundation to further my education.

"I learned here that if you dedicate yourself, there's no telling where you can go," he added.

That's a message Rice says he continues to share with young people, and he shared it again with EAEOCS members during Friday night's banquet as encouragement for the group's endeavors to improve the school.

EAEOCS, formed in September 2002 to organize alumni of EOHS, as it has been known since 2002 following

the name change from B.L. Moor High, to sponsor a project to help improve the school in the wake of the April 7, 2002, arson fire that partially destroyed the building.

The group's work led to meetings with representatives of the Carl Small Town Center at Mississippi State, meetings with EOHS students and teachers and community supporters in developing the project that will culminate with the construction of the outdoor classroom, an educational walking trail, a park for picnicking and relaxation and the student courtyard.

Numerous local churches and businesses, as well as the Oktibbeha County Board of

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Supervisors, have pledged their support to the project, and that type of community support for the school is critical, Rice said.

"This project is going to be great. It will give teachers an opportunity to educate students in new ways, and it's going to be good for the community," Rice said. "It's really all about the kids. For me to participate and play a small part is exciting, but this has been and must continue to be a team effort. The community must be involved for any school to succeed."

EAEPOCS member Jackie Ellis, president of the school's Class of 1974, said the land for the walking trail and outdoor

classroom has been cleared and that alumni hope to hold a formal dedication ceremony next summer after the project is complete.

"That would be wonderful for us to be able to come together next year and dedicate the finished project," said Ellis, who now lives in Atlanta. "The community has responded exceptionally well to this project, and for that we are so grateful. We wanted to do something to help our school, and with the help of so many, we're doing that."

For Oktibbeha County School District Supt. Walter Conley, who this year marked the 40th anniversary of his graduation from Moor High, seeing the community response to the project has been encouraging.

"It really is fantastic, and I just have to commend Jackie Ellis for her work. It reminds me of when I had her in the classroom all those years ago. She has the same determination and spirit to see a project through," Conley said. "The way all the alumni and members of the community have come together to support this project is amazing. Community involvement in our schools is the key to success."

Various businesses, government entities and churches have contributed to the project including Wal-Mart, Columbus Bricks, Boral Bricks, Morgan Tree Works, the Oktibbeha County Board of Supervisors, Mississippi State University faculty, the Carl Small Town

Center, Weyerhaeuser Corp., Pine Grove Baptist Church, Bethel Baptist Church, Austin Church of Christ, Oktibbeha County Ministerial Alliance, Sessums Water Association and various alumni of the former Moor High, Alexander High and Pleasant Grove schools.

Anyone interested in making contributions to the project or for other work by EAEOCS may write to EAEOCS, P.O. Box 463, Starkville, Miss., 39760, or visit the organization's Internet site at <http://www.eaeocs.org>.

EAEOCS members are continuing their celebration of the improvement project with a picnic and community fun day at the school from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. today.

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