

7 leaders receive Mississippi Medal of Service

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JACKSON — Harry Martin of Tupelo is a long-time economic developer who helped bring tens of thousands of jobs to northwestern Mississippi. The Rev. John Perkins of Jackson is a religious leader who has worked tirelessly for civil rights and racial reconciliation. Al Rosenbaum is a former Meridian mayor who helped lift his city's fortunes through work in government, business and charity. Gov. Haley Barbour honored them and four others Tuesday with the Mississippi Medal of

Service, an award he created last year to recognize people whose work has improved the state.

"I'm the 63rd governor. And every one of us who has had this job stands on the shoulders of people who went in front of us," Barbour said. "In this case, this is an example of some of the people that have made a difference for Mississippi and whose leadership should be recognized — because it's not easy."

Dozens of friends and relatives attended Tuesday's ceremony in the Woolfolk state office building near the Capitol.

The Medal of Service recipients were Brad Dye,

who was lieutenant governor from 1980-92; businessman John Palmer, who formed and sold two telecommunications companies before serving as U.S. ambassador to Portugal from 2001-04; former Mississippi Department of Archives and History Director Elbert Hilliard; Gulf Coast businessman Victor Mavar, one of the early leaders of the state Republican Party; Rosenbaum; Perkins and Martin.

Mavar said when he was in his family's seafood business several decades ago, he and his relatives would start work by 3:30 a.m., then take a coffee break about 8:30 a.m. at the old Buena Vista

hotel. He said he'd see politicians and they'd chuckle as they asked him about the Republican Party. In the late 1950s, Mavar said he was one of the few Republicans in Mississippi.

Mavar said he recruited a young Republican named Trent Lott to run for the coastal Mississippi congressional seat in 1972.

"The next morning, after the election, it wasn't so funny anymore," Mavar said.

As Rosenbaum accepted his medal, he joked with the Republican governor: "I should tell you that I ran as a Democrat."

Martin started working for the Economic and

Community Development Foundation in Tupelo and Lee County in 1956. He persuaded cities and counties to put aside their traditional rivalries and work together to attract jobs, Barbour said.

The governor praised Perkins for helping the downtrodden and for putting "service above self when it was hard, when it wasn't popular."

Perkins said he left his native Mississippi in the late 1950s because of oppression and poverty. He and his family returned from California in 1960 and started a ministry for the needy in Mendenhall. In 1972, they started a ministry in Jackson.

"I wanted to come back and live my Christian faith in Mississippi," Perkins said.

Dye is the only person in Mississippi to have served three terms as lieutenant governor — an office that's now limited to two. Before winning the state's second-highest office, Dye served as state economic director and oversaw the rebuilding of the Port of Gulfport after Hurricane Camille struck in 1969.

Barbour said Hilliard has "done more than anybody in this generation of making sure that we preserve our history for our children and our grandchildren to learn about how our state became what it is."