

Combination of powerhouses: Illinois Humanities opens new office in Lewis & Clark's Mannie Jackson Center

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EDWARDSVILLE – Two humanities powerhouses are coming together in Edwardsville, Illinois.

Illinois Humanities' new southwestern Illinois office, located inside Lewis and Clark Community College's Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities, is slated to open Wednesday, July 5.

"We're grateful for our partnership with Lewis and Clark Community College, which will enable us to engage more fully with communities in southern and western Illinois," said Angel Ysaguirre, executive director of Illinois Humanities. "The opening of our southwestern Illinois office presents an exciting opportunity for us to enhance our role as a statewide cultural institution as the Illinois Bicentennial approaches. We're eager to see where that opportunity leads."

Founded in 1973 and headquartered in Chicago, Illinois Humanities is a nonprofit organization that serves as the Illinois affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Its mission is to strengthen society by fueling inquiry and conversation about the ideas and works that shape culture.

Illinois Humanities provides resources and support to cultural organizations throughout the state. Additionally, drawing upon the content and methods of humanities disciplines such as history, literature and philosophy, it conducts original programs in five focus areas: public policy, media and journalism, business, art, and access.

Various members of the organization's staff will visit the Edwardsville office frequently, and its program manager for access, Matt Meacham, will be based there permanently.

Meacham, a native of Chester in southwestern Illinois, has a background in teaching, journalism, music and folklore, and a particular interest in the cultural health of rural communities. He joined Illinois Humanities in 2013 and manages its Museum on Main Street program and Road Scholars Speakers Bureau.

He also assists with its Community Grants program and has contributed to such recent initiatives as Continuing Ed.: Parents and the Future of Illinois Public Schools, Seeding Change: The Future of Our Farms and Communities, the Veterans Reading Group program, and the Southern Illinois Wonders radio series.

The new office not only offers Illinois Humanities access to the Metro East as well as southern and western Illinois, but also fosters opportunities for collaboration with the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities. The two entities have closely aligned missions.

The MJCH seeks to conduct activities that enhance mutual understanding and respect among people of different cultures, races, ethnicities and religions; promote positive social change by transforming attitudes and perceptions towards greater acceptance, tolerance and interaction among these groups; and ultimately remove barriers that hinder individuals and groups from realizing their aspirations and full potential.

The center's physical location, at the site of the historic Lincoln School, opened in December 2015. The Lincoln School was where African American students attended classes before the Edwardsville School District was integrated in 1951. One of those students was Mannie Jackson, who achieved notable success in both sports and business. Jackson purchased the Lincoln School building in 2008.

When Lewis and Clark Community College became one of the first two-year colleges to receive a challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2011, Jackson donated the building to the college and established an endowment for a humanities center to be housed there. The college renovated the building in 2014-15.

The MJCH's current activities include humanities education, research and public engagement. Projects include a cultural mapping and storytelling humanities research project; Conversation Toward a Brighter Future, in which middle and high school students from Madison County identify and research issues affecting their communities and make action-oriented plans to address them; and emerging STEM humanities programming in partnership with the Madison County Regional Office of Education, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and Lewis and Clark Community College. Public engagement efforts have included speakers such as retired U.S. Secretary of State Gen. Colin Powell and basketball legend/humanitarian Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. New this fall, the MJCH will co-sponsor an International Symposium to be hosted in Washington, D.C.

"The world's population is becoming increasingly pluralistic and polarized, creating conditions of resource scarcity and economic imbalances resulting in imploding nation states and worldwide migration of populations seeking safe harbors," said Mannie Jackson, president of the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities Foundation (MJCHF) Board of Directors. "The MJCH seeks to understand, through people's stories, how they interact with their environments, their sense of place and how that can connect with environmental science to resolve social and economic issues."

The opening of Illinois Humanities' office inside the MJCH will continue an already constructive relationship between the two institutions.

“Illinois Humanities’ decision to open an office at the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities will provide opportunities for statewide coordination of humanities program development through both entities,” said MJCH Foundation Executive Director Ed Hightower.

“I am honored to serve as a board member of Illinois Humanities and look forward to sharing the MJCH’s vision with Illinois Humanities, finding synergies between the two missions,” said L&C President Dale Chapman, who also serves on the MJCH Foundation board.

In 2015, Illinois Humanities provided support for an exhibition accompanying dramatizations of the early 20th-century Alton School Cases, concerning the desegregation of Alton schools, presented by the Illinois Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission and Lewis and Clark Community College. The college also collaborated with Illinois Humanities to present “Changing Currents: Valmeyer and Pinhook Reclaim Community After Flooding” during the 2015 Greater St. Louis Humanities Festival.

“Our goals and those of the Mannie Jackson Center complement one another well, and we foresee many opportunities to work together for the benefit of the region and our state,” Ysaguirre said.