

[Home](#) / [News](#) / Endowment created to atone for slavery

News and Progress

Founding father descendant establishes slavery atonement endowment

Jan. 23, 2008

COLUMBIA, Mo. – For Clay Westfall Mering, his great-great grandfather James S. Rollins was a complex man living in an age very different from today. The many contributions his great-great grandfather made to MU are recognized even now, and he is still known as the “Father of the University of Missouri.” Yet Rollins was also a slave owner, holding as many as 34 slaves during the period before the Civil War. Mering recently decided to address his personal ties to his relative and this painful legacy by giving to the Black Studies Program.



Clay Westfall Mering, of Tucson, Ariz., is the great-great grandson of James Rollins, one of the founders of the University of Missouri. Rollins is pictured in the painting by George Caleb Bingham, an heirloom of the family which hangs in the home of Clay Mering's mother.

Mering established the Black Studies endowment fund in the amount of \$25,000. The permanently endowed fund will support research, travel expenses for conferences, sponsoring of conferences and seminars, and scholarship awards to participants. With help from the investment, students and faculty can continue the study of slavery and its persistent after effects.

“I had known since I was a child that my ancestor owned slaves, but had never really considered how I might personally address this issue,” Mering said. “In the past year it occurred to me that it would be beneficial to create an endowment in my relative’s name which speaks to the family’s involvement in slavery and expresses regret for that involvement. I knew immediately, with Rollins’ strong and life-long advocacy of the University of Missouri, that the endowment belonged here.”

Clay is related to Rollins through his mother, Ellen Westfall Mering. Rollins was passionate about MU; he rallied support to pass the law which opened the school and donated land for the original campus. He served on the Board of Curators for 18 years, and also worked as a lawyer. Last year, Mering decided to learn more about MU and ways he could donate. Both his mother and father had graduated from the school, earning degrees in English and History, respectively. Mering was interested in making a lasting impact for students and teachers, and discussed possibilities with development officers at the school. He decided at an early stage that the Black Studies Program would be the most appropriate place for the fund. He also knew that just handing over the money would not be enough.

“I knew the use of the money needed to be specified in a way that not only addressed slavery itself, but also acknowledged the effects of slavery that continue to this day,” Mering said. “The fund will support research and study of topics in slavery, race relations, civil rights and black culture. It will help to keep these subjects out in the open, and it is important to recognize their impact on society.”

The details were finalized in December, and the endowment became permanent under the name of Mering’s relative. Mering felt strongly that the name of the fund should reflect the motivation behind its creation. The fund is titled “The James S. Rollins Slavery Atonement Endowment.”

“This is a significant gesture and we are grateful for Mr. Mering’s generosity,” said Michael Middleton, Deputy Chancellor and representative for the Black Studies program at MU. “It would be wonderful to see a groundswell of similar efforts and contributions come from this. It is a gift from the heart, which is gratifying to all parties involved. If more people in our country made similar selfless gestures, we would all be in a better situation.”

The Black Studies program is crucial to the University of Missouri’s mission to integrate multicultural knowledge into course work and increase the participation of ethnic and racial minorities in higher education. The central mission of the Black Studies Program is to train scholars to teach and research the world black experience by making available information and the analytical tools with which to study African people whether in the U.S., Africa, or throughout the Diaspora. Clay Mering was born in Ft. Bragg, N.C., to John and Ellen Mering, both graduates of MU. In 1981, Ellen donated materials to the Western Historical Manuscript-Columbia’s collection on James Rollins. Clay graduated from the University of Minnesota with degrees in architecture and geography, and currently lives in Tucson, Ariz. with his wife and daughter.

Copyright © 2008 — Curators of the University of Missouri. [DMCA](#) and other [copyright information](#).
All rights reserved. An [equal opportunity/ADA](#) institution.
Published by University Development, 306 Reynolds Alumni Center, Columbia, MO 65211
Phone: (573) 882-6511 • E-mail: formizzou@missouri.edu
Last Update: Jan 25, 2008