

'Welcome Home': University Opens LGBTQ+ Lounge in Lamar Hall

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Jaime Harker, University of Mississippi professor of English and director of the Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies, cuts the ribbon on UM's new LGBTQ+ lounge inside Lamar Hall. Photo by Kevin Bain/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

OXFORD, Miss. – The University of Mississippi on Thursday (Oct. 31) dedicated a new LGBTQ+ lounge space in Lamar Hall – a relaxing, open area with stylish seating and large windows, which offer an impressive campus view from the fourth floor.

The space, UM's first dedicated LGBTQ+ area, is the result of five years of work. The UM Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies and Division of Diversity and Community Engagement joined Facilities Management to redesign the area, donated by the Department of Writing and Rhetoric.

Jaime Harker, Isom Center director and professor of English, held back tears as she spoke at the dedication. She said when she came to the university in 2003, one of the only real gathering places for LGBTQ+ students was her gay and lesbian literature class.

As their professor, Harker had a strong sense of the isolation they felt, which helps her appreciate the progress here.

“For all of the students who have come before, the students who are here now and the many more to come – all of us together – this space is for you and for that glorious tribe of queer Southerners you represent,” Harker said. “On behalf of all of us, welcome home.”

Harker said creating the new lounge, as well as hosting campus conferences, lectures, Pride Week and other events over the last five years have helped strengthen the local LGBTQ+ community.



The university has a new lounge for LGBTQ+ students on the fourth floor of Lamar Hall. Photo by Kevin Bain/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

The ribbon cutting and reception was held on the last day of October, which is LGBTQ+ History Month. At the gathering, many students, faculty, staff and alumni mingled inside the lounge and ate while reflecting on the historic moment of the lounge opening.

Shawnboda Mead, UM assistant vice chancellor for diversity, said the day was special to her and others working to foster inclusion at the university.

“This space and this moment, this place in time at the university is just one step forward, one showing of progress, and we know we have much more work to do,” Mead said. “I’m so excited to be a part of that.”

Stephen Monroe, chair of the Department of Writing and Rhetoric, said his department is proud to support the creation of the lounge.

“Our LGBTQ+ students and colleagues make our university stronger and better,” Monroe said. “Through spaces like the lounge, Dr. Harker and other UM leaders are creating a new Southern hospitality on campus, a hospitality that is complete, inclusive and welcoming of all.”

Brenna Paola, a senior sociology major from Overt, in Jones County, noted the meaning attached to having an actual physical space on campus.

“A lot of times, we look at queer spaces as something that is made in a moment and will go away,” Paola said. “This is physical and real and you can look at it. There’s a sign for it. I think that is just fabulous because space means a lot of things, and this is really our space.”

Cadence Penthany, UM coordinator of inclusion and cross cultural engagement, attended Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania, and saw the years of work that went into creating a similar space there. But in her year at Ole Miss, she is in awe of the work being done here.

"I think coming to a place like this, you really start to see the hard, hard work and the dedication of folks who care about a place and care about it in a way they want to make it better," Penthany said. "I am grateful to be here to witness all of the beautiful, hard work that is happening here and also grateful to be a part of that."



Alumnus Pat Miller, who attended the university in 1969, talks about her experiences as a student the ribbon cutting for Ole Miss' new LGBTQ+ lounge. Photo by Kevin Bain/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

Pat Miller, of Abbeville, and her wife, Gail Stratton, came to the event to show support for the lounge and the students who will use it. Miller said she was a student at the university in 1969 and is very proud to see the new space opened.

"I am so proud of what work the university has done, in particular, Dr. Harker," Miller said. "You can imagine how it was being a student back then. Everybody was closeted. I can't imagine being a student here now, but I wish I were.

"I'm so happy just to be here today to share this."

Stratton expects students will be drawn to the space in different ways.

"I guarantee you there will be people who come here in the middle of the night to see it first before they will come here during the day," Stratton said. "It's really something. It's fabulous."

Harker encourages everyone to take advantage of the opportunities in the lounge, which is open any time Lamar Hall is open.

"Let's make this a space where everyone who feels isolated or confused or despondent can come and find community here and find people to embrace them and value them," Harker said. "And let them know that here they will always have a space that is their own."