are almost countless varieties of heirloom tomatoes on God’s green earth, and Marcus Blanton is out to find the very best one.

That’s no small quest for a man who has personally raised approximately 200 different kinds of tomatoes this year alone at his Carthage residence and has tasted at least 700 varieties.

The campus police officer’s lifelong passion for gardening was sown by his grandmother, who instilled a deep love and respect for nature’s bounty.

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Just call Dr. Mart McMullan a “fixer.”

Since becoming senior advisor to the University of Mississippi Medical Center vice chancellor during Dr. Dan Jones’ tenure, McMullan has been tasked with turning around areas that need improvement or even a makeover. That has ranged from jump-starting the pediatric congenital heart program to enticing top physicians to join the Medical Center’s staff.

McMullan, who retired at the end of June, has used his decades in private practice and vast people skills to craft solutions that make the Medical Center a better place for patients and employees alike. Since 2005, he’s had the ear – and the trust – of department chairs and faculty that has allowed him to “push the right buttons to help people,” said his School of Medicine classmate, former vice chancellor Dr. James Keeton.

“He would come to me and tell me things when there was no way I could have known that,” said Keeton.

“For a Rebel, he’s certainly a Bulldog,” said Dr. Mike McMullan, director of UMMC’s adult congenital heart program and one of Mart McMullan’s distant cousins. “He’s so tenacious. He makes things happen.”

Mart McMullan arrived at UMMC following a 32-year career at Baptist Hospital in Jackson.

“I came here at age 65 thinking, ‘I don’t want to be an old doddering fool,’” he said.

“Mart McMullan spent most of his career fixing hearts in his role as a cardiovascular surgeon,” said Jones. “It was the combination of that will to fix things, his strong local and national reputation and his gentlemanly charm that drew me to recruit him to be a part of our leadership team.”

The plan was for McMullan to continue in surgery. Jones, however, asked him just weeks into the job to be his senior advisor, focusing on clinical functions. Not long after, McMullan got a title befitting a troubleshooter.

“It was Jimmy Keeton who started using the ‘czar’ word,” McMullan said. The two were classmates, former vice chancellor for clinical affairs, and he recruited two of the busiest cardiologists in St. Louis.”

“He told me when he became chief of cardiac surgery at Washington University in St. Louis, he had no cardiologists to work with,” McMullan said. “So, he recruited two of the busiest cardiologists in St. Louis.”

That gave him and then-University Hospitals and Health System CEO Dr. Will Ferniany “the idea to start fierce recruiting,” McMullan said.

The two convinced Dr. Bryan Barkdale, past chief of staff at Baptist Hospital, to join the UMMC faculty. Barkdale in turn brought three fellow cardiologists with him.

Other recruits during McMullan’s tenure included Dr. Jorge Salazar, who arrived in 2010 from Texas Children’s Hospital in Houston, to be chief of congenital heart surgery at Batson Children’s Hospital.

And Mart McMullan assisted Keeton in attracting Dr. Charles O’Mara, now associate vice chancellor for clinical affairs, in 2013 as Keeton’s special adviser. O’Mara had spent the last five years on the staff at Baptist Hospital.

“They trusted Mart,” Keeton said of the local medical community. “He’d been in private practice longer than me, and he could tell the story of the Medical Center out there, so we were able to recruit great physicians.”

“Right now, the adult and pediatric cardiology divisions are the strongest they’ve ever been,” Mike McMullan said. “He’s certainly had a part in growing both of those programs and in developing the new University Heart. A lot of that has to do with his charisma.

“He is the reason I developed my love of cardiology.”

It’s no surprise McMullan has another avocation lined up, one that’s definitely not for, in his words, “an old doddering fool.” He will assist the Office of Development in an advisory capacity to encourage members of the community to remember the Medical Center in their wills and estates.

McMullan “will be wonderful at that,” said Keeton. “The bottom line is, he cares about improving the health of Mississippi. This is his way of doing that.

“The Medical Center is better because he was here.”
University of Mississippi Medical Center administrators named five faculty members to receive Billy S. Guyton Distinguished Professorships, an honor recognizing significant research accomplishments and excellence in teaching.

The honorees’ fields spanned the gamut of UMMC’s three primary missions: education, research and health care.

“The University of Mississippi is indeed honored to pay tribute to the contributions of Dr. Billy S. Guyton to medical education in Mississippi by awarding these distinguished professorships in his name,” said Dr. LouAnn Woodward, vice chancellor for health affairs and dean of the School of Medicine.

Though Guyton Professorships recognize outstanding scholarship, there’s no threshold for the number of grants or the dollar amount of grants for faculty to be considered.

The faculty members chosen by the selection committee for this honor – Dr. Robert Hester, Dr. Luis Juncos, Dr. Jane Reckelhoff, Dr. Richard Roman and Dr. Richard Summers – are nationally recognized by their peers and have contributed to the growth and development of the Medical Center, said Dr. Ralph Didlake, vice chancellor for academic affairs, professor of surgery and director of the Center for Bioethics and Medical Humanities.

To be eligible, the nominees must be tenure faculty members with at least five years of service and must be active teachers and researchers with national distinction in their areas of study. Didlake added.

The distinction, which carries the name of one of the Medical Center’s most distinguished early leaders, is awarded every five years.

Reckelhoff’s research includes studies of gender-influenced hypertension and the mechanisms affecting post-menopausal hypertension.

The professor of physiology and biophysics and director of the Women’s Health Research Center joined UMMC in 1991 after receiving a Ph.D. in biochemistry from the Medical College of Virginia at Virginia Commonwealth University in 1985 and completing postdoctoral work at Texas Southwestern Medical School and West Virginia University. She previously was named a Guyton Distinguished Professor in 2010.

Hester’s research focusing on cardiovascular responses to obesity has earned continuous funding from the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the American Heart Association and the Orthopedic Trauma Association.

A professor of physiology and biophysics and director of the Center for Computational Medicine, he earned his Ph.D. in biomedical engineering at UMMC after receiving his master’s in mechanical engineering from Mississippi State University.

Juncos has continuously researched renal disease and injury while serving as a professor of medicine, a professor of physiology and biophysics and director of inpatient renal replacement therapies.

A graduate of the medical school at the Universidad Nacional de Cordoba in Argentina, Juncos would later join the staff at Mayo Clinic in its Division of Nephrology and Hypertension before coming to the Medical Center. His expanding expertise in physiological and translational research related to kidney disease and hypertension is advancing patient care and the education of medical students at UMMC.

Roman, professor and chair of pharmacology and toxicology, has focused his research on renal and cerebral disease, the development of a treatment for diabetes-induced kidney damage and disease, and the role of the adducin protein in the development of renal disease and brain damage from impaired blood flow.

Roman was a postdoctoral fellow in physiology at Harvard Medical School after earning his Ph.D. in pharmacology at the University of Tennessee Center for Health Sciences in Memphis.

Summers, associate vice chancellor for research, has more than 300 publications to his credit – most of them focused on the use of computer models for hypothesis formulation and systems analysis to answer biomedical questions. Summers established a national reputation with his work on quantitative models of human physiology on behalf of NASA’s Digital Astronaut Program.

After earning his M.D. at UMMC, Summers joined the faculty in 1988. Along with his current position as leader of UMMC’s research enterprise, he has joint appointments in the Department of Emergency Medicine and in the Department of Physiology and Biophysics.

Dr. Billy S. Guyton served as dean of the School of Medicine from 1935-44 while it was a two-year school at the University of Mississippi campus in Oxford. He steered it through the Great Depression’s ravages, state-level political issues and the near loss of its accreditation.

Following his tenure, Guyton served on a planning committee to build the four-year school in Jackson. In 1955, when the new school and hospital opened, Guyton served as its dean emeritus. His son, Dr. Arthur Guyton, joined the medical school in Oxford in 1947 and built a world-renowned department of physiology and biophysics.

The Billy S. Guyton Professorships were formerly the Barnard Distinguished Professorships and were established by former University of Mississippi Chancellor R. Gerald Turner to honor the best scholars on the faculty and to provide an incentive for them to remain academically active and associated with the university.
The following tomato varieties can be found growing in the SHRP garden:

- Anna Russian
- Cherokee Purple
- Dwarf Arctic Rose
- Dwarf Blazing Star
- Dwarf Mr. Snow
- Dwarf Sweet Sue
- Dwarf Wild Fred
- Eva Purple Ball
- Grammy Cornwall's Mortgage Lifter
- New Big Dwarf
- Pink Berkeley Tie Dye
- Roselle Crimson
- Roselle Purple
- Sleeping Lady
- Summer Sunrise
- Summertime Gold
- Sweet Scarlet
- Tasmanian Chocolate
- Three Fat Men
- Wherokowhai
- Zogola

Blanton weighs tomatoes with OT students, from left, Allie House, Abigail Hartman and Jennifer McNair.

Blanton's home garden yields a wide variety of produce.

OT student Abigail Hartman with Blanton

"She loved to raise flowers and vegetables," he said. "It just came naturally. I always had a garden, because I always thought I had to have one."

The garden he has carved alongside the town’s Main Street may only be a city lot square, but it produces a cornucopia of fresh fruits and hardy vegetables each season: peppers, beans, eggplant, onions, collard greens, turnips, cabbage, lettuce varieties and carrots, just to name a few.

But tomatoes are the somewhat unexpected raison d’etre of his garden, considering his early experience with the fruit.

“I had never cared for tomatoes - tasting them was like sticking your tongue to a car battery,” Blanton said. “I didn’t like them.”

A handful of Brandywine Heirloom Tomato seeds he acquired shortly after moving to Carthage in 1992 changed his mind.

“When my Brandywine matured, I tasted a sample of it. It was buttery, succulent, it had a slight sweet taste. It was my first great tomato – what I had wanted all along.

“I was like Archimedes - I wanted to tell the world, ‘I’ve found it!’”

During one winter, the pair decided to start tomato seeds under a grow light. "I didn’t like them." Blanton said.

A goal that should benefit citizens of Mississippi and Watson’s students.

"They would see Marcus bring in tomatoes, squash and corn from his garden, and I began to think, ‘With SHRP focused on making Mississippi a healthier place, how could we connect what we teach in the classroom to the core of Mississippi's agrarian society?’" Watson said.

The result is the school’s first therapeutic horticulture club. Last spring, Blanton, Watson and several SHRP students formed a garden area on the northwest quadrant of campus alongside the SHRP building.

Scavenged pallets from a campus loading dock and composted hay bales now yield dozens of varieties of lush green plants brimming with soon-to-be-ripe fruits, small and large. A “sunflower wall” stretches across the brick on one side of the building, while “earthtainers” of repurposed plastic storage bins are filled with clusters of young tomatoes.

Dr. Jessica Bailey, dean of SHRP, said, “Just watching these students stick their fingers in the dirt is amazing - they absolutely love it.” Watson said. “It’s an opportunity to take students from multiple disciplines and have them interact in a single environment toward a team-oriented goal.”

A goal that should benefit citizens of the state for decades to come.

“Planting seedlings in pots and counting out seeds requires fine motor movement and exercises the mind,” Watson said. “We have had students take that knowledge of how to do this and apply it to their patients in nursing homes and for people who are home-bound.

“Whether they are PT (physical therapy) or OT (occupational therapy), they can take this rehab model and figure out how to utilize therapeutic horticulture to accomplish their goals with their patients. It’s really neat to see them synthesize their academics with where their patients are coming from to accomplish therapeutic goals.”

Students and their future patients aren’t the only ones who have been introduced to the benefits of horticulture by Blanton. SHRP faculty members have learned quite a bit from him, too.

“Many of these fruits and vegetables trigger a memory,” Blanton said. When he prepared a pot of Lowdermilk Butterbeans for a staff holiday meal, “the faculty bypassed the store-bought turkey and dressing and cleaned out the pot. They said, ‘I can remember that taste from when I was a teenager growing up.’”

Blanton’s therapeutic horticulture club also serves as a connection to those whose teenage years aren’t so distant.

“When we’re out planting seeds, digging in the dirt, perspiring together, the students don’t see me in a police uniform,” he said. “They see me as a human. That is very important.

“I tell them in a different light, too, rather than just someone who will be going into a stuffy office or practice one day.”

Although the SHRP garden is primarily focused on Heirloom Tomatoes this summer, there is plenty of room for club growth. Watson would like to add a small blueberry orchard later this year.

Faculty in the Occupational Therapy Program have asked Blanton and Watson to help teach horticulture’s health-care benefits to their students. And the club will be highlighted in a chapter on therapeutic horticulture in an upcoming book by Carol Tubbs, associate professor of occupational therapy in the school.

It’s amazing what a few small seeds can produce. So after more than two decades of growing, sampling and swapping seeds, how is Blanton doing on his ultimate tomato quest?

“I have found some great ones,” Blanton said, “but I haven’t found the best one yet.”

Blanton weighs tomatoes with OT students, from left, Allie House, Abigail Hartman and Jennifer McNair.
Dr. Dean James distinctly remembers what he said the day his editor called. He may have set a record for consecutive OMGs—an understandable reaction from a writer who has just made it to the best-seller list of the New York Times.

That was five years ago, and it was only the beginning for the associate professor of academic information services, whose daytime job is at the Rowland Medical Library, and whose after-hours pen name is Miranda James, creator of the mystery series, “A Cat in the Stacks.”

James, whose Ph.D. from Rice University is in medieval history and who speaks four languages—five, counting “feline”—also speaks to a large number of readers who wallow in the adventures of widowed librarian Charlie Harris and his Maine coon cat, Diesel.

“Miranda seems to have struck a chord, especially the cat,” said James, a Grenada native who worked in Houston, Texas, for 33 years before joining UMMC seven months ago.

Cats are intimate with a genre that boasts Rita Mae Brown, famous for such works as “The Litter of the Law.” Unlike Brown’s cat, Mrs. Murphy, Diesel is more of a companion than a gumshoe throughout his owner’s exploits in amateur sleuthery, beginning with the first, “Murder Past Due” (Berkley Prime Crime).

“Diesel is sensitive to people’s moods, though,” said James, whose real-life companions are a female calico named Pippa and Toby, a gray-and-white “big gato of a cat.”

A Maine coon is also known for being “smart, affectionate, loyal and possessive,” he said. “I intended to get one myself, but I guess the universe had other ideas.”

“Better behaved” than James’ nonfiction cats, Diesel may, occasionally, nose out a clue from a suspicious purse, when his owner isn’t walking the 30-plus-pound goliath on a leash around the imaginary town of Athena, Mississippi.

“A Maine coon is the defensive tackles of the cat world,” James writes in “Murder Past Due”—although this one is named after John “the Diesel” Riggins, a retired running back for the New York Jets and Washington Redskins.

This formula has worked for a half-dozen “Cat in the Stacks” books; virtually every one of them is a best-seller.

It doesn’t take a detective to find the culprit at the heart of James’ passion for mysteries. Actually, it does—Nancy Drew.

A rapacious reader from the start, James, around age 10, discovered the teen tec in “The Secret of Shadow Ranch,” a thriller involving a ghostly steed. He has been riding that horse ever since.

The young James dove into other, like-minded series—“The Hardy Boys,” “Trixie Belden,” etc.—but Nancy Drew was his foremost love.

“I guess partly because Nancy was, like me, an only child,” James said.

At age 12, he wrote his first whodunit, which, like the ghost, has disappeared.

In adulthood, he authored books that are still with us, including “By a Woman’s Hand” (Berkley, 1994), which he co-wrote with Jean Swanson, and which won the Agatha Award for Best Mystery, Non-Fiction.

He co-wrote or co-edited other books before tackling novels; but best-seller success eluded him until the Diesel engine.

Just before that, Vicki Myron’s “Dewey the Library Cat” had become a sensation. It was a true story about a cat abandoned in a library book drop.

“My publishers thought, ‘Well, a series about a librarian with a cat might catch on,’” James said. “They were right.”

Like Nancy Drew, James’ Charlie Harris is an amateur.

“I like to see how a murder mystery affects ordinary people,” James said.

“I don’t want to have to learn about police procedures or guns.”

In deference to his primarily female audience, James writes under the name Miranda—plucking it from Shakespeare’s “The Tempest.”

Besides, he said, referring to James Dean, “a name like mine tends to get lost in the Internet, with a dead movie star getting most of the attention.”

Still, the fact that Miranda is a man is no longer “a closely held secret,” said James, the author of additional series, including a Miranda spinoff, “The Southern Ladies Mysteries.”

Both series are popular, attracting mostly adult readers, but “there’s no blood and gore, so they’re very safe for a 12-year-old to read,” James said.

Miranda James’ Facebook page has more than 1,700 likes. One of his greatest fans is Beverly Linn Guy of Mickleton, New Jersey.

“Dean’s books always leave me smiling and so happy and eager to read the next book,” Guy said in an email. “With each new book that comes out, it is... like coming home again to all of the awesome happenings in Athena!”

Another enthusiast is New York-based writer Zac Bissonnette, author of the Times’ best-seller, “How to Be Richer, Smarter, and Better-Looking Than Your Parents.”

“Dean James is ridiculously great,” Bissonnette wrote in an email. “He’s probably the greatest and most respected living writer of the great American detective novel, having achieved commercial success and the respect of his fellow writers...”

“Not-so-bold prediction: Dean James, or rather, Miranda James, will continue to see rapidly increasing sales over the next few years.”

That seems likely—James is under contract for three more Miranda books, including one due out in hardcover in 2016 with a mystery wrapped in a title that may baffle Diesel’s fans: “No Cats Allowed.”
AMBULANCES traditionally pull up to the front of the University of Mississippi Medical Center Holmes County but now, they’re circling to temporary headquarters on the back side.

That’s because the gutted Emergency Department is being rebuilt from the ground up on the hospital’s south side.

That construction competes with the sound of hammering and sawing, as former first-floor offices are converted into patient rehabilitative services, including occupational therapy, speech-language programs and the county’s only physical therapy services.

It’s all part of a $4 million renovation of the 25-bed facility in Lexington, originally built in 1950 as Holmes County Community Hospital, that’s providing care to a growing number of residents from the Holmes County region north to Grenada.

And the transformation couldn’t come soon enough, said chief executive officer David Putt.

“Admissions are up by 20 percent, and traffic in our Emergency Department is up 13 percent,” said Putt, who also serves as CEO of UMMC Grenada.

Radiology services are up 7 percent and clinic visits 34 percent over last year, he said. The hospital this year anticipates about 450 admissions and 9,000 patient encounters of all kinds.

Patient services coordinator Marie Coffee has worked at UMMC Holmes County for the past 15 years, driving about 20 miles each way from her home in Attala County. She’s watched the construction as it transforms the hospital.

“The noise, she said, is a small price to pay for a better facility.

“I can see a great, great future here,” Coffee said. “Our numbers have picked up. A lot of our patients really like it here, and I’ve gotten to know them just like family.”

No hospital operations or services have been interrupted by the construction, which is expected to wrap up in March 2016.

Renovations also include:
- ED upgrades that make that space more functional, giving it five treatment rooms plus a two-bed trauma room;
- A new room to house a CT scan;
- Relocation of the patient registration and information desk in close proximity to the hospital business office;
- New flooring in older clinic space;
- Conversion of temporary ED space into respiratory therapy services and additional clinic space; and
- Design improvements to outpatient and specialty clinics that provide better traffic flow.

Mary Ann Stevens of West, a former state representative whose district included Holmes County, has been eagerly keeping up with the construction. Stevens serves on the hospital’s community advisory board.

“UMMC Holmes County is a great asset to Holmes County, and it will make it that much better to update it,” Stevens said. “They have a great physical therapy department, and it will be in a completely new area of the hospital when the construction is finished.”

The Lexington hospital came into UMMC’s hands in 2000, and about a decade ago, became one of Mississippi’s critical access hospitals, providing care for patients with acute illnesses or conditions that require observation or hospital admission.

The last 15 years have seen it transform from a small rural facility to a 100-employee trailblazer in the use of telehealth to diagnose and treat patients.

The critical access designation means UMMC Holmes County must have no more than 25 beds, must have a full emergency department, and must admit patients for no more than 96 hours. The construction project directly addresses that designation through ED improvements and the strengthening of other patient services, Putt said.

A total 16,425 square feet are affected – approximately a third of the campus, he said.

Maximum functionality for a facility that gives initial care to many trauma patients is critical to the hospital’s ED, said Jason Rogers, a nurse practitioner at UMMC Holmes County since 2011 and a UMMC employee since 2002.

“For a small ER, Holmes County has some of the highest acuity,” Rogers said. “We’re 45 minutes from the closest hospital, and we get a lot of trauma here.

“It’s good that Holmes County has a hospital, or there would be a lot of mortality.”

Expansion of services made possible by the construction program further enhances the relationship between UMMC Holmes County and UMMC Grenada, which has 340 employees and is licensed for 156 beds. The two campuses share top leadership, including the CEO, nursing executives and directors of human resources, ambulatory operations and purchasing.

That relationship includes a number of patient treatment collaborations. For example, patients in the Grenada area and surrounding counties who need wound management or rehabilitation services can receive that at the Lexington hospital. A physician from the Grenada hospital visits the Lexington campus several times a month to provide colonoscopies and a number of gastrointestinal services, but performs more intricate procedures on those patients at the Grenada campus.

Patients at the Holmes County hospital and clinics often go to the Grenada hospital for surgery rather than expending time and money getting the same procedures done on the UMMC campus in Jackson.

Stevens, who broke her arm in March, said a physical therapist from UMMC Holmes County is visiting her in her home as she recuperates.

“They have been a tremendous help to me in getting the use of my arm back,” she said, noting the hospital “has saved many lives. A lot of people wouldn’t make it to Jackson.

“I don’t know what people would do without it.” — GV
CMN crowns new ‘miracle’ champion

Vicksburg resident Hannah Dunaway, center, shares the stage with her mother, Nicki, left, and her longtime Batson Children’s Hospital nurse, Ashley Arceo, after being introduced as the 2015 Children’s Miracle Network Champion May 27 at the Marriott Courtyard in Vicksburg.

Hannah, 14, a Vicksburg resident, joins champions from 170 children’s hospitals nationwide who are members of Children’s Miracle Network, a nonprofit organization dedicated to saving and improving the lives of children by raising funds for children’s hospitals.

Hannah kicked off the summer by traveling to the nation’s capital as the ambassador for Batson Children’s Hospital, where she’s been treated since birth for cystic hygroma, a rare tumor condition that so far has resulted in 44 surgeries. Her multiple upper-body tumors are not malignant, but there’s no cure.

SHRP contestant spreads runway cheer

Morgan Burnett, Miss Pearl River Valley and an occupational therapy student in the School of Health Related Professions, visits with Batson Children’s Hospital patient Landon Westerfield and his mother, Amber Matthews. Burnett and dozens of her fellow contestants stopped by the hospital June 20 to spread some cheer before battling it out in the Miss Mississippi pageant last weekend.