

Heard the One About Mississippi? It's Fighting Back

Oxford, Miss. — For decades, a search at the bottom of the nation's barrel of rankings has always seemed to come up with the same state. When anyone wants to know the nation's poorest state, or its fattest, or least educated, or sickest, or most corrupt, the answer has most often been Mississippi.

It has even been rated the worst place to raise a child.

Mississippi has long chafed at those perceptions, which in some cases spring more from stereotype than from statistic. Some time back, however, Rick Looser, chief operating officer of the Cirlot advertising agency in Jackson, acting at his own initiative, set out to counter the low self-esteem inspired by them.

The advertising campaign that Mr. Looser and his colleagues created — called “Mississippi, Believe It!” — addresses the old clichés directly and seeks to turn them to its advantage as a way of spreading a message about some of the state's more notable accomplishments.

The 14 posters in the campaign, which were sent to schools in Mississippi last year, take umbrage at backwoods stereotypes including monster trucks, hog calling and Klan rallies. In smaller print, the posters describe in detail the achievements of native authors, athletes, scientists and businessmen, and the state as a whole.

“In Mississippi, we always have our hand out,” reads one advertisement, showing an open palm. “But it's usually to give, not receive. We always hear about Mississippi being last. Last in this, last in that. Well, at last, Mississippi is first. And what a first place to hold ... in generosity. For eight years in a row, our generosity has won out over every other state in the nation. Per capita, we give more in relation to income than any other state. Any other state. Mississippi. Yes, our hands are out. And our hearts are open.”

Another poster, with the headline “Yes, we can read,” continues, “Some of us even write.” It goes on to list notable Mississippi writers including William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Eudora Welty and John Grisham.

The creators of the campaign, who are raising money to spread it nationwide, make no apologies for its direct references to the stereotypes.

“We're just talking about the 800-pound gorilla that's already in the room,” said Mr. Looser, adding that he was trying to save the state from “list fatigue.”

Mr. Looser, who created the campaign without charge and has not allowed any corporate logos, even his agency's, to be placed on the posters, said he wanted to start changing the way everyone, especially Mississippians, saw



A campaign begun at the initiative of a Jackson advertising agency seeks to dispel longtime unfavorable perceptions about Mississippi. But some, like Kathy J. Hervert, a school receptionist, find the tone to defensive.



From left, Jerry Rice, Brett Favre, Steve McNair and Walter Payton, Mississippians all, star in one of the campaign's 14 posters

the state.

In setting out to do that, he said, he realized he was “biting off a big ol' piece.” Indeed, there proved to be a fine line between boosterism and apology: many, feeling that the campaign failed to strike the right balance, found its defensiveness an unwelcome surprise.

Kathy J. Herbert, 46, the receptionist at Oxford Elementary School agrees that the state needs a better image, saying that when her teenage children travel, they are frequently embarrassed to say they are from Mississippi. But she takes exception to the posters' approach.

“I think it's pitiful,” Ms. Herbert said. “It's pitiful we have to do that.”

Others say a public relations campaign to make people feel good about Mississippi only glosses over a need to solve real problems.

The perceptions of the state “are not that far off,” said Kristen M. Chase, who moved from New Jersey to Mississippi in 2002 to take up a post as a college professor and director of a career-oriented undergraduate program. “It's hard to not be surprised when your students attend separate black and white proms or when you go to a restaurant and the husband of a couple will only talk to your husband.”

But many Mississippians like the campaign, and say it is time somebody

stood up to the stereotype and those who promote them. Many here noticed when Gov. Rick Perry of Texas, in an interview this year about social services, told a reporter for The Dallas Morning News, “I don't want to become Mississippi.”

Jolee C. Hussey, the librarian at Oxford High School, said she planned to ask students to write about one of the famous Mississippians pictured on the posters. Ms. Hussey said she supported any effort to show students the possibility of a brighter future.

“You've got to make Mississippians have pride,” she said. “You've got to make them believe in themselves first to help them rise.”

Mr. Grisham, the best-selling author, who lives in Oxford, said he understood the sentiment that had brought on the campaign.

It's kind of a way of fighting back, because we do get hammered,” he said. “But things aren't all hopeless down here. There is some life and culture and education and football and stuff like that.”

Still, Mr. Grisham — who in 1983 ran for the Legislature, successfully, because Mississippi had failed to establish a public kindergarten program, unlike any of the 49 other states — said the problems were much bigger than a collective low self-esteem.

A P.R. campaign might make us feel good,” he said, but “I'm not sure it's going to help anything. What's going to help is education and economic development. We've been on the bottom economically since the Civil War, essentially our entire history.