

Ads throw cold water on Mississippi stereotypes

By Kitty Bean Yancey
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“Yes, we can read”: Informational ads on *Mississippibelieveit.com* turn stereotypes of the Magnolia state on their heads.

Mississippi businessman Rick Looser despises what he calls “the look” that folds from the Deep South get when they travel to destinations such as Manhattan and say where they’re from.

But what really got to him was sitting on a plane near a 12-year-old from Connecticut, who blurted out: “Do you see those Ku Klux Klan people on your streets everyday, and do you hate black people?”

So late last year, Looser and his wife, who own an ad agency in Jackson, Miss., started an educational and promotional campaign to instill pride in Mississippians and change the way the state is perceived.

Their website, *Mississippibelieveit.com* – launching a new round of informational ads and an online store this week – takes stereotypes and turns them around.

“Yes, we can read. A few of us can even write,” one ad says, referencing renowned Mississippi authors including William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams, Richard Wright and John Grisham.

One new campaign spotlights the state’s “New Good Ole Boys” – including prominent female and black legislators.

Another of the Mississippi, Believe It! messages will resonate with tourists. “No black. No white. Just the blues.”

It refers to the “Blues Highway” – Highway 61 – that rolls south from Memphis through burghs where blues music was born and where modern-day visitors seek out down-home juke joints.

Looser, 45, drives it often on the way to hunting camps, and “every weekend I see someone who doesn’t speak English or speaks it differently than I do. They’re making a blues pilgrimage.”

He’s not working with state tourism officials and has poured his own resources into the campaign, he says. But he’d be happy to lure more visitors.

Yes, the state has had a painful past, he says. But thanks in part to the way Mississippi is portrayed in movies and on television, “there’s an ignorance of what it’s like here,” he declares.

“I want to change the way people look at us.”