

Clarion-Ledger article for 6/17/01

Near or far, Mississippi will always be home

On June 9, over a thousand people gathered in the East Meadow of New York City's Central Park. Most of them were from Mississippi, had relatives in Mississippi, or simply knew about the gathering and wanted to experience southern hospitality first-hand.

This was the annual gathering for the Mississippi Picnic in Central Park. Now 22 years old, the picnic has become somewhat of an institution in New York. People may drive up from Mississippi or simply cross the East River to share an afternoon of food, fun, and stories about what's happening back home.

If you don't look above the tree line, you might think you were at one of Mississippi's great state parks, surrounded by trees and the smell of catfish cooking.

One look above the tree line and you know you're not in Mississippi.

But, the hospitality, the story-telling, the food, and the good-natured ribbings about next year's football season remind you that the people are 100 percent Mississippi.

This was a great opportunity to visit with those who have chosen to move away to New York or its surrounding areas, whether for work or education, and tell them what's happening here. It was a chance to visit with businesses looking at Mississippi and take our good news beyond our borders through interviews with *The New York Times*, *Fox News Network*, *The Financial Times*, *Barron's*, *Forbes*, and *Business Week*. Meetings were held with site selection consultants to tell them about the Advantage Mississippi Initiative and what it means to businesses coming to our state.

They all wanted to hear about the good things happening here. They wanted to hear more about the Nissan plant, the Computers in the Classroom initiative, the fact that Mississippi ranks fifth in the nation in teacher certification, and our efforts to raise teacher pay to the southeastern average.

Native Mississippians also wanted to talk about their concerns for their home state – about recruiting and retaining the best teachers possible in the public schools and universities, health care for their families in the more rural areas, and building Mississippi's image as a player in the world marketplace.

And, I was excited about visiting with them. I spoke with so many people about what we're doing right in Mississippi, and how they can contribute. There are so many good minds that have left our state for others, whether for economic, educational or personal reasons.

I wanted to let them know Mississippi is eager for them to come back. We want their energy, their intelligence and their input into helping this state reach its full potential. We need them to help sell the message about Mississippi – that it is a great place to live, work, and raise a family.

I hope we got through to some of them. I hope, one day, some of the students studying in the north might return home to put their knowledge to work here. I hope we see some of our native sons and daughters working up there come back and share the talents and skills they have learned and used in other places.

Not everyone at the picnic came back to Mississippi when it was over. For those who did, I'm glad we have them here with us to continue the work we've got going on.

And for those who stayed behind, don't look over the tree line, and just think about home.