

*Remarks for the
Washington County MS Valley State Alumni Banquet
April 27, 2002*

(recognize Dr. Leslie Newman, President of
MVSU)

(tell story of lawyer on plane to DC)

In preparing my remarks for this evening, I
noticed the topic was listed as “rekindling
the spirit of our legacy.”

I believe Mississippi is going through a
process where it’s own spirit is being
rekindled – a sort of revival of its promise
and potential.

I believe Mississippi is going through a revival – in its commitment to making the most of the promise of *all* its people, in all areas of the state.

That revival begins with how we care for one another. It begins with how we focus our efforts on health care, on education, on jobs that put food on the table and roofs over our heads.

If we are going to be successful in that revival, we have to set priorities for how we want to reach our goals and achieve our dreams.

I've always believed that God makes our dreams a size too big so we can grow into them. Mississippi is growing; we're growing fast and we're growing together. I believe we are far beyond the Mississippi that most people think of; we are a Mississippi that shares a common belief and a common commitment to the worth of all people.

We're moving beyond issues that have held us back and focusing on issues like education, health care and economic development.

There are 2.8 million people in Mississippi who look to me and other elected officials to help provide leadership, direction and guidance for them.

Those people were first and foremost in my mind and in my efforts to protect Medicaid in recent weeks. The 650,000 Mississippians who depend on this vital health care program need to know it will be there for them.

They are the reason I fought to make sure we could get the flexibility we needed to manage the program efficiently and effectively, and still provide quality health care services.

The flexibility to manage demands the flexibility to commit to medical services when they are needed, and I will not be satisfied until I know the people of this state can receive health care when they need it.

I asked for flexibility, and today it is here.
This is the first step toward ensuring quality health care – as well as some peace of mind – for those 650,000 Mississippians who expect me to help them.

Yesterday, I participated in a conference call with governors from around the nation about Medicaid. We are working together to lobby the federal government for changes that can make the program work even better.

As a member of the National Governors Association Executive Committee, I will be focusing on how we can help shape a national strategy for restructuring Medicaid – a strategy that will have its roots in Mississippi.

The restructuring of Medicaid is just part of the spirit of Mississippi that's being rekindled.

We're doing great work for the state of Mississippi. Great things are happening in our state.

We are capturing the attention of the world outside our borders because of the exciting things we've got going on, and I'm sure you will agree that it's good for Mississippi to be recognized for being on the cutting edge.

We're on the cutting edge in education.

We've got 405 teachers across this state who have earned National Board Certification.

This process recognizes the very best in teachers, as determined by their peers.

We now have over 1,100 teachers in Mississippi with this certification – the sixth highest number in the nation. Let me repeat that – the sixth highest in the nation. Not 50th, not 40th, not 10th – sixth highest.

Mississippi was also the first state in the nation to offer more pay to teachers with national board certification.

We are also on track to be the first state in the nation to place an internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom, a goal we'll meet by the end of next year.

We've put together a unique partnership between the public and private sectors, a partnership that has raised money and solicited used computers for the classrooms.

We are going to ensure that our children are ready to compete in the economy of the 21st century, an economy that will be global, borderless and wireless.

Now, combine this with our commitment to pay teachers like the professionals they are. In July, we made this commitment law and the rest of the nation stood up and took notice.

The day after the special session on teacher pay, the New York Times ran an editorial piece commenting that “Mississippi had been able to put together the kind of package that continued to elude New York.”

High praise for our work here, and I’m proud our commitment to our teachers has received such widespread notice. I want the world to know that we’re serious about education in Mississippi, we’re serious about building a better world for our people, we’re serious about shaping a brighter future for our children.

We show that we're serious by making education a priority. We cannot force unfunded mandates on our schools. We cannot force our teachers to pay for supplies out of their own pockets.

I'm proud the Legislature followed the recommendations for funding education I offered in my executive budget proposal.

With a strong foundation in education, we can focus on the business of building jobs.

Mississippi is growing like never before. In the past two years, during a national recession, we've created more than 21,000 jobs and attracted over \$6 billion in new investments.

Site Selection magazine, one of the top trade publications in the economic development industry, ranked Mississippi as one of the top ten states for its "Governor's Cup" award.

The perception of Mississippi is changing. The old question of “Why Mississippi?” doesn’t get asked anymore. The question now is, “Why *not* Mississippi?”

And the answer is, because we can compete with anyone, anytime, anywhere.

We’re committed to building Mississippi and making sure it achieves its promise and potential. Our people deserve nothing less.

This same message applies to people in every state across our nation. If we are to build our states, our country, we must do it by creating jobs and building industry. We must do it by investing in our people through workforce training.

Even though we are in a national recession, we aren't backing off on our investment in economic development and workforce training. I'm proud of the work we did during the legislative session to ensure the Mississippi Development Authority was adequately funded, and the results will validate our work.

It was once said that “success seems to be largely a matter of hanging on after others have let go.”

I tell you this – we aren’t letting go. There are too many opportunities out there, and too many opportunities for us to create, to ever think about letting go.

Believing “I must do something” solves more problems than saying “something must be done.”

You won't hear us say, "something must be done." We live in America's state of promise. It is a promise too long unkept. That has changed.

I pray every day for the strength and the wisdom to do this job, a job that I love. I would ask for your prayers as well – not just for myself, but for all in public service – that we might do work that serves our people and serves God.

That work includes doing everything we can to come together not just as Mississippians but as creations of God – made in His image, blessed by His grace, and sharing in a spirit eager to be rekindled.

We can do this. It's happening right now. It's helping make a better, stronger, healthier Mississippi – and I'm thankful for it.

God bless you, and may God bless Mississippi and America.