



THE BEST WE CAN BE

By DIANA LADD, editor

Last week, I attended one of those uniquely Jackson events that national media never seem to know about when they paint us with a broad brush. It was a performance of "Defamation," a play by a Chicago playwright that allows the audience to act as jury and decide whether a black woman or a Jewish man should win a defamation suit she brought against him because he assumed she stole a watch from him and then caused her to lose business as a result.

Much like the film "Crash," the play has all sorts of circular prejudice messages wound up in it and some powerful lessons about ingrained racism most of us never see, especially if we're white and part of the majority culture.

I enjoyed the play and the discussion, but it was a quick statement the playwright made during the Q&A afterward that stuck with me. Earlier in the week, they had performed the play for students at Lanier High School, and in a straw vote afterward, the students had split about a third for the woman, a third for the man and the third undecided.

The playwright then told us, off the cuff, that Lanier had one of the best and smartest student audiences he had encountered.

I was, and still am, stunned at how important a statement that was--and how seldom we hear it in this city where so many like to slam and stereotype our inner-city youth, especially those at Lanier, any chance they get.

The playwright wasn't being defensive; he wasn't trying to paint a rosy picture; he wasn't involved in our local race politics. He just noticed that his Lanier audience contained a lot of sharp thinkers. They were the best.

His statement left me wanting to shout: BELIEVE IN OUR KIDS AND THEN WATCH WHAT THEY CAN DO. And I don't want to just yell this at white folks and bloggers and radio-show hosts; I want to shout it at media, and their parents and teachers and professors; and at everyone who touches our young people every day. We must believe in ourselves and each other and our youth.

In a recent GOOD Ideas issue about crime, our staff went deep into research about what causes crime and how to prevent it. Not surprisingly to us, the evidence is incontrovertible that young people who hear on a regular basis that they are not worthy are much more likely to (a) believe it and (b) do things that neglected children do. One result is crime, especially for kids who have economics stacked against them and are growing up with a parent or two who went through the same cycle.

The deliciousness of hearing this playwright make this statement after "Defamation," of course, was that the play was about a racist assumption cycle: that the woman of color must have done it. In the play, even the man's accomplished black female attorney talked about how people treat her because she is black, drawing false assumptions.

Not to mention, they performed the play in a state that many people make assumptions about. Because of a relatively small handful of people with backward ideas--that we allow to control the world's impressions of us--the world looks at Mississippi and assumes that we're the most racist place on the planet. When national media parachute in, they are usually so busy looking for where we haven't changed that they don't notice the remarkable progress happening among our people (those who do notice usually remark that they never witness our kinds of frank race conversations and diversity back in their big city).

But as a result of the assumptions about us (yes, granted, self-inflicted), our residents have long believed we can't be the best--ironically proving the effect that bigotry of low expectations has on our children. I have seldom, if ever, met a Mississippian of any race that doesn't feel the weight of growing up in a state considered such a hellhole. Yes, we all get angry at media and politicians beyond our borders who treat us like we're all uneducated hicks, but how often do we collectively act to change it? How often do we get together and fight the good fight right here at home, challenging the people, political parties and corporate media chains that play us against each other and assume we're dumbasses?

Yes, some of us fight it more often than others. Sadly, though, we collectively give into it too often and just assume it can't change.

It doesn't have to be this way. Mississippians have the passion, the creativity, the humor, the hubris and the diversity to be the best state in the country for our people. Sure, we have a ways to go. But considering how awful we were on "the race question" (let's be frank: the worst and most violent in the nation) just 40 years ago, it's remarkable the progress we've made to date. Let's be proud of that.