

Don't look for Tocowa, Mississippi, on the map – you won't find it. The small community outside of Batesville doesn't exist anymore, but it's the place where Mississippi Governor Ronnie Musgrove grew up. It's the place where he learned that success depended on turning obstacles into opportunities, and that lesson has stayed with him all through his life.

As a child in Tocowa, a “suburb” of Batesville, as he refers to it, Musgrove lived in a town with a population of 42. Home to hard-working people, none of its residents had ever graduated from high school. His mother had left school in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade; his father, in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He lost his father at an early age, and his mother raised the family on her own.

Musgrove realized early in life that a good education would be his ticket to bigger and better things. He worked hard, graduating from high school and then going on to Northwest Community College. He made his way to Ole Miss, where he supported himself by working on oil rigs and selling books door-to-door in the summers.

His perseverance carried him on through undergraduate school and eventually law school at Ole Miss. The young man from Tocowa was making his way into the world.

The same perseverance that took him from the dirt roads of Tocowa would propel him into a successful race for the Mississippi Senate in 1987. Entering elected office with a commitment to improving education, he made his mark early and soon became chairman of the Senate Education Committee.

He served as lieutenant governor prior to his election as governor in 1999. As the state's highest elected official, he quickly earned the respect of his peers around the nation for his work ethic and dedication to improving the quality of life in Mississippi.

Musgrove serves on the Executive Committee of the National Governors Association, and as Vice Chair for Policy with the Democratic Governors Association. He is chairman of the Southern Regional Education Board, the Southern States Energy Board, and the Southern Growth Policies Board.

The Delta Business Journal met with Governor Musgrove to talk about his hopes for Mississippi and his focus on education in the state.

**Delta Business Journal:** You've said on more than one occasion that your personal passion is improving education in Mississippi. Does this passion spring from your own background?

**Governor Musgrove:** Growing up in Tocowa, I saw how hard people had to work to make ends meet. It was not an easy way of life, and the same was true for so many other communities and families around the state. My mother instilled in me a desire for learning, and she taught me that a good education would make all the difference in my life.

I worked hard to get a good education. I went to Ole Miss without many of the advantages of my classmates, and the drive to succeed was intensified because of that. Today, there are still so many young people in our state in the same situation. As

governor, I have the opportunity to make a difference for them and it's an opportunity that I won't let pass by.

**DBJ:** What have you been able to do to make the most of that opportunity?

**GM:** Our work to improve education in Mississippi has come from all sides. First and foremost, I'm proud to say that we've finally recognized teachers as the professionals they are and made a commitment to raising teacher pay. The package we passed in 2001 will raise the average teacher pay in Mississippi from 49<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> in the nation. That's a tremendous step forward. We have to recognize the commitment teachers make each and every day to our students.

**DBJ:** Much has been made of your initiative to place an Internet-accessible computer in every classroom in the state. Where are you with that effort?

**GM:** It's a done deal. Mississippi is now the first state in the nation to have an Internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom, a fact confirmed by the National Governors Association. More than 32,000 classrooms, from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, are wired and connected to the Internet.

Any student, regardless of location or economic status, can now log on to the web and have immediate access to the greatest resource of information the world has ever known. The impact on their learning will be incredible.

One of the keys to the success of this initiative was the partnership we made between public and private entities. We were able to pull resources together and work toward a common goal.

I'm extremely proud of the hard work done by hundreds of students across the state on this project as well. Since June, nearly 6,000 computers were built from scratch by students and distributed to classrooms. I had the opportunity to watch these students, on several occasions, as they put the computers together. Watching them build, knowing they were honing their own technological skills while they were contributing to the future of thousands of students, was one of the greatest feelings I've ever known.

**DBJ:** Do you have more plans in store for education?

**GM:** Absolutely. We've made progress, but we can't rest. Our test scores are up. The Princeton Review has said we have the sixth best testing system in the country. We have accountability and testing standards in place that are more stringent than those called for in the "No Child Left Behind" legislation passed by Congress. More of our students are going to college than ever before.

Will Rogers once said that even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there. We've got to keep moving.

I've presented a budget for the 2004 fiscal year that focuses 62 percent of spending on education. It fully funds the teacher pay raise, and stabilizes funding for the Adequate Education Program.

And, it addresses the dire needs facing our institutions of higher learning. I've called for the establishment of a \$200 million "brain trust" to recruit and retain the brightest minds for our universities and colleges. If we can commit to \$20 million a year over the next ten years, we can make a tremendous difference for Mississippi.

In the end, it's all very simple. If we shortchange our investment in education, we shortchange our future. That's an alternative I'm not willing to accept, and I have called on the Legislature to fully fund my budget and keep us moving on the right track.

**DBJ:** There's a sense that the relationship between you and the Legislature is strained. What would you say to that?

**GM:** I have a very good relationship with the Legislature. I don't think you'll find a legislator who would say that I don't have an open door policy, or that I'm not willing to meet with them at any time.

I have a responsibility to the 2.8 million people of this state. I also have a responsibility to put together a plan of action to address education, jobs, health care and public safety, as well as a responsibility to present a budget that reflects the priorities of our people.

But, when the Legislature comes out with a budget that cuts education, that doesn't fully fund the needs we have with regards to health care and taking care of children and families, then we are going to disagree.

**DBJ:** Next year is an election year. Mississippi will be one of three states with a gubernatorial race. What are your plans for the next eleven months with regard to the election?

**GM:** I can tell you what I don't plan to do. I don't plan to let politics get in the way of getting things done for the people of this state. My focus has been, and will continue to be, on improving the quality of life in Mississippi. I'm going to focus on the passage of my budget, with its 62 percent funding for education, on recruiting and retaining business in Mississippi, on creating quality jobs and on ensure the safety and security of our citizens.

**DBJ:** You're the parent of two teenage children; you must have high hopes for them.

**GM:** I do have great hopes and dreams for my kids. I want them and every other child in Mississippi to realize the incredible potential that's out there for them. Every obstacle has to be turned into an opportunity, and every opportunity has to be taken.

I'm proud of the work we've done to move Mississippi. Other states are looking to us now and following our lead, and that's a great position to be in. We're on the right track, and we're not sitting still.