

Being Memphiotan

By Andria K. Brown

I'm not from around here.

Now, if we were speaking in person, you'd probably know that without me saying so, but since I'm new here, and you can't hear my generic Midwestern vocal patterns through this screen, I thought I should come right out with it. It's probably the most significant detail I can tell you about myself, the one thing I think you might need to know if you're so kind as to approach this space twice a month. To recap: I was born on the other end of the river, outside Minneapolis, Minnesota, raised in multiple Great Lakes states, and college-educated in Chicago. I am, to put it succinctly, a Yankee. A Yankee so Yankee I didn't know people still used that term until I moved to Memphis and was promptly labeled as such by my 91-year-old neighbor, Effie Mae (bless her heart).

That move happened twelve years ago, however, which means that, all told, I've lived in Memphis a third of my life, and longer than any other place I've called home. Not only do I own cowboy boots, I've had them resoled. I'm pretty sure that's a step toward becoming a naturalized citizen, right after dropping the second A in Graceland and somewhere before running against a Ford for local office. Also, did you just see me write "bless her heart?"

In my observation, most Memphians are either natives or newcomers. Okay, that's true of any city, but the difference seems more pronounced here. Ironically (unless you happen to know the depth to which Memphis struggles with self-esteem), I find it's the newcomers who have better things to say about the city than the natives. Those who've been here their whole lives often feel like they're missing out on something bigger, brighter, and better that another city could offer. But if that's true, how do you explain those of us who came here by choice, and then choose to stay? For whatever national publications may say about us, Memphis is a good home. It may not be the safest or healthiest or most prosperous city in the U.S, but it is something many glossier cities aren't: it is worthy. It does so much, it gives so much. There are the obvious call-outs – Stax, Sun, FedEx, St. Jude, Justin Timberlake – but the true gifts of Memphis are handed out every day in smaller, less obvious parcels, like a bass solo at Wild Bill's or a quarter-pound bag of fresh-roasted goobers from The Peanut Shoppe. Natives may not realize it, but a city with a clearly perceptible soul is a hard thing to come by.

Which isn't to say there's no room for improvement, or that I have some magical outsider-vision that erases the very real problems in our city. Like any true Memphian, I've seen some these problems up-close. I've had my car, home, and business broken into, been held-up and physically threatened. My daughter attends a city school and my son is preparing to enter kindergarten in the fall, so the constant battling and uncertainty over our educational system hits close to home. The stark philosophical divisions in our city can leave me feeling supported and enthusiastic on one side and enraged or under attack by the other.

Yet even in these struggles, I feel the promise and potential of Memphis. The goal of this column is to share all the facets of this city, the things to celebrate and the issues to address, the people who inspire

and occasionally those who madden. And since I'm used to sounding a little different from those around me, I don't mind being a unique voice within the confines of the Main Street Journal.

I was born next to the Mississippi and have lived beside it long enough to know that the current can pull you under or carry you along, depending on how you ride. Memphis may not be the prettiest craft on the water, but the food is great, the music is endless, and the company is always entertaining. No matter where she may drift or the leaks she may spring, I plan to stay in the boat and see where we all wind up.