

# WHY JACKSON IS BEATING THE RECESSION

by Melia Dicker  
Photo by Lizzie Wright

## Economic Diversity

As Mississippi's capital, Jackson is a hub for medical care, institutions of higher education and government operations, which are priorities for the public no matter what the economic climate.

Jackson's manufacturing and financial industries also provide essential services, which keeps tax revenues up and job losses down. Private firms that contract with the government (janitorial, vehicle maintenance, and so on) are also stable.

Dr. Pat Taylor, associate professor of economics at Millsaps College, says that Jackson's economy doesn't depend on one sector. If one begins to decline, others can bolster the city's overall economic health.

"We're not a one-trick pony," Taylor says.

Whereas suburbs have slowed their development, downtown Jackson continues to grow, Taylor says. Moreover, the state's housing market has remained relatively stable—Mississippi has consistently made RealtyTrac's lists of states with the lowest rate of foreclosures. Taylor says reasonable housing prices keep mortgage payments affordable, and stable jobs mean that homeowners are able to pay.

"Everybody I know has kept their jobs and will continue to do so," Taylor says.

## Low Cost of Living

When metal artist Stephanie Dwyer wanted a change of lifestyle in August 2006, she decided to move from Seattle, Wash., to Jackson. She has family in the South, and it is here that she found her passion: creating custom metal art out of high-quality metal.

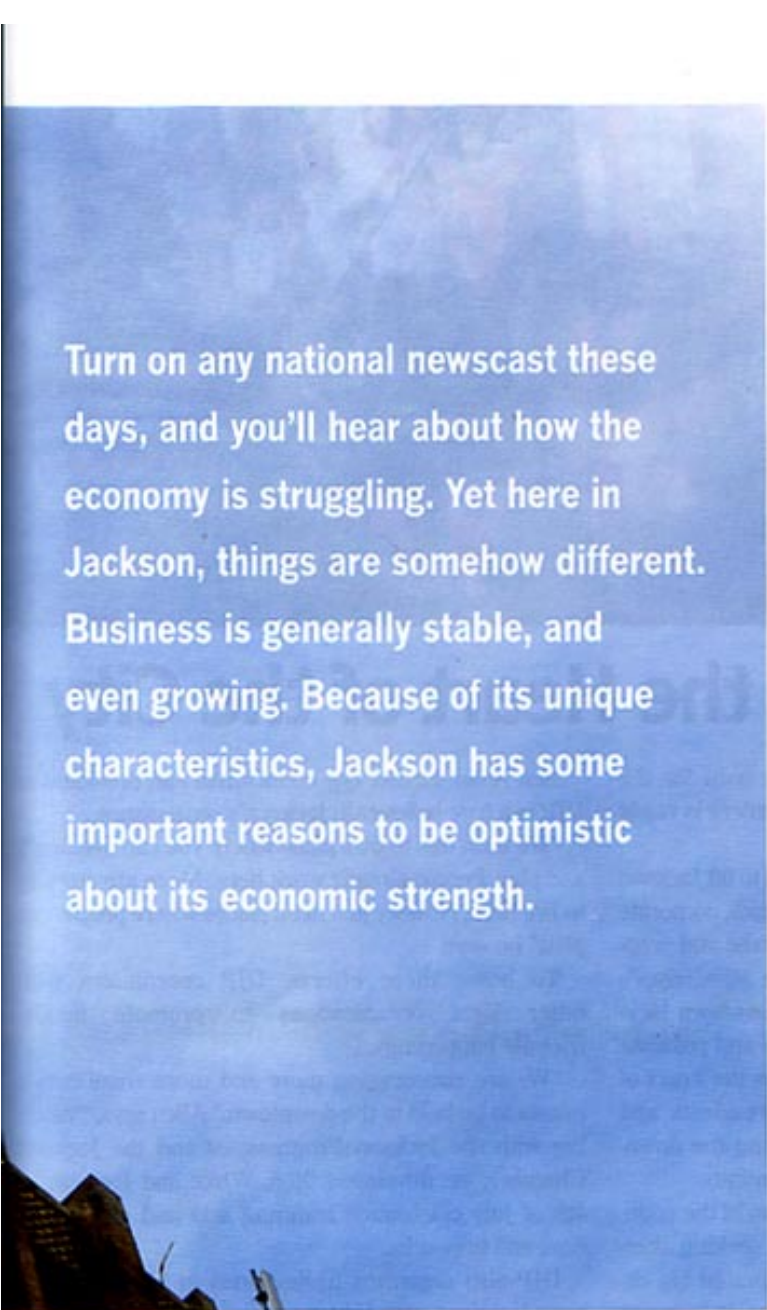
Under the name Miss Metal Design, Dwyer makes sculptures ranging from magnets to birdbaths. Her handcrafted bottle tree sculptures are by far the most popular.

Because it is relatively inexpensive to live in Jackson, residents like Dwyer can succeed at careers outside the normal "9-to-5." According to Kiplinger's magazine, Jackson currently rates 95 on a 2009 Cost of Living Index, where 100 is average. Seattle's score is 113.

"There's no way I would make it in Seattle, doing what I do," Dwyer says.

Lately Dwyer has been busier than ever. She is grateful to have found her artistic niche in Jackson, and she has no plans to leave.





Turn on any national newscast these days, and you'll hear about how the economy is struggling. Yet here in Jackson, things are somehow different. Business is generally stable, and even growing. Because of its unique characteristics, Jackson has some important reasons to be optimistic about its economic strength.

we'll take care of them," Thornton says. "There's a personal touch to the service."

### Collaboration, Not Competition

The attitude of the Jackson small-business community seems to be: "If I succeed, you succeed." Business owners want their entire industry and the local economy to develop as well as their individual businesses.

Mike Peters, a Jackson real estate developer, says that locals in his business are friendly with each other.

"If we're after a tenant and (competitors) get them," Peters says, "It's still good for everybody. You know: I'll get the next one."

Peters has collaborated regularly with fellow Jackson developer Andrew Mattiace, a friend of over 25 years. Together, Peters and Mattiace developed Fondren Corner, which houses businesses and apartments. In partnership with Jackson Public Schools, they completed a \$25 million project to convert the historic Duling School building into a large commercial space called Fondren Place. It opened this year and is already filled with tenants like The Auditorium, an upscale restaurant that mixes classic Southern food and architecture with modern design.

### A Market Receptive to New Businesses

In some cities, it seems as if every new business idea has already been tried. Jackson, on the other hand, is fertile ground for launching new ideas, including those that have succeeded in other places.

When Jeff Good started BRAVO! Italian Restaurant in 1994 with the Blumenthal brothers (Dan, a chef, and Dave), Jackson had never seen anything like it: an Italian "trattoria" combined with a Napa Valley bistro.

"We took a great idea that's highly differentiated," Good says, "but if we were in San Francisco, we'd be just another restaurant."

In Jackson, BRAVO! has done well, receiving regular awards for its food and wine list. So well, in fact that in 1998, Good and Dan Blumenthal opened a second restaurant: Broad Street Baking Company and Café. Again, they drew inspiration from an outside influence: granddad Sol Blumenthal's Trenton, N.J., bakery on Broad Street.

"It's not that we invented this," says Good of the enormously popular café and bakery. "We synthesized what we thought were world-class ideas from other markets."

In 2007, the team opened Sal & Mookie's, a family pizzeria and ice cream shop in the Fondren neighborhood.

"We wanted to do classic New York Little Italy food in Jackson," Good says.

Before opening the restaurant, Good and Blumenthal took a research trip to New York. They ate at 13 pizza restaurants in three days, bringing back slices from each in a cooler to guide the development of their own pizza.

Today, all three restaurants are thriving, and Good and Blumenthal continue to bring the best of the world to Jackson. ■

### Strong Culture of Buying Local

Jackson is full of small businesses, many of which have been here for decades. Rather than relying on a chain-store brand to ensure quality, Jacksonians tend to trust local business people instead.

Sherrell Thornton, along with his wife Lea, is one of those business people. Thornton owns the Montgomery Ace Hardware stores in Fondren and the Maywood Mart shopping center in Jackson, as well as another store near Hattiesburg. The original Fondren store opened in 1946.

"Our goal is to provide a superior product at a competitive price with legendary service," Thornton says.

Instead of wandering around chain hardware stores without finding anyone to help, customers count on "the convenience factor" at Montgomery. They can pull right up to the front door, he says, have a familiar employee wait on them, and be on their way.

He says that a lot of Jacksonians "enjoy shopping with local people" for a variety of reasons.

"They know that we stand behind what we sell to them, and