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At First Sight, Stereotypes, Then Real People Emerged

By [SHAILA DEWAN](#)

MEMPHIS — Wearing a lilac suit and rhinestone earrings fit for an Easter service, Savannah Simmons made a grand entrance on Sunday at AutoZone Park, a minor-league baseball stadium in the center of downtown. News photographers clustered around her as she smiled broadly enough to broadcast a single gold tooth amid her pearly whites. On the wall behind her, a portrait of Ms. Simmons, an 80-year-old black former factory worker, in a giant mural showed that same gold tooth in a slightly more restrained version of that same smile.

Ms. Simmons may have been the picture of elegance, but when her face began to take shape on the wall about a month ago, some people viewed it in a very different light — particularly because it was in clear view of almost every seat at the popular stadium.

Gregory Grant, the president of the local chapter of the National Action Network, an advocacy group headed by the Rev. [Al Sharpton](#), saw in it an offensive stereotype in a city that already had its share of racial problems.

“We’re telling our young people to take the gold teeth out of your mouth and pull your pants up and be a responsible citizen, and then you paint one on the wall,” Mr. Grant said. “I immediately responded in a very violent, negative-type way.”

He began hearing from others with similar concerns, and got in touch with officials from Rhodes College, where a group of students was overseeing the mural, which portrays a diverse group of the city’s residents, arguing that they might as well have painted a black child eating a watermelon. That is when he learned from Elizabeth Daggett, the coordinator of the college’s arts outreach program, that Ms. Simmons was a real, longtime Memphian.

“As soon as Liz said, ‘We meant no disrespect to Miss Savannah,’ he stopped cold and said, ‘Who is Miss Savannah?’” recalled Daney D. Kepple, the director of communications for Rhodes.

Mr. Grant said, “I thought it was an artist’s rendition of what he thought an African-American in Memphis should look like.” Instead, he said, “This is a real live beautiful African-American woman.”

By the time the 152-foot-by-58-foot mural was unveiled Sunday, Mr. Grant and his allies had become supporters. The lesson, he said, lay in taking the time to talk and listen. “This will help to heal some of the wounds that we’ve had all the way back to the ’50s and ’60s,” he said.

Forever scarred by the assassination of the Rev. Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) here in 1968, Memphis today is still dominated — many say oppressed — by racial issues. Last year, a black candidate for Congress, Nikki Tinker, linked her white Jewish opponent, Steve Cohen, to the [Ku Klux Klan](#). Mayor Willie W. Herenton, who

is black, has called his critics “haters.”

John Kirkscey, who is raising money for an arts building and park downtown and was on hand for the unveiling, said the mural had created a “kumbaya moment” which, he hoped, signaled a kind of détente. “There’s kind of a hair trigger around here” about race, Mr. Kirkscey said. “People assume the worst.”

Such sensitivities may have led Chick Hill, the white building owner and Rhodes trustee who had the original idea for the mural, to tread carefully when asked how he knew Ms. Simmons, whom he had introduced to the muralist, Jeff Zimmermann, when he was looking for subjects. “Through churches,” Mr. Hill said vaguely.

Actually, Ms. Simmons, who now volunteers at a Head Start program four days a week, said she had been the Hills’s nanny and housekeeper for about a decade — a fact, Mr. Hill later explained, that he preferred to leave up to her to disclose.

On Sunday, the mural’s theme of “turning the page” seemed to be exemplified by the festive, multiracial crowd lounging on a nearby hill. Angela Franklin, 38, was bursting with pride at the likeness of her daughter, Dominika Haywood, 14, another of Mr. Zimmermann’s subjects.

Ms. Franklin’s upper front teeth were encased in gold, in a style known as a grill. Asked about the mural controversy, she said she wished it would teach people not to make negative assumptions about people with gold teeth. In her case, she explained, she was stuck with a fashion decision she made at 16. “I would love to have my pearly white smile back but I just can’t afford it right now,” she said. “Those golds hold me back from doing a lot of things I want to do.”

Indeed, it would be a mistake to assume that Ms. Simmons’s own gold tooth had anything to do with fashion. When she got dentures, she asked her dentist to add a gold tooth in memory of her father, who had one in the same location.

“It didn’t bother me” that people took offense to it, Ms. Simmons explained. “They just didn’t know who I was.”

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