

Celebrities Now Give Thonx For Their Roots in the Bronx

Ads Try to Repair a Tattered Reputation

By TIMOTHY WILLIAMS

First came the rebuilding, then the arrival of artists and antique shops — then the marketing campaign.

Putting its own spin on celebrity image repair, the Bronx has stepped up a feel-good promotional push that includes radio spots, newspaper ads and billboards along roads from Boston to Washington in an attempt to boost the borough's poor, but rallying, image.

The primary goal is not to attract tourists, though visitors certainly would not be turned away, officials said, but to change the business community's negative perception of the Bronx — a borough whose longtime unofficial slogan, "Only the strong survive," is not exactly conducive to incubating business.

Among the Bronx natives who appear in the \$200,000 campaign are the television host Regis Philbin, the mystery writer Mary Higgins Clark, the singer Valerie Simpson and the Yankees television broadcaster Michael Kay.

"Your team is turning around an entire borough," Mr. Philbin tells Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrión Jr. in one radio spot. "That's life changing."

"You've noticed the recovery, then?" Mr. Carrión asks.

"Hey, I'm from the Bronx," Mr. Philbin responds. "I don't miss a thing."

The idea for the ad campaign was prompted by a study conducted by Fordham University graduate students that found a well of negative perceptions about the borough among business executives. Among the students' recommendations was marketing the Bronx in hopes of changing such views.

The campaign, now in its third year, is financed by several Bronx institutions featured in the ads, including the Yankees, the Bronx Zoo, Fordham University, the New York Botanical Garden, Jacobi Medical

Center and Woodlawn Cemetery.

"There are some persistent stereotypes about a place called the Bronx that are no longer reality, and obviously, it is important to dispel those stereotypes," Mr. Carrión said.

While the marketing campaign does not promote a slogan for the borough, Bronx boosters hope a positive spin will make old negative catchphrases — from Ogden Nash's couplet, "The Bronx? No Thonx," to Howard Cosell's declaration, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx is Burning," to Bobby Bonilla's threat, "I'll Show You the Bronx"— go the way of the fortified crack house.

A few years ago, the borough changed the phrase on its street wastebaskets from "Don't dump on the Bronx" to "Beautiful Bronx." Mr. Carrión said an officially sanctioned slogan for the Bronx is being discussed. "We are doing some internal soul searching," he said.

These days, with plans for high-rise co-ops in the South Bronx moving forward, construction cranes have become the borough's new visual metaphor, replacing the window decals of the 1980's in which pictures of potted plants and drawn curtains were placed in the windows of abandoned buildings to give the appear-

ance of a nonexistent domestic life.

While Bronx residents and natives were reflexively defensive about their borough for years, they now say they have reason for some old-fashioned New York-style braggadocio. On the "I Love the Bronx!" Web site, for instance, the Bronx Tourism Council (yes, such a body exists) boasts, "The Bronx is Up!"

While crime and unemployment continue to fester, despite gentrification, promoters of the Bronx would rather talk about the new glass sculpture exhibit by Dale Chihuly at the botanical garden, or the new wild dogs at the Bronx Zoo. Or that the new criminal courthouse and the expansion of the Bronx Museum of the Arts are nearing completion. Or about seafood on City Island, the open-mike poetry series at the Downtown Bronx Bar & Cafe and the upcoming Tour de Bronx bicycle ride, or about the Yankees, of course, who have managed to win despite a raft of injuries.

Even Mr. Nash had second thoughts about the Bronx, and eventually tried to make amends. In 1964, 33 years after his original four-word poem was published, Mr. Nash wrote a letter to the dean of Bronx Community College apologizing — sort of:

*I can't seem to escape
the sins of my smart-alec youth;
Here are my amends.
I wrote those lines, "The Bronx?
No thonx";
I shudder to confess them.
Now I'm an older, wiser man
I cry, "The Bronx? God
bless them!"*



A poster put up in Metro-North Railroad trains recently extols the positive aspects of the Bronx.

A borough wants to shed its unofficial slogan: 'Only the strong survive.'