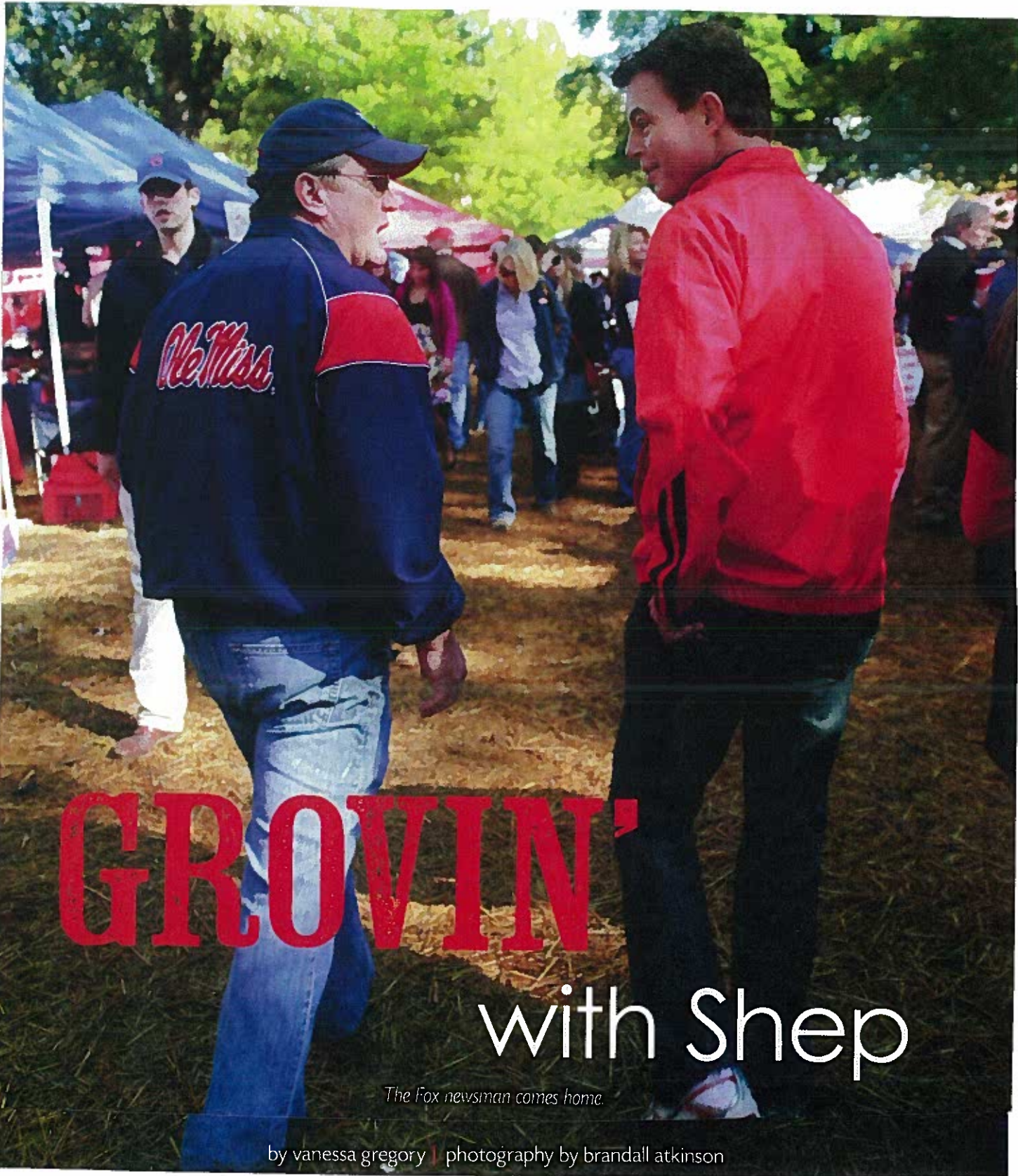


# MISSISSIPPI

Magazine



# GROVIN'

with Shep

*The Fox newsmen comes home.*

by vanessa gregory | photography by brandall atkinson



# S

tudents and alumni stare at Shepard Smith, dressed for the Grove in jeans and an Ole Miss jacket, as he walks past a row of tents.

"Shep!" a student calls out. "What's it gonna be, man?"

The news anchor grins. "Well," he says. "I hope we're gonna play some football!"

Smith, of course, is hard to miss. The Holly Springs native with the distinctive face—dark-edged eyes set under peaked brows—has covered some of modern history's biggest news stories, including the tragic 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, Hurricane Katrina, and the notorious O.J. Simpson trial. Most folks in the Grove recognize him as the lead news anchor for Fox News with channel programs that include *Studio B with Shepard Smith* in the afternoons, and *The Fox Report*, his wildly popular evening newscast. But fame hasn't made the former University of Mississippi student forget his roots. "I was in New York on 9/11, and I've lived there for years, so that's home too," Smith says one sunny game morning in Oxford. "But this is home. I understand this."

In other words, Smith understands that fall Saturdays are meant for friends, family, and football—in particular, Rebels' football. He's always talking about his beloved team on air, and rarely misses a home game at Vaught-Hemingway stadium. These football weekends back in Oxford are a family affair: his father, Shepard Smith Sr., lives in town, as does Smith's brother, Benton Smith, and Benton's wife and children. The joy of reuniting with family comes first for Smith, but it's closely followed by his delight of visiting the Grove, a place he struggles to describe to Northern friends. "The Grove is something that doesn't translate to videos or stills, because you can't smell it or taste it," Smith says. "You really have to be here."

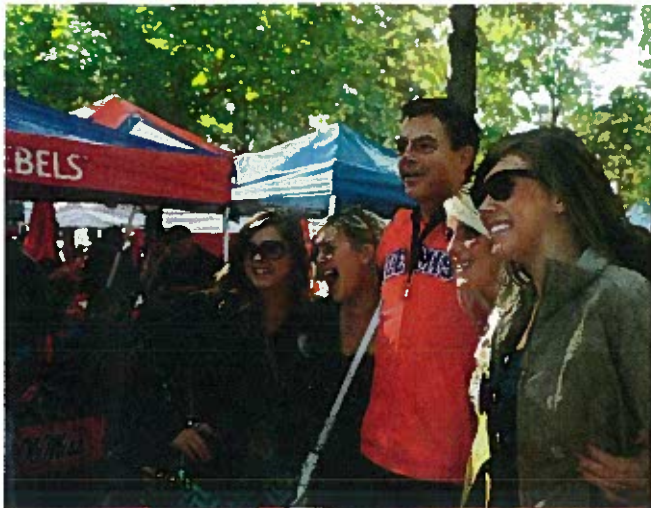
Years ago, Smith says he worried too much about the Rebels' performance to relax in the Grove. But the "surprisingly civilized" gathering on the grass won Smith over, and these days he's a regular. So a typical game weekend might start with Smith offering to babysit his niece and nephew, followed by a Saturday morning spent watching football on television until it's Grove time. "I like being out there with my friends," Smith says. "I love the simplicity of it."

Those friends include Hal Haney, a local dentist, and his wife Carole, a retired administrator of North Mississippi Regional Center. The Haney family welcomed Smith into their red-and-white tent about seven years ago. "We enjoy having Shepard," Carole Haney says. "And he loves Ole Miss."

It's a good thing, too, since the Haney family are Ole Miss devotees who have been tailgating for more than four decades. For years, they've set up a special spot on the grass, covered a table with food and decorations, and invited friends into their







PREVIOUS PAGES: Ole Miss graduate Shephard Smith is a regular figure in the Grove in Oxford. Carole and Hal Haney welcomed Smith into their tent festivities about seven years ago. Sitting with his father in the Rebel Club is one of Smith's favorite Saturday game activities. "As long as my dad can go to the game, I am sitting next to him," shares Smith. Ever the newsman, Smith stops to do a little pre-game interview.

ABOVE: Smith always has time to pose with other Rebel fans. Decorative cupcakes are offered in the Haney's tent. A sea of red, white, and blue underneath the canopy of oaks is a vision that Smith relishes. Cheering for the Rebels is what thrills Smith every home-game weekend.

space. Their buffet always includes a creative floral centerpiece, often inspired by a rival team. For a game against Vanderbilt University, for instance, Hal Haney built a tiny door to represent the rival Commodores, and declared the tent a slam-the-door-shut zone. When Smith has time, he brings a dish to share with his hosts too. "He is a Southern boy who hasn't lost his Southern charm," Carole says.

And there's plenty of Southern charm at the Haney tent, a place that serves as pre-game headquarters for about 25 friends and family members. The food changes every game, but it almost always has a Dixie twist. An afternoon game might inspire Carole to organize a spread with deviled eggs, fried chicken wings, and seven-layer dip. She gets some food from caterers, but keeps the fare simple: tamales from Walmart, which look and taste great, are sometimes in the mix. Early games mean more breakfast staples, such as biscuits, cheese grits, and shrimp and grits—all Smith favorites. "He says he doesn't see grits very much in New York," Haney says.

For Smith, mingling with friends in the Grove is the perfect warm-up before a family football game. At the sight of the Ole Miss Band, Smith leaves the Grove to meet his 82-year-old father at the stadium. "As long as my dad can go to the game, I'm sitting next to him, period," Smith says. It's a luxury he's grateful to have earned. Even though his work may appear glamorous, he has spent years working weekends and going where news broke on a moment's notice.

He gained his work ethic growing up in Mississippi. Even as a teenager with a job at the local drugstore, Smith was an exceptionally hard worker, says his father, a retired cotton merchant who also attended Ole Miss. Smith's determination, and his booming voice, helped him get into college on a scholarship to sing bass with the Ole Miss Concert Singers. "I heard him singing the 'Lord's Prayer' one time," Smith Sr. recalls. "I've never heard anything like it."

With the Concert Singers, who travel to perform, Smith got his first glimpse of the greater world: a young man who had never been west of Arkansas and Louisiana soon found himself in Europe. So it's easy to understand why his affection for Ole Miss is so strong. "Thank God for a place like this where you can get educated at home," he says.

That love comes with an obligation, Smith explains before the game. "Along with loving Ole Miss comes hating LSU," he says with a smile.

That's the kind of good-natured trash talk Smith likes to exchange with well-wishers who stop by the Haney's Grove tent. He may be a newsman in New York, but under the oaks he's just an excited fan, eager for the game, and happy to be with friends and family. "Leave your politics at the door," Smith says. "That's usually what I do. I'd rather talk about the Rebels." **FO**