

Opinion

Sometimes life takes you to places you never would have predicted

By **ALAN J. ORTBALS**

I'm fascinated by the way some peoples' careers take turns they never expected



Ortbals

— taking them places they never thought they would be.

For example, there was a man who owned and operated a tavern at the corner of Jefferson and Cherokee streets in south St.

Louis. While attending the World's Fair in 1904, he saw his first motion picture. That got him thinking. He acquired a film and projector, rented the vacant storefront next door, and packed the house. That was the end of the tavern business and the beginning of Wehrenberg Theaters, a fixture on the St. Louis movie scene for more than 100 years.

Or, back in the 1970s, a couple of 20-somethings, friends since high school, were sitting around shooting the breeze. One of them was unemployed; the other had a job that he hated. The idea of starting their own business came up and they began

kicking around ideas. They decided to open a bagel store; went to a local purveyor of used restaurant equipment and asked to see a bagel maker. When the salesman showed it to them, they were taken aback. It was much more than they could afford. Then, one of them asked, How much is that ice cream machine? Their names were Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield and that was the beginning of Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream.

My career took a crazy bounce as well. I had spent 25 years in economic and community development, first in St. Louis and then making the jump across the river in 1985. When I made that move, I was like every other Missourian. Illinois was like the dark side of the moon. But, coming across the river I was struck by some very big differences — the development pattern for one.

On the Missouri side, communities blended together. You could drive down a street like Manchester or Lindbergh and go from one municipality to another, not knowing which one you were in. The Illinois side, on the other hand, was made up of small towns both geographically and socially separate from one another.

So, when Kerry Smith, a reporter with

The Telegraph in Alton, called to tell me that she was considering creating a business publication for the Metro East, I told her that I knew absolutely nothing about the newspaper business but that I loved the idea from an economic development standpoint. I thought such a publication could help bridge those divides and bring the communities of southwestern Illinois together.

Little did I know that just a few years later I would find myself out of a job for the first time in my adult life. I sent letters to about 150 of my closest friends and acquaintances, letting them know that I was job hunting. I received some interesting responses but one day I received a call that left me speechless. It was Kerry asking if I would be interested in coming to her new paper. I thought that was the most preposterous idea I had ever heard and sat for several moments just staring at the phone. We concluded the conversation and I assumed that would be the end of it.

When my wife came home from work, I told her about the bizarre call I had received and thought that she would agree with me that the idea was ludicrous. She didn't. Instead, she said that she thought that it had merit and I should think about

it. The more I thought about it the more I liked the idea and finally came to the conclusion that I not only wanted to do it but wanted to buy half of the business.

That was 16 years ago and over that time I think we built a publication that did indeed bridge the divide, bringing businesses and communities closer together. So that it may continue long into the future, my partner Dennis Grubaugh and I have sold our interest in the Illinois Business Journal to Better Newspapers Inc. of Mascoutah, Ill., publishers of more than 20 newspapers across Illinois and Missouri.

Dennis and I will still be involved and the Illinois Business Journal will continue to deliver the high quality journalism that's been our trademark for nearly two decades but this move ensures that the IBJ will continue long after we retire.

If some fortune teller had told me 17 years ago that I would end up in the newspaper business, I would have told him he was crazy, out of his mind. But, like Fred Wehrenberg, Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, I ended up somewhere I never would have predicted.

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Southwestern Illinois doing some things right in economic development

By **DENNIS GRUBAUGH**

I'll admit that Ron Starner and I are a couple of dinosaurs. He said as much when I interviewed him this past month.



Grubaugh

"I somehow managed to survive 30 years in the publishing world," he told me.

I have him beat by a decade — a total of 40 years this spring. That doesn't make me all that special,

more of an oddity really, in a profession in which endurance is as much about luck as it is talent.

And while all my time has been spent at newspapers in Southwestern Illinois, Starner has traveled extensively in multiple media roles, the latest being a 19-year stint with Conway Inc., which operates Site Selection magazine and related ventures. Starner is now the executive vice president. The magazine is a go-to source for economic developers around the world.

To be sure, Starner has a depth of

knowledge that I'll never be able to match. He's been all over the place, writing about a wide range of issues. Topics are as diverse as attracting top talent; the growth of aerospace and homeland security firms; robotic takeovers; the challenges of high-tech; the travails of agribusiness; renewal energy; the pharmaceutical industry; and on and on. Good stuff and well documented, too. He frequently travels to discuss the magazine's research. His home base is Peachtree Corners, Ga., in suburban Atlanta.

He came to Madison County at the invitation of the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois, a not-for-profit member-based economic development corporation representing primarily Madison and St. Clair counties. Members wanted his thoughts on what works — and what doesn't — when it comes to attracting (or repelling) development.

He praised Leadership Council's efforts. The council's expressed mission is to unite the region for economic growth through its coalition of 250 board members who are leaders in business, industry, government and more.

The council's Executive Director Dr.

Ronda Sauget and individual committee members have traveled extensively in recent years spreading the word about Southern Illinois, trying their best to get this region's name in front of people who are simultaneously considering dozens if not hundreds of other opportunities.

Sauget, when I last talked to her, was planning a trip to Washington, D.C., for a presentation to a Japanese trade organization. She was hopeful of meeting with firms interested in foreign direct investment in Southwestern Illinois. Japanese interests have more than 3,800 business operations in our country employing more than 400,000 with a concentration in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee, she said.

It would be nice to see more of that interest shown in Illinois, and Starner said such a dedicated, local approach is the right thing to do.

"Absolutely. That is exactly the way to go. You absolutely need your best and brightest minds, the leaders of the community who have skin in the game and have (professionally) accomplished something. They know what it takes to succeed in this region."

Without that kind of leadership, a region

is "doomed," he added.

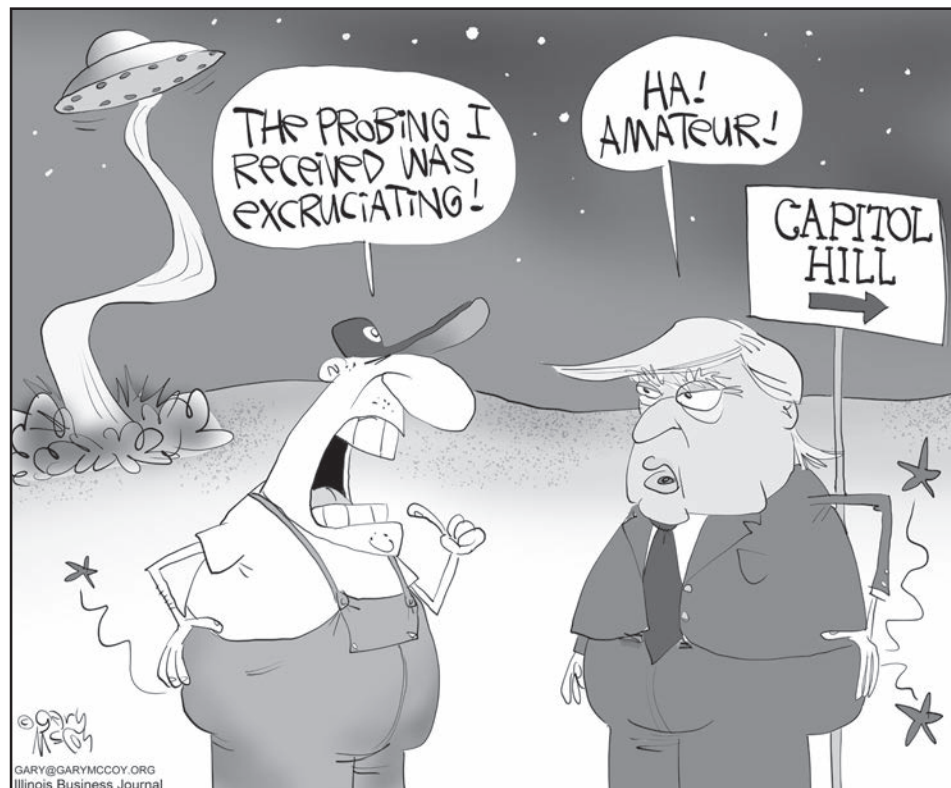
Regional economic development agencies that live up to their promises are a top attraction for companies wanting to locate in a market, Starner said. The big turnoff for developers, it turns out, is when they negotiate with individual communities who balk at permits, incentives, infrastructure or other particulars at crunch time.

Illinois has gotten a bad rap in recent years, but so much has made of its fiscal problems that some successes have been overlooked.

Site Selection magazine regularly compiles datapoints of interest. During his visit here, Starner presented a list showing that Illinois in 2018 was actively involved in 444 development projects — making the state the third on a list of top 10 states.

Most of those projects were in the Chicago area, but the point still must be made. There are things happening in the state if you're paying attention and will continue to be if we're doing things right. In Southwestern Illinois, I believe we are.

A related story is on Page 1. Dennis Grubaugh is editor of the Illinois Business Journal. He can be reached at (618) 977-6865 or dgrubaugh@ibjonline.com



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