

Celebrates 20 Years

2000 - 2020

A newspaper risk became an investment in Southwestern Illinois

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

I began my career as a high school social studies teacher, got a master’s degree and transitioned into economic and community development, a field to which



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I devoted about 20 years, first in Missouri and then in Illinois. I met Kerry Smith while I was running the Southwestern Illinois Development Authority in the late 1990s. One of the projects that I was involved in then was the redevelopment of the Owens-Illinois Glass plant in Alton. At one time some 4,000 people were employed there but by the late ’90s it was closed, abandoned, dilapidated and seriously contaminated. I suggested a financing mechanism to the prospective developer, Harold Clark of Clark Properties, and we were able to bring it to fruition, erasing the blight, remediating the contamination and creating in its place Alton Center Business Park where more than 1,000 people are employed today.

Smith was a reporter with The Telegraph in Alton and would

periodically call to interview me on the project’s progress. During one of these calls she told me that she was considering starting a business newspaper that would focus on the Illinois side of metro St. Louis. What did I think? I told her that I knew absolutely nothing about the newspaper business, but I thought it was a terrific idea from the economic development perspective.

I had been born and raised in the city of St. Louis and didn’t come to the Illinois side until 1985. Like practically every other Missouri resident, Illinois was the dark side of the moon to me. And, upon making the move, I was surprised to find several fundamental differences, one of which was the development pattern.

The Missouri side had pretty much begun at the river and grew outward from there. If you drive west on Manchester Road, for example, you will travel through mile after mile of solid development. You will also traverse many a municipality and may not know which one you are in at any given moment. It doesn’t make that much difference. They are invisible political boundaries more than anything else.

But, when I came to Southwestern Illinois, it was completely different — more than now. The Illinois side was a collection of small towns, each separate and distinct from one another and

surrounded by corn and soybean fields. And each had its own newspaper — the Granite City Press-Record, the Collinsville Herald, the Alton Telegraph. There was no one paper through which a business owner in Alton could communicate with one in Cahokia or Belleville and vice versa. And, communication, I thought, was key to pulling the area together and spurring economic development.

I also thought Smith was very astute to recognize the need. Afterall, she wasn’t from this area, having grown up in Milwaukee, going to college in Wisconsin and living for some time in Houston. Upon moving to Alton, she tried to talk the St. Louis Business Journal into hiring her to cover the Illinois side, but they had no interest in doing that and that opened the door for what became the Illinois Business Journal.

One of the other things I noticed when I came to this side of the river is how divided the metro area was. You don’t think about it when you live in Metro West but much of the media is based on the Missouri side, essentially standing at the river and facing west. Metro East was a market of over 600,000 people, 30,000 businesses, and no one was paying much attention to it. Smith created the Illinois Business Journal with the aim of filling that void.

I wasn’t the only one that Smith conferred with about her idea and she got enough encouragement that she made the dive into the deep end in 2000.

In March of 2003 I found myself out of a job for the first time in my life and I sent letters of inquiry to about 150 of my closest friends and associates. I received a number of feelers, but one day I got a call that floored me. It was Kerry Smith calling to see if I would be interested in joining her in the paper. I

