## Celebrates 20 Year A newspaper risk became an investment in Southwestern Illinois

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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



**Ortbals** 

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

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

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

was so astounded that I was nearly speechless. After all, I knew absolutely nothing about the newspaper business. When my wife came home from work, I told her about the ridiculous call I had received. Instead of joining me in my incredulity, she said she thought it made some sense and I should think about it.

The more I thought about it the more I liked the idea. When you are in economic development, you need to know about government, law, banking, finance, business, construction, real estate development and a whole host of other things. And I realized that my knowledge in those areas would fit perfectly with a business journal. If you're going to be successful in business, you need to know about those things, too. I bought in.

We had some rough times at first, but we soon found our footing and turned the Illinois Business Journal into one of the premier publications in Southwestern Illinois. Through good journalism, a constant focus on our market area, and a staunch belief in a balanced approach to differing views, the IBJ filled that void that Smith had identified and that I thought was needed to draw the region together.

Over the last 20 years, the Illinois Business Journal has become an important part of the economic development fabric of Southwestern Illinois, championing projects like the new Mississippi River bridge and fighting to present the Illinois viewpoint on the location of NGA-West. As I stepped into retirement, it was important to me that the IBJ continue to fill that role. In selling to Better Newspapers, I think we found the perfect match. I, along with the rest of Southwestern Illinois, look forward to many more issues of the Illinois Business Journal



