

Opinion

Then and now: Twenty years goes by in the blink of an eye

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

So, how does a startup print newspaper find its way in the world? It's not easy. Most of them fold up long before they realize success.



Grubaugh

Like any other business, successful newspapers are a testament to their ability to handle many factors, not the least of which are competition, business environment, employees, revenue stream, expenses, and dealing with the unexpected.

But, unlike other businesses, newspapers are their own animal. They buy ink by the barrel and can create friends and foes with each run of the press. They are staffed by people who can be comrades in arms to the bitter end — or egos at loggerheads over story play and sentence structure.

For 22 years I worked for a seven-day paper, and the daily miracle was simply being able to make it from one edition to the next. Now, and for the last seven years,

I only have had 12 editions a year to fret over.

All this leads me to the 20-year miracle of the Illinois Business Journal. How did the IBJ make it this far? Darned if I have a single answer. My colleagues and I would love to say that genius was the reason, but in truth luck played a big part, as it does in every enterprise.

Luck, and being able to roll with punches. Fortunately, we never had a lot of bureaucracy to plow through when we decided to try various things. We just did them, and if they worked, we did them again and again. And we stuck to the theme of covering and bolstering Southwestern Illinois, which was good for business.

At first, the success was in persistence, being able to slowly gain the respect of advertisers and readers. The ownership changed but the paper remained much the same. Founder Kerry Smith published the first issue in October 2000. Smith took on partner Alan Ortvals in 2003. After Smith left to pursue other ventures in 2013, Ortvals took on his own partner, me.

Now, with Al's retirement last year, the IBJ is a product of yours truly and its newest owners, Greg Hoskins and his

Better Newspapers group, a reliable source of community print journalism throughout Southern Illinois and Central Missouri.

Individually, we all came along at the right time, helping carry forward the IBJ year to year. Each of us brought something to the table — Smith, an amazing knack for entrepreneurship; Ortvals, a deep understanding of economic development; and me, a career writing for Metro East newspapers.

The approach has occasionally been seat of our pants, but it has also been a veritable thrill ride. The tough part was simply getting established and gaining credibility. Then came the rollercoaster recession that lasted years. And always there was the face-off against the dastardly internet, which was viewed for years as competition but more recently as a venue of advantage.

Today, the IBJ has multiple platforms — a monthly print edition, a weekly newsletter and our daily news updates on ibjonline.com. We also make use of Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. We've adapted because we had to.

It's sad to say that several local newspapers have come and gone in the last few decades. Remember the Metro East Journal? The Globe Democrat? The Wood

River Journal? The Bethalto American? All have passed on since I first stepped into the box.

I wasn't around for the start of the IBJ in 2000, but I watched with interest from nearby. The Illinois Business Journal was an experiment, and it was a bit of a risk. But, as another entrepreneur of that same era once said, "The biggest risk is not taking any risk." You may have heard of the guy. Fellow by the name of Mark Zuckerberg.

The IBJ's success has been in filling a niche. It also has been our ability to work with local leaders to promote the general welfare of the region. Sometimes that means pointing to our faults. So be it. It's what good newspapers do.

Hopefully, you did not pass over Pages 4 and 5 in this edition because they contain some profound thoughts from two people I very much admire. Starting this newspaper was hard, keeping it going was harder. Living to recap the first 20 years — and now looking ahead — seems easy by comparison.

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Perhaps we're confusing freedom with just plain selfishness

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

In 1998, Tom Brokaw's "The Greatest Generation" hit the bookstores. In it he chronicled the stories of the men and



Ortbals

women who came of age during the Great Depression and World War II. "They answered the call to save the world from the two most powerful and ruthless military machines ever assembled,"

Brokaw wrote, "instruments of conquest in the hands of fascist maniacs. They faced great odds and a late start, but they did not protest. They succeeded on every front. They won the war; they saved the world." "They have so many stories to tell," he continued, "stories that in many cases they have never told before, because in a deep sense they didn't think that what they were doing was that special, because everyone else was doing it too."

It wasn't just those who served in uniform that won the war. Everyone pitched in and endured hardships to conquer the common foe. Income taxes shot up. At the beginning of the war, only 10 percent of employed people were

subject to income tax. By 1944, nearly everyone was. And taxes were high. The top marginal rate was 94 percent and the threshold to hit that bracket was lowered from \$5 million to \$200,000.

Prices and wages were controlled. Items like tires and gasoline were rationed. By 1943 a shopper needed government issued ration stamps to buy coffee, sugar, meat, cheese, butter, lard, margarine, canned foods, dried fruits, jam, gasoline, bicycles, fuel oil, clothing, silk or nylon stockings, shoes, and many other items. Cars and home appliances were no longer made at all.

More than 11 million people volunteered for the Civilian Defense Corps and performed tasks like firefighting, enemy aircraft reconnaissance and blackout enforcement. Blackout orders required that either all lights were turned out at night or thick curtains drawn. Kids got involved, collecting scrap copper and brass through the Junior Citizens Service Corp for use in artillery shells. They also harvested milkweed for use in the manufacture of life jackets.

And millions of American retirees, housewives and students went to work in the factories to produce everything from shoes to ships, working long hours for fixed wages.

In Brokaw's estimation they were an extraordinary group of people. I disagreed.

It seemed to me that any people under similar circumstances, besieged by a common foe, would pull together and do whatever was necessary to defeat that foe. I was wrong. Clearly, we Americans of today are not up to the task.

Today, we find ourselves under attack by a different kind of foe — a virus that lives, thrives, and reproduces in the human respiratory system. It is a novel virus, meaning it is new to the human species, and so no one has developed an immunity to it. It passes easily through the droplets we all exhale and it is far deadlier than the typical flu. So far this year, 200,000 Americans have been killed by COVID-19. For perspective, more than 400,000 Americans died fighting WWII.

Unlike our ancestors, we're not pulling together. We're pulling apart. Everyone knows — or should know — what's necessary to hold the virus at bay until a vaccine and/or a therapeutic can be created. Wear masks (properly); keep a safe distance from others; wash your hands. It seems like so little compared to what the Greatest Generation did, yet so many of us are unwilling to do it.

Some states refuse to implement mask mandates. The governor of Georgia even overrode the mandate put in place by the mayor of Atlanta. Jefferson County, Mo., passed one on one day and repealed it the next after receiving a tsunamic backlash.

Dozens of public health officials have resigned, retired or been fired due to the hostility of the people they are trying to protect.

We've all seen the photos and videos of college students partying like it's 2019 instead of 2020. And 500,000 people went to the tiny town of Sturgis, S.D., for the annual motorcycle rally. The only masks I saw worn there were by a barmaid, and she didn't have them on her face.

Lauren Boebert is running for Congress in Colorado on an anti-COVID protocol platform.

"They want to take away our freedoms, our rights, our liberties," she says. "This isn't the proper role of government. It's government's role to inform us of risks and let us use personal responsibility to evaluate that risk ourselves."

That would be true if your actions only affected you, but they don't. They affect everyone you come in contact with and everyone they come in contact with and so on. Perhaps we are confusing freedom with selfishness.

I saw a man holding a sign that said, "The only person's health I'm responsible for is my own." Imagine if the men who stormed Omaha Beach had had that same attitude.

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