

The Illinois Business Journal

Two decades of regional coverage, identity — AND THE GOAL LIVES ON

By KERRY SMITH

Where have 20 years gone? Seriously, it does seem like yesterday — well, maybe a few yesterdays ago — when I relocated from Houston, Texas, to a new land known as Southwestern Illinois. Three weeks after my arrival I began working full-time as a reporter at a small daily newspaper, my dream after having been part of a large daily in Houston for nine years.

It didn't take long for this outsider to see what many Southwestern Illinois natives long did: The region to the east across the Mississippi River, less than a half hour's drive from St. Louis, was growing and developing in significant ways. As a newcomer, I marveled at the economic development, commercial development and quality of life advancements taking

place. From month to month, as I explored this new land, I witnessed the noticeable progress. As a reporter, I regularly came into contact with regional leaders who were embracing and building this territory. The substance of genuine (and mostly positive) news was occurring as a byproduct of the strong leadership and hard work being done on "this side of the river." And yet no one was covering it — not from a regional business perspective, that is. The year was 1999, yet it was a clear déjà vu for me of what I'd experienced in Houston several years earlier. The same business journal conglomerate that owns St. Louis' weekly business publication also owns Houston's weekly business journal. A similar level of significant growth and progress was occurring in the less-populated county just to the northeast of Houston. But due to strict geographical coverage boundaries, the big city's business journal wasn't interested in recognizing, appreciating and covering the news to the northeast.



Does this sound familiar? In mid-1999 when I moved to Southwestern Illinois, I saw exactly the same phenomenon occurring. St. Louis' business publication gave a once-a-year nod (in the form of a gratuitous story and republished photo) to our region, but that was the extent of it. I tried to convince this publication (via several sit-downs with management) that our region was generating myriad legit news coverage opportunities, but no go. So — as my former longtime business partner Al Ortvals aptly expressed it — I "didn't overthink it," quickly diving in to raise support and birth a regional business publication that Southwestern Illinois could claim as its own. Without your ardent support — with your finances and your advocacy — the Illinois Business Journal wouldn't have lifted off the ground with issue No. 1 in October 2000, thrived and continue to be in publication today. This newbie to the region 20 years ago rapidly met colleagues who quickly became true friends who remain so today. Without the volunteer expertise of SCORE counselors Richard Rook and N. Gail Weinrich (both of whom are now gone and missed dearly), the IBJ wouldn't have made the transition from concept to reality. Less than a dozen issues in, 9/11 happened, spurring an economic recession. The young IBJ endured. Another recession ensued seven years later, when the housing market teetered and collapsed. The IBJ endured. During the time I owned

and operated this publication, printing technology changed markedly. We went from trucking broadsheet-sized hard copies of the paper to the printer (and cutting color into ads with X-Acto knives) to Zip drives, then to CDs of the pages and ultimately to transmission from office to printing press entirely over the Internet, all of this over a period of only 10 years. Also during the early years, other publications either ignored us or tried to thwart us, but your support and our determination held firm. I'd like to think back in those early days that we — along with many of you — helped advance the mindset of regionalism, if only on "our side of the river." We launched a product that connected the economic development goals shared by one Southwestern Illinois municipality with others. We intentionally cross-pollinated (in an editorial sense) one local business source with another, weaving a regional narrative to convince St. Louis to sit up and take notice. It truly is a David and Goliath story of the little publication that could and did. I fondly recall so many of you — in those early days — who carried stacks of this business journal across the river, proclaiming to St. Louis that "this is OUR business journal." That it is indeed. This is your publication. Happy 20th Anniversary, Illinois Business Journal. *Kerry Smith is founder of the Illinois Business Journal.*

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