

Opinion

Time, relationships and the power of words

By MELISSA CROCKETT MESKE



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Time flies. We all know that. And it isn't dependent solely on having fun. It flies, regardless. We strive to spend those moments of time, as they fly, learning new things or building new memories that become positive pieces of the future as we are continually propelled forward.

It's been over a year now since I stepped into the role of editor here at the Illinois Business Journal. I was honored to have been asked to do so first by an incredible mentor and role model, former IBJ editor Dennis Grubaugh.

But I realize that I never really got to introduce myself, and I think that taking an opportunity to do so now is an important next step.

I've spent a lifetime working in communications, albeit along a very diverse career path. I spent two years as the student newspaper editor at Lewis and Clark Community College during my undergraduate studies, and my first full-time job after college was in the newsroom of The Telegraph in Alton, where Dennis first mentored me. When I left there, I

spent nearly a decade in workforce and economic development before starting my own consulting firm in Jerseyville.

And for nearly another decade, I helped clients from all over the Metro East share their messages and launch new product lines while teaching a few management and marketing classes at L&C. I also organized publicity efforts for the ACS Relay For Life of Jersey County for three years; one year led to a national award for our efforts.

My entrepreneurial efforts continued again after a three-year stint leading one of the region's nonprofits through a major restructuring and rebranding. My husband's work then took to the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia for a few years. From my home office in Charles Town, W. Va., I interviewed business and industry leaders back here for Dennis and the Illinois Business Journal, and out there for an interstate trucking company.

I also edited three books formerly available on Amazon for a retired military leader who had a keen imagination for fiction with Native American roots, and who has since passed. I felt honored that he had trusted me to help refine the stories he told to the world.

We moved back home to Illinois seven years ago because my mom, now 88, needed someone by her side. Coming back home also meant, for me, coming back to journalism. I became the regional editor for the Jersey, Greene, and Calhoun County

newspapers before moving on.

I shifted to the former AdVantage News as its senior reporter/editor and spending the next almost three years there, with my work recognized by the IFPA as part of a national award presentation for business news reporting. And when their newsroom downsized, I found myself back on an entrepreneurial journey before arriving here as the IBJ's third editor.

Many years ago, I acquired an associate degree in management with a minor in accounting while attending Lewis and Clark as a single mom. I took a year's worth of mass communications classes at University of Illinois Springfield, later completing my bachelor's degree in organizational leadership through Greenville University and my master's degree in organizational management through University of Phoenix, all while working full-time and parenting two kiddos. And, while out East, I completed a paralegal studies undergraduate certificate program through American Public University.

I don't share this as a pitch to convince anyone of my qualifications to be here, and I acknowledge that I do not have a formal education specifically in journalism. But I can assure you that my education, professional and pre-professional accomplishments have all been the result of my keen ability to communicate – in writing and in person. I am also a lifelong diehard researcher.

And now, over this year-plus,

I've met many more impressive people and have been honored to tell your stories as well on our pages.

Recently, Charlie Huelsmann (our IBJ marketing manager) and I started exploring what many of you might see as the future for our medium. You are being heard.

We've already added some features to our website, ibjonline.com, in response to what you've told us so far, and we've tweaked our weekly newsletter a bit. For example, you can now submit your press releases and story tips using our online submission form.

Our graphic designer Emily has also been modernizing many details within the pages of each IBJ, and it's looking good.

We are eager to keep moving the IBJ forward while continuing to pay homage to the things that have been working for the past 23 years. We will be reviewing our editorial calendar in the next few weeks for 2024, and we would like to know what you like and don't like about what we've been doing, and what you'd like to see added or done differently.

Just shoot me an email – macmeske@ibjonline.com – and tell us what you think. What can we do to bring the news you need to read, want to read, and need to share, to you and your world, in a way that works for you?

• *Melissa Crockett Meske is the editor of the Illinois Business Journal.*

Commentary

Community-building: *Getting it right by testing assumptions*

By CORY M. JOBE & PATRICK S. MCGINNIS

Too many community-building practitioners cling to the notion that jobs alone build community. But, are jobs enough to attract and retain talent? Workforce training, manufacturing plants, and warehouses are touted as solutions. Creating a day labor center is not community-building. There is more to livability than a job and there is more to community-building than roads, workforce training, and the next Toyota plant.

Downstate Illinois continues to bleed population. One side argues the cause is lack of opportunity, while the other sides argues it's taxes. But maybe, just maybe, downstate Illinois isn't paying enough attention to livability.

Some regions in downstate Illinois have the bones to host the best bedroom communities in the Midwest, if we can recognize and appreciate the connection between community-building and destination-building. Instead of prioritizing blue-collar employment centers and giving handsome tax breaks to encourage large out-of-state companies to move here, why not give equal attention to the livability of our metro north collar corridor of Greater St. Louis. With its proximity to the largest population center in downstate Illinois, our Metro North could be a preferred relocation destination for young families, professionals, and retirees, if we build livable communities and reveal a unique and vibrant regional brand.

There is nothing wrong with pursuing revenue generated by large employment centers, if revenues are dedicated

to building great schools, great parks, great business districts and vibrant downtowns with preferred housing choices.

There is obvious value in having a skilled workforce. Relevant skill sets and proficiency create career opportunities and can attract employer and investor interest. Having great transportation corridors, access, and distribution centers in the Midwest at America's crossroads is a no-brainer. Attracting advanced manufacturing and repurposing our built environment to accommodate next generation employment opportunities makes total sense. But, as so many communities and regions are discovering, it's not enough. You also need great neighborhoods, great schools, access to quality affordable child care and housing, open space and parks, vibrant downtowns and entertainment districts, and unique natural and cultural assets that are stewarded. Perhaps, more importantly, you need a sense of direction and purpose!

We could be that place. But, we cannot simply beat the drum and crow about how great a place this is, or could be. We have to build the communities we want and each of us deserve.

Instead of chasing big employers and opportunistic developers, we need to be chasing young families, retirees, and talent. Talent is looking for a great place to live and most talent already has a job. Alas, activating place-making and transformative change that is impactful and moves the needle of real change is much more complex than having an interstate nearby and competing for the next Amazon center. I believe we are finding that out.

Our Metro North has a chance to get it right. We have the right cultural and natural

assets to build on, but chasing one-and-off development schemes won't get us there. We need to build affordable destinations where people want to work, play, and raise a family.

Arriving at a well-informed, balanced approach to growth that weaves economic pursuits with place-making in a planned for manner is overdue. Our region has need of a brand promise that reveals a forward-leaning, planned for activation strategy. To get there, we will need a highly collaborative effort across jurisdictions leveraged with regional cooperation and smart (not exploitive) public/private investment.

Regional and local comprehensive plans are essential. They must be updated and drive key milestone attainment using an annualized performance-based and measured campaign to reveal and report direction and betterment.

It's time to test our assumptions about growth and livability and affirm a shared commitment to community-building that matters. We can no longer afford a custodial approach to civic matters. Keeping busy with good intentions isn't enough. We must find the capacity, purpose, and resolve to be difference-makers and remake downstate Illinois into a preferred relocation destination that boasts high scores on each of the attributes or key performance indicators of community livability.

We cannot continue to settle for less. Our Metro North region could be a model for real change. Let's begin!

• *Cory M. Jobe is the president & CEO for Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau. Patrick S. McGinnis is the founder of Resilient Communities Group.*

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