

Parting Words

By John O'Brien, upon his retirement as
Executive Director of New Jersey Press Association
September 23, 2010

I am so impressed with tonight's turnout.....there are even people here I don't like!!!

Earlier this evening someone asked me when I knew it was time to retire? How did I come to that decision? I can tell you exactly when it happened..... It was the NJPA Fall Meeting last year and as I stood near the registration table, welcoming new arrivals, for what seemed like the 1,000th time a short, white-haired weekly publisher came up to me, put her hand over her name tag and said, "You don't remember who I am do you Mr. O'Brien?"

I said, "NO....and I don't give a shit!"

It was time to retire!

This is a special night because, like you, Chris and I have two sets of friends....those who we've met through the newspaper industry and those who are, what I call, personal friends, those who we grew up with and have been by our side through these many long years. Tonight is special because these two groups seldom, if ever, meet. And here you are, all in the same room with one common thread....me! That's really special.

This is kinda' like being at my own wake....but I am able to drink!

There is no way I can condense 45 years of stories about my highs and lows in the newspaper industry into a 10 or 15 minute speech tonight and I won't even attempt it. I'll simply say I've had the best career that one could imagine. I've worked in every department of a newspaper, I've been a publisher for the likes of Malcolm Forbes which meant I rode motorcycles and took hot air balloon rides with statesman and Hollywood celebrities. More importantly, my career allowed me to help shape the careers of countless young journalists, photographers and ad sales people so they could ultimately share my excitement and enthusiasm about this wonderful industry.

Then I spent nearly 20 years as the executive director of NJPA and loved every minute of it. To paraphrase Will Rogers, I never met a publisher I didn't like....however, but Bob Collins came close! Thanks to the flexibility of the board of NJPA I've done newspaper training in far off places like Taiwan, Hong

Kong, Poland and Russia. I have been truly blessed. I've seen this industry transform right in front of me. And like you, I'm not sure where all this will end up. It's scary for we "over 60- types" but it must be exciting as Hell for those in their 20's and 30's. I hope I live long enough to see where it all ends up!

Many of you receive InPrint, NJPA's monthly newspaper, and saw my final column in this month's edition. For those of you who missed it, in the column I mentioned some folks who were important to me during my years in the business; people like Seely Thomas, Ed Mack, Palmer Bateman and Malcolm Forbes....and I mentioned a few people who here tonight, like Mac Borg, Don Lass And Jerry Aumente.

But there is one more newspaper person I want to mention tonight who has had a profound impact on me and my life. Her name is Missy Flynn. Missy was our communications manager at NJPA and the most athletic person I had ever met. She competed in triathlons including the famous Ironman event in Hawaii where she swam 2.4 miles, then rode a bike for 112 miles, then jumped off the bike and ran a 26 mile marathon! Missy had a personal trainer and a personal nutritionist. She was a big-time, Olympic caliber athlete! Then one day in December 2006 she suffered a brain aneurism walking down a street in suburban Philadelphia and her life and the lives of all of us who knew her changed forever. The aneurism left her almost totally paralyzed. With the help of her companion Brian Wong, Missy has made great strides since that fateful day....but she has a ways to go.

Missy always encouraged me to exercise when I got the chance. When she first met me, I defined exercise as walking all the way from the couch to the refrigerator to get another beer! She told me to walk...and I do. Every morning I get up at 6 a.m. and walk. But it's not easy. Every morning I still look for excuses not to walk. I look out the window to see if its' raining...or maybe it's too chilly...or maybe I should lay down again because the last glass of wine I had with dinner last night is still rattling around in my head. Then I think of Missy....and I say, "How dare you! How dare you even think of not walkinga task so simple almost anyone can do it.....except Missy. So I walk...and I think of her and I thank her for giving me the strength and resolve to do it one more time. I'm up to 3 miles every day and with any luck my reduced work schedule will allow me to push further. And despite her physical limitations, she still affects me profoundly. So I'd like to publically say thank you Missy Flynn for all you have done and continue to do for me.

No one gets to this point in their life without a lot of help and there are people here tonight that I want to mention and thank for their efforts in making my career so enjoyable.

The entire staff of NJPA is a truly great group of “kids” as I call them. George and Amy and Denise and Catherine and Jane are indispensable. Diane and John and Jennine and Erin give a lot more than they get. And Peggy, who I’ve known for close to 30 years, has been my friend, my confidant, my alter-ego and the kid sister I never had. I thank all of you from the bottom of my heart. I couldn’t have been here today without you.

I also want to thank NJPA’s long-time attorney and my friend Tom Cafferty. Tom has forgotten more that most lawyers know about New Jersey media law. He is an invaluable resource to all of us in the media here in the Garden State. In addition he’s a gentleman and a great husband and father. He’s one of my heroes.

Also joining us tonight, and I am so honored that he is here, is the former Chief Justice of the NJ Supreme Court, James Zazzali. I serve on the Supreme Court’s Bench, Bar, Media Committee with Jim (or The Chief as we call him). He is a wonderful man and one of the truly great minds in the law profession here in the Garden State and someone who “gets it” when it comes to the media’s role in our Democracy. Thanks for honoring me with your presence Chief.

I belong to a group with the acronym of NAM...Newspaper Association Managers. We’re a tight-knit group because there are only about 50 of us throughout the Nation. A few of my fellow Namers are here tonight and I would like to introduce them and thank them for coming all that way. My good friend Tim Williams of the Pennsylvania Newspaper Association. I’m honored that John Sturm, President of the Newspaper Association of America, came all the way from Washington, DC to be with us this evening. Also Morley Piper who recently retired as the executive director of the New England Newspaper Association. Morley is special in my life because he typifies everything that is terrific about this great country of ours. One of the proudest moments of my life took place 10 years ago when Morley and I, in New Orleans for a conference, toured the newly completed D-day Museum. Morley, you see, was a 19 year-old second lieutenant and platoon leader in the 29th Infantry Division when he went ashore in the first wave onto Omaha Beach....June 6, 1944...D-Day. Of the 30 men in his platoon, only 17 made it to shore. And of those 17, making it to the beach was the last thing many of them ever did. To stand next to him in that wonderful memorial built to honor the valiant men, like him, was a moment I will never forget. Thank you Morley for everything you’ve done for me...and for America.

I’d now like to introduce some people I am extremely proud of
...and they have very little to do with the newspaper industry. My family.

My brother Kevin is here all the way from western Maryland. Most of us who know Kevin are envious of his lifestyle. When he graduated from West Virginia

University he took a part time job as a whitewater raft guide in the summer and a ski instructor in the winter. Kevin is now 53 years old and he's a whitewater raft guide in the summer and a ski instructor in the winter....how cool is that? As he gets older, he's also getting a bit nostalgic...about old friends and our home town. During a recent conversation he was reminiscing about bygone days and he said, "Remember when dad threw me out of the boat at Batz's Lake trying to teach me how to swim?" I said, "What makes you think Dad was trying to teach you how to swim?"

Our first born...our daughter Kelly...is here with her family....husband Mike Zengel, son Greg and daughter Sarah. Chris and I were tickled to death when our first grandchild Greg was born, but when Kelly had Sarah, Chris and I did a little dance around the kitchen singing, "Kelly's gonna have a teenage daughter, etc" We are very proud of Kelly. She's the program coordinator of the Family Medicine Residency Program at the Hunterdon Medical Center after completing a 12 year stint in the Emergency Department in the hospital.

Our Son Tim flew in today all the way from Seattle. Still at home are Tim's wife Tracie and his 3 daughters Aidan, Maiti and Rory who arrived 4 weeks ago. Tim...some fatherly advice...you're here laughing and partying away...and your wife is home with a 4 year old, a 2 year old and a 4 week old. I'd get my butt home as quickly as possible...if you get my drift. Tim has had an exciting life. He just ended a 10 year career as a senior mountain guide for Rainier Mountaineering, taking clients to the top of the world's tallest peaks. He's now in the VP of New Business development for a TV production company in Seattle....TV...why don't you just put a bullet through you old man's heart Tim!!!

Finally, I want to introduce the most important person in my life. But first, let me set the stage. In 1967 there's this 20 year old skinny kid....who is the sole support of his disabled father and his 10 year old brotherwho has this really terrific job...in the pressroom of the local weekly newspaper...he meets this gorgeous girl....on April Fools Day (which she says should have been a omen for her)...they date for 5 months and he asks her to marry him...and she says yes. And that has made all the difference. Ladies and gentlemen...my wife of almost 43 years...Chris.

As I said earlier, I've had the best job in the world for the last 20 years. No other press association manager has gotten more support from his members than I have. I thank the newspaper people in the room for all the kindness and encouragement through the years. And doubly so for the friendship I've had with all of you hometown friends. Chris and I are proud to call all of you our extended family.

Now some of you know one of my quirky hobbies is collecting Country & Western song titles. Over the years my fellow NAMers have sent them to me on a regular basis. (It's a lot easier to get a variety of C & W songs in Texas or Montana than Trenton, NJ) Some of my favorites are...

Waylon Jennings' great hit... "My wife ran away with my best friend and I miss him"

Johnny Cash's "If I had my life to live over again, I'd live over a tavern"

Dolly Parton's lovely ballad. "I shaved my legs for this?"

And that old Willie Nelson standby, "From the gutter to you ain't up!"

I want to close tonight with the words of a favorite C & W song of mine by Lee Ann Womack. Don't worry...I won't sing!

Her beautiful lyrics really express a lot about my philosophy of living life....and they are my parting message to you...

*I hope you never lose your sense of wonder
You get your fill to eat but always keep that hunger
May you never take one single breath for granted
God forbid love ever leaves you empty handed
I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean
Whenever one door closes I hope one more opens
I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance
Never settle for the path of least resistance
Living might mean taking chances but they're worth taking
Loving might be a mistake but it's worth making
Don't let some helping heart leave you bitter
If you come close to selling out reconsider
Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance....
I hope you dance!*

I did.