

COMMENTARY

Big two-hearted Yankee

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Paul Flynn, as you might imagine, is Irish, at least in name, and Irish Catholic, at least as defined in his birthplace (the Yankee heart of Irish immigrant-land), Massachusetts.

When he retires next month from the helm of the Southwest Florida Community Foundation, he'll be a world away from Quincy, where he grew up.

But Flynn, 70, is still Yankee to the core, a 20th-century careerist and do-gooder sculpted in an Irish Catholic stereotype: He's the man with two hearts.

From one extends the gift of gab, and from the other that priest-hardened, nun-plated (Catholic-school educated) hankering to do "Good," before he calls it a day.

For Flynn, doing good lately has meant hobnobbing with people who can provide a lot of money to the Foundation, which then gives away scholarships and grants.

If you like to measure a man in dollars, here they are: Flynn came to the Foundation when it struggled with \$13.8 million, and boosted its worth to \$50 million this year.

But when he steps away on June 1, he'll be putting down more than just an 11-year career as a philanthropic fundraiser.

Born to struggling parents — his father was a shipyard worker and his mother became a telephone operator when the old man was injured — Flynn will also be retiring his blue-collar toughness and hard ambition.

He rode those qualities, and some luck, he

says, into a decades-long career as a newspaper man, beginning at the age of 16, when he went to work as a sports reporter for the local paper in Quincy.

In that era, most women didn't manage much more than the secretary's desk in newsrooms, and men could drink on the job.

"When I started out, it was perfectly permissible to have a pint in your drawer," he recalls. "And a number of people did. I'm not a saint, by any means — I had my drinking days, too. And it got me into trouble a few times."

After earning a degree at Stonehill College, he joined the Army. (One of his four daughters, all Fort Myers High School alumnae, also attended Stonehill, in Massachusetts.) But four years later he was back in newspapers, finally arriving at Gannett's doorstep in New York State, in 1966.

Gannett owned a mere 23 papers at the time, all of them in the North. While the corporation helped change the face of newspapering from family to corporate, Flynn became publisher of *The News-Press* and one of Al Neuharth's chief lieutenants.

Neuharth founded *USA Today* in 1982, and later wrote a popular reminiscence, "Confessions of an S.O.B.," which many say is accurate in title.

"When I came to Florida in '77, there were 45 dailies in the state, only four of us corporate owned," Flynn says. "Today only one is still family owned — the *Port Charlotte Sun Herald*. Shareholders rule, and now you've got to keep the stock price up."

That's newspapering on the corporate level, and it had already begun when Flynn met Neuharth, and the S.O.B. was general manager of a paper in Rochester, New York.

"He was tough and driven," Flynn recalls. "I hung onto his coattails, and my career went up with him. You end up with a love-hate thing, in a way."

Ultimately, he faced tremendous pressure at *USA Today*. "I'm not sure Neuharth would admit it, but Gannett was in trouble," says Flynn. "Every day was a disaster. There were 'fires' all the time, and I left with clinical depression in 1984."

Then, after a stint as publisher of a Gannett paper in Pensacola, which ended abruptly and unhappily, his Gannett star had faded for good. He consulted for a while, he dabbled in a family-owned newspaper in New Hampshire for a few years, and finally he returned to Fort Myers and to the Foundation.

People who knew him before his Foundation days figure that was just putting good money after good.

"He was charming, and he could be generous," recalls Betty Parker, a longtime writer and political analyst for *The News-Press*. "He gave you money when you won awards, and he made a big deal of it — it wasn't some little memo that appeared from nowhere on a bulletin board."

Lee Melsek, an award-winning and now retired investigative reporter, credits Flynn for getting out of the way during what was arguably the most important reporting the paper ever did.

Melsek and another reporter began breaking stories about corruption in county government. "It went on for about a year, day after day after day, and three County commissioners ultimately went to jail," Melsek says.

"As it went on, Flynn was under growing pressure from the Chamber (of Commerce)



COURTESY PHOTO

Paul Flynn

and from big advertisers. They claimed the news stories were giving Lee County a bad name around the country, and they threatened to pull ads."

Flynn required the editorial desk to do a series that described what was "right" about the county, Melsek recalls. "That was a big puff piece, and it created some controversy at the paper. But throughout that year, as far as I know, we never backed off our investigations or our stories about corruption. There was no pressure put directly on reporters, and I'll always give him credit for that, for staying away from the newsroom, and not backing down."

Meanwhile, Flynn's wife, Arline, has studied him for about half a century, now.

"He really hasn't changed," she says. "In the corporate world he found out that you can't trust anyone, but it didn't stop him from continuing to trust." Or from continuing to do "Good."

There will be a lot of thanks for that, perhaps, both here and in the long hereafter of big two-hearted men. ■

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