

BUSINESS PROFILE

Admittedly, bank CEO has some pretty good moves

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
ewilliams@florida-weekly.com

"I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can," is the name of a book by Barbara Gordon, which Florida Gulf Bank President and CEO Bill Valenti said sprung to mind.

That was immediately after his second meeting of the morning, with loan officers, concluded; and his third, an interview with Florida Weekly, began.

After that he planned to two-step through a lunch appointment with the Rotary Club, tango with a client about a loan request, and collapse into his office chair at 3 p.m., where he would discuss with board members the bank's new location, opening the next day. Evening plans involved a quick work-out, time permitting, and a semi-social soiree at Harborside Event Center in downtown Fort Myers, which was par for the course.

"I tell people I spent most of my career with a glass of wine in one hand and a chicken wing in the other," he said.

Looking a lot like the grandfather he is, in a white shirt and tie with only a few grey hairs left above a kind, bright face, no young eye would mistake Valenti for a dancer.

But who can tell? The fast-paced double-time schedule suits the Staten Island, N.Y. native. Valenti remembers the city with one cool word: "tempo," he said. "...The people speak quickly, they move quickly."

There is a similar sense of urgency to his life: work, family, world travel, sports and literature all have their place in the Latin-born motto with which he summed things up: Mens sana in corpore sano (a healthy mind in a healthy body).

Valenti has lived in Florida for 31 years, 16 of them in Fort Myers. In New York, he graduated from St. Francis College, majoring in History and minoring in Political Science. He spent 42 months as First Lieutenant Infantry Commander in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War. He was, he said, lucky to be stationed in Germany the entire time.

When Valenti worked at Irving Trust Company in Manhattan (now Bank of New York) after the war, he lived on Staten Island. The 5-mile, 25-minute commute through New York Harbor on the ferry, passing the Statue of Liberty, was a daily routine. During that time he was also attending night school in Brooklyn, an adventure which eventually produced, after five years, an MBA in Finance.

Scenes from his old life there dance from his lips: the morning rush into the subway, juggling a coffee and stuffing down a quick donut. And he still does an astonishing, accurate imitation of a New Yorker: "Eh, get outa my face, gimme the money!"

Later, before getting married, he traveled extensively and alone, with his work. The spaces between his busy, episodic schedule were often filled with stories read at one restaurant or another hotel.

"When you travel by yourself, dinner for one, that kind of deal..." he said. "I got into the habit of reading short stories because I could go from beginning to end quickly... then I came to really appreciate them. With the short story - which is purely an American form - you have to get the audiences' attention right away... You have to paint the scene in your audiences' mind, and you have to come to a dramatic conclusion.



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Florida Gulf Bank President and CEO, Bill Valenti

"For me it was (also) a way to be introduced to a lot of different authors."

Some favorites include Rudyard Kipling and the poetry of Robert Frost.

Also Joseph Conrad.

"Here's a guy who didn't speak English as his native language," Valenti said. "And is one of the great storytellers of all time, in a language he wasn't even born with."

When he traveled by car, he often listened to tapes of William Shakespeare's plays.

"In high school when you take a class and you read Shakespeare, it's all just a bunch of crap," he said. "But you listen to them performed and you realize they really are written in English and they are really some great stories."

A pause. Then Valenti concluded, "That

has nothing to do with banking."

Recent travels brought him to Sicily and Malta, with four other Rotary Club members.

He enjoyed downhill skiing in Colorado this winter, and frequently takes family members (his wife Eneida, three girls and a boy, all grown) wakeboarding. It's like snowboarding on the water, he said.

Perhaps most thrilling of all to Valenti, was the baby girl born four months ago to his son and daughter-in-law.

"She put a spring in my step," he said. "And she loves her Grandpa. I tell everybody, it's a good thing she can't say 'Mazerati,' or she'd probably have one."

Meanwhile - newborns, New York memories, Joseph Conrad and wakeboarding aside - Valenti leads a bank still growing in a weak economy. He founded the original Florida Gulf Bank in Fort Myers in February 2001, and opened the city's eighth location Feb. 27, on Coconut Road and U.S. 41.

"Of course our best growth, like everybody else, was in 2005, 2006," he said. "But we're still expanding, still doing well. We've been lucky enough to avoid this real-estate debacle... These are challenging times and I like to think I thrive on adversity."

These are times in which Valenti plans to thrive in a variety of ways, personally and professionally, until his presence at the bank is noticed mostly by pictures on the wall.

"Oh, that's Bill Valenti," he envisions a passer-by saying. "He started that bank back in 2001. God, people dressed funny back then."

He'd be proud to have them see it.

"This bank is my legacy," Valenti said. ■



PUT YOUR EQUITY TO WORK FOR YOU.

Introducing

The Business Equity Line of Credit

Unlock the equity in your commercial or investment property including buildings and raw land to receive quick access to funds for working capital, business expansion, short term cash flow needs or other business purposes.

Business Equity Line of Credit Features:

- Access line via checks or debit card
- Monthly interest only payments
- No loan origination fee with a min. draw of \$25,000
- Various size lines beginning at \$50,000 to fit your needs
- One-time closing

Suitable Property Types Include:

- Vacant Commercial Real Estate
- Owner Occupied Real Estate
- Income Producing Commercial Real Estate
- Income Producing Residential Real Estate (no vacant residential accepted)



Perry Roberts | Pat Sutton | Jeff Schorle | Tom Fuess



(239) 333-2838

www.swcapitalbank.com

All lines are subject to credit approval. Some restrictions may apply.