

ACHIEVEMENT

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A good seed

Amy Gravina was shy in her Orlando high school. She remembers that about herself, and was not pleased with it. But even before she went to college she found she had a gift for something she said is often misunderstood, called "Public Relations," or finding a way to communicate positive messages to other people.

"My Dad, the whole way through college, kept saying, 'Now what is Public Relations?'" Gravina said.

She even changed her mind about it once - "I was going to be an interpreter for the U.N." she said, "But I failed French class."

At the University of Florida, Gravina joined a sorority and got involved in intramural football and competitive swimming. She worked full time as an administrative assistant (which she said is a fancy name for "secretary" or "clerk-typist"). By the time she had earned a bachelor's degree in Public Relations and a master's degree in Mass Communications, Gravina had undergone a transformation from a "nerd" to "the confident risk taker she is today."

That doesn't mean she goes sky-diving or wrestles alligators (although she does love taking long bicycle rides with her husband, especially near their second home in Montana). Her risks are directed towards her PR firm, which she founded in 1983 after working a couple of years in a similar capacity for WINK-TV then the Mariner Group. And in the PR business, she said she boldly free falls into any challenges, even ones that seem over her head. Once, for example, some Naples hotels were looking for a PR firm to promote themselves in Europe.

"We knew nothing," Gravina said. "We did so much homework to figure out how to promote a destination internationally."

That time it worked, as she said it usually does. Although failure and risk taking would seem to go hand in hand - isn't that a natural part of the process? - Gravina said failure is never a consideration for her.

"Maybe my risk taking is different," she said. "The way I take risks is, I promise somebody I can do something and I never second-guess myself, so I push myself by overpromising...Because I figure out a way to get it done, no matter what, even if I have to stay up all night."

This approach earned her firm a diverse list of local clients, whom Gravina and members of her firm consult with on strategically planning and carrying out local, state, national and international public relations and marketing programs. Just a few include Florida Gulf Coast University, Hope Hospice, Norman Love Confections, South Florida Water Management District, Oswald Trippe and Company, Inc. and Naples Winter Wine Festival.

She credits the inner-serenity and confidence it took to pull it all off to her parents. Although she was introverted in high school, the seed of her confidence had already been planted. Her mother always encouraged her dreams; her father was an entrepreneur who ended up owning a Mercedes-Benz dealership in Orlando.

"(My father) encouraged us to take risks," Gravina said. "But he also practiced it, like when I was growing up, every Sunday afternoon one child would give a presentation to the rest of the family - on Picasso, or the American Revolution..."

"And the allowance that he gave you, \$2 per week; but a certain amount had to go to a college fund and a certain amount for the family and a certain amount for spending money..."

"When I was 12 and wanted to babysit - everyone else just babysat - but he had me produce a flyer and walk door to door and research it."

Another key to her ongoing success is community and family.

"It's all very interrelated, I think," Gravina said. "My husband and I are both very involved in the community...Our friends are

all business leaders and involved in the same causes we are."

Some of those causes include the Boy Scouts (Gravina has served for 10 years on the Boy Scouts Distinguished Citizen Award Committee), Hope Hospice and Uncommon Friends Foundation.

She met her husband, Pete, on her first day of college. They've been married 30 years and have two children, Matthew, 25 and Sarah, 21.

Navigating newspapers and philanthropy

Paul Flynn's reportage of his hometown, Quincy, Mass., began in the sixth grade, when he and friends started a paper to illuminate neighborhood happenings. It was sold for a penny; ads cost a nickel.

Since then, he has been remembered in a number of ways, as publisher at The News-Press, one of the founders of USA Today, and later as a charming philanthropist.

"He really hasn't changed," Flynn's wife of almost half-a-century, Aline, told Florida Weekly in a profile of her husband last May. "In the corporate world he found out that you can't trust anyone, but it didn't stop him from continuing to trust."

As a teenager in the 1950s, Flynn covered junior high school baseball games for the Quincy Patriot Ledger, more for love of the news-room itself than sports. It was an exiting place for him at the time, more hard-edged than today, if not exactly kid friendly.

"When I started out, it was perfectly permissible to have a pint in your drawer," he said. "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 Flynn graduated from Stonehill College in 1957, then served six months in the US Army, he began a newspaper career that carried him from the Ledger's sportswriting department to president and publisher of The News-Press (1977 to 1984); then as executive vice president of USA Today, also a Gannett paper, where he was involved in its startup with publisher and self-confessed S.O.B. Al Neuharth (See Neuharth's book, "Confessions of an S.O.B.")

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

The newspaper career went on at another Gannett paper in Pensacola, then at a family-owned newspaper in New Hampshire, before Flynn retired to Fort Myers. There, John Sheppard, then President of Southwest Florida Community Foundation (and still a member on the board of trustees), asked Flynn to succeed him. Sheppard said they worked together for the next 10 years, and became close friends.

"He's never met somebody he didn't like," Sheppard said. "And that kind of carried over to his work with the Community Foundation. He never saw a need in the community he didn't want to find a solution to."

Flynn held meetings at his home after Hurricane Charley, Sheppard remembered, because he had power still on at his home. As a result of the meetings, the Community Foundation completed a 36 hour fundraiser which brought in over \$100,000 to aid clean-up efforts.

"All of his talents, his abilities, his compassion, his gregarious personality - all of these things came together after Hurricane Charley," Sheppard said.

As President, Flynn came to the Foundation when it had \$13.8 million, and left it in 2007 with \$50 million. Current President Julia East said Flynn was a great mentor, one she still consults on occasion.

"He's very jovial and has a wonderful sense of humor," East said. "And an unbelievably positive outlook on life."








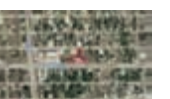







"From the day I stepped foot in the office Paul was making sure I understood all the workings of the Foundation and let me be in on meetings and decisions and hiring personnel, and really very quickly started turning over responsibilities to me."

I think he felt the way you start learning something was by doing it and he was right." ■

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