

BUSINESS PROFILE

Former newsman counts his blessings, every day

BY BILL CORNWELL
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The arc of John Fish's newspaper career took a precipitous dip in July of last year with the announcement that he was resigning as publisher of the Naples Daily News after only three years in the job. The stated reason for the surprising departure was that Mr. Fish wished "to pursue other professional opportunities."

Neither the newspaper nor Mr. Fish has seen fit to amplify on that boilerplate explanation, leaving it to bloggers and media gossips to fill in the blanks with a variety of theories — some that are favorable to Mr. Fish and many that are not.

In general, the lines of attack on Mr. Fish portrayed him as a trendy, cost-cutting martinet who was obsessed with technological advancement at the expense of traditional newsgathering, while his supporters saw him as a forward-thinking manager who was laid low by a corporate maelstrom.

For his part, Mr. Fish kept his counsel and moved on, offering himself as a consultant to newspapers and businesses that seek to flourish in the age of the Internet. Technology had been his specialty at the Daily News and at other newspapers at which he had worked, and he had become something of a guru in that field. Even the Daily News, in announcing his leaving, noted that he had acquired "an international reputation for being an innovator in online news."

To his delight, Mr. Fish found a num-

ber of publications and businesses were eager for his services. And so, on March 5 of this year, Mr. Fish, who is 50 years old, was in fine spirits as he drove along I-75, headed for the airport and a business trip to Philadelphia. Things seemed to be coming together again. But then the oddest thing happened: Mr. Fish's body — his right side, to be precise — simply shut down.

"Yeah, it happened right there on I-75," he recalls. "The right side of my body froze. I kept control of the car, but I had to slow down. It lasted for about 30 seconds and then I was ok. I thought it was a quirk."

This strange sensation continued to come and go over the next few days. Finally, Mr. Fish's wife, Juan, insisted on taking him to an emergency room. That was on a Wednesday evening. The "quirks" were actually seizures, doctors explained, and by Friday Mr. Fish was undergoing almost seven hours of surgery on his brain.

"It was a fairly large tumor," Mr. Fish says. "But good news was that it was a slow-growing tumor."

Since the operation, he's been treated with chemotherapy and radiation. Although the treatments are draining, he has remained strong and confident throughout, and the tumor has not increased in size. "I'll have to say that I am very proud that I've been out of town six times on business since the operation," he says.

While the prognosis is hopeful and "everything is looking good," Mr. Fish readily acknowledges that he faces a struggle.



COURTESY PHOTO

John Fish

Yet he continues to be enthusiastic about his consulting work, which has landed him clients in places like Savannah, Philadelphia, Arkansas and his home state of North Carolina. "All the companies I work for have been very kind, and they know what I'm going through," he says, adding he has reduced his work over the past few months.

He's quick to note that not all of his clients are newspapers. "I work with non-

media companies as well, and the majority of the time I'm working with them in the area of Internet sales," he explains.

As a consultant, he continues to preach that newspapers — his true love — must evolve or face extinction. "I don't think most newspapers have any idea where they're headed," he says. "They just know it's all up in the air. The new thinking requires that everyone at a newspaper shift their thinking about the Internet and other media."

He offers for sale, to clients and non-clients as well, a 600-page manual that he says outlines "where newspapers need to be five years from now."

In addition to his consulting duties, Mr. Fish is a blogger (johnfish.com), which allows him to post updates about his health and business affairs. Although he made his name on the business side of newspapers, he began as a reporter, and his blog reveals him to be a graceful writer of considerable wit and insight.

"I enjoy the writing; it's a release," he says.

Mr. Fish's future is speculative on several levels. There are the health concerns and the business considerations, and it is uncertain if he will remain in Naples for the long term. He and Juan hope to stay in Naples until the younger of their two daughters, who is a high school sophomore, graduates.

"I know it sounds cliché, but I swear it's true. I count my blessings every single day. Every day. I'm a lucky man." ■

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