

George Ewing Jr.

A Publisher's New Life

Nearly four years after selling his Messenger Post Newspapers, former publisher is now teaching, finishing his master's degree. Retirement? Not his 'shtick'

By Amy Cavalier

Ask George Ewing Jr., 58, about retirement and he'll tell you it isn't his "shtick." After more than 20 years working in the newspaper industry and serving as president and publisher of Messenger Post Newspapers in Canandaigua, he sold the newspapers to Gatehouse Media in January 2007. By the end of that summer, Ewing was starting to get "antsy."

"All I knew is that I wanted to have a job," he said. "I needed some focus, something to keep me fresh and vital. I subscribe to the philosophy of civic responsibility in one form or another, and I've always loved teaching, so I decided to go back to teaching."

At the age of 56, Ewing landed a job teaching American literature, English and modern American poetry at The Williston Northampton School in Easthampton, Mass. He also served as an assistant varsity girls ice hockey and varsity boys lacrosse coach. It was the same private school he had taught from 1979 to 1985, several years before coming to work with his father at the Messenger Post Newspapers.

"It was a rough transition, because it's a totally different rhythm, pace and different expectations," he said. "The first quarter was hard. It was about February that it started to feel comfortable. By spring quarter, I was

cooking with gas."

Then, the economy crashed and Ewing found himself in the unlikely position of being laidoff in June 2009. It was something he'd never experienced before.

"I still get angry because it's so unfair," he said. "You question 'Do I not have the ability; am I out of touch; do I not have the energy?' You start to question 'What's wrong with me?'"

Looking back though, Ewing said, "it was a blessing in disguise."

By the end of June of 2009, his father was diagnosed with late-stage leukemia. "It came on like gang busters," he said. Ewing moved back to his family homestead in Canandaigua to care for his father, George Ewing Sr., who passed away in September 2009. After the dust had settled, Ewing started looking for another teaching position. He searched, but to no avail.

"I'm sure the economy is a big part of it," he said. "I'm sure age is a part of it, though I'm sure no one will tell you that."

Then Ewing discovered his "plan B." He decided to return to school to complete his master's degree in American studies. This fall, Ewing enrolled as a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, to finish what he started in the early '80s. He'll be splitting his time between

Minnesota and Canandaigua.

"I know that in my heart I'm still a kid, a college student, excited to learn, ready to rock n' roll, but in my head, I know I'm not the same," Ewing said. "I'm not your standard 25-year-old grad student."

An old friend of Ewing's, Bill Greer of Canandaigua, said Ewing is a bright, engaging, community-minded person. Finishing his master's, Greer said, is the next logical step.

"George is a student whether he's in school or not," Greer said. "He's always thinking, observing, studying. That's what a newspaper person does, learning about the community and the people around him."

Newspapers and education have run like two parallel roads throughout Ewing's life. When he was about 2 years old, the family moved to Mountain View Calif., where Ewing Sr. started in advertising sales for a newspaper. He later became general manager of the paper.

"That's where he decided he loved it," said Ewing of his father. "He'd always wanted something that would combine business and public service."

In 1959, Ewing Sr. decided to move the family to Canandaigua and to purchase the Daily Messenger.


After graduating from Kenyon College in Ohio in 1975 with a



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bachelor's degree in English, Ewing worked for the National Congressional Analysis Corporation in Washington, D.C. for a year. The daily publication capsulated and indexed each day's "Congressional Record" for Washington, D.C. lawyers, lobbyists, Congressmen and their staff.

"The perk of the job was when Congress was off, we were off, which seemed like one-third of the year," he said. "We had all of August through Labor Day off. I'd come back from vacation in August and two weeks of paychecks had bounced. I went to work the next day and the door was padlocked shut."

After a few months of serving tables in downtown Washington, Ewing moved back to Canandaigua to work as a sports editor for his father's paper from October 1976 to June 1979. Then he decided to try something new. He'd always wanted to be a teacher, Ewing said, and he didn't want to look back later in life and regret not trying it.

From 1979 to 1988, Ewing worked at The Williston Northampton School in Easthampton, Mass., and at Breck School in Minneapolis. In the meantime, he started his master's work in American studies at the University of Minnesota.

Then, in 1988, Ewing's father called him to say his "number two" person had been hired away by the Finger Lakes Times. Ewing and his younger brother advised their father to hire a head hunter to find a replacement. A week later, Ewing's father convinced him to return to Canandaigua to work as the assistant publisher of the newspaper.

"I wanted to do it, but it wasn't my timetable, but that's life," said Ewing. "Things happen. You've got to roll with it, so Meg and I came back."

Circulation for the Daily Messenger at the time was about 7,000 with a two-section daily, printed entirely in black and white. The offices were at the same location on Buffalo Street, Canandaigua, as they are today. Originally built in 1971, the Ewings added onto the offices in 1999. Ewing purchased the newspapers from his

father in May of 1992 and in the fall they began printing a Sunday paper and introduced full color. Ewing Sr. was still a major player as chairman and editor.

In 1996, Messenger Post Newspapers grew when Ewing purchased the Wolfe papers, which included nine weeklies covering Rochester's surrounding suburbs, and a printing plant in Fishers. The Gates-Chili Post was purchased in 1999 from Patricia Smith.

Bob Matson, former executive editor at Messenger Post Newspapers, said Ewing had foresight.

"He was progressive in the sense that he went into new markets in Monroe County," he said. "It was a smart move which solidified our position in the marketplace."

In addition, Matson said, Ewing kept family values and integrity in the newspaper business.

"It's much more of a bottom-line focused industry today," Matson said. "He [Ewing] looked at what was good for the community and what was good for the people that worked for him. Those things mattered to him a lot more than they do to newspaper publishers today."

Ewing said he staunchly believed in independent ownership of the newspaper.

"It meant a lot to me that we were family owned," he said.

Started in 1796, Ewing said, The Daily Messenger is the seventh oldest continuously published newspaper in the United States and the oldest continuously paper published west of the Hudson River. By the early 2000s, Ewing was starting to see the effects of New York's weakening economy on the newspaper business.

"When I came on, we paid 100 percent of employees' health insurance," he said. "Dad and I subscribed to the philosophy that we knew we couldn't pay as much as what people felt they were worth, but we were very conscious of trying to give good benefits. That's what I called the hidden paycheck."

The cost of newsprint continued to rise, and the onset of computers, technology and the Internet prompted



George Ewing Jr. with his dad, the late George Ewing Sr., in front of the Messenger Post's headquarters in Canandaigua.

Ewing to begin toying with the idea of selling the papers. Advertising and circulation revenues did not keep pace with the rate of increase in newsprint, technology and health care costs.

"We didn't have the resources," he said. "It got to the point that three of the last five years I implemented wage freezes. That was brutal. I did not enjoy that."

Meanwhile, Ewing said, they slowly began backing out of their health care portion, forcing employees to pay for more of the cost out of pocket.

"Emotionally that was hard," he said, "because people were working hard. These were people, with families. I've always believed that happy people make happy employees. I couldn't do it financially."

The Ewing family was able to grow the Messenger Post Newspaper's circulation from about 5,000 to a little

over 15,000 in their more than 40 years of ownership. Ewing decided to look for a buyer in the winter of 2006.

"I knew, in order to go forward, there would have to be huge cuts," he said. "I didn't want to have to be the one to tear down what had been built up. I could have done it, but emotionally, it would have been a huge stress."

Matson said it was the right decision.

"I know those were agonizing months and probably even a period of years when he saw the writing on the wall," he said. "The industry was struggling. The Internet had changed so much, particularly the newspaper industry. I'm sure it was a tough decision, but you can't fault him. He made the sale at just the right time, in good business sense, because the value of the company was probably at its peak when he sold it."

Ewing said he began the search for a buyer that would have similar philosophies as the paper did under his leadership. Local newspapers are the glue in a community, he said. Then Gatehouse Media came along.

"It's a huge organization, but their papers were small like ours... weeklies and dailies," he said.

Gatehouse Media Inc. purchased Messenger Post Newspapers in January 2007.

With two sons in college and one a senior in high school, and he and his wife recently divorced, Ewing finds himself in the unlikely spot of trying to reinvent himself at the age most people are thinking of retirement. He currently serves on the board of directors for Garth Fagan Dance and the advisory board of Ontario County ARC.

An old family friend, Paul Marshall, said he thinks Ewing's happiest times have been when he's teaching and coaching.

"Realistically, it's going to be a challenge because he is older, but I think he has a very good attitude about it," said Marshall. "He wants to finish up old business."

Ewing's oldest son Patrick, 22, is a senior at Malcalester College in St. Paul, Minn. He said he's proud of his father. "I mean he's not exactly a young guy," he said. "He's had a full career, but he wants to keep doing something useful with himself, I'm not sure I could say that about myself when I'm his age. And just taking steps that seem like they might be backwards can be difficult and frustrating, but I thinking he's doing a great job making it a step forward."

While he works on his thesis at the University of Minnesota, Ewing said he may also put his name in as a substitute teacher at some of the area schools. He's not sure where life will lead him from here or where he'll make his home in the future.

"It's both daunting and incredibly exciting," he said. "Where am I going to be a year from now, emotionally, physically, what is life going to offer me? I've been through a lot of changes the past couple years, but you know, you roll with it."