

NEWS PHOTOGRAPHER

Pim Van Hemmen: "The Future Is Still Bright"

When Pim Van Hemmen, former Star-Ledger assistant managing editor for digital news and photography, decided to take a buy-out and leave the newspaper in 2008, he knew that the next thing he wanted to do – now that he has some free time – was something "that matters." Now he's joined with photojournalist Najlah Feanny Hicks to form a new nonprofit organization, Do1Thing.org, and they have a live project coming up in February. Here Van Hemmen writes about his decision to leave the paper, what Do1Thing.org has planned for Valentine's Day, and he invites photojournalists around the world to volunteer to take part in this new project.



LAST DAY. Photography staff members signed a "farewell" page for Pim Van Hemmen after his 25 years at the Star-Ledger in Newark, NJ. Photograph by Matt Rainey

By Pim Van Hemmen
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NEWARK, NJ (January 21, 2009) – Sometimes life tells you to move.

July 31, 2008, was one of those days for me.

In a hastily called morning meeting that day, Star-Ledger publisher **George Arwady** announced that 200 non-union employees would have to take voluntary buy-outs. If that demand and concessions from two remaining unions were not met, he said the newspaper would be sold.

I stood back and watched from the perimeter. As I looked around the room some people stared ahead vacantly and many looked downright shocked. A few started crying.

A couple of hours before, my editor had broken the news to me in his corner office. As the assistant managing editor for digital news, he'd wanted me to post the information on our Web site so we wouldn't be beat to the punch by other news outlets. Even then I hadn't been shocked; he sent me an eMail afterwards praising me for handling the news so well.

I had no reason to be surprised. I'd seen this coming for years.

As a photography director, I hadn't hired a photographer in seven years; the news hole had been shrinking for more than 10 years; advertising revenues had been dropping like water at Niagara Falls; and we'd recently lost 15 percent of our circulation in one reporting period.

And there had been other signs.

Over the last few years upper management had ordered various new ventures, many of which seemed like the last orders of a captain on a sinking ship.

First they wanted us to produce Blogs, then videos, then books, then magazines, and finally an online television show. None of them were bad ideas in and of themselves, but most of them were poorly executed, with little or no forethought, no training, and no apparent market research. Worst of all, they seemed like too little, too late.

Even though I'd been requesting video training for the photographers since 2000, in 2005 we were given the order to build a video operation in less than two weeks. Management said there were all kinds of video advertising dollars out there that needed to be captured immediately.

Three years later, after the photography department had invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in equipment, training, and man-hours, during which it produced hundreds of videos, our marketing and advertising departments had sold a grand total of two video advertisements.

I also knew the newspaper's losses had been mounting for years.

It had started small, but then owner **Donald Newhouse** announced that the newspaper could lose between \$30 and \$50 million dollars in 2008. And that was before the economy tanked, which was soon after the publisher had dropped his bomb.

My wife and I had discussed the prospect of taking a buy-out from the newspaper for more than a year. The newspaper had made previous offers, but at the time I hadn't felt the need, the urge, or the desire to take them.

But this time it was different. Even though I had just accepted a brand-new position as assistant managing editor for digital news – after nearly 25 years as a photographer, photography editor, and manager – as soon as the words spilled out of my editor's mouth, I knew I'd have to seriously consider leaving the newspaper.

In the end, I had dozens of reasons for leaving and only a few for staying.

Reasons to stay?

Money: The Ledger paid me handsomely, even though my salary had been frozen for three years. But frankly, the money had turned into a pair of golden handcuffs.

My new position: I'd recently taken the digital news position, because I was excited about the online world and considered it (and still consider it) the future of news.

The best reason to stay?

The people: Journalists are smart, creative, witty, and eccentric, and at The Star-Ledger we had a newsroom full of them.

Some reasons for leaving?

Age: I was 46 years old (47 by the time you read this), and I needed another 10 to 15 years out of the newspaper business to put my kids through college and build a retirement fund. Realistically, I felt The Star-Ledger wouldn't have another 10 to 15 years in it. And even if it did, I'd have to do my new job with at least 100 fewer journalists, a prospect I did not relish.

My kids: At eight and nine years old they're now halfway to college, and by leaving the paper I could at least spend some of the next year with them.

Financial uncertainty: The prospect of the newspaper being sold and me being pushed out by new owners with nothing more than a year's salary was not an acceptable financial risk.

Our Web site: Even though we'd just gone through a Web redesign, our site was still among the worst and most unattractive in the newspaper industry. Worst of all, there was no sign that our online arrangement would change. (The Star-Ledger gets its online infrastructure and a prominent dose of non-news content from a separate company, Advance Internet.) The arrangement stifled innovation, and when we tried to innovate our efforts were usually squelched.

Construction vs. destruction: I've always considered myself a builder. Whether it's a piece of furniture in my home workshop, creating a photograph, or constructing a photography department, building is what I like to do. This, however, was starting to feel more like a dismantling. And deep down I knew I didn't have the stomach for taking apart the photography department I'd worked so hard to build over the previous 10 years. (The buy-outs caused the photography department to get cut in half, going from 50 to about 25 people).

I'm lucky. My wife is the smart, sensible type and she encouraged me to sign, even though she doubted out loud that I would be truly comfortable leaving the newspaper.

So, after weighing all the options, a week's vacation in Maine (always a cleansing experience), conversations with my wife, friends, and colleagues, and a couple of chats with my editor, it was pretty clear what I'd do.

It was time to start something new.

I would sign.

Our human resources director was shocked. She thought of me as a Ledger lifer. I had conceived a project that had become the newspaper's first-ever Pulitzer, and I was a vocal fixture in the newsroom who had just assumed a position that was considered pretty critical to the future of the newspaper. After 24 years, she just didn't think I'd ever leave. When I called her to make an appointment to sign the papers, she swore I would not show up in her office. When I showed up the next morning, she said I wouldn't sign, and as I signed she said I'd be back before the seven-day cooling off period had passed.

I told her I would not be back. My mind was made up, and strangely, I was comfortable with the decision.

Even stranger, I was euphoric.

After I signed I went upstairs to the newsroom, grabbed my coat, and went out for a long lunch with a couple of close friends, one of whom had signed on the dotted line alongside me.

When I returned to the newsroom, word had already spread. Van Hemmen had signed.

I am confident I made the right choice. In the last month of 2008, The Rocky Mountain News was put up for sale with a threat of being folded by the end of January, the Tribune Co. filed for bankruptcy, and The New York Times was being told by investors to sell its building to create cash flow.

A lot has happened over the past three months. Many people, some of whom have already departed the paper, were very angry. There was a lot of that in the newsroom but strangely I never felt it, or if I did, it passed quickly.

As I told my editor, I'm not bitter. I'm actually very happy and excited about the future. I got 25 great years out of the newspaper industry, and like other industries that have come and gone – railroads, shipping companies, and typewriter manufacturers – it's just life. I don't think newspapers are toast yet, but I do think the toaster may have been purchased and someone is looking for a place to plug it in. I think a number of newspapers will survive, but I do fear for the ones that refuse to recognize that times have changed and that drastic measures – other than enormous newsroom reductions – have to be taken.

This was all hard to imagine 25 years ago.

This will sound strange and farfetched, but it's true. When I was in college I imagined spending 10 years in the field as a photojournalist, becoming a photography director at a large newspaper, and then helping win a Pulitzer.

Before I turned 40 I had done all three, and along the way a bunch of cool stuff happened that made it even more memorable.

When *After The Fire* (which won the Pulitzer in 2001 for Feature Photography for **Matt Rainey**) was published in September of 2000 you couldn't buy a fire extinguisher, fire escape ladder, or smoke detector in all of North Jersey. The series, which ran over seven days and included more than 100 photographs, had raised awareness of the dangers of fire and caused a run on stores throughout TheStar-Ledger's circulation area. It also caused a federal law to be passed that made fire sprinklers mandatory in all college dormitories. Eight years later I find that more gratifying than winning any award.

And in 2005, fellow photojournalist **Najlah Feanny Hicks** and I co-founded the Heart Gallery of New Jersey, a nonprofit organization to find permanent homes for foster kids. The Star-Ledger jumped on board with the effort, and since then 150 of those “unadoptable children” have been adopted.



Do1Thing.org co-founders Pim Van Hemmen (left) and Najlah Feanny Hicks on the streets of New York City outside the International Center of Photography.

Photograph by Les Stone

So what's next?

It's a strange amalgam of things, but somehow it all feels right.

I've picked up the cameras again and am starting a freelance business. After 15 years of editing some of the best photographs in the world I feel my own photography has actually matured. I've also joined a media consulting group as a visual and online consultant, and I'm talking to a major Internet provider about the future of the news industry.

I'm excited about all of those ventures, but the one I'm most excited about is a new nonprofit venture.

After The Heart Gallery, Najlah always said that if I ever left The Star-Ledger that we'd have to join forces.

We've formed a new nonprofit organization called **Do1Thing.org**. We are going to use socially conscious photography to facilitate change in places that desperately need it. Our first effort will address the “aging out” phenomenon, where foster kids get tossed into the street once they're deemed too old to be taken care of by the government. Unlike the Heart Gallery, which was focused on New Jersey, we're taking this one national.

We both have that magical feeling about **Do1Thing**, and so do others.

I've had this feeling before.

In the midst of reporting *After the Fire* in 2000, odd coincidences kept happening that made us sense that the project was special. One of those coincidences was that 15 years earlier I had photographed one of the subjects, **Shawn Simons**, as a child at an Easter parade where he'd won best of show for his outfit.

The Heart Gallery had that same special feeling. We created a major gallery opening at a prominent venue with 1,000 guests in a little over four months, from concept to completion. In that time we built a Web site in three days that quickly drew 20 million hits and, in the end, created new lives for more than 150 kids.

Do1Thing has that same magical feeling.

So far we've recruited two dozen Pulitzer Prize-winning photographers to volunteer, a bunch of young and talented photojournalists, members of the VII agency, and a high caliber crew of photography editors and support staff from around the country. And we're looking for more.

Najlah's created a terrific info **Web site** (a full-blown site will be launched by early February), and sponsors like ThinkTank, Camera Bits, Soundslides, Fuji, and Canon have joined forces with us. A major national magazine has expressed interest in publishing the project's photographs.

So I won't be bored, and even though I have left The Star-Ledger, I haven't left photojournalism.

The future is still bright.

If you'd like to know more about Do1Thing, go to Do1Thing.org.