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Parting shots from a business powerhouse

By KRIS HUNDLEY

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Nobody ever accused Marty Donsky, former Florida marketing manager for PricewaterhouseCoopers, of being timid.

Bearded, balding and outspoken, Donsky, 53, has worked nonstop over the past four years to get local tech entrepreneurs tied into the clubby Tampa Bay power structure. He dubs the area's splintered economic development efforts "looney," the Chamber of Commerce ineffective.

Although Donsky helped launch the fast-growing Tampa Bay Tech Forum, he saw the technology incubator he spearheaded at the University of Tampa fizzle fast. Though disappointed, he remains passionate in his opinions about what went wrong and what will make things better.

Now Donsky is leaving the area, to take a new internal marketing position for PWC in the Southeast. He will be based in Washington, D.C. In a recent conversation with the Times, he shared some parting thoughts, and a few shots, on the Tampa Bay area and the challenges here.

Q: In your previous position, you marketed PWC's services to promising technology companies. Will you miss that interaction?

A: Nope. There's not been that much to do. A lot of tech companies are struggling. My work really tracked the venture capital numbers. It started diminishing at the end of 2001.

Plus, this market - Florida and Tampa - is still relatively immature on the tech side. There are a lot of young companies with the mentality where the importance of the audit is not what it can do in terms of controls and risk but from an opportunistic aspect. They need a real education.

This market has really struggled, and when the recovery comes, it's going to start first in the key tech markets. The strong will survive in those markets.

Q: How do you feel about leaving Tampa after living here, off and on, since 1990?

A: Tampa will always be a very easy place to live. The airport is the best in the country. But you have to balance that easiness of life with what you want from life and your career. About a year ago, my wife (Susan Bowles) and I decided we really wanted to raise our boys (ages 18 months and 4) with the best opportunities to learn as much as they

could about everything. (Donsky's 16-year-old daughter by a previous marriage will remain in Tampa.) We came up with a list of 10 cities, and Washington was on the top of the list.

Q: Do you think Tampa has changed much in the time you've been here?

A: I think there's been quite a bit of change. My firm, myself and a bunch of other people played a critical role in getting the community to understand that technology is not just Tech Data. The recent decision by the state to invest some of its pension money in venture capital is something we worked on. Myself and a number of people were involved in making that case.

On the flip side, there is still kind of a parochial attitude here. I've always figured I'm working from a viewpoint of enlightened self-interest. I can't deny I'm looking for business; that's the way the world works. But you put your self-interest second to the good of the group. I think it's important to have the competition involved. That's why Mike Brennan, formerly of Andersen and now of Ernst & Young, and I teamed up on a number of things.

But two years ago, when I heard about the Gulf Coast Life Sciences Initiative, I contacted them and offered to help, and they said, "Thanks but no thanks, we already have an accounting firm involved." They're back to the old way of thinking, of not being inclusive.

I could have told them in 10 seconds the top venture firms for biotech, but nobody asked.

Q: You were one of founders of the Tampa Bay Technology Forum, which brought together surprisingly large numbers of local tech entrepreneurs for informal networking events. What do you think will happen to the Tech Forum now that it has received its first funding through an alliance with the well-established Tampa Bay Partnership?

A: I hope the Tech Forum will not lose sight of who it serves. And that's not the board, it's the entrepreneurs who look to the Forum to meet, network and learn.

I've been accused, both to my face and behind it, of being Mr. Negativity, but let's just be realistic. We're not a top-tier tech community here. It took 40 years to build Silicon Valley, and it has taken decades to build a tech community in places like Boston and Raleigh. We have to be careful about visiting places like Baltimore and saying, "This is the future."

The whole state's economy is in transition. Agriculture, health care, tourism and retirement are still the main thrusts and everybody knows it, and we haven't yet figured out how to diversify.

I just think we have to temper our expectations to our environment. It's got to be a slow, steady pace.

Q: Is the Tech Forum, once seen as the brash newcomer, in danger of losing its edge?

A: The risk now for the Tech Forum is that there will be more people, more egos and more committees.

The Tech Forum is changing. When it started, its primary mission was to help bridge the digital divide by getting computers into the Boys & Girls Clubs and bringing tech executives together. Now it's going to be doing more advocacy for the technology community.

Several of the original board, including myself and Antoinette Rodriguez (Tech Forum's co-founder, who has also moved from the area), have left the Tech Forum board, and that's natural and necessary. They need fresh blood and fresh ideas.

And I never said I had the lock on good ideas. I'm just a little on the strident side, that's all.

Q: You were also one of the key players in opening a tech incubator, Tech Village, on the campus of the University of Tampa. Unfortunately it closed after only about a year. What happened?

A: The good news is we showed we could raise \$125,000, open a facility and do things that needed to be done. And the Tech Forum, University of Tampa and University of South Florida will be doing programs that are outgrowths of what we were doing at Tech Village.

We showed people what we can do. But when things turned sour, people lost interest. There was no long-term support. I remember pitching the incubator to a law firm, and they said, "We don't see the immediate benefit." I said, "You're right."

Q: Are you bitter about the experience?

A: Not bitter, but really disappointed. The business community never embraced the incubator. And the key was having UT's faculty and students helping the startups, and that didn't happen. When UT's business school was applying for a \$200,000 federal grant, they were all over the incubator. Then they were gone.

We always thought UT would take it over. But in October, when the incubator's money finally ran out, Joe McCann (dean of UT's business school) said he feared that if the incubator failed on his watch, UT would have egg on its face.

The irony is that a piece of the grant money UT got is being earmarked for the Tech Forum, so we'll still get some use out of that money.

Q: It seems that there are a number of local business groups, all duplicating efforts. Did you ever get the feeling there were too many chiefs and no Indians?

A: Our economic development structure is looney. We've got the Committee of 100, the Chamber of Commerce, the Tampa Bay Partnership, the I-4 Corridor group, each with its own mission, and nobody wants to play second fiddle.

Our business groups are not at the level you'll find in someplace like D.C. or Atlanta. Our chamber is not a real serious player. They have no product to sell. They run the risk of marginalizing themselves over time.

The biggest challenge in Florida is the quality of the public schools. Everybody admits the solution is money, but nobody wants to pay. By moving, I'll be paying about \$6,000 more per year in county and state taxes. But I'm convinced my kids will get a better education.

There are some good public schools in Florida, but it's really uneven. And the university system is out of control. We're letting our universities be in a free-for-all to be No. 1. When you don't increase taxes and you say every university will be equal, you wind up diminishing the best.

Q: Who will you remember as the best businessmen of the Tampa Bay area?

A: The best entrepreneurs - national entrepreneurial gods - are the Outback (Steakhouse) guys. On the tech side, I'd have to say Gregg Smith of Z-tel (Technologies Inc.) has got entrepreneurial vision. John Kang (of Liquidmetal Technologies) is a great money guy.

On the second tier, you've got people like Russ Hobbs of Blue Ocean Software, Ami Utji of Pilgrim Software and Jared Rodriguez of Skyway Software. And you've got to put Marty Traber (of law firm Foley and Lardner) in there. He's good at creating friction and connecting people.

Then you've got the Johns - Hill and McDonald of Hyde Park Capital. And the Steves - Lux and Bennett (of Stonehenge Capital), and Tate Garrett (of Advantage Capital).

There are others, but it's not a long list.

Q: Any regrets?

A: If we made one mistake in the local tech community, it was that we didn't play to our strengths. The market here is for hospitality, so we should have asked, "What needs do these hotels have?"

Instead, everybody was trying to copy what was hot in Silicon Valley. That's where our heads were. I guess health care just wasn't sexy enough.