

BUSINESS PROFILE

Banking on Fifth Third during challenging times for the industry

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It was his first week on the job, Halloween night, when David Call experienced a sign of the times unlike any in his 21 years as a banker.

He had just settled in as the new president of Fifth Third Bank-South Florida when the FDIC asked him to absorb Bradenton-based Freedom Bank, which had been deemed no longer financially viable. Mr. Call remembers the experience vividly. "I'd never done such a thing," he says, "where you go into a bank and the FDIC asks you to be a part of it."

"It felt James Bondish, very top secret. They (the FDIC) let you know you can't discuss it with anyone. They make that clear."

The acquisition was on top of Mr. Call's other responsibilities: 65 banks from Bradenton to Marco Island and from Boca to Miami, about 700 employees, 300,000 clients and \$5 billion total assets. South Florida is among the largest of Fifth Third Bancorp's 17 affiliates.

The absorption of Freedom came with 19 new employees, many of whom stayed late that Friday night to make the transition a smooth one.

One employee Mr. Call will never forget: a mother whose child was going trick-or-treating for the first time. "She had to stay at the bank, and her husband brought the child by... Employees were there all weekend, and the bank opened up Monday morning."

Although Mr. Call can't speak for

the FDIC, he believes being chosen to absorb the smaller bank was "a very good sign" about the financial health of Fifth Third.

But he also suggests that South Florida, primarily because real estate is one of its major economic drivers, could be slower than other areas of the country to recover from the downturn. "(2009) will be as tough as any year we've ever had," he says, adding, "That's true of any bank, and probably just about any industry."

His strategy for dealing with the fragile economy includes daily analysis of Fifth Third-South Florida's assets. "I think it's going extremely well," he says.

When Mr. Call moved here from his post as president of Fifth Third's Ohio Valley affiliate, he knew that banking in South Florida would pose challenges he might not have faced elsewhere. But he was ready to tackle it. "As a banker — as a confident banker," he says, "my first



David Call

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thought was 'I can do that.'

"Actually, my first thought was 'Naples... all right!' The geographical area is definitely appealing."

Now 43, he grew up in a suburb of Charleston, W. Va., called Hurricane, where his father was president of a community bank. He has three brothers, all of whom are bankers.

After graduating from Eastern Kentucky University and earning a master's degree in business administration from the University of Charleston, he graduated from Louisiana State University Graduate School of Banking. He credits a professor with giving him some of the best advice in business: to make your bottom line the customers' needs, not your total income. "He told us you have to be in business to fulfill a need. Then you'll have growth."

After college, Mr. Call started a job as an internal auditor for a bank near his hometown. Nine years ago, he was recruited by Fifth Third Bancorp to grow its Cincinnati-based Ohio Valley affiliate. Now he and his wife, Kerri, are happily at home in Naples with their two children.

His career's greatest reward continues to be seeing the dreams of customers and their financial needs fulfilled. "We get to help people purchase their first car, their first house — or their second car and second house — start businesses, send children and grandchildren to college, build retirement... That makes it a rewarding profession."

Sometime in the near future, Mr. Call hopes to find a few spare hours to play a round of golf, but for now he's working long hours because of his new position's rigors.

"Those waters will calm," he says. ■

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