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Annapolis man isn't afraid to take on business or politics

By KATIE ARCIERI, Staff Writer

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It's Thursday afternoon at John White's waterfront offices on Severn Avenue in Eastport.



Joshua McKerrow — The Capital

John White, left, chief executive officer of Compass Marketing in Annapolis, listens to Joe Conoscenti, vice president of sales for the McCormick spice company. White has made a name for himself among Fortune 100 companies, as well as the local political scene by catapulting himself from a newcomer to recognizable name on both sides of the aisle.

Inside, picture frames hold photographs of the 39-year-old businessman beside former President George W. Bush and Michael Steele when he was lieutenant governor of Maryland.

Another photo is of White with his brothers and sisters, most of whom served with the Maryland State Police.

And outside is a stormwater run-off management system that his company, Compass Marketing, uses to help protect the Chesapeake Bay.

One look around White's office and it's clear what's important to him: Republican politics, family and the bay.

It also is clear that while businesses across the world are suffering in a recession, White's company shows no signs of slowing down.

Over the past decade, White has built an international firm that predominantly helps Fortune 100 companies sell their products in stores such as Home Depot, Staples, Best Buy and Sports Authority. As company chairman and chief executive officer of Compass Marketing, White has been at the forefront of the "alternate channel" industry and garnered business partners including

McCormick, and, most recently, the Kellogg's cereal company.

"We are certainly thankful for our growth and respectful that not all companies are even able to retain their current size or scope, much less survive," White said. "We are

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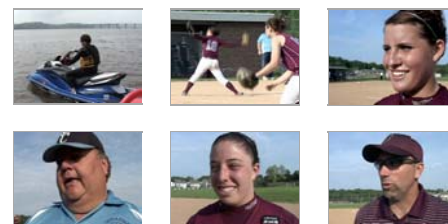
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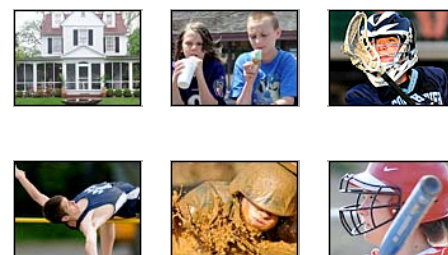
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thankful but mostly respectful."

While White has undoubtedly proven his business skills over the past 10 years, he also has emerged as a new force in the political arena.

In 2006, he ran as an unlikely candidate against opponent John Sarbanes for an open seat in Maryland's 3rd Congressional District, which covers parts of Anne Arundel, Howard and Baltimore counties and has a Democratic advantage.

During his campaign, he caught the attention of everyone from local voters to those in the highest levels of the Republican party in Washington, D.C., said Chip DiPaula, who served as chief of staff for former state Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.

"He was relentless in finding opportunities to promote his platform - through mail, through advertising, through yard sales," said DiPaula, who met White during his run for Congress. "He was all over his district."

Along the way, White also caught the attention of prominent Democrats.

House Speaker Michael E. Busch, D-Annapolis, said White was a "formidable candidate" running for office in a district that was very tough for a Republican to win.

"I think John is just someone who is not afraid to face the challenges of life," Busch said. "I wish we had him on our side. John's probably the one that got away."

From helping Paul Goetzke defeat a sitting Anne Arundel judge to winning a legal battle against two mammoth drug companies, White has never been one to back away from a fight.

He fought two pharmaceutical corporations in a \$65 million civil lawsuit accusing them of conspiring to cut his company's commissions for selling their over-the-counter products to alternate-channel markets. His case inspired a Department of Justice investigation and reached the Maryland Court of Appeals, which ruled unanimously in favor of Compass Marketing.

"It certainly represented what I thought was a David versus Goliath (situation)," White said. "In this case, it was a David versus two Goliaths. To be simple and frank, we were right and they were wrong."

White is willing to help other underdogs, too.

He arranged events and fundraisers for Goetzke, whose win marked the first time since 1976 that voters denied the governor's judicial appointee a full-term in Anne Arundel County.

"He really is a sincere and dedicated guy," said Goetzke of White. "He's not afraid to take on a challenge."

White even pitched in to help local boardsailor Farrah Hall, someone he said reminded him of himself when he was her age.

Last year, Compass Marketing and its clients sponsored Hall with \$22,000 to support her campaign for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, China. The money also helped finance a legal battle Hall waged against US Sailing that alleged unfair procedures in determining the winner of the trials in the Women's RS-X Windsurfing class. Hall was stripped of her title after a one-party protest hearing requested by another competitor.

"Farrah represented the real nature of how we are wired up," said White. "We are wired up to be competitive and we are wired up to be action-oriented, and we felt Farrah was not getting a fair trial or a fair review."

Hall said that US Sailing is under review and that rules for redress - when a sailor who has been fouled requests a jury to award a better placement - may change as a result of her battle. And this year, Compass and its clients are sponsoring Hall with \$24,000.

"He loves the little guy," said Hall, 27. "He's been one of my main supporters for the past couple of years. There's no way I could have accomplished this much without their support."

Besides helping the little guy, White also immerses himself in charity work: He is president of the advisory board for the International Foundation for Research and Education on Depression, participates in an annual 100-mile bike race sponsored by Compass to raise money for diabetes and works with the Chesapeake Bay Environmental Center in Grasonville to raise money and awareness for the bay.

He also is particularly proud of the fact that he employs his entire family, saying that he encourages nepotism. White said he recently got the last of his siblings to work for him when he hired his sister Kathy to work in Compass' accounting department.

The Dark Horse

White grew up among six brothers and sisters. His father worked for the National Security Agency; his mother was a homemaker. White held many jobs as a child and used his own money to put himself through college at Towson State University. He earned a master's degree from the University of Baltimore before starting Compass Marketing in 1998. White said it was after a round of golf with his brothers that he came up with a plan for his business on the back of a napkin.

He said he saw a growing demand for the sale of consumer products in nontraditional places such as department stores. From there, his firm signed on clients such as Johnson & Johnson, Gillette and Heinz.

Although he had no political experience, White said running for Congress against the son of a U.S. senator was "winnable."

White said he became "super-charged and excited that we could do things" after helping Anne Arundel Circuit Court judge Paul Goetzke run a successful campaign.

While White seemed like a long-shot to many during his run for Congress, he still managed to win the Republican primary.

"I was certainly elated that we won, mostly because it was against all of the odds," White said. "We were certainly the underdog."

But Dan Nataf, a political scientist at Anne Arundel Community College and director of the Center for the Study of Local Issues, said it was still a "forgone conclusion" that Sarbanes would win. There weren't enough crossover voters who were enticed by an obscure candidate like White, Nataf said.

"Sarbanes was going to win and that was that," Nataf said. "He started off with 100 percent name recognition."

But Nataf said White's Republican primary win was still a feat. "There's certainly nothing to discourage him from running for other offices where he can apply his marketing skills," Nataf said.

So will White ever run again? He said he has no plans right now.

But, White also said he's learned to "never say never."

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