

## One-On-One with John Lewinger

By **Richard Metcalf**  
*Journal Staff Writer*

**The Basics:** Born John Richard Lewinger on Aug. 5, 1945, in Lakewood, N.J., the youngest of three children. He graduated from Admiral Farragut Academy in New Jersey; bachelor's degree in fine arts from Bethany College in West Virginia; served 5 1/2 years as an aviator in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War. Married to Jamie for "five wonderful years — quote me on that." Two children from a previous marriage: Ben, 29, in Honolulu and Katie, 27, in Albuquerque; two dogs, Murphy and Blu.

**Position:** CEO and principal of Grubb & Ellis New Mexico, a commercial real estate services company. In addition, Lewinger is chairman of the Greer Group in Santa Fe, board member at the CNM Foundation, First National Bank of Santa Fe, NAIOP Commercial Real Estate Development Association and Real Estate Education Foundation.

**What You Didn't Know:** "I'm really a homebody. My wife is my best friend. Regardless of what people think, outside of work, I betcha I spend 95 percent of my time with my wife. Our interests include a love of travel. Her mom lives in France, her sister lives in England. We're going to Europe in October to see them. We'll visit Amsterdam. I'll see the factory where my Crosslé (race car) was built."

John Lewinger was born into a entrepreneurial family.

His father, Louis, managed a real estate office. His mother Natalie, he said, "was really my mentor. At one time, she owned two dress stores, a half interest in a hotel, operated a chicken farm and was building houses. And she managed to make very little money doing all that, but every two years she got a new Cadillac."

His path to a career in business, however, was interrupted by the Vietnam War. He reluctantly joined the Navy in 1968, but soon learned to enjoy military life.

"I've been everywhere in Asia," Lewinger said about his time with a noncombat electronic countermeasures unit. He started as a pilot, but was switched to navigator after an electroencephalogram test detected some strange brain waves.

"My last duty station was Albuquerque," he said. "I ended up having a bad epileptic seizure after compiling 2,000 hours of flying time."

Thus ended his naval career.

His involvement in real estate began shortly thereafter in New York City. In 1975, he moved to the Southwest and settled in Albuquerque.

The roots of Grubb & Ellis New Mexico go back to 1985, when Lewinger founded The Lewinger Co. Five years later, John J. Hamilton became a co-owner, resulting in the formation of Lewinger-Hamilton Inc. In 1997, the company became an affiliate of Santa Ana, Calif.-based Grubb & Ellis, a publicly traded company with 130 offices worldwide.

With about 100 employees, Grubb & Ellis New Mexico is one of the state's major commercial real estate brokerages. But like most other companies involved in real estate, the company has been going through difficult times.

"As long as there's activity, I make money. It doesn't matter if people are going down or moving up," Lewinger said. "The problem has been people have frozen up, but I think

they're now starting to thaw out."

Q: The Journal interviewed close to 60 business leaders for its One-on-One column before getting around to you. What's your reaction to that?

A: How did I get so high on the list?

Q: You attended a military prep school in New Jersey, a small private college in West Virginia, then served as an aviator in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War. Could you connect those dots?

A: I went to military school when I was 13. I was told it was an opportunity, but I think my parents just wanted the kids out of the house. I didn't get much of an academic education, but I did get a great social education. Marching to breakfast at 13 wasn't the greatest idea, but I learned discipline. I think discipline is very important for people to have a well-rounded life and be successful in business.

(Lewinger drove a truck for two years after prep school, taking a college course here and there, before attending Bethany.)

When I got out of college in 1968, the Vietnam War was raging. The chances of me getting drafted were pretty damn good. One of the things my mother taught me was to be in control of your destiny as best you can. So I joined the Navy. In my case, it was a defensive move.

Q: You're known for not taking yourself too seriously — you can laugh at yourself — but clearly you take what you do seriously. Can you bridge that gap for us?

A: I'm a relatively serious guy but I think there's nothing wrong with having fun. I think the majority of the people I know are far too serious. I have a couple adages that help me be unserious. One is, 'I can do nothing about the past, I can only do something about the future.' Everybody seems to be hung up on something they did yesterday. One of the other adages I have is, 'It doesn't matter who's right, but what's right.' If you can get away from arguing who's right and just delve into the issue, most things are usually pretty simple. Another thing is when you're wrong, everybody knows it anyway. If you want to move on, just admit it. If I follow these three principles, I have very little stress.

Q: You're also known for not being afraid to say what you think. In an age of political correctness, does this get you into trouble?

A: I think one of the problems is we have very little time. I've found that being too tactical can be very, very time consuming. I listen to others beat around the bush — I just care not to. Do I get into trouble? Occasionally. The trouble created is minor in comparison to the efficiency of being straightforward and honest. I think people learn to rely on your honesty. It's a very good practice in marriage as well.

Q: You once had a reputation for partying hard. Is that true or false? What's your idea of a good party today?

A: A party now? Dining out with my wife and we usually leave before dessert. I used to be a pretty raucous guy. I wasn't crazy. In order to enable my business to grow, I had to get to know a lot of people. You couldn't do that by sitting in an office. I probably did go to five times as many social events as anybody else. As long as I went, I was going to enjoy them. A concern now is being in a position of driving while you're drunk. My wife and I are all about not getting in a vehicle when we've had too much to drink.

Q: Talk a little bit about your car-racing hobby. How long have you been doing it and what do you get out of it?

A: I've been at it about eight years, and usually I get a very sore back out of it. I've always had an interest in automobiles. If you think about an engine running, everything has to be very, very precise. I really like mechanical things. I love watches. If you like

preciseness, go look at a very expensive, handmade watch. It's extraordinary ...

I'm trying to live a more balanced life. For the first 30 years of my adult life, I pretty much just worked. A psychologist once told me I could condense a two-week vacation into a weekend. I didn't think that was healthy as I got older. So I decided to get into car racing. (Lewinger races a 1971 Crosslé formula Ford model 20-f, a training car for Formula One racing that resembles a torpedo with big open wheels.) The kind of racing I do is not cutthroat racing. You don't have to be a millionaire to do it. You get to travel and interact with every spectrum of society. Nobody cares who anybody is — it's all about a common interest. I go to every race I can. I probably average four a year. It's very exciting.