Social media has dramatically changed the dynamics of crisis communications. In high-profile public relations crises, the timing and manner of social media crisis management can mean the difference between a positive outcome and a negative outcome.

David Murray will offer an entertaining look at how social media professionals navigate crisis situations on April 13 at 6:30 p.m. at the Texas Star Conference Center, 1400 Texas Star Parkway, Euless. The event is free and open to the public.

Register by April 8. RSVP by April 22 to iabcfortworth@gmail.com.

Cost: Members $20, nonmembers $25, students $10, all with a reservation; without a reservation add $5. Refreshments will be served.

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From Here to Paternity

Fort Worth PRSA.

This column reflects the author’s views and is not intended to represent Greater Fort Worth PRSA’s views.

An irreverent look at the people and events that keep us up at night

THIS MONTH IN PR/MARKETING HISTORY BY JEFF RODRIGUEZ

A Little Boy was Miraculously Rescued from the Ocean, but No One Could Save Him from the Media Tsunami

wanting to “stay just a little bit longer.” The Clash could not decide if they should stay or go. But never got to choose, because everyone wanted to decide for him.

others attempted to escape Cuba by boat. But the engine stalled, a storm came up, and Elián’s mother drowned. The boy and two others were rescued by two fishermen, one of whom was named

Although Elián’s parents were amicably divorced, his mother had fled without telling his father, Mikael González Quintana. When Juan Miguel learned his son was in the United States, he wanted the boy back; maternal relatives in Miami wanted to keep him, invoking political asylum. And thus a new story was born: The New York Times understatedly opined that Elián “may find himself at the heart of an unusual international custody case.” A more prescient Newsweek observed, “Elian may well be the first 6-year-old to spark a demonstration, get a congressional subpoena and become a presidential-campaign issue all in the same week.”

local officials, community activists, family members and the media all became obsessed with Elián, alternately making their case and embarrassing themselves. A Cuban exile support group released a photo of the kid headlined “Another Child Victim of Fidel Castro.” The Miami Herald ran a photo of him having fun assembling lawn ornaments with his great-uncle, who said Elián “has tasted liberty, and he doesn’t want to go back.”

In January 2000, Elián’s Cuban grandmothers flew to the U.S. to meet with Juan Miguel González Quintana, had gathered to assess his devotion to his son (and, presumably, to communism). Time magazine summarized the situation with a heartwarming cover photo of photojournalism — remarkably the right spot to photograph the encounter. Diaz’s photo would win a Pulitzer Prize. And the guy holding Elián? None other than Donato Dalrymple, the fisherman who plucked the boy and the headline, “Were Does He Belong?”

The stalemate rolled into March, when a federal judge dismissed the relatives’ petition for asylum. The Miami-Dade County mayor announced that he would not cooperate with federal authorities. Meanwhile, protesters, among them pop singer and Cuban refugee

In April a video of Elián was released in which he said he wanted to stay in the U.S. On whether he was being coached by adults, outtakes include a clip where the boy demands a second take, with different lighting.

Early Saturday, April 22, border agents raided the house, going room to room until they arrested Elián and a woman who was holding him. By an incredible coincidence, Associated Press photographer Alan Diaz just happened to be in the house and in the right spot to photograph the encounter. Diaz’s photo would win a Pulitzer Prize. And the guy holding Elián? None other than Donato Dalrymple, the fisherman who plucked the boy from the sea. Apparently, Donato had just happened to be in the house and in

Each logo in the ad rail links to the sponsor’s website!
A few hours later, Elián was reunited with his dad at Andrews AFB. The next day, a truncated version of the story was played on network evening news shows. The three hours between the two events counted as a federal custody case originating in Miami. Instead of walking Elián to the airport, the court-appointed lawyer for Elián’s mother, Virginia Figueroa, followed him to the airport. The next day, Andrew Wilson, APR, Fellow PRSA; Doug Newsom, APR; and I, APR, Fellow PRSA, were on the phone round-the-clock for 48 hours, trying to block the deportation, organizing protests, and putting Elián’s story in the national news (at the expense of other news stories, which, unfortunately, were spinning our story off the ground).

As a result of our efforts, the U.S. Department of Justice, in a federal court in Miami, ruled that it was in Elián’s best interest to remain in the United States. The family was reunited with Elián. The White House Foreign Press Association Award for Public Service was given to Roberto and Virginia Figueroa for their efforts on behalf of their son Elián. The Washington Post focused on the family, quoting Donato as saying, “They leave Washington until she had seen Elián; she worried that he was being kept from her and he was going to be taken back to Canada.”

Elián was Miami’s version of Waco. Instead of killing people this time, federal agents killed Elián’s mother. She skipped out on her family; she forced her son to be separated from his father and said his stay in the U.S. had been “very sad times.” Which could make things awkward at the next family reunion.

In all, this was not the finest moment for any of the parties involved. But for PR professionals, the Elián González story is a wonderful case study. Now if we can just figure out what the lesson is.

PEOPLE & PLACES

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Beautiful competition this spring spotlighting public awareness and education efforts in supporting environmental issues. Publisher Southwell employees diverting 20 percent of local recyclables to the landfill. The paper and organized and led teams for litter cleanups. “We have been in print 11 rules of Writing, grammar and Punctuation

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The Onion

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