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20 years at ATG, Birnbaum has passion for success

As a new college grad, Peter J. Birnbaum prepared for law school by clerking and doing title searches for Law Bulletin Publishing Co. in Chicago. He had planned on a career as an entertainment attorney or a personal injury lawyer.

Those dreams soon gave way to a different path in 1981, when he took a job at Attorneys' Title Guaranty Fund as a law clerk while a first-year student at Chicago-Kent College of Law. In 10 years, he was president of the bar-related title insurer.

Now celebrating his 20th anniversary with ATG and 10th year as its chief executive officer, Birnbaum will receive an ISBA Board of Governors Award on Friday, June 22, during the 125th Annual Meeting at The Abbey on Lake Geneva.

He finds himself in a situation unlike that of most people of his generation, having spent virtually his entire career at the same company. His passion for the business has never waned.

Birnbaum's meteoric rise up the corporate ladder began shortly after he joined ATG. He showed such promise that, when a staff attorney position became available, the slot was held open for him until he graduated from law school.

In 1985, at the tender age of 27, he was promoted to vice president and counsel, heading up ATG's growing Chicago office and staff of 60.

A Chicago native who had demonstrated a penchant for savvy marketing, Birnbaum made an impression on ATG management and its board of directors. He met and exceeded their expectations quickly: within three years, the number of closings out of the Chicago office had jumped from 3,000 to 20,000.

But all was not smooth sailing. In 1987, Birnbaum faced what he still considers his toughest challenge. Chicago Title dropped its prices 40 percent virtually overnight to put pressure on smaller companies like ATG.

"We had to reduce our prices without reducing service to our members," he said. "It was tough."

Birnbaum's competitive strategy succeeded and, partly due to that and other successes, he was promoted to the office of president and CEO in October 1991 at age 33.

Today, ATG has 3,500 member-attorneys. Last year, they closed 30,000 residential real estate transactions, contributing in great part to record gross sales of \$100 million and net revenues of \$20 million.

"This company has always challenged me intellectually," Birnbaum said. "Over the years, many people have seen me as



ATG President Peter J. Birnbaum (right) visits during the ISBA legislative reception May 2 in Springfield with (from left) former legislator Daniel M. Pierce of Chicago, State Rep. Karen May of Highland Park and David E. Murray of Sterling, secretary of the Labor and Employment Law Section Council.

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Birnbaum leads UPL challenge

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the visible 'face' guy, but what they may not realize is how hands-on and multifaceted my job is. That's what I've always liked about it."

A supporter of the Illinois State Bar Association's fight against the authorized practice of law, Birnbaum has been an active member of every committee, section council and task force that has dealt with the issue.

A long-time champion of attorneys whose practice includes real estate law, he has led ATG in a new direction "to become the premiere lawyer service organization for the benefit of the profession and the public."

Under his leadership, ATG has vastly expanded the services its lawyer-members can offer their clients. They now include a mortgage origination company, a trust company and a real estate auction company. ATG and its subsidiaries have 14 offices in Illinois and businesses in Indiana, Wisconsin, Missouri and Canada.

"I believe it would be fair to say that Peter has always had the full confidence of the board and has proven to be an outstanding choice as president," said Aurora attorney Herbert C. Steinmetz Jr., who was board chair at the time Birnbaum became CEO.

"He has always given 100 percent in terms of effort and his vision and leadership have certainly played a crucial role in making ATG what it is today," Steinmetz observed. "As a tribute to Peter as a person, many board members and employees also consider him to be a good friend as well as a business associate."

Despite a grueling work schedule, Birnbaum has been an ardent supporter of Big Brothers-Big Sisters in Chicago. A past board president, he has raised more than \$500,000 for the organization and has been a voluntary "big brother" to a west side teenager for three years.

As to the future, Birnbaum could envision himself spending another 20 years at ATG, building the company into one with a national and even international presence. Then again, he has a keen interest in public service and hasn't ruled out a run for public office.