



Family members share pride in the Making a Difference Award received recently by Peter Birnbaum. From left are Juliet, Peter and Madeline Birnbaum, and Kyron Shaw, the recipient's "Little Brother" for the past seven years.

Making a difference is par for Birnbaum's life course

By Stephen Anderson

It's been said that some people make things happen, some people watch things happen, and some people just wonder what happened.

Peter Jay Birnbaum is somebody who makes things happen when he takes on a professional or personal challenge. His participation in a worthy initiative is likely to ensure its success.

President and CEO of Attorneys' Title Guaranty Fund for the past 14 years, and a 24-year ATG mainstay, Birnbaum has made his mark professionally.

It was his interest in mentoring at-risk youths, however, that recently earned him personal recognition with a Making a Difference Award during an Abraham Lincoln Marovitz "My Hero Award" luncheon.

ATG has succeeded under Birnbaum's leadership in the precarious market of title insurance in residential real estate, and he has augmented his concern for protection of the home-buying public with tireless vigilance against the unauthorized practice of law.

He has served on ISBA task forces on UPL for the past decade, and he has supported legal battles that have been waged by the Illinois Real Estate Lawyers Association, often in tandem with the state bar association.

But less visible than Birnbaum's business persona has been a personal commitment to nurturing Chicago's disadvantaged and underprivileged children so they may find opportunities for leadership in their communities.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metropolitan Chicago has been the major beneficiary of Birnbaum's humanitarian interest, and he truly has made things happen for countless youths.

Beside being president of Big Brothers Big Sisters from 1997 to 1999, he turned to his favorite pastime, golf, as a means of getting more professionals to participate in programs and provide financial support.

In seven years as chair of the organization's annual Pro-Celebrity Golf Classic, Birnbaum was able to add more than a half-million dollars to its mentoring and counseling efforts.

Beyond his tangible contributions is the quality of self-pride and motivation he has instilled during seven years as a Big Brother to Kyron Shaw, a recent graduate of Austin High school who attends classes at Triton College.

"Peter made me a better person," Kyron told Illinois Bar Foundation executive director Susan M. Pierson, who nominated Birnbaum for the award, "He directed my attention from the streets and showed me a better way of life."

Being a Big Brother may also have been a factor in Birnbaum's marriage to Juliet Mastaglio, who has been a Big Sister to Wanakee Jackson for nine years. (The young woman is now a student at the University of Maryland.)

Each December, Peter Birnbaum is a figurative Santa Claus as Attorneys' Title is host to a holiday party for children from its adopted kindergarten at Byrd Academy in Cabrini Green. They receive gifts and a performance by the Jesse White Tumblers.

Professionally, Birnbaum has received an ISBA Board of Governors Award, a Distinguished Service Award from the Chicago-Kent College of Law and a resolution from the state legislature.

Personally, the Making a Difference Award in the name of his own mentor, Judge Marovitz - coupled with testimony from Kyron Shaw at the ceremony - may rank just a bit higher.

The nomination was supported by Margaret C. Benson, director of the Chicago Volunteer Legal Services Foundation. Birnbaum was a founder of its Harold I. Levine Center for Housing, which helps families protect their homes from predatory lending lawsuits and foreclosures.

Citing his "all-around heart of gold," Benson said Birnbaum "is a true mensch, actively and heavily involved in a variety of community and legal projects that benefit the less fortunate."