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McDonald was 'right guy at the right time' for ATG

After nearly 50 years at title insurance company, Champaign lawyer exits

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Ward F. McDonald recalls searching for the building that would become Attorneys' Title Guaranty Fund Inc.'s first downtown Chicago office in the mid-1970s.

At the time, McDonald headed the company, which is now owned by its more than 4,000 member attorneys in Illinois, Indiana and Michigan and provides services such as title-insurance policies, process serving, real estate auctions and legal education.

After making the drive from Champaign, McDonald and another ATG official walked around downtown looking for a suitable professional home, settling on Barrister Hall at 29 S. LaSalle St.

"It's one of my favorite memories," he said.

McDonald, 72, retired from ATG's board last month, ending a nearly 50-year affiliation with the company.

Four decades ago, ATG had fewer than 10 employees. In 1975, ATG got the \$500,000 bond it needed to qualify for operations in Cook County and statewide.

Entering the Cook County market was a major milestone, said Peter J. Birnbaum, ATG's current president and CEO.

McDonald "turned ATG from an idea into a viable business," Birnbaum said. "He raised most of the money to qualify it as an insurance company. He convinced lawyers this was a good thing for their practice and for their clients."

McDonald initially worked at ATG — which now calls 1 S. Wacker Drive its home — as a law clerk in the mid-1960s. He became ATG's executive vice president in 1970, then later became president and served until 1983. He eventually joined the board of directors and served a one-year stint last year as chairman.

In 1970, ATG had a gross annual revenue of \$86,000 and had reached about 45 of the state's 102 counties. McDonald and his staff aggressively recruited more attorneys in the face of opposition from commercial title companies, lenders and brokers.

The company now garners more than \$100 million in annual



Ward F. McDonald

revenue and has 18 offices and 250 employees.

ATG celebrated its 50th anniversary last year and has issued more than 3 million policies.

William W. Austin, a partner at Siemer, Austin & Fuhr in Effingham and the current chairman of ATG's board, said McDonald recruited him and his firm to become members of the company in the mid-1970s.

"Ward will be remembered as the right guy at the right time," Austin said. McDonald "was a great spokesman for the company at a time when the company was first trying to gain traction."

McDonald retired "because I had fulfilled my commitment as chairman," he said. "It was simply time to pass the baton after all those many years."

McDonald does, however, continue a commercial real estate practice at Meyer, Capel P.C. in Champaign.

In addition to his private practice and work with ATG, McDonald also was an adjunct professor at the University of Illinois College of Law and College of Business.

Since 2010, ATG has donated \$125,000 to the Ward F. McDonald Scholarship Fund at the U. of I. law school.

The scholarship is awarded to a third-year law student in good academic standing who wants to practice real estate law.

"We wanted to do something that would honor Ward for giving back to the profession by teaching," Birnbaum said. "We wanted to recognize that effort by naming that scholarship for him."

ATG's 14-member board is set to meet in Chicago early next week. For the first time in 40 years, McDonald will not attend that gathering.

He will be at his second home in Palm Desert, Calif.

"I'll be on a tennis court in 85-degree weather," McDonald said.