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ALTA Board Member Honored for Professional, Civic Achievements

Peter Birnbaum, president and CEO of Chicago-based Attorneys' Title Guaranty Fund Inc., was named an Academy of Illinois Lawyers Laureate by the Illinois State Bar Association's Academy of Illinois Lawyers for his dedication to the legal professional and equal commitment to investing in his community and assisting neighbors.

Over the past three decades, Peter Birnbaum proved to be a dedicated legal professional committed to not only the art and craft of law, but equally committed to investing in his community and assisting his community neighbors.

Birnbaum, president and CEO of Chicago-based Attorneys' Title Guaranty Fund Inc. and a member of ALTA's Board of Governors, has been described as a man who follows the golden rule. His unrivaled dedication to his profession and community were recently recognized, as he was named a 2011 Academy of Illinois Lawyers Laureate.

The Illinois State Bar Association's Academy of Illinois Lawyers inducted its 11th class of Laureates, including Birnbaum and six others, during a luncheon in April. The Academy

was established in 1999 to celebrate excellence in the practice of law by individuals who maintain the highest standards of professional and public service. The 2011 class brings the total number of attorneys receiving the honor to 102.

"This is very humbling and something I didn't expect," said Birnbaum, who has been with ATG for 30 years. "In an era where people jump from job to job, it's validating to those who spend their careers doing something they feel compassionate about. Working at one place my entire career has given me the opportunity to build relationships and I hope a good reputation. In turn, I think that has given me a chance to give back. I'm truly honored to be included among this select group."

The Board of Regents selects the Laureates from submitted

nominations. To be eligible, candidates must have practiced law primarily in Illinois for at least 25 years, must be a member of the Illinois State Bar Association, and must have demonstrated a commitment to the highest principles of the legal profession and to serving the public.

"The Academy honors lawyers who have established and maintained the highest principles of the profession as demonstrated by their pervasive record of service to the law and the public," said Mark Hassakis, ISBA president.

Birnbaum began his career at ATG as a law clerk in 1981. At the time, he was a first-year student at the Chicago-Kent College of Law, from which he graduated in 1983. He advanced to positions of staff attorney, and vice president and counsel before being named CEO and president in 1991. He has testified before the U.S. Congress, the Illinois Senate and the Illinois Supreme Court Rules Committee. In April, Birnbaum was reconfirmed for his second term as an Illinois Court of Claims judge. His community involvement includes participation with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metropolitan Chicago and the Jesse White Tumbling Team, among others.

"A spirit of civic duty and giving back has always been a good part of my life," said Birnbaum, who resides in Chicago's Roscoe Village neighborhood with his wife, Juliet, and their three children. "I've been

fortunate in my career. I believe I have a duty to help others.”

Spearheaded by Henry Shulruff, senior vice president at ATG, several influential jurists, politicians and community leaders wrote letters supporting Birnbaum’s nomination.

“He is a lawyer’s lawyer, a successful business executive, a humanitarian, a mentor, a philanthropist, a teacher, a devoted father and a great friend,” said Shulruff, who has worked with Birnbaum for nearly 25 years. “There is in some men, an innate quality that drives them to help those around them in any way they can. Peter exemplifies the values, standards and ideals of the best of the legal profession.”

Birnbaum’s lectures and articles are staples in the educational programs of local bar associations, the ISBA and the American Bar Association (ABA). While his topics are diverse, they carry a common theme of promoting the profession and protecting the consumers it serves.

He’s also left his mark by reaching into the homes of thousands of underserved families by putting together the largest foreclosure prevention events held in Illinois. Lawyers were trained to counsel at-risk homeowners on how to restructure their mortgages and save their homes. The service gave about 3,500 vulnerable people the opportunity to keep roofs over the heads of their families.

“These are the things of which Laureates are made,” Shulruff said.

Birnbaum’s humanitarian side was evident early in his career when in 1992, he agreed to serve on the board of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metropolitan Chicago. He served on the board for nearly a decade and was elected the group’s president in 1997.

Wanting to do more, Birnbaum was matched with a young boy from Chicago’s tough west side. He helped the boy into a better school, worked with teachers, paid his tuition and provided guidance when the boy went astray.

“Although the odds were against him, that child is now a productive young man making his mark on society,” Shulruff said.

When his path crossed with that of now Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White, another charitable opportunity presented itself. Believing in the objectives of the Jesse White Tumbling Team, which provide a safe, drug-free alternative for children residing in two Chicago housing projects, Birnbaum offered to donate his time and took a seat on the charity’s board. He’s led the effort to develop the Tumbler’s first free-standing center since it was founded in 1958. The ground-breaking ceremony for the Jesse White Community Center was held in April.

“In more than 30 years of our friendship, Peter and I have become partners in working toward a brighter future for children,” said White, founder of the Tumblers. “His work has helped ensure that at-risk youth are provided with a positive alternative to gangs and drugs.”

Among the various awards and honors bestowed on him, Birnbaum has received the Outstanding Service Award from Big Brothers Big Sisters, a Board of Governors Award for



▲ Peter Birnbaum

Outstanding Service from the ISBA and received a Making a Difference Award from the Abraham Lincoln Morvitz Lend A Hand Program, to name a few.

“It’s hard to imagine that Pete has the time for all of his community projects and still has enough left in his tank to guide a major company into the 21st century,” said Tom Leahy, partner of the law firm Leahy & Hoste.

Birnbaum also has been an active member of ISBA’s Unauthorized Practice of Law Committee; served on Chicago-Kent’s Alumni Association for many years, serving as president in 2001; and served as president of the National Association of Bar Related Title Insurers.

Harold Kent, dean and law professor at Chicago-Kent College of Law, said Birnbaum stands out from the crowd because of his commitment in reaching out to others. Kent recalled a time Birnbaum delivered a talk at Chicago-Kent about the role of title insurance and engaged in conversation with Chinese graduate students.

“He later invited the students to shadow him at his office so they could get a better ‘feel’ for the structure of the title insurance industry,” Kent said. “Peter’s dedication to the legal profession, his mentees, his colleagues and to the community is unparalleled.”

Birnbaum, always the educator, saw an opportunity to explain the value of having property rights and having the protection of title insurance.

“I tried to give the Chinese students an understanding of private land ownership – a concept anathema to Chinese culture,” he said. ■