

The Good News Is...

By **ROY L. WILLIAMS**

News staff writer

Jim Lawrence believes size has its advantages, but doesn't buy the idea that independent real estate companies can't thrive in today's volatile housing market.

Last week, the president of LAH Real Estate announced that the Birmingham-based company he and two partners co-founded in 1992 has joined seven other independent realty firms across the state in forming Alagroup, a statewide network.

The alliance allows the eight members - one in each city ranging from Birmingham to Huntsville, Florence, and Gulf Shores - the opportunity to work together, yet retain their independence, Lawrence said.

In an interview, he shares how the alliance will strengthen each member. A Vietnam War veteran who won a Purple Heart after getting injured in battle, Lawrence also talked about how he utilizes skills gained during an eight-year stint as a University of Alabama English professor to help train LAH agents on the ins and outs of real estate.

Q. *What has the reaction been since you announced Tuesday the formation of Alagroup?*

A. I've had 15 to 20 phone calls so far from mortgage companies, title

companies, insurance companies, and advertising agencies all wanting a part of the action. That's the advantage of having a statewide network.

I've heard the same reaction from brokers at our partners. A lot of people have been amazed that we could pull this off.

We are looking to expand in Anniston, Gadsden, Auburn/Opelika and Decatur. We've also been contacted by independent brokers from two cities not on our target list.

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Q. *How will this affiliation strengthen each member?*

A. Because each of us has exclusivity in our cities and aren't competing, we can share ideas. We are talking of setting up a quarterly brokers roundtable.

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Q. *What was it like fighting in Vietnam?*

A. We lost 151 American soldiers in the battle at Albany, a clearing in western Vietnam, and 125, including me, were wounded.

I went through three months of rehabilitation and have lived with the mental and psychological scars of that battle ever since.

Q. *What led you into real estate?*

A. Tom Rast was my mentor and brought me to Birmingham in 1978 after I was teaching at the University of Alabama.

I grew up in the business at Johnson-Rast & Hays from 1978 to 1992, managing several of their offices. When I decided to open my own company,

Tom suggested I consider Keith Arndall, his son-in-law, as a partner.

Keith suggested we bring on his buddy Maurice Humphries, who worked with him in JRH's commercial real estate department. My background in residential sales and teaching fit in well with their commercial sales experience.

Q. *How have you managed to grow from one agent to 225 and six branches over the past 16 years?*

Most real estate companies grow by recruiting agents from other firms. We chose not to go that way, but to identify people we thought had great potential for real estate sales and train them through a real estate course I taught.

We have some agents from other firms, but most of our agents came from within. The advantage is they reflect our philosophy and they're loyal.

Q. *You mentioned before that LAH has been approached by the big chains.*

Yes we have. Century 21, Coldwell Banker and Re/Max are all great international and national franchises, but there is value in being local.

When you get outside Birmingham, nobody knows who LAH is, or knows Hamner Real Estate outside Tuscaloosa. Our goal is not to get outside Alabama.

Q. *What is your view of the bill the House approved last week that would aid 400,000 American homeowners facing foreclosure and help prevent the collapse of Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae?*

A. Am I for helping people experiencing problems? Absolutely. But here's the problem.

If people get themselves in trouble, they learn a lesson. If you get them out of this mess, they'll expect you to bail them out the second time too.



A lot of people were fooled and deceived by shady lenders. But greed on the part of some homeowners and lenders who gave them loans they shouldn't have gotten also caused this problem.

We went through a period where for 10 years anybody could get a loan, credit was too easy and everybody took advantage. Now we're paying the price for it.

Q. *The Birmingham Association of Realtors reported last week that sales in June plunged. Does that concern you?*

A. I think what's happening right now is what some call a "perfect storm" that has households talking and made people shy away from the housing market. We've got a war that's gone

on too long, \$4 a gallon gasoline, one of the craziest presidential campaigns I've ever seen and almost daily bad economic news.

The good news is housing prices in metro Birmingham have held steady and not experienced the big drops of many other markets. Interest rates

remain in the 6s and there is a good supply of homes to choose from.

Q. *How do you relax away from work?*

A. I love listening to music, reading books and exercising.

I've reached an age, 67, where exercise is vital for my health. I run two miles a day.

When I get home from work, I get an MP3 player my wife gave me two years and listen to music.

I love rock from the '60s and '70s, '50s rock and roll, Celtic music, classical, bluegrass and especially blues music.

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