

The opportunity to serve

As his term draws to a close, APRO President Tiger John Cleek reflects upon two years of achievements, challenges and ceaseless legislative pursuits

As we commemorate the association's 30th anniversary during APRO's Convention and Trade Show in Louisville this July, I'll be completing my second term as your president. I have been an APRO member for 25 years and it has been an honor, privilege and challenge to lead our association in these harsh economic and political times. Since I'm winding up my term, I wanted to take a moment and share with you a few of the highlights—and challenges—of my time at the top.

Years ago, former APRO president Kevin Quinn told me, "Tiger, you will know when you are needed, and you will step up." Due to the strong relationship I developed with Congressman William Lacy Clay—whom Dan Cole, Larry Carrico and I persuaded to be our lead House sponsor in 2007—that time was August 2008 when I was elected president during our St. Louis Convention. Two weeks later, my wife Ann and I attended the BrandSource/AVB show in Las Vegas. In May 2008, the APRO board had voted to co-locate with BrandSource/AVB for our 2009 Convention and I wanted to meet the principals and show APRO's support. The decision to co-locate was made strictly for financial reasons, but it was a very divisive issue for our association during the first several months of my presidency.

In September, Dan Cole and I had dinner with Congressman Clay at an annual fundraiser held in his father's honor in St. Louis. With Congressman Clay, it's always been: "Tiger, what can I do to help your industry?"

That same month, my son John Jr. and I went to the Midwest Training Expo. Ohio Rental Dealers Association President Mike Tissot had a packed house and a first-class event. We were impressed that, instead of paying for speakers, they sold sponsorships to vendors who conducted training seminars during the show. At this event, I also persuaded Bob Bloom, president of ColorTyme, to serve on the APRO government relations and public relations committees. Getting members who were not on the APRO board involved in committees has been one of my goals and Bob was a great addition. Also, Mike Tissot, one of APRO's most popular speakers, agreed to conduct a seminar at our 2009 convention.

In October, I went to Dallas for the Texas Association of Rental Agencies' 25th-anniversary celebration. RentDirect Nationwide was TARA's main sponsor and had formed the Nationwide Rental Coalition (NRC) to give its members a voice in federal legislative efforts. As APRO president, I welcomed all NRC members and rental dealers to participate in the legislative process—but stressed that we must be united in our message or we would all fail!

That same month, I flew to Atlanta for TRIB Group's Meeting of the Minds and to help re-organize the Georgia Rental Dealers Association for the second time. Bill Keese and I had helped organize the group in 2003, but interest had waned and they needed a new spark. To help with that effort, Chris Bolin, president of the Kentucky Rental Dealers Association, attended, as did Sam Choate, an attorney and Georgia's lobbyist. The Georgia Rental Dealers Association was re-born again.



Representative William Lacy Clay and Tiger John Cleek

Later that October, I traveled to Springfield, Illinois, with Dan Cole for the Illinois Rental Dealers Association meeting. IRDA President Steve Braning had done a good job running the association, as was evident when that group was awarded Most-Improved State Association at APRO's 2008 Convention.

In November, we held APRO's board of directors meeting in Austin, Texas. I came in a day early to meet individually with APRO staff members. Bill Keese has assembled and maintains one of the most talented and devoted staffs I have seen in any business. While we were in Austin, Barack Obama won the presidency and the Democrats took control of both the House and Senate. How to deal with the NRC became a topic of heated discussions, as did APRO's 2010 Convention and whether or not we'd co-locate again. There were so many unresolved issues that the board agreed to meet again the following January.

In November 2008, we decided to partner our company, Cleek's, with Aaron's; the following month, we bought the Aaron's franchise rights for all of our markets and began the conversion process—which is no minor feat, as those of you who have ever changed company names will know.

In January 2009, I went to Washington, D.C., for a strategy session with APRO's Bill Keese and Richard May, Rent-A-Center's Dwight Dumler, Aaron's Beth Gibbs and members of the five lobbying groups that represent our industry. Among other meetings, I met with Senator Mary Landrieu, who agreed once again to be our lead sponsor in the Senate. I had a great meeting with my good friend Frank "Les" Davis, Congressman Clay's chief legislative assistant for financial services issues. Les laid out very aggressive goals for the upcoming session of Congress and I knew once again that we had the right lead sponsor!

Also that month, your APRO board met again, this time in Dallas, to hone our legislative strategy and work out the issues regarding APRO's 2010 Convention. John D. Raffalli, a lobbyist who has represented our industry for nearly 20 years, gave us a federal update and emphasized that any division in our legislative approach could be catastrophic. Emotions ran high, but in the end, we decided that APRO would not co-locate with any group in 2010.

In February, I attended the Missouri Rental Dealers Association meeting in my hometown of Columbia and gave them an industry update.

For months during this period, I talked to Les Davis daily. Congressman Clay decided that instead of merely introducing the RTO bill with a handful of original co-sponsors, he wanted to nurture bipartisan support for his bill and he needed numbers to do it. We arranged for a nationwide conference call in March that included state association presidents representing 45 states, APRO's board of directors and executive advisory board, as well as our government relations committee. For the

first time in APRO's history, a sitting U.S. congressman participated in our conference call and gave an impassioned call to action. It worked beyond our wildest dreams! APRO members contacted members of the House who had co-sponsored in the past and asked them to contact Clay's office and become co-sponsors on the latest bill. Richard May, Bill Keese and Jeannie Hutchison motivated our grassroots efforts with full force.

In March, I went to Dallas for the TRIB Group meeting and told them that Congressman Clay was going to introduce his bill that week and that Senator Landrieu would do likewise in the Senate the following week. On March 26, 2009, Congressman Clay introduced HR 1744, the *Consumer Rental Purchase Act of 2009*, with 41 original co-sponsors—a record number!

In April, Aaron's held its national general managers meeting in Washington, D.C. I was there both as APRO president and as a new Aaron's franchisee. During the meeting, more than 200 Aaron's managers spent a day on Capitol Hill meeting with Congressional staff members to lobby for the rent-to-own bills. APRO developed a special computer program to schedule those meetings and post the results online. Cynthia Baber-Strunk came to help and was invaluable in our efforts.

That same month, APRO held its annual Dave Egan Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C. The NRC members scheduled their conference for the same time and APRO's staff coordinated all of the meetings for both groups without a hitch. What had started as a confrontation became an act of cooperation and we had a record number—more than 200—rental dealers on Capitol Hill delivering a unified message: that our legislation was good for our customers and created thousands of jobs. Congressman Clay came to APRO's social event during the conference and continued to inspire and impress us with his commitment. After all the traveling I had been doing, I was missing time with my family, so I brought them with me to Washington. Ann, our daughter-in-law Heather and the world's best grand kids—Johnny, Mary and Thomas—had a great time sight-seeing while John Jr. and I lobbied the Congress.

After the Legislative Conference, telephone calls and e-mails replaced airline tickets for a few months until Ann and I went to Williamsburg, Virginia, in June for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's Golf and Tennis Classic, a first-class event to raise money for the scholarships provided to students all over the country. It was also an opportunity to hear Vice President Biden speak and to mingle with members of Congress in a relaxed setting. We were joined by Gary and Mary McDougal, Dwight Dumler and the incomparable "professional auctioneer" Jamie Slatton. APRO is the major sponsor

CONTINUED ON PAGE 46

of the silent auction, but it was the live auctioneering talents of Jamie that stole the show.

Late August and early September 2009 found us at APRO's Convention in Las Vegas. Our legislative momentum continued as House sponsorship for HR 1744 had grown to 101 co-sponsors; but the real highlight for me was getting to present our industry's highest honor, the Lifetime Achievement Award, to Gary McDougal, a three-term APRO president and the greatest statesman I have ever known. At the convention, I was re-elected president. I let the board know I could not travel as much as I did my first year, but would continue to concentrate on legislative issues.

The APRO board met in November in Louisville, very much aware of the uncertain political climate. We developed a strategy to continue the push for co-sponsors—particularly in the Senate—and upgrade APRO member benefits.

In February 2010, more than 125 rental dealers attended the 17th annual Dave Egan Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C., which continued the drive for support of our legislation. As of May 31, HR 1744 has 126 co-sponsors and S 738 has 18.

As we all know, Congress has been consumed with stimulus packages, bailouts, health care legislation and, now, financial reform. Rent-to-own has not even been a blip on the Congressional radar, despite all of the co-sponsors for our bills. In today's political climate, that might not be so bad. No anti-RTO legislation has been introduced—and that is very good news. I can't emphasize enough what a fantastic job the industry's lobbyists—paid for primarily by Rent-A-Center—have done to protect and promote our interests. The lobbyists, teamed with your board of directors and the APRO staff, remain fully engaged in this, the most tumultuous political climate in my lifetime. And yes, if the opportunity presents itself, Congressman Clay is ready to push for a hearing on his bill in this session. Even if he can't get the hearing, I assure you that he has done more for his constituents—rent-to-own customers and dealers alike—than any member of Congress I've ever known.

I have worked hard for the industry and the association these past two years. It has been challenging, but more often, it's been a lot of fun. I have met a lot of rental dealers and made a lot of new friends. I have tried to advance the interests of the industry and foster a sense of cooperation among dealers. Two years later, we are better than we were; we are not yet as good as we surely are going to be. I look forward to seeing all of you in Louisville to celebrate APRO's 30th anniversary together! ✧

Tiger John Cleek lives in Columbia, Missouri. His e-mail address is tigercleek@cleeks.com.

rent-to-own division by name—Amanda Barrows, Brian Duke and Danelle Stanger—saying that “those folks make me look good everyday.” Again and again, he mentions the support he's received, from his co-workers and rental dealers alike. “We have the best dealers in the world,” he says. “We've got tremendous support in the dealer community.”

APRO, too, gets credit from French for his success in the industry. “The fact that we are involved supporters of APRO has been of tremendous benefit to our company,” he says. “Last year, I ran for the board for that very reason.”

It may not be surprising that someone who loves his work and has been in sales for nearly 40 years has had his share of protégés. “A lot of the fun I've had in this business has been coaching other people and helping others be successful,” French says. On this subject, he has a clearly defined philosophy. “I can't stand lazy people, nor those who are dishonest,” he says. “I will fire you for lying to me; I will never fire you for making a mistake. The only people who don't make mistakes are people who don't do anything.” Building upon that, he mentions a piece of advice from his manager at Frank Lyon Co. that has stuck with him: “Always hire people who are smarter than you, who will work harder than you and who probably want your job. If you do that, you'll always be successful.”

In fact, the only thing French says he enjoys more than work is time with his wife, three children and nine grandchildren. He calls his wife of 22 years, Mary Lou, a great supporter and a great partner. His children and grandchildren live in Missouri—where French is from originally—but he says he talks to his children on the phone virtually every day; however, he confides that it's “impossible to talk to my grandkids, because they just want to *text*.” Like any grandfather, though, who wants to dote in this modern age, he texts them right back.

Finally, there is golf, which he tries to play once or twice a week, although he wishes he had the time to play a bit more. “It's a sport at 65 that I can play at a high enough level where it's fun and I can compete,” he says, noting that he is a 16 handicap and that a good day for him is 80 and a bad one 90. “It's one of the places I don't think about work and you can just totally, totally, totally unwind.”

A successful career, good health, close friends, a loving family and some fun on the golf course. “I've got nothing to complain about,” French says. If he makes it look easy, it's only because he's worked so hard to earn all he's got. “It's funny the way the good Lord works,” he says of finding his career by first serving as an ill-prepared bartender. “I wound up here and it's been a tremendous amount of fun.” ✧

Tiffany Hamburger is a freelance writer based in Austin, Texas.