



# The **Bolin** basics

## An APROfile of **Chris Bolin**



After years of dealing with the complexities of rent-to-own's big guns, Chris Bolin keeps it simple, on his own terms. For Bolin, owner and president of Bolin Rental-Purchase in Clarksville, Tennessee, his success boils down to one simple truth: "I know people," Bolin says. "I know how to talk to people, how to show respect for people. I got it from my dad and my grandfather and it's taken me a long way in life." ❁ Bolin is all about boiling it down. Born and raised in Clarksville—also home to the creator of the present-day supermarket concept and the inventor of the corn-sheller—the 42-year-old entrepreneur is a man who believes in the basics: hard work, good relationships and grit. In whatever direction the conversation begins, it seems to return to these core themes again and again. And why not? They've served, and continue to serve, this native Tennessean well as he climbs the ladder of rent-to-own success, rung by unpretentious rung.

**By Kristen Card**  
**Photographs by Teresa Cole**

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olin doesn't spend a lot of time delving into the details of his childhood and upbringing, so it's understood that when he does make mention of some event or person specifically, it must hold significance.

Bolin's quick to note that his parents, William and Patricia, were and are wonderful, and even quicker to mention the immense influence his maternal grandfather, John Powell Jr., had on him.

"He was a life-long, over-the-road truck driver," says Bolin. "And he had a wood business on the side. When he was in from the road, we'd go out and cut firewood for people to burn in their fireplaces and wood stoves. Boy, he kept me busy as a kid and that really stuck with me. That's where I got a lot of my work ethic from."

Powell and Bolin clearly shared a special cross-generational appreciation of one another. When Bolin expressed a liking for motorcycles, his grandfather signed for him to get his first motorcycle at the age of 16—which led to his first job, at Buddy Appleton's Harley-Davidson dealership.

Bolin also had a love for law enforcement and about five years after getting that bike, he earned his way onto the Clarksville Police Department. Bolin showed plenty of promise as an officer and at 25 was one of the department's youngest members to be promoted to sergeant. With the

101st Airborne Division located in nearby Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Bolin found his first experience as a supervisor a little intimidating.

"It was a unique experience being a supervisor for officers who were either retired or had done military

service. Many of them had seen combat duty," Bolin recalls. "It really gave me a distinctive perspective on managing people."

With seven years on the force under his belt, Bolin says he left the CPD under "unfortunate circumstances," again, not providing much detail, except to relate it to the next phase of his life.

"I just sat down and thought to myself, 'I can either file bankruptcy and sit here in misery,'" says Bolin, "or I can get out there and find a job.'" Little did the dejected young man know he was about to discover not just a job, but a whole new career.

Bolin's first job as a civilian came as an account representative for Alrenco. Ambitious as ever, Bolin was promoted within only three months to assistant manager. In another three months he was dubbed store manager and, by his own account, became one of Alrenco's top managers.

Bolin was considering becoming a multi-unit manager when he accepted an offer from his former boss, Mike Foley, to work in Chicago for a Michigan-based ColorTyme franchise. Bolin moved on up to the Windy City to run five stores—and learned some hard lessons in rent-to-own.

"If you're very naïve, boy, that place will wake you up," Bolin says. "What a great, dynamic city. It's great, but it's a very, very competitive, tough market there. Fixed costs are high, labor costs are high and it's just plain hard to find good help."

"When I got there, the stores were in terrible condition, with no bench," he continues. "So I had to hire, train and develop people and, at the same time, reconcile inventories and get managers to practice the policies and procedures of the company. Boy, was it a challenge. But it made me a much better supervisor, a much more dynamic leader, for sure."

"I had all kinds of experiences and very little close supervision, so I had to make a lot of decisions on my own," Bolin says. "Some of them were wrong, but a lot of them were right. We really improved that operation there a great deal."

**W**e had been in Chicago less than two years when Bolin got a call from Alrenco Chief Operating Officer Bud Holladay, wanting him to return at Alrenco. "He said if I was happy, then that was fine," says Bolin, "that he'd just call me again next winter." But Bolin had already had his fill of the big city and definitely didn't need an engraved invitation to escape another bitter Chicago winter. He returned to Alrenco as a multi-store manager, working from a Nashville base.

Bolin rode the wave as Alrenco went public, merged with Home Choice, which then merged with RentWay.

"I changed companies three times in six years, but kept the same job," says Bolin. Despite supervising

as many as 13 stores at once and working in six different states, Bolin just couldn't seem to get that elusive next promotion.

So in 2000, when Bestway Rent-To-Own made him an offer to be a regional manager—with the potential of becoming a vice president for the company—Bolin accepted and went to work overseeing 10 stores in Middle Tennessee.

The bottom unexpectedly fell out of that deal when structural changes eliminated the promise of promotion for Bolin. He briefly returned to RentWay to run eight

invoices got paid on time and the store stayed full of inventory. It was just a miracle that all that happened, because our cash flow was just virtually nothing."

However it happened, it doesn't seem likely to need repeating. Today, Bolin Rental-Purchase has a healthy cash flow with minimal advertising and myriad referrals. The company still consists of only the flagship store with four full-time employees renting computers, electronics, appliances and furniture. Bolin says that while he plans to expand his business, he wants to pay off debt first.

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stores in Lexington, Kentucky. By that time, though, he was already thinking ahead.

"I didn't see myself being promoted by the current RentWay bosses, so I thought, 'Maybe I should do something for myself,'" he says. "I knew how to select sites, negotiate leases, set up software, control expenses, buy product and advertise effectively, so I figured, 'Why not?'"

So Bolin came full circle, going home to Clarksville to open up his new store, named, simply, Bolin Rental-Purchase. It was February 2004 and Bolin says he hasn't regretted a moment since.

"Boy, what a home run," says Bolin. "It's been great. I got so much upfront help and support from owners and operators like Brownie Calvin, Bill Kelly, Eric Marlin and Jeff White. The only real concern I've had was back between about month six and month 10—I still don't know how all the checks cleared, all the



**Above:** Clarksville's Officer Bolin. **Right:** Chris with his wife, Zulima.



Meanwhile, Bolin claims the bulk of his business success to date can be tied to a single underlying and recurring concept: strong, positive relationships—with colleagues, employees and customers.

“Our showroom looks and feels crisp and clean, it has a good feel about it, and our product looks good, feels good, is priced reasonably,” says Bolin. “But really, it’s about the people. Our employees have a terrific attitude and we just take care of our customers. We just love our customers. My employees know if you don’t love our customers, then you just can’t work here. I make sure my employees treat my customers the way I want to be treated when I’m standing on the other side of the counter.”

Bolin’s customer-is-king philosophy is clearly working. Within the first half of the year, Bolin Rental-Purchase had more than 200 rental agreements pay out, while continuing to increase rental revenue. But while customer relationships are the company’s top priority, Bolin understands it takes happy employees to make happy customers.

“One of the things I knew would help me build a great organization was taking care of my employees,” Bolin says. “I pay very competitively, I offer health and dental plans—which the company pays half of—I pay for life insurance, they receive holiday and vacation pay. Trying to treat people right and give them a job with perceived value has helped me retain good people who treat our customers really well.”

Bolin says his approach to people is somewhat instinctive, but was naturally shaped by his family and raising,



and has been dramatically refined by many mentors during his dual careers—people like Alrenco’s Bud Holladay.

“Bud was really tough,” says Bolin. “But if you did the right thing, if you worked smart, focused on your job and did what you were supposed to do, then he made sure you weren’t overlooked. He was very inspirational to me.”

“I’ve made a lot of relationships in this industry,” Bolin continues, “And a lot of those people I still go to today for advice, information, encouragement. I’ve had some relationships for five, 10 years or more, and it’s still an excellent exchange. As long as you’re honest with people, shoot straight and treat people like you want to be treated, generally, you’re going to do okay.”

Bolin says one of the most valuable pieces of wisdom he has gleaned from industry cohorts is to find other people like himself and teach them everything he knows.

“I think too many times, managers are very reluctant to share information with other people because they’re insecure, and that, I think, is a fatal flaw,” says Bolin. “If you don’t try to find people as sharp or sharper than you are and show them everything, then you’re failing at your job and you’re failing at developing that other person. Especially in larger companies, you see managers keep their cards very close to the vest, because that information is their special thing, their security. But they’re really hurting only themselves—the person they’re supposedly training, yes, but ultimately, themselves. When you share information, a whole new dynamic opens up and you’re able to accomplish twice the work in the same time, as well as motivate people and develop careers.”

Bolin believes this type of information-sharing is essential to success; he also believes it’s the single greatest value in industry trade organizations. A member of the Association of Progressive Rental Organizations since the day his doors opened and vice president of the slowly-and-steadily-blooming Tennessee Rental Dealers Association, Bolin is continually awed by the overwhelming knowledge among these groups’ members and their utter openness to impart it all.

“Wow!” he exclaims. “This industry is so different from so many other industries in that owners and managers and vice presidents will tell you all sorts of information and share it with you freely. That doesn’t happen much in other businesses.



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**BOLIN’S TEAM.** Standing: Brandon Wilkes, Chris Bolin and Keith Williams. Seated: Gene Mealey and Ronald Hayes

“Every time I go to an association conference, someone comes up to me and says, ‘I didn’t know this,’ or ‘I didn’t realize that and I’m really glad to have gotten this information today,’” Bolin says. “There’s a ton of information you’ve got to have to run your business and it’s freely available at these member events. It’s really good; I think it really makes rent-to-own unique and dynamic.”

**B**olin, inspired, is happy to share his own nuggets of advice with would-be rent-to-own entrepreneurs, gleaned from that iffy premier year of his now-flourishing store.

“Don’t plan on paying yourself much money, at least for that first year or so,” he counsels. “Plan on working sun up to sundown, six or seven days a week. Plan on that being your only focus. And if you’re married or have children, make sure your family understands and supports what you’re doing.”

Luckily, Bolin’s wife, Zulima—a native of Medellin, Colombia, whom Bolin met via the Internet—understood and supported the intensity of both Bolin’s dream and the demands associated with launching a new business.

“I think back now on some of the stress and pressure—even though it was a good sort of pressure, I was doing something really good for myself,” says Bolin, “and I realize, if I’d had a wife who didn’t get it, or was upset or angry whenever I was gone all day and half the night,

or who didn’t come into the store sometimes and bring me lunch or other things like that, boy...then that would have been a super-tough time for us. Thinking back at it now, though, this is probably the single best decision I’ve ever made in my life.”

The couple have been married for more than four years. Today, with a little more flexibility in Bolin’s work schedule, he and Zulima enjoy gardening together and frequent trips to Colombia. Bolin also searches for opportunities to scuba dive and water ski whenever possible, and retains his love of motorcycles.

Hard work, good relationships, grit. Elements that seem so simple, so basic, yet seem to cover so much ground in Chris Bolin’s life and success. While the first two are evident to those around Bolin from day to day, the third—the grit, the determination, the tenacity—might escape those unfamiliar with the continual pullings of the proverbial rug from beneath him. But it isn’t lost on Bolin.

“You’ve got to persevere,” Bolin says. “There have been lots of obstacles in my life and if I would have just sat down and given up, then nothing good would have happened. Instead, I found ways to go around and instead of feeling sorry for myself, I sought something new and different, something I could be good at and I can try to make my life better and make the lives of those around me better, too.” ■

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