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Financial adviser on Worth list

By **Jenifer K. Nii**

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John Bird came West to Utah in the early 1980s "to ski powder and climb rocks."

But, Bird said, "once I got here I found that although I loved to ski, I could only talk about skiing for about a minute and then I'd get bored. So I started talking about starting a business."

One young man he talked to was W. Toby Levitt, who would become his business partner. The business they talked about became Albion Financial Group, a wealth management firm that today reports more than \$300 million in assets. And this month, Bird climbed another peak as the only Utahn named to Worth magazine's list of "The Nation's 100 Most Exclusive Wealth Advisors."



John Bird

The January issue of Worth names 100 advisers chosen based on nominations from clients, industry associations, private banks, wealth management and investment firms and other advisers. Bird was asked to complete surveys and supply information about his experience, education, compensation, client retention rate, portfolio size and returns, and wealth management philosophy. In addition, nominees had to submit documents filed with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission proving that they manage or oversee more than \$25 million in assets.

Dwight Cass, Worth's editor-in-chief, said the list was the only annual feature carried over by the magazine, which was relaunched late last year by Robb Report. In its new incarnation, both the list and the magazine target a more affluent readership.

"We're trying to fill a niche that we believed hadn't been filled," Cass said. "There's a host of excellent personal finance magazines out there that serve a demographic of ideas for people who want to build wealth. But there weren't a lot of magazines for people who had made their money."

Worth was designed to fill that gap. In a way, the January top 100 list was created to address another.

"There's been a bunch of surveys in the last year that indicate that there's all sorts of anxiety, among the non-affluent and the affluent alike, about getting good financial advice," Cass said. "So many people have lost so much money, and there's a great deal of mistrust. We wanted to write an article from our readers' perspective. We wanted to provide a list of people whose clients say do a good job and can be trusted. We believe there's a need for that type of information."

Albion Financial Group, according to the magazine, manages \$307 million in assets. The net worth of its largest client is about \$70 million. Median client net worth is \$700,000.

Not that Albion is all about snootiness. In fact, Robert Fujinami, a longtime client and university professor, said he was surprised that Bird had been grouped in with managers who served the "exclusive" and "elite."

"I'm more your typical university professor, hoping the state will give us more money," Fujinami laughed, noting his net worth "doesn't approach" the magazine's target audience (\$1 million in annual income, \$5 million net worth).

Fujinami said he was just looking for someone to manage his assets and chose Albion because of their style.

"I was impressed by how comfortable I was with them," he said. "They weren't pushy. They were up front with everything."

Bird said the firm was built that way, philosophically and structurally, which helped it during the recent corporate and financial industry scandals.

To avoid conflicts of interest, Albion, like the bulk of the firms on the Worth list, is a fee-only operation. Advisers are paid a flat fee based on a percentage of assets under management, rather than the sale of products.

Also, about 95 percent of assets are in individual securities rather than mutual funds, Bird said, which shielded Albion clients in the wake of the latest mutual fund debacle.

"Don't get me wrong — there are some really quality fund companies out there," Bird said. "They're ethical, and they're doing it right. But the greed in this industry, unfortunately, gets out of hand. The lack of disclosure gets out of hand. So, as I've looked at the scandals over the last several years, in a way they've actually helped us. Certainly, they did not surprise us."

Bird said Albion's philosophy is pretty simple: a client-centered focus, manifested structurally in its adviser-to-client ratio (there are currently 12 Albion advisers serving about 200 clients), and a focus on the basic principles of money management — principles that apply to the middle class, Bird said, every bit as much as they serve the affluent.

"The real trick to financial planning is really sticking with the basics — are you spending less than you're earning? Are you doing what you can to mitigate or reduce debts? Are you putting money away for a rainy day? There are a lot of complicated tools and techniques we could talk about, but at the end of the day, those are the things that count," he said.

Clients like Fujinami say Albion has served them well.

"Even during the economic downturn, I don't think I lost as much money as many of my colleagues," he said. "Over the last three years the market has not done well. But we've managed to maintain my assets. This last year we kind of caught up to where we were three years ago. It was a good year."