

SQUARE FEET

THE INTERVIEW

WITH ROBERT J. ALEXANDER

In Complex Office Deals, He's Mr. Big

By TERI KARUSH ROGERS

FOR another commercial real estate broker, it would have been the deal of a lifetime. In March, Robert J. Alexander and his team at CB Richard Ellis arranged the \$505 million sale of Verizon's headquarters, on the Avenue of the Americas near 42nd Street in Midtown Manhattan, to Equity Office Properties Trust, the nation's largest office real estate investment trust. At the same time, as part of Verizon's consolidation efforts, he helped the company buy the old AT&T headquarters in Basking Ridge, N.J., for \$100 million. Next, Equity Office hired him and his team to act as leasing agent for the former Verizon headquarters, with 1.1 million square feet of space.

But the trifecta, which stands to generate millions in commissions for CB Richard Ellis, is merely the latest coup for Mr. Alexander, 50, whose heavy-hitter status and physical stature — he is 6-foot-2 and still has the shoulders of the high school defensive end he once was — have earned him the nickname Mr. Big.

"I don't think there's ever been a phenomenon quite like Bob Alexander," said Mary Ann Tighe, CB Richard Ellis's top executive for the New York tristate region, who bears her own outsized reputation as a broker. "He is the top producer in New York brokerage, in the world and maybe even in history."

The nameplate near his door at CB Richard Ellis, where he is chairman for the tristate region, says "Robert 'Mr. Big' Alexander." It was apparently placed there a year or so ago as a practical joke — and was never removed.

Mr. Alexander's rise has been particularly steep, given its origins on a garbage truck in Hempstead, N.Y., his hometown.

For three summers in college, Mr. Alexander — son of a prosecutor and a British-born schoolteacher — earned \$5 an hour hauling trash.

"It was tough work," he recalled. "I moved about 20 tons of garbage a day, and

that was two cans at a time."

The experience taught him two things. "At the end of the day, you had to work hard to sort of make a success of anything," he said. "And you knew that if you didn't have an education, it is no joke to work manual labor to earn a living."

After finishing college at Niagara University in Niagara Falls, N.Y., he worked as a salesman, first for a tool wholesaler and then for a cosmetics manufacturer. A family friend who was a successful broker at Cushman & Wakefield piqued Mr. Alexander's interest in commercial real estate. At 24, Mr. Alexander landed a rookie-level job as a broker at the firm now known as GVA

Williams. He was given a telephone, a desk and a mandate to drum up business. This often involved plucky subterfuge: he used pretext to enter buildings for reconnaissance and devised fictitious story lines to gather lease expiration information over the phone, he said.

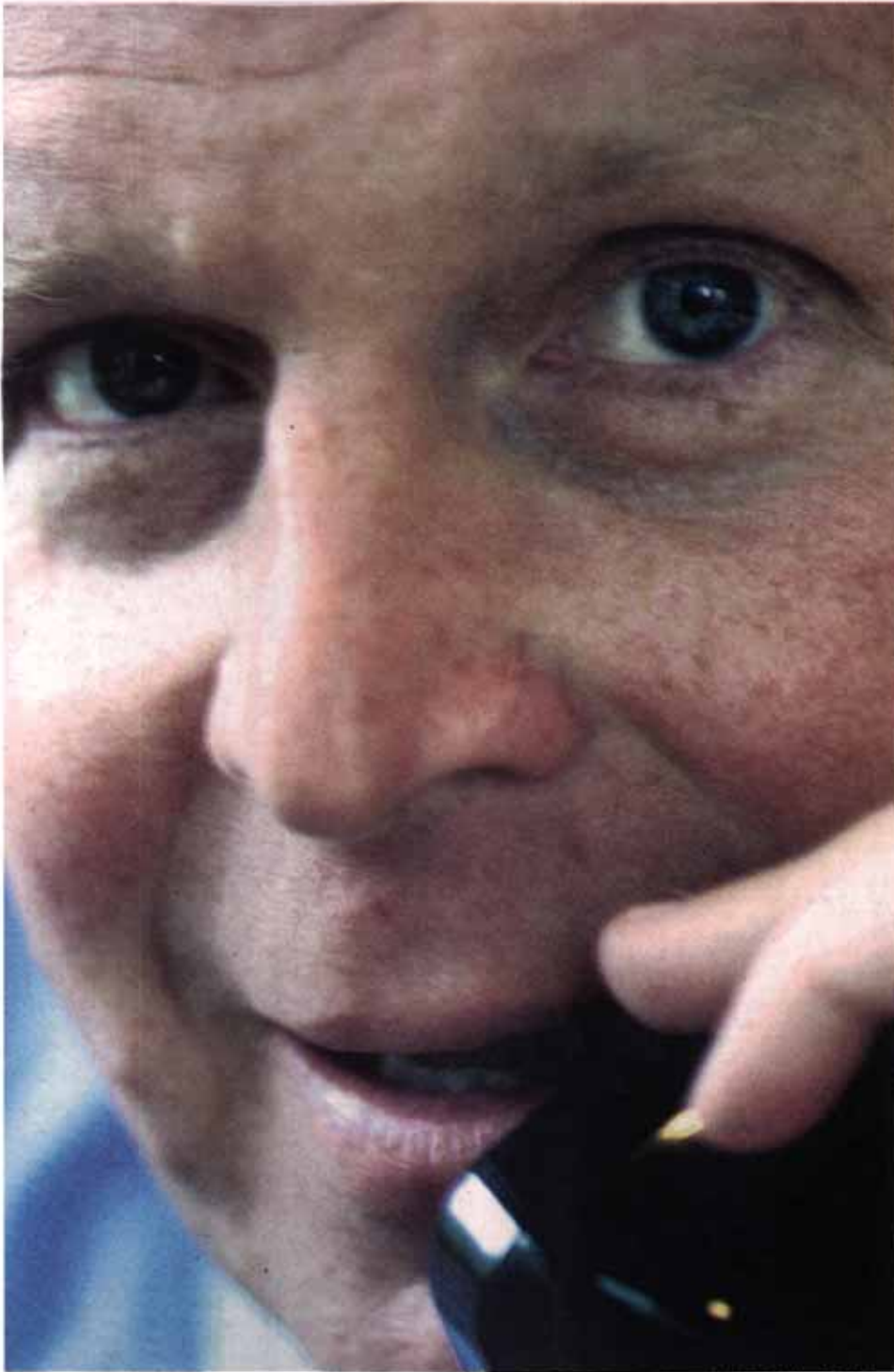
Combing magazines and newspapers for leads on companies that might need to add or reduce space — a practice he still follows — Mr. Alexander began to build his business. These days, however, he also often deals directly with boardroom figures among his client base, predominantly from the financial sector, including Lehman Brothers, Deutsche Bank, J.P. Morgan Chase and Axa Financial.

"My job now is to be the chess master," he said. "That's what people expect me to do when they hire me, to know the pieces that are going on and to anticipate pieces, and to create."

Indeed, Mr. Alexander's deals occasionally involve a breathtaking level of complexity. In 2000, for example, he and his team at Insignia/ESG (a firm later acquired by CB Richard Ellis) orchestrated a musical-chairs-like shuffle involving J.P. Morgan Chase, Credit Suisse First Boston, MetLife and Deutsche Bank. By the end, Mr. Alexander's team arranged the lease or sale of 3.6 million square feet of property; for his firm as a whole, the total was 5.5 million square feet.

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Phil Mansfield for The New York Times

"He's fun, he's alive, he is active in the sense that he's got his hands in a lot of deals," said Robert J. Winter Jr., executive vice president for development and joint venture management at Equity Office Properties Trust, who hired Mr. Alexander to lease out the old Verizon Building. "But it's his ideas that matter, it's strategy. I can sit in his office and in a short period of time I can come up with three or four ideas." Mr.

Alexander's office is equipped with four phones and two meeting areas to accommodate sometimes frenzied trading-room-like action.

Mr. Alexander is also said to exhibit an uncanny prescience.

"Think of a great athlete like Wayne Gretzky or Michael Jordan, the kind with great ball sense who knew how a play was going to develop before it even happened,"

"My job now is to be the chess master," says Robert J. Alexander of CB Richard Ellis in New York. "That's what people expect me to do when they hire me."

said Robert Stillman, an executive vice president in CB Richard Ellis's consulting group, who works on many of Mr. Alexander's deals. "He's like that."

In a recent interview, Mr. Alexander seemed reluctant to acknowledge that he is driven to and from work every day, but his regular-guy persona is no facade, those who know him say. He nurses a knee battered from decades of athletics, and he married a woman from his hometown. They are raising their three children — twin 12-year-old girls and a 17-year-old boy — in Hempstead.

He is also fond of jokes, some more practical than others.

Last year, possibly raising more ire than chuckles, Mr. Alexander famously sent a gorilla-costumed substitute in his place to a dinner celebrating the closing of a deal.

"I think that was just done out of appreciation and humor," he explained a little stiffly. "We just wanted everybody to have a good time, and we thought everybody should have had a good time."

"At least, I never heard back from anybody who didn't," he added.

Mr. Alexander linked his impish side — "there's more to life than a nickel or a dime" — to brushes with mortality. He had a malignant tumor removed from his right leg five years ago. A few years before that, he survived a nearly fatal case of cardiomyopathy, which can be caused by a virus that attacks the heart.

BUT neither years nor health issues appear to have dimmed his salesman's doggedness. Gazing at the densely packed real estate beyond his windows, he can rattle off information about each building — ownership, past and present tenants, coming lease expirations — as if reading from giant index cards stuck onto each tower.

"I never knew I was going to be here," he said. "But I knew one thing when I started — I did want to be successful. I looked at it like a competition, like everything else in life, and went to work."

"And I did my mental gymnastics every day in order to try to be a success in this business and to stay on top, because one thing I have found, is that to compete at the highest levels with all the smart people that are in this industry is just as hard or harder than getting there." □