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# MEET THE DUPAGE REAL PRODUCERS TEAM



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# Publisher's Note

DuPage Real Producers is hitting stride with our third issue. We are growing at a healthy pace thanks to our Preferred Partners – the vendors who sponsor the publication and help us keep everything free for you. Every Preferred Partner is referred by you, the Top 500 REALTORS® in DuPage County, so you know they have the professionalism and capacity to serve top-performing brokers and teams.

Special thanks to the Designated Managing Brokers and Brokerage Owners who have opened their doors to DuPage Real Producers and embraced the movement. We are always looking for your recommendations for editorial features, especially rising stars who may not yet be in the Top 500, but whom you know are on their way.

As I write this on a zero-degree day in late February, it's easy to long for Spring. The warm January gave DuPage real estate a very successful first month of the year. Economic indicators and REALTOR® vibes are pointing toward a strong Spring Market.

And I know, I know...everyone is incredibly slammed during Spring Market. The whole community is going to be working all hours to prepare, repair, stage, list, show, inspect, asses, review, negotiate, lend, and close. To provide an oasis in the desert, a beacon in the tempest,

a port in the storm, if you will, DuPage Real Producers will be throwing you a party right in the middle of it!

**Our LAUNCH PARTY will be on THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 4:00-7:00 in Oak Brook Terrace!!** Details are in this issue, and the event is free for the Top 500 DuPage agents. Save the date, and get ready for a great cocktail party with your fellow premier brokers from all corners of the county. You're going to get lambasted via Eventbrite, Facebook, email, and maybe even a call from me...so no excuses!!



**Joseph D'Alessandro**  
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\*Source - Zillow Consumer Housing Trends Report 2019

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# RAY & DAWNA WATSON



▶▶ all in the family

Written by Joe D'Alessandro with Nora McDevitt

Photography by Katherin Frankovic

## Keeping It Fun Decade After Decade



Ray and Dawna with their daughters Chloe (left) and Elise (right), and Baxter, the Boxer-Shar-Pei they rescued in 2013

**Ray and Dawna Watson met on a blind-ish date. Blind-ish because Dawna was taking her real estate course at Coldwell Banker Schaumburg, where Ray had been a REALTOR® for 10 years and because they were one class apart at Hoffman High School though they did not know each other. It was Dawna's father, a fellow CB agent with Ray, who set them up.**

There was an immediate attraction. Ray and Dawna dated for a year before Ray popped the question on Valentine's Day 1997 and they were married six months later. They immediately began working together, and the complimentary personality elements that make their relationship work so well translated perfectly into a real estate partnership. Ray is more analytical, while Dawna is more outgoing and social. Ray enjoys doing all of the analysis work and is accurate and thorough. Dawna loves to network and oversees all of the marketing. This symbiotic arrangement has been working for decades as they have grown into one of the most consistent high-performance teams in DuPage County.

In 2010, Ray and Dawna knew they needed help with their growing business at RE/MAX All Pro

in Bloomingdale. Though their daughters Chloe and Elise had helped out as high schoolers, they needed a more consistent presence. Katelyn Mucci was a senior in high school when she and Dawna met while volunteering together in a community youth program. It was during another volunteer project that Dawna asked Katelyn to work for her. Katelyn took busy work like mapping appointments, printing listings, and improving social media presence off Dawna's plate, working part-time while she attained both bachelor's and master's degrees in social work. Katelyn worked in her field for one year before joining the Watsons full-time as a buyer's agent in 2015. As Katelyn nears her five-year anniversary, she works in every aspect of real estate and does a great job bringing in new clients. Recently Katelyn's sister Melissa Mucci, a college student, joined the Watson team as an assistant and provides invaluable organizational and marketing skills.

The Watsons' first rule: Keep it fun! They make it a rule that everyone is together in the office twice each week. This helps them bond and deepen their relationships. Then they get out to special events like dinner in Chicago or a day at Lake Geneva about once a quarter. Ray and Dawna consider a healthy balance of work, family, and leisure a big part of their success. Ray plays trumpet in a jazz band. Dawna is into cooking and fitness. Together, they like to bass fish, kayak, and travel. Katelyn loves VOLUNTEERING at her church, community service and visiting local trendy coffee shops.

...

Ray and Dawna's success has come through persistence and steadily cultivating relationships. Dawna explains, "We farmed one neighborhood for five years before getting our first listing there and ever since, for over 20 years that neighborhood has been good to us. If someone tries to sell you a shortcut to getting new business, think long and hard because if it were that good, everyone would be doing it. You can't get away from the basics."

Ray and Dawna focus on making sure the needs of all parties in the transaction are met. Successful negotiations require creating win-win situations. Ray says, "Our end goal is for everyone to walk away from the closing table feeling as good as possible." Dawna adds, "We have colleagues with whom we've successfully negotiated for 35 years. If you're in the industry long enough, you will cross paths with agents multiple times, so it's important to make sure each interaction is positive. We like negotiating with people who understand mutual respect and professionalism."

The Watsons consistently approach their work with a growth mindset. They view a willingness to innovate and try new things as essential to their success. Over the years they have participated in Tony Robbins events where they have completed the "Fire Walk" and embraced his phrase, "Life begins at the end of your comfort zone." Though Ray is in his fourth decade as a REALTOR® and Dawna is in her third, they still push themselves to grow. And they're still keeping it fun, professionally and personally.



The Watson Team - Ray, Dawna and Katelyn Mucci

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H I N S D A L E

▶ cover story

Written by **Lauren Young**  
Photography by **Katherin Frankovic**

## Living the “Perfect Combination”

“I always tell my college-aged kids you don’t know where you’re going to end up or what you’re going to be,” says Kris Berger. “It’s funny how life leads you in a direction you never thought.” For Kris, this meant an unconventional route from art and marketing degrees to a successful career in real estate.

From a young age, her father instilled in her business lessons, helped her foster a love of design, and encouraged her to pair them together. Fresh out of college, Kris began her career in accessories representation at the Apparel Center and Merchandise Mart in Chicago, with the Midwest as her territory. She then worked for a national furniture rental and staging company in their residential division. It was the perfect fit for her studies in design, her understanding of marketing, and her ability to connect with people. Then one day, by chance, Kris was tapped to cover a huge commercial project for one of her coworkers.

“I was called in to design a 40,000-square-foot space on behalf of a large commercial real estate broker client,” she recalls. “I had never worked commercial, but my coworker wasn’t available, so I filled in.” After she walked them through the staged space, the excited client signed up. “When the meeting ended, the broker high fived me and said, ‘Your furniture design just clinched it for me!’” Her jaw dropped when the broker shared his commission on the project, around \$200,000. “I think I made about fifty bucks off that deal. That’s when I thought to myself: ‘I’m going into real estate.’”

A friend in commercial real estate set her up in an industrial and commercial group. Thanks to her time spent traveling the Midwest as a rep and at one of the area’s largest furniture rental companies, she was well versed in its retail landscape. “I had gained knowledge of where stores were located and why they chose those locations,” says Kris. “This insight was a big asset to the commercial real estate group. I brought in a couple of the nation’s largest retailers to Chicago just by cold calling. And I loved it.”



At home with John and Gordy the Golden Retriever

# Kris Berger

When Kris’s son Weston was born, her family moved from Chicago to LaGrange, purchasing and rehabbing a house themselves. “This was before HGTV made it popular for homeowners to do their own work,” she says. Since they were one of the first of their friends to move out of the city into the suburbs, they got surprising reactions from couples who visited their newly renovated house. “All my friends started saying, ‘Find me ...



Kris with veteran team members Neringa Mockus (left) and Lara Barber (right)

•••

a fixer upper! I sold six houses to friends within a short amount of time, and connected them to contractors and handymen, designing and planning their kitchen and bathroom renovations. I was like a general contractor.”

The taste of designing and selling homes led Kris to leave commercial real estate for residential. It meant she could trade the eight-to-six workday for one that allowed flexibility to raise her children. She continued to design on the side, in addition to selling homes. But when the housing market dipped during The Great Recession, she knew she needed a shift in focus to accelerate her growth as an agent.

“People would call and ask me to help them pick paint colors and fabrics, and I was being pulled into these extra projects,” she remembers. “I knew I really needed to step up my game, and that required me to start saying ‘no.’” She began referring design work out to her contacts so she could concentrate on home sales. “Once I stopped and focused just on the real estate, that’s when my business took off,” she says. “I was also able to be with my kids at their functions and holiday events. I owe a lot of credit to my mentors Laura Murphy and then Beth Burtt who taught me so much as a new REALTOR®, including that crucial lesson.”



Today, Kris still provides occasional design consultations, but mainly as part of her expertise for current or past clients who are selling a home. Since her move to the Compass’s Hinsdale office in 2019 her success has skyrocketed. For 2018 and 2019 her total volume exceeded \$100 Million. In over 23 years of selling real estate, she has surpassed \$500 Million in total sales. Her accomplishments include the Top Nine individual agent in the State, Top Five in DuPage County, and in her many years at Berkshire Hathaway Home Services Hinsdale, Top Produc-

er, Top 10 in the Nation, and top individual agent two years in a row.

Family is another passion for Kris, and a key motivator for her achievement. When not selling real estate or designing homes, Kris spends her free time with family, friends, her dog Gordy, swimming, skiing, and traveling with John, her husband of 25 years, John, her 23-year-old son Weston, a college student at California Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo California, and Karly, her 20-year-old daughter, a junior at Indiana University. Additionally, she enjoys a close relationship with her large extended family. John is one of thirteen children and each Thanksgiving over 75 Bergers share breakfast at her in laws’ home, attend mass together, and then 45 of them enjoy dinner together. Kris even adopts clients into this close-knit family group. “Once a friend always a friend,” she says.” She considers helping others find a place to call home a key factor in her indirect career choice.

“My son who is graduating in June recently asked me, ‘You started out as an art major and now you’re in real estate. Is this what you really wanted?’” Kris thought about it and replied, “I Real estate is the perfect combination of everything I love, and I couldn’t be happier.”

“

I always tell my college-aged kids you don’t know where you’re going to end up or what you’re going to be. It’s funny how life leads you in a direction you never thought.

”





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# MARGARET GEHR & KATHY LOBKOVICH

## OF CHICAGOLAND HOME STAGING



Margaret Gehr and  
Kathy Lobkovich

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“I honestly don’t remember how I first heard about home staging,” says Margaret Gehr. “It really was by accident. I heard someone talking about it and I thought, ‘I would love to do that!’ From that day forward I’ve never looked back”.

Margaret’s love for interior design started at a young age and led her to study interior design at the Harrington Institute of Chicago. After a few years of creating furniture store displays and residential design, she realized it just wasn’t paying enough. That’s when she was lured into the family business, auto sales.

“My dad owned a car dealership, so I grew up around the business. I found that I really enjoyed meeting new people,” Margaret recalls. “Every day was different. I guess that is where I learned how people tick and how to meet their needs. If you listen well, they will tell you what they want.” The relational skills she developed during this time are key to her success today.

As luck would have it, Margaret’s future husband was in the car business as well. They met, married, started a family, and settled in Plainfield. The next stage in Margaret’s story developed because of Margaret’s REALTOR® mother-in-law, Gini Valentino of Century 21 Affiliated in Naperville. Knowing Margaret’s interior design background, Gini began introducing her to real estate connections and she even called upon Margaret for help with her own listings. This is when Margaret staged her first home and found her true calling.

“Knowing this was something I wanted to pursue, I began hitting the

streets. I met one person who introduced me to another, and they would introduce me to someone else,” she explains. “As I look back, our entire business originated with two REALTORS®, Gini Valentino and Debora McKay of @properties in St. Charles.”

Early on, Margaret was invited to introduce her services to a group of twelve RE/MAX REALTORS®. “The funny part was that it was at their monthly bunco night. You can picture me interrupting their fun night out for my sales presentation,” she laughs, “lugging in my huge design board, pictures, and taking them through my fifteen-minute presentation. While they didn’t ask me to stay and play with them, I must have done something right, because I still work with many of them today.”

For the first three years, Sue O’Connell, Margaret’s mother, joined her because the business was rapidly gaining momentum. Ultimately, Margaret needed another leader to join the team. That’s where Kathy Lobkovich came into the picture.

With a business degree from Marquette University and ten years of experience in corporate marketing, Kathy and her brother had launched an on-demand delivery service for restaurants in New Hampshire. This was years before GPS, smartphones, apps, and Uber Eats, a true ahead-of-its-time innovation. After three years and with a growing family, Kathy moved back to Naperville due to her husband’s job transfer.

While raising three boys, Kathy Lobkovich found herself helping friends and relatives prepare their homes for





Taking a break from staging with their husbands, Tim Gehr (left) and Mike Lobkovich (right)



Design meeting with Becca Given, Sales Support (left) and Kathy Hill, Project Manager (right)



•••

sale. “I had a solid track record of quick sales for all the homes I staged and wondered if there was a way to use my experience to help others,” Kathy recalls. “I did some research and decided to take a training course in home staging.”

Margaret and Kathy were introduced and that’s when Margaret asked her to come along on a home staging project. “I must have passed the test, because she started calling me to help out whenever she needed an extra pair of hands,” says Kathy.

Over the next two years, Kathy would join Margaret and Sue more and more frequently as the staging business continued to take off. Not only did they have compatible and complementary business skills, they also got along quite well. Facing a crossroad of limitations, Margaret approached Kathy with an offer to become a partner.

With encouragement from her husband, Kathy joined the team, and they became Chicagoland Home Staging.

Since then, Margaret and Kathy make it a point to attend several home staging conferences around the country together every year. In fact, they frequently spend time together outside of work, socializing and attending live music events. In February, you’ll often find them making a vacation out of the Las Vegas World Furniture Market, with their husbands, Mike and Tim, in tow. In fact, they try to plan a getaway together revolving around a conference or market whenever their schedules permit. These events allow them to stay ahead of industry trends and to continue their education.

The High Point Market in North Carolina is the biggest commercial event they attend with 2,000 exhibitors. It is the oldest, and

most important market. Here, the industry reveals the trends and styles ahead of each season. The pair visits twice a year to buy furniture to refresh their 10,000 square foot warehouse. “High Point Market is like the Merchandise Mart in Chicago, except much larger,” Margaret explains. “We like to go and see what’s coming up, the colors that will emerge, and how to stay ahead of the design curve.”

Over the years, Margaret, Kathy, and their team have won many awards. They include nominations for Top 75 People in the Real Estate Staging World and the Most Influential People in Staging. Margaret is the founding Chicago chapter President and recent Illinois State President for the Real Estate Staging Association. They have been in the Top 10 Professional Home Staging Teams four times. *The Wall Street Journal*, Associated Press, *LUXE Magazine*, MSN, and *The Chicago Tribune* have featured their insights, helping to introduce and educate home staging’s value. Margaret co-authored an industry book, *Home Staging: The Power that sells Real Estate*.

“Staging has evolved and grown in popularity, but there was a time when no one understood stag-

ing or its benefits,” says Margaret. “Since the beginning I learned that education was key. I regularly speak in REALTOR® offices and homeowner events spreading the word. Fifteen years later, it’s exciting to see how the bar has risen and the professionalism that has emerged.” Margaret and Kathy have been pioneers in the staging industry.

When they are not staging homes or flying across the country to attend industry events, Margaret and Kathy enjoy spending time with their sons when they are in town. Margaret’s youngest son, Jonathan, 20, is studying business and marketing at Illinois State University and wants to take on a bigger role at Chicagoland Home Staging after he graduates. Her other sons are busy in their own pursuits. David, 24, is a fire support specialist in the Army and Michael, 21, is studying game design in college.

Kathy and her husband Mike are getting closer to being empty nesters now that their three boys are pursuing their own interests. Kathy’s son Steven, 23, is a musician and also helps out in the business. Their oldest, Kevin, 25, is living in New York City pursuing comedy and writing. Their youngest, Bryan, 21, is finishing up his degree in international business.

As Margaret and Kathy look ahead, they foresee an even bigger presence in the luxury market and raising the bar for the staging industry. They are currently growing their team and consistently grow their sales every year. Both are especially looking forward to this next year. “My husband likes to say that Kathy and I are fearless,” says Margaret. “When you do what you love, you love what you do, and you can’t help but put all your energy, excellence, and passion into it every day!”



# BRIDGET SALELA

▶ REALTOR® feature  
Written by **Lauren Young**  
Photography by **Katherin Frankovic**

## CATALYZING HIGH PERFORMANCE WITH “THE VILLE”

Celebrities and busy executives have estate managers and assistants to manage their affairs, why not busy households in Naperville? That was the idea behind UrGo2Girl, a business launched by Bridget Salela in early 2013. Soon, she was juggling everything from dog grooming to landscaping and luxury car maintenance for her elite clients.

Eventually, she found herself buying and selling homes on their behalf, even acting as a general contractor on renovation projects. That’s when she fell in love with the process. “My clients began purchasing investment properties and fixing them up,” says Bridget. “That’s when the lightbulb went on. I knew I had to get into real estate.”

Without fully knowing what she was getting into, Bridget signed up for real estate license training and jumped in with both feet. Her experience buying and selling luxury real estate for others, she thought, would give her unique insight as an agent. But in a competitive market like Naperville, a new approach and trusted partner would be her keys to success. “To start this new career, I wanted to have a partner that I knew I could trust, was interested in doing real estate differently, and would hold me accountable to that,” she says.

Ironically, Bridget’s long-time family friend and neighbor of 17 years, Walt Burrell, had recently transitioned into real estate. He had gained valuable access to a variety of properties through his successful California Closets franchise, which he had sold. “When I told him I was going to get my real estate license, it was like, ‘Oh, boy. Are

we going to end up having this awkward competition thing going?’” she reflects. Over several weeks of discussions, they decided to join forces instead of competing. He eventually agreed and The Ville was born at Coldwell Banker Residential in Naperville, based on the pair’s shared experiences with luxury homes in their previous careers.

Two years later, Bridget’s and Walt’s hard work and distinct expertise has paid off. In 2019, The Ville had a total revenue of \$32 Million, beyond impressive for a small group so new to luxury real estate. The Ville received the 2019 Coldwell Banker International President’s Circle Award and was named the #1 Coldwell Banker Team in Naperville. They also became Guild Certified through the Institute of Luxury Home Marketing. The Ville started growing their team by adding a third broker associate, Nikki Genthner, a rookie to real estate, who closed \$4.5 Million her first year in 2019.

“It’s that team approach that Walt and I feel so proud of,” she says. “We want each member to be successful and get credit for their own achievements. Our brokers are not competing against each other but working together.”

Giving back to the local community has been a focus for Bridget since she moved to Naperville so naturally, a heart for service and has become ingrained in The Ville. Bridget’s firefighter husband of 23 years, Scott, was promoted to Bureau Chief of Training for Naperville Fire Department the same month The Ville was launched. Such drastic life changes for both could have meant disaster. “It was stressful to say the least, but Scott transitioning off his 24-hour shifts to more of a nine-to-five position made it easier for me to work nights and weekends,” she said. “It turned out to be a blessing in disguise for the success of The Ville.” With this attitude of thankfulness, you’re likely to find Bridget and The Ville at Naperville Professional Firefighters for a Cause charity fundraising events. There, the team works tirelessly to support her husband, now a Division Chief, and his heroic colleagues and their families.



The Salela Family, left to right: Troy, Scott, Gianna “Gigi”, Bridget and Luke



Bridget with husband Scott, a Division Chief in the Naperville Fire Department

Together, Bridget and Scott are raising three distinctively different children. Luke, 17, has an entrepreneurial streak. He founded Salela Detail at the age of 14 detailing luxury cars in Naperville and now has recurring clients from Iron Gate Motor Condos to Trump Tower. He may be their future REALTOR®. Troy, 15, is a charmer. An offensive lineman at Naperville North High School, Troy makes friends easily and has a very busy social schedule. Bridget fears she may never see him again once he gets his driver’s license. And then Gianna (“Gigi”), 11, is the princess of the house. She has a sweet and tender personality but has a competitive

The Ville, left to right: Tom Maschmeier, Nikki Genthner, Bridget, and team co-founder Walt Burrell



...  
side, dancing in hip hop contests every other weekend. Bridget and Gigi have birthdays in the same month, so that means “girl trips” in the future. As a family they love pool days in their backyard and traveling together. One of Bridget’s favorite things to do is just snuggle up with them on the couch after a long

day all together with their two dogs Bronx and Brooklyn.

The only pursuit Bridget might enjoy more than luxury real estate may be her fondness for luxury sports cars. Her passion for Porsches has become

a hobby she shares with her sons, who always join her on trips to rallies and exotic drives. “They are constantly signing me up for car meet-ups at extravagant places,” she laughs. “In the past few years, we’ve driven to helicopter hangars, gorgeous mansions,

Lower Wacker Drive, and, my favorite, the Iron Gate in Naperville.” She’s also put this pastime to work in her day job, using luxury cars to connect with potential clients. Bridget has become known for closing down the street in front of a luxury listing and inviting sports car enthusiasts to showcase their cars.

In 2020, The Ville aspires to continue their meteoric growth, while improving upon their unique approach. They have added a commercial broker, Tom Maschmeier to their team to fuel their expansion into commercial real estate. Reflecting on all they have accomplished in just two years, Bridget

is quick to direct appreciation and praise on her partner, Walt Burrell. “Every day I think about how glad I am that we joined forces,” she says. “I just knew we could do something really big together!”



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