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►► publisher's note

Written by **Mitch Felix**

KEEPING IT LIGHT



I felt like I had to make a change. But when I went for a run that day it hurt. My whole body hurt. My lungs couldn't give me what I needed. I gave up and walked the rest of the way. But I kept walking. And I've been walking ever since.

What else changed?

I got tired of hearing myself complain.

My wife and I have a weekly family meeting. It's a time for us to talk. Relate.

We created structure...financial, health, spiritual, family...run through the topics of our lives, and every week, when we speak about health, I had the same story.

"I don't feel good."

I spoke about how I wanted to do more to improve my health. And didn't do anything. But over time I got tired of knowing I could do better and stopped talking about it like I was a victim of my circumstances.

However, I was still stuck...I couldn't seem to get any momentum to move through that process from talking about it to getting into action.

Then...I realized that my One Thing needed to be done first thing. I needed to wake up and work out. So I did.

Being a dad...that started February 5. I don't have the words to describe the complexity of the awareness of legacy and mortality all wrapped up into one Lil Bundle of Potential.

I really like walking and I'm optimistic I can keep up with my daughter when she starts running.

My wife and I joke that the name of my gym would be "Suffer and Starvation."

A mixture of walking up to 10 miles a day while taking my calls and intermittent fasting has helped me lose 20 pounds. I'm pretty excited about it.

It all started when I got the scale out again. I had put it away because I didn't like its attitude. Every time I asked it a question, I didn't like the answer, and so I put it away.

Then one day, I took it out, and the number that came up was one that I hadn't expected.

That got me.

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The Winding Road to Success



▶▶ star on the rise

Photos by Anita Barcsa
Written by Zach Cohen

Nestor Icaza



“[The revolution] was life-changing for them. They came to San Francisco, and then I was born...Their rhetoric to me was, ‘We got you this far; you’ve gotta take the baton and keep running.’ I didn’t take it for granted,” Nestor explains.

HEADING NORTH

From an early age, Nestor always knew that he wanted to create a life of freedom and abundance. And since before he can remember, he understood he could get that from real estate. His initial dream was simply to own real estate.

“After college, I worked in education — after school programming. I wanted excitement. I wanted an adventure. And I also wanted to buy land. I got enamored with land and living on a ranch.”

So Nestor saved up some money and bought himself land in Northern California. He had a friend that was getting into land deals at the time and became curious about the possibility of selling real estate. So, at 23, Nestor took on the role of Project Manager for a small development company that he started with two friends.

“We would purchase land and we would kind of get entitlements on it — bulldoze, clear cut timber, put in a building pad, punch in a well, and resell that property in rural California. That’s how I got my start in real estate,” Nestor explains.

During his time investing in land, Nestor acquired a small vineyard in the wine-growing region of Spain known as the Ribeira Sacra. “It started off as a joking conversation, a dream, then my business

THE WINDING ROAD TO SUCCESS

“Who is at 23 thinking about buying a ranch?”

Nestor Icaza was this person; at only 23 years old, he left his life-long home in San Mateo County for Trinity County in Northern California with the dreams of owning land and building a business for himself.

“I was always younger than all my peers. Everyone was a year older than me growing up, but I was still more mature,” Nestor reflects. “What attracted me to that lifestyle was the freedom. The American dream.”

Nestor’s parents left their home in Nicaragua only a year before he was born. Caught in the midst of a political revolution, they headed for California with the hopes of creating a better life for their family.



...

partners and I were buying plane tickets and flying out to Spain with as much cash as they would let us take on the plane for the downpayment. It's a small vineyard, but we produce about 800 bottles a year and only sell it directly online," Nestor smiles.

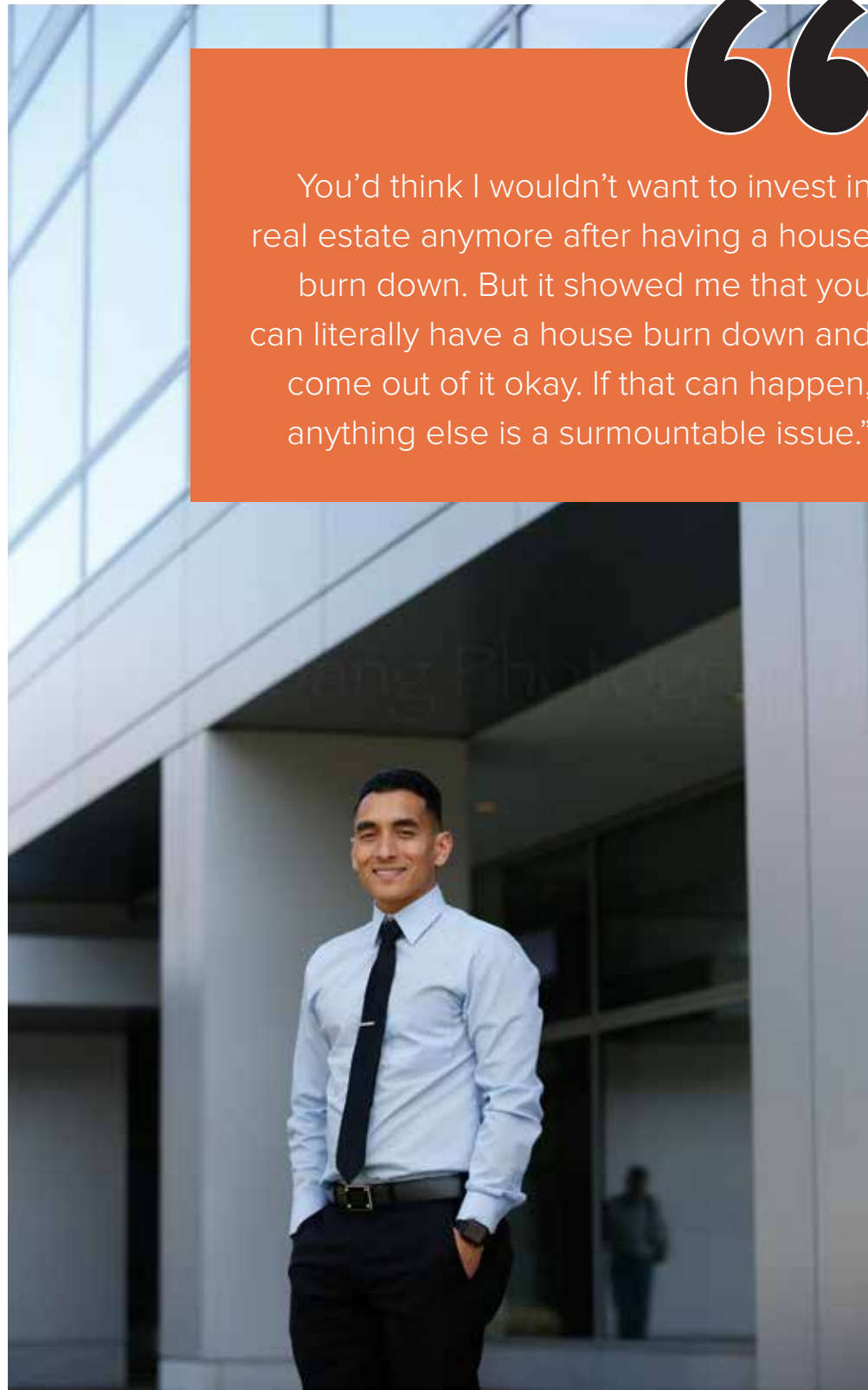
Despite his success, after four years of wholesaling land, Nestor needed a change.

"Our lives got way too intertwined. My partners and I were friends, business partners, roommates, and it was too much on the relationship."

COMING HOME

It was an obvious choice for Nestor to return home to San Mateo County. When he arrived back on the Peninsula, he was already licensed in real estate, but he had initial resistance to becoming a real estate agent.

"I thought, 'There are way too many agents. It's commission-based.' I didn't want to do it at first. But I was talking to a friend of mine, and I was like, 'What should I do?' He said, 'What do



“

You'd think I wouldn't want to invest in real estate anymore after having a house burn down. But it showed me that you can literally have a house burn down and come out of it okay. If that can happen, anything else is a surmountable issue.”

you mean, what should you do? Go sell real estate.' He was right," Nestor recalls with a telling smile. In the end, it was a natural transition.

Nestor has taken the skills he learned in his time in Trinity County and combined it with his natural ability to communicate, his calming disposition, and his newfound proficiency for sales to swiftly build a stable real estate business. In 2017, he was recognized as Rookie of the Year. In 2018, he was part of the Diamond Society (top 11% of agents internationally at Coldwell Banker). And in 2019, he became the Chair of the Young Professionals Network of the San Mateo County Association of REALTORS®.

AN OPTIMISTIC OUTLOOK

During his time in Northern California, one of the houses that Nestor was invested in burned down. It was a challenging time, but it taught him a lot about perseverance and maintaining a calm state of mind — two attributes that serve him well in real estate sales today.

"You'd think I wouldn't want to invest in real estate anymore after having a house burn down. But it showed me that you can literally have a house burn down and come out of it okay. If that can happen, anything else is a surmountable issue."

It's this optimistic nature that leaves Nestor with a bright future in real estate. As he continues to grow his business, he seeks to continue to tap into this sense of optimism, while simultaneously remaining humble.

"I feel like I have a lot of work to do," Nestor explains. "First of all, I feel like I'm late to the party. There were a lot of good years to this market that I missed. And there's a lot of really good young businessmen in this area. So I'm here, surrounding myself by top producers...I'm going to osmosis myself into success and supplement that with hard work and attitude."





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CATHY JACKSON



Stories of Resilience

"Time management is essential, and mindset and attitude are how you stay in the game."

For Cathy Jackson, 2008 was more than than a time of recession. It was a time of profound personal loss and readjustment.

"My little brother had just died, and he was my closest best friend," Cathy says. "I took care of him while he was dying and I stopped working for six months."

Despite the break, Cathy's business stayed afloat with the help of her business partner. As she mourned her loss, she developed new strategies for how to be in business and in the world.

"I used to be sorry for days about lost deals or problems or drama. I stopped allowing that into my life, and instead, I cut my sadness about anything to 45 minutes. Once I learned that, I cut it down to 30," Cathy explains. "I learned the saying, 'Water off a duck's back.' Move on and get the next one."

Cathy also developed a steady routine during this time. She would plan out the following day the night before and remained driven and organized.

"Memories of my brother and his successors drove me to work smarter and harder and have more kindness," Cathy says. "I would keep in touch with past clients. I also started reading books and did a lot of meditating. I just called it my quiet time at that point. I decided I wanted to be more like him. He was my best friend."

Over a decade later, Cathy continues to carry the lessons of resilience into her life.

"I have been selling real estate for 38 years...that's resilience. When times are tough, you have to spring forward."

▶ stories of resilience

Written by Zach Cohen
Photo by Hyunah Jang

▶ partner spotlight

Written by Zach Cohen
Photos by Aerial Canvas

At heart, we're a company that truly believes in innovation. We are brand builders. We are salespeople — we understand sales. We're consultants. We're here to provide the best solutions. We're here to ultimately elevate a real estate agent's approach to marketing themselves.

Brendan Hsu, Director of Operations Colby Johnson, Creative Director

FLYING HIGH WITH AERIAL CANVAS

Aerial Canvas began with a dream. In the mid-2010s, longtime friends Colby Johnson and Brendan Hsu were living in Illinois, where Brendan owned an IT services business called Fyxit, and Colby was working as a product manager for Horizon Hobby.

As Brendan practiced and honed in on his business-building skills, Colby became more and more interested in drones — a technology that was just breaking onto the scene. Little did the pair know that it would be these two skill sets that would bring them together again, on the other side of the country, to build the business that would become Aerial Canvas.

BEGINNINGS

“When I was growing up, my dad and I did a lot of radio control,” Colby reflects. “I was really obsessed with building RC models, flying them, and aviation in general. It is a passion of mine. At one point, I wanted to become a pilot to follow my passion in radio control.”

Colby sensed there was a business opportunity in flying drones. He came to Brendan to discuss the possibilities of growing his passion into a bona fide business model.

“I felt like I was just helping him out. Never did I think Aerial Canvas would be a business I am so involved in,”





Brendan admits. “I was running Fyxit and then Market U, but Colby knew I was the guy to talk to about starting his own business.”

Brendan and Colby came up with a business plan and a name: Aerial Canvas. Yet, the idea went dormant for a year or two. Colby was recruited to work in the Bay Area for another company, Ehang, and the pair parted ways.

“Things were going well, his company had a decent amount of funding, but then things went south,” Brendan explains. “The product they were looking to launch wasn’t successful. And the company closed its doors.” He was out of a job in the San Francisco Bay Area, and rent is high — really high. He was scrambling to see what he could do.

Colby’s friend and former roommate, Erin Vece, had an idea. Her father worked at Sotheby’s, and she suggested that Colby fly drones for their listings. Colby was intrigued and went into Sotheby’s. He ended up taking on his first client free of charge, and the real estate agents took a liking to his work.

“Pete Vece at Sotheby’s was my first ever client; he was essentially the first



real estate agent that I ever reached out to to see if he was interested in drone photos,” Colby recalls. “I credit the Vece family a lot in being able to set me up and helping me out with introducing me to a network of real estate agents. He was the first agent to believe in me.”

“Immediately after I sent him the drone photos and videos, he said it was really good. He showed his broker, and I got an interview to meet with the managing broker at Sotheby’s.”

“Sotheby’s was looking to bring Colby in for more marketing,” Brendan recalls. “So, Colby called me and said he needed my help. ‘How do I approach them?’ he asked.” Brendan mentioned this would be a great opportunity to start his own business and put a stake down for Aerial Canvas, rather than take a job.

“It went well,” Colby says. He landed a contract for 10 listings a month.

“He was the drone and video guy, then the go-to photographer for many agents. It was all self-taught,” Brendan says.



Within a year, Colby had built up his business and created the marketing solution that Aerial Canvas has become best known for: the Premier Package. This all-inclusive photography, videography, and marketing package contains everything a real estate agent needs to highlight a property for all its potential.

Colby worked on Aerial Canvas as the sole founder for a year. Yet, all along the way, he continued to lean into Brendan for guidance.





“Being the entrepreneur I am, I love helping people with their ideas,” Brendan says. “I had been consulting him along the way.”

In early 2018, Colby gave Brendan a call and asked how his second business venture, Market U, was going.

“It was going alright, but my business partner was a little all over the place. I didn’t think it was going to work out,” Brendan said.

Colby was getting pretty busy, and he eventually asked Brendan to join him at Aerial Canvas. “He’d seen me grow Fyxit and become the best computer and phone repair business in town. He knew I was legit,” Brendan says.

So in early 2018, Brendan picked up from Illinois to join Colby in the Bay Area, bringing his business and marketing expertise to Aerial Canvas. “And that’s how Aerial Canvas came to be,” Brendan smiles. “Colby — he’s the founder, and I’m the catalyst, the firepower to take the business to the next level.”

AERIAL CANVAS IS BORN

Two years later, Aerial Canvas has positioned itself as a premier marketing services provider for real estate

agents. They’ve grown to a team of 30 people, and because they have all of their staff trained in-house, they are able to provide a higher quality product and greater value compared to their competitors.

“We provide an end-to-end solution to help put your listings on the market, get you more exposure, and build your real estate brand,” Brendan explains.

“We provide an end-to-end solution to help put your listings on the market, get you more exposure, and build your real estate brand.”

Aerial Canvas offers photography, videography, drone footage, 3D Matterport, prints, copywriting, design services, commercial video productions, and lead generation campaigns through social media.

“We have a team of dedicated photographers, editors, filmmakers, project managers, and more to back your business as an agent,” Brendan says. “You can call or text us at any time and expect a prompt response.”

Brendan, Colby, and the Aerial Canvas team believe that everyone should have access to great content. The world is an experience, and they are available to provide that experience through highly engaging content.

“We want to serve the market better. We want to serve this world better,” Brendan explains. “We want you to be seen.”

“A lot of clients come back to us because of the personal touch in what we do,” Colby adds. “Our team is dedicated to helping real estate agents and clients out in the long run. Clients know that they’re going to get a project manager, a skilled photographer, a videographer, an editor, support staff, and the confidence that they can count on us to deliver the content they need the next day. That’s why people are coming back to us, time and time again.”

A CUT ABOVE

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DEBBIE WONG

cover story ◀◀

Written By: **Zach Cohen**
Photos By: **Teresa Nora Trobbe**

Following the Golden Threads



“For deeper reasons than any of us can know, of all the connections that run through the world, there are certain ones that touch us more strongly, that call us, that become the golden threads that generate...the attentive noticing of the soul...The connections that touch us in this way are special. They are the ones meant for us, for reasons only the Earth will ever know.”

“Golden threads touch all of us every day, but most often, only artists and children take the time to follow them.”

—Stephen Harrod Buhner

“I started in real estate 30 years ago; this was like the Dark Ages,” Debbie Wong begins with one of her characteristic laughs. “Pre-internet, pre-cell phones. Rich people had cell phones, these giant things. It was hilarious. That’s when I started in real estate.”

A San Francisco native, Debbie comes from humble beginnings. She was the first person in her family to have gotten a college degree, and her parents have never owned a home.

Three decades ago, as Debbie transitioned into adulthood and the working world, she had aspirations of becoming a lawyer.

“I’m a self-made woman,” Debbie explains. “I sent myself to college. To me, it was a big thing. I worked full-time and went to school full-time. And I had two small children...Yeah, I work hard.”

Law called to Debbie because of the opportunity to affect many of the inequalities that she witnessed in the world. She wanted to help others, to stand up for those that needed help or those that were burdened by the functions of social and political systems.

“I really wanted to be an attorney, but I didn’t have the extra money for law school,” Debbie recalls. “My kids were little at the time, I didn’t think it was right to take out student loans.”

Debbie researched how she could make enough money to pay for law school. She had some friends who were doing well in real estate, and she thought, “I can do that.”

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Finding Her Way in Real Estate

“And that’s how I got started,” Debbie smiles. “I had a minivan; I called it my mom-mobile. It was always clean and shiny. I had snacks, drinks, in a cooler in the back, typical mom stuff. So when I worked with buyers, we didn’t have to stop for lunch.”

“Back in the day, it took a long time to sell homes,” Debbie continues. “One hundred and eighty days, on average. We didn’t have the internet, but I knew if I understood the market and understood financing, I could get people into homes in 30 days or less. I became a buyers specialist right off the bat.”

Debbie found tremendous early success. She also found that she loved real estate.

“So I ended up not going to law school because I realized that I love the real estate business. Where else can I combine my love of law and the ability to help people, impacting their lives in such a deep and meaningful way? Helping them give them the keys to their first home? Home is where it all starts. The nucleus of families. That’s where the heart is. This is my dream job.”

Home is where it all starts. The nucleus of families. That’s where the heart is. This is my dream job.

Thirty years later, Debbie continues to love the work that she stumbled into all those years ago. She’s stayed true to her initial intentions to be in this business in service of others, and it’s remarkable to see how far it’s taken her.



Staying True to Her Values

“More than anything, I’ve been able to achieve a reputation of being great to work with, and fair. People hear my name, and know they will have a good experience,” Debbie says. “At the end of the day, your reputation is what you have. It’s not something money can buy.”

Debbie has a strong belief that, even in this world of speed and technology, doing the right thing is still meaningful.

“In my opinion, success is not only about doing 100 transactions a year. For some people, it might only be about the money. Surely, you need an understanding of numbers to do well. Success for me means, what did I accomplish? Did I experience enrichment from it? Was I able to manage people’s expectations and emotions to get them what they need in the end? Transforming lives through the power of homeownership. That’s what really touches my heart.”

“To me, that’s truly the definition of success.”

On Gratitude and Giving Back

One of the ways that Debbie continues to achieve success is through her commitment to helping those in need. It’s the reason she got into real estate, to begin with.

“I wholly believe in giving back,” Debbie says. “We live in such an amazing time of technology and an area of great wealth. Giving back not only improves the lives of others, but you improve yourself when you give of your time, talent, even in some small way. It makes the business and the wins more satisfying.”

Debbie not only gives to local charitable organizations; she also mentors agents in the business. Her time with her family and what she can give to them is also at the top of her list of priorities.

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"I have this amazing small human named Maxwell—my grandson," Debbie beams. "He's such a delight. It's true what people say, as a grandparent, it gives a different perspective on everything I do."

"He's living life at its very most simplistic form, in a total state of wonderment. Sometimes as adults, we lose sight of how wonderful our lives really are."

Debbie's daughter (and Maxwell's mom), Marla, has been working with Debbie in real estate for the past 16 years. For Debbie, it's a joy to work with her daughter.

"We are just having the time of our lives. It's so much fun. Marla is so knowledgeable and talented, and she is an amazing person. She really gets it."

Debbie practices gratitude as a way to continue to tap into the wonderment of life. "I wake up in the morning... and I realize, 'Wow, this is a new day. Who can we help today? What can we do positive today?' Everything you do and say has an impact somewhere," Debbie says.

"Living life from a state of gratitude allows more things to happen. That's wonderment for me."

Real estate can be a stressful business. Realizing and understanding people's feelings, stresses, and understanding where one can help alleviate some of that stress, that's the crux of what real estate agents do. The people who are successful in this business understand that.

Debbie launched her real estate career by simply and profoundly following the path that was laid out in front of her—the golden threads. As she heads into the future, she aspires to continue to follow what rings true.

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We are just having the time of our lives. It's so much fun. Marla is so knowledgeable and talented, and she is an amazing person. She really gets it.



"I believe that if you are meant for something, good things will happen. It's been an amazing 30-year ride of good things happening."

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