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Following the strategies of Realtors Rupert and Karen Irby as they try to make their mark in the upscale market in Naples. BY JUSTIN PAPROCKI

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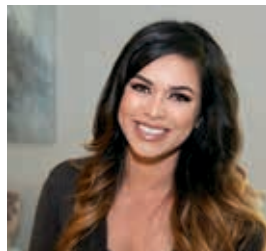
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# HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY!

## ►► publisher's note

Dear Naples Real Producers,

Hard to believe it's May, and almost half of 2022 has already gone by! This month, we celebrate mothers... our own, and the amazing mothers in real estate we have in our *Real Producers* community. We are featuring several inspiring boss moms this month. Check them out in this issue!

My own mother has been a tremendous positive influence in my life. As a driven achiever herself, and someone who doesn't take no for an answer, she's definitely helped shape my own work ethic. From her, I learned the value of perseverance, among many other things.

When I was younger, my mom pushed me, and instilled both the value of hard work and the importance of giving back. To make extra money while I was growing up, I started a lawn care business with a friend. We called it TLC, for "Teen Lawn Care." My mom fully supported my early entrepreneurial venture and made flyers for us to give to the neighbors... The coolest thing, though, was that she made it mandatory that 10 percent of all of our earnings would go to a local food bank. It was important to her that I learned to lift others up, and when blessings came my way, I was to share with those less fortunate. These are values that are with me today and that guide me in life and business. I'm so grateful to my mom for



My mom, Kim, has been my biggest supporter.

teaching me invaluable lessons and for being a shining example of how best to live my life — with hard work and a sharing heart of gratitude.

In honor of Mother's Day, we asked our community to share some of the most meaningful things they've learned from their own mothers with us. Check out "We Ask, You Tell" on page 24 for answers from Real Producers you may already know (or may meet soon at one of our quarterly events) for inspirational messages about what they learned from their own moms.

Our next big event will be coming up in the near future. As always, be on the lookout for your exclusive invitation, and I look forward to seeing you all soon!

Very respectfully yours,



**ANDREW REGENHARD**

Owner/Publisher  
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# What is the biggest lesson(s) you learned from your mother?



**PATRICK DEARBORN**  
JOHN R. WOOD PROPERTIES  
Biggest lesson learned from my mother, who adopted me as a baby and is a 3-time cancer survivor (lost both breast and her eye), is to never give up. Never surrender. I carry that with me every day.



**YASMIN SAAD**  
COMPASS  
My mother taught me to be an independent thinker, to ask questions, and always look for the good in others and all things. She told us to always know three things while growing up: remember who you are, where you came from, and where you are going.



**JOE EPIFANIO**  
ROYAL SHELL REAL ESTATE  
Always wear clean underwear in case you're in an accident. And the second one: never forget your mother's birthday.



**SUSAN OWENS**  
AMERIVEST REALTY  
My mom always said, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." It has served me well throughout my career. Whether working with other real estate professionals, clients, attorneys, or vendors, if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all. You'll always be taking the high, ethical road.



**RENEE HAHN**  
WILLIAM RAVEIS REAL ESTATE  
My mother has always been an inspiration to me, and through her own life and her encouragement in mine, she has truly taught me that anything is possible if you work at it. She also taught me that even cheap wine can taste good with the right aerating tools.



**KARYN SAMUEL**  
JOHN R. WOOD PROPERTIES  
The biggest lesson I learned from my mother was the importance of family above everything else. I grew up Jewish, and every year, my mother would host many Jewish holidays at our house. My extended family would drive over an hour to have dinner with us multiple times a year. Every Christmas Day, a day when most Jewish families have nothing special on the calendar, she'd host our Jewish relatives at our house. There was always lots of laughter and plenty of food, and these memories helped shape my childhood. To this day, I have a special bond with my long-distance cousins. I try to carry this tradition on today.



**APRIL HOOVER**  
JOHN R. WOOD PROPERTIES  
My mom passed away at age 54 in 1995, so this is in honor of her memory... My wonderful mom was a single mom who set a good example for me. She was a true entrepreneur with a can-do attitude. My mom taught me: "Take chances, work hard, be persistent, treat others how you want to be treated, and you can achieve anything you set your mind on — if you believe you can. Never give up."



**LORI FOWLER**  
COLDWELL BANKER REALTY  
I lost my mom to Alzheimer's in 2019, and she is a big part of what makes me who I am. I love honoring her influence on our family. The biggest lesson my mom taught me was that I could be anything I wanted to be despite my age, with or without a man by my side, and regardless of my economic background. I am grateful to have such a supportive and amazing husband who has always appreciated the independent and driven woman that I am, and we have raised our girls the same way.



**KATIE WERCHEK**  
LUXRE, LLC  
"Stop being in such a RUSH!!" My mom got into an accident that should have been fatal because she was in a RUSH! While she was being taken away, she was yelling to me goodbye and that she loved me because she thought it was over and not to be in a rush.



**APRIL KEATING**  
MVP REALTY  
"You can do anything if you put your mind to it!" Thanks, Mom!



**NEIL CRESSWELL**  
SELLSTATE REALTY SYSTEMS NETWORK  
My mother instilled in me that I could do anything I wanted, and I was the best. Since I was a small boy, my mother would always tell me I was very special and very smart and was going to be super successful and very rich. When she introduced me, even as a small boy, to her friends, she would say, "This is my son, Neil. He is so special that he is going to be very successful." I remember how special I felt at those times. We never had much money, but I grew up believing in myself. That was the best gift and lesson any parent could give a child. I have done the same in the raising of my children and have two very successful, confident young adults now who I am very proud of.



**LAUREN MAXWELL**  
MAXWELL MORTGAGE TEAM  
Perseverance. No matter what obstacle you face, you can overcome this by perseverance. My mother had many obstacles in life and overcame all with no complaints and a positive attitude. She is 75 years old and still lives her life to its fullest. Never a bad day and a smile always. I have been lucky in my life that I have another role model, as well, that I consider my mother. So in actuality, I'm a very lucky lady.



**WILL JOYCE JR.**  
CALLAHAN BROTHERS MOVING & STORAGE  
The importance of patience.



**VINCENT SAPUTO**  
NAPLES PREMIER HOME WATCH  
I like to think my mother instilled good manners upon me and, ultimately, to treat people how I wished to be treated as a golden rule.





**BRITTANY SKOTAK**  
DOWNING-FRYE REALTY, INC.

Resilience. I learned at a very young age that life isn't fair — we're all dealt different cards. Handling these obstacles and setbacks with grace and focusing on moving forward is key. My mom always kept going, no matter what. That is the most valuable lesson — and she taught me by example.



**DOVILE "D" COLLINS**  
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I was honored to be raised by my mother — the kindest and the most giving human I know. She always told my sister and I to never worry about anything that is not going to matter in 10 years. Living every moment to the fullest is pure happiness.



**DANIELLE DAMIANOV**  
CMG FINANCIAL

The biggest lesson I learned from my mom is to treat others how you would want to be treated. Don't judge, and always be kind to everyone. You never know what someone might be going through.



**TOM STARR**  
JOHN R. WOOD PROPERTIES

Mother passed away many years ago, however she is still with me always. Mom was a very kind person. She taught me the importance of kindness and to always be considerate of others. Mother developed my conscience by instructing me in my decisions. She always said to me, "As you are considering an action or decision, just ask yourself, "What would your mother think?" I believe this is a wonderful test as we go about our daily life.



**JACOB ANDERSON**  
COHARBOR ELECTRIC

When I was a child, we moved around a lot. I lived in many different states. Forming new friendships was hard, and having a strong family unit was so important. My mother taught me that friendships sometimes come and go, but family is forever. She taught me that your family members are, and should be, your best friends in life. Invest in them, love them, lift them up, and cherish them ... because there is no more fulfilling relationship than family.

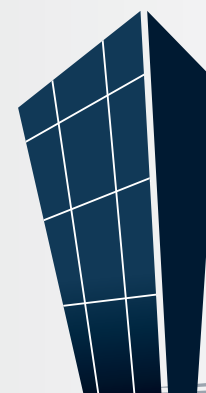
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## Why REALTORS® Shouldn't Overlook It



With housing inventory at historic lows and the situation not likely to let up significantly in the foreseeable future, the rental market is an important niche that Realtors would be wise to consider incorporating in their business, if they haven't already.

As a direct consequence of the low housing inventory, the rental market has skyrocketed in the last couple of years — with demand at an all-time high and rents climbing exponentially. This is especially true in Florida, where retirees and families from the Northeast and the West Coast continue to pour into the state, drawn by its lack of state income tax, thriving job market, and beautiful year-round weather, and a steady stream of snowbirds looking for winter properties to rent for weeks or months has put pressure on the market for available housing of all sorts. In this environment, even people looking to buy may have to rent for a time before they're able to find a suitable property to purchase and survive the multiple-offer situations they find themselves in.

In today's strong renters' market, spending a portion of their time on rentals will bring Realtors additional steady, quick income, along with residual benefits to their core business. Since renters tend to move around fairly often and/or are prospective homebuyers waiting for the right

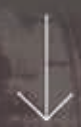
opportunity, if a Realtor has taken good care of them, they are likely to become repeat clients, whether they need another rental in the future or end up buying. They can also be an excellent source of referrals to others who are looking to either rent or buy.

With the rental market's lower commissions (most often a listing agent receives 100 percent of a full month's rent or 10 percent of the lease term), it's truly a numbers game. However, the numbers are there — and closing multiple rental deals a week is easily possible. According to The Real Deal, some areas in Florida have seen rent increases of up to 24 percent in just a few weeks already this year.

To say that the rental market can be an extremely lucrative niche, especially in this environment, would not be an understatement. The hot rental market is something few Realtors should overlook, whether they're new to the business or are long-established. Much like diversification of one's investment portfolio, diversification of income streams has substantial benefits. The income from handling rentals can keep their business growing even during home sales slowdowns, keep them competitive with an organically growing leads base, and be a source of easy additional income.



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In each episode of *The RP Experience* podcast, we are excited to feature a top REALTOR® paired with a valued industry partner for engaging, informative, and entertaining segments on topics of interest to Real Producers in our community.

Listen in the morning while you get ready for your day, in the car while driving to and from appointments, or after work while unwinding from your busy day.

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To learn more, or to inquire about being a guest on *The RP Experience*, email [andrew.regenhard@realproducersmag.com](mailto:andrew.regenhard@realproducersmag.com).

## RECAP OF EPISODES 9-16

### EPISODE 9

#### MARC DEVISSE AND EVAN CORREALE

**MARC DEVISSE**  
*Real Producers* preferred partner Marc Devisse, owner of Tri-Town Construction, went to FGSU, graduated with a marketing degree, and always knew he wanted to be in business from the beginning. Marc moved to Naples 30 years ago and started his business in 2006.

**EVAN CORREALE**  
Evan Correale, a Realtor with Domain Realty, grew up in Southeast Florida and moved to Naples to attend FGSU. He later decided he wanted to get his license and focus on a career in real estate. Evan is married with one daughter.



From left to right: Evan Correale, Marc Devisse, Andrew Regenhard.



From left to right: John Huffman, Greg Sofranko, Andrew Regenhard.

### EPISODE 10

#### JOHN HUFFMAN AND GREG SOFRANKO

**JOHN HUFFMAN**  
*Real Producers* preferred partner John Huffman, owner of Innovative Design Solutions, was born and raised in Naples and has made many connections over the years that have helped build his business. In this episode, John talks about getting sober and how he stopped using in 2009. He is now a part of Teen Challenge and focuses on his passion for his renovation business.

**GREG SOFRANKO**  
Greg Sofranko, a Realtor with Premier Sotheby's International Realty, is originally from Chicago and came down to Naples in 2000. Greg eventually moved back to Chicago to work for Oakbrook and then returned to Naples to focus on real estate. Greg met John through *SWFL Real Producers* and they have formed a great working relationship over the past few years. Both men have been sober for over 10 years and talk about their sobriety and getting clean in this episode.





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## EPISODE 11

### CHRISTIN TAYLOR AND DENNY BOWERS

#### CHRISTIN TAYLOR

*Real Producers* preferred partner Christin Taylor with CrossCountry Mortgage, is originally from Illinois and attended the University of Illinois, where she got her bachelor's degree. After she graduated, she moved to downtown Chicago, where she started a residential lending business. Christin eventually decided to move to Naples full-time and started her mortgage lending business, where she now works alongside her husband, Kirk.



Christin Taylor and Denny Bowers.



Andrew Regenhard.

#### DENNY BOWERS

A Realtor and principal of The Bowers Group at Compass, Denny Bowers is originally from Pittsburgh. He went to school at Slippery Rock University and studied exercise and physiology. During his time as an undergrad, he interned in Naples and later discovered that he wanted to make a transition into real estate in Naples.



## EPISODE 12

### DANIELLE DAMIANOV AND NEIL CRESSWELL

#### DANIELLE DAMIANOV

*Real Producers* preferred partner Danielle Damianov, a loan officer with CMG Financial, was born and raised in a small town in Massachusetts. Danielle eventually decided to make her move to Florida, first to Tampa and later to Naples. She is a proud mother of two.

#### NEIL CRESSWELL

Neil Cresswell, owner/broker of Sellstate Realty, was born and raised in Northern Ontario. During his time in Ontario, Neil had several businesses. Eventually, he decided to sell his businesses and move to Naples to focus on his real estate career.



From left to right: Neil Cresswell, Danielle Damianov, Andrew Regenhard.

## EPISODE 13

### MATTHEW GOODWIN AND KATIE WERCHEK

#### MATTHEW GOODWIN

*Real Producers* preferred partner, attorney Matthew Goodwin, is the owner of Goodwin Law, P.A. He was born and raised in South Florida and is married with two sons. Matt also has a passion for music, and in this podcast episode he discusses his business and his musical background.

#### KATIE WERCHEK

Katie Werchek, owner/broker with LuxRe, LLC, is originally from the suburbs of Chicago. She attended school in Madison, Wisconsin, and originally thought she would become a lawyer. It wasn't until Katie took a real estate law class that she discovered her interest in and love for real estate. Katie moved down to Naples in 2005 and focused on a career in real estate.



Katie Werchek and Matthew Goodwin.



Andrew Regenhard.



## EPISODE 14

### JOSH WHITE AND BILL EARLS

#### JOSH WHITE

*Real Producers* preferred partner Josh White, with Sentry Insurance Advisors, was born and raised in Mansfield, Ohio. Josh moved to Naples in 2004 and started his career in insurance, specializing in personal risk management. He is a father to two boys and has a passion for cars and golf.

#### BILL EARLS

Bill Earls, has been the top sales producer at John R. Wood Properties for the past 28 years. Bill moved to Naples from Maryland in 1983 to focus on his real estate career and, like Josh, Bill talks about his passion for golf. He also enjoys flying planes during his free time.



From left to right: Josh White, Bill Earls, Andrew Regenhard.

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## EPISODE 15

ERIC SOLOMON AND JOE PAVICH JR.

### ERIC SOLOMON

*Real Producers* preferred partner Eric Solomon is a practicing attorney and owner of Legacy Title — a full-service title company established in 2008. Eric is originally from New York and came down to Naples in 2002. He talks about taking a proactive approach in dealing with clients in this industry. Eric is a proud father to two sons.

### JOE PAVICH JR.

Joe Pavich Jr., of J. Pavich Real Estate, has ranked number 1 in the world for his brokerage, Realty World, the last nine years in a row. He was born and raised in Claymont City, Illinois, and is the proud father of three children.



From left to right: Andrew Regenhart, Eric Solomon, Joe Pavich Jr.



## EPISODE 16

VINNY SAPUTO AND JEFF FELDMAN

### VINNY SAPUTO

*Real Producers* preferred partner Vinny Saputo, owner of Naples Premier Home Watch, is married with two daughters. In this episode, Vinny talks about the importance of having great communication skills, being reputable, and being honest with his clients. Vinny has been in Naples for over three years, and before he started his home watch business, he worked in law enforcement.

### JEFF FELDMAN

Jeff Feldman, a Realtor with Premiere Plus Realty, has been in Florida for over 34 years and living in Naples for over 20. He got his start as a mortgage broker but realized he wanted to get into real estate and got his license in 2003. In this podcast, Jeff talks about his passion for comedy and how he was able to differentiate himself from other agents.



From left to right: Jeff Feldman, Vinny Saputo, Andrew Regenhart.



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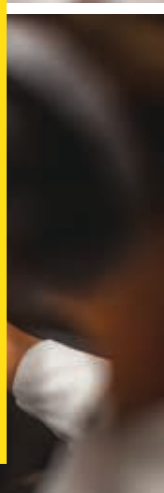
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PRESENTS

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## WORDS OF WISDOM FROM THIS MONTH'S FEATURES

### CHRISTEL JOHNSON

Paradise Coast Property Team

"I think that the reward, the ultimate reward, is how we live our life... What if we just say, what's the right thing to do for this person? So they are really difficult. They must have a hard life. So how can we serve them? How can we make the goal that they feel like someone cares about them? If you do real estate correctly, it's about being a humble servant."



### ERICA EISTER

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"I strive to be the best mom I can be, somebody my kids can look up to and be proud of. I want them to see that women can work and be a good mother with no excuses and do as much as any man. I want them to know they can do anything they want to do. Whatever your dreams are, you can accomplish them."



*A Word from Our Sponsors:*

### BRITTANY SKOTAK

The Skotak-Brown Group  
Downing-Frye Realty

"I always wanted to jump into real estate, but as a stay-at-home mom, it wasn't possible. With two kids to plan a future for, I finally had my 'why.' I knew it was time to start on the career path I always had a passion for."



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"Once I started photographing the cats and incorporating them into my business, I decided to give 10 percent of every purchase of a Balanced Image of one of the big cats back to that individual cat as another way to give back."



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# BRITTANY SKOTAK



►► featured agent

By Zachary Cohen  
Photo by Michelle Reed



## STAYING HUMBLE

Photo by Michelle Reed

In high school, Brittany Skotak and her classmates each created a time capsule; the assignment encouraged them to envision their future in 10 years. Brittany chose to write about the life she imagined for herself — a family and a career in real estate.

“And that came to be. I don’t truly know why,” Brittany admits, “but I was always drawn to it.”

### BEGINNINGS

By 2011, Brittany and her husband, Nick, had just welcomed their second child to the world. Brittany had been a stay-at-home mom since the birth of her first child, but she desired a new professional adventure. When her husband’s schedule shifted, she took the opportunity to make a change.

“I always wanted to jump into real estate, but as a stay-at-home mom, it wasn’t possible. With two kids to plan a future for, I finally had my ‘why.’ I knew it was time to start on the career path I always had a passion for.”

In 2011, Brittany was licensed in her home state of Michigan. She joined a team and worked primarily on the back end.

“It was a lot of work with little pay, but I got paid in experience,” Brittany says.

### A FRESH START

In 2014, Nick was offered a job opportunity in Fort Myers. So Brittany and her family picked up their lives and headed south. Both Brittany and Nick were born and raised in Michigan. They had no friends or family in Florida. They were beginning again with a clean slate.

...





Brittany Skotak with Puff, her 13-year-old Peek-A-Pom. (Photo by Michelle Reed)

- That made starting a real estate business challenging. Brittany took year 1 to study the market, familiarizing herself with different cities, communities, market conditions, prices, and client expectations — all while homeschooling her two sons.

#### FINDING HER NICHE

In late 2015, she joined Downing-Frye Realty. She had all intentions of working as a solo agent, but her opinion shifted after meeting Rick and Brenda Brown.

“It was just the two of them, and our broker knew they were looking for someone to help them. It was just a fit. It was a great opportunity for me to learn from two highly successful people,” Brittany explains. “I learned how they ran their business, their market. I got to interface with their clients, and they introduced me to a network of people here. They took me under their wings. I didn’t know anybody here. Because of their mentorship, I was able to grow exponentially, probably faster than most.”

Under Rick and Brenda’s mentorship, Brittany flourished. By 2018, she became a team leader.

“Today, I’m the team lead of The Skotak-Brown Group. There are six of us, and year over year, we’ve continued to grow. We’ve worked hard to earn the number 1 team ranking within our Downing-Frye brokerage, year over year, since 2015,” Brittany beams. “Where I’ve come in this short period of time is a big deal. Starting over in a new state with no connections to where I am today... If I can achieve what I achieved in the last seven years in the next seven, I’ll be happy.”

#### CENTERED ON FAMILY

Amid so much change in her career, Brittany welcomed her third child in January 2019. Suffice to say, outside work, Brittany is devoted to family life. Cruze, Nixon, and Stella are now 14, 11, and 3.

“Outside of real estate, any free time that I do have is spent with the kids. My husband works from home, so he is able to juggle with me, the school runs, and playdates. And that’s what we do,” she smiles. “When we do get a chance



“Where I’ve come in this short period of time is a big deal. Starting over in a new state with no connections to where I am today... If I can achieve what I achieved in the last seven years in the next seven, I’ll be happy.”



...

to take a break for three or four days, we try to get over to the east coast, go to Miami. I like to shop. Good food. It's a quick little getaway."

As we closed our interview with Brittany, we asked one final question: "What's one thing we absolutely shouldn't miss about you?"

"The one thing that I don't know people know about me and I hope they do — I truly am a humble person, down to earth. I don't have an ego. I work really hard, and I just try to be as friendly as I can be. But no matter what success I achieve or where I am at in my life, I know that I'm the same person. A humble, regular person from Michigan. And I hope that I always remain that way."



“  
The one thing that I don't know people  
know about me and I hope they do —  
I truly am a humble person, down to earth.  
”



The Skotak family (from left to right:  
Cruze, Nick, Stella, Brittany, Nixon).  
(Photo by Kathleen D Photography)

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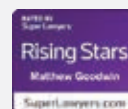
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**The key to success in an endeavor always comes down to communication. A breakdown in communication could take a couples relationship or an entire organization down. On the flipside, mastering your communication can take relationships and organizations to the next level. Here are five ways to master your communication.**

**NUMBER 1 — especially in business, is we need to understand behaviors.** We need to use behavioral assessments. The one I use is the DISC. Understand that there are four behavioral types. Each type is different and wants to be communicated with in their style, not ours.

Let's begin with the "D". "Ds" are very direct people. They're task-oriented. They don't want to fluff around with stories. They want to get to the point. So when we're talking to a "D", we need to be brief and get to the point in our communication.

"I"s are influencing. They're more friendly as they're people persons. They want to establish rapport. We really need to be complementary to a high "I" and be friendly in addition to sharing our views while respecting theirs.

"S"s are reserved. They're steady. They like structure. They don't like confrontation. We immediately need

to slow down our speed and tonality when we talk to a high "S". And "C"s are extremely analytical. Think of a CPA as they're all about numbers, statistics, data, structure, perfection. You need to be prepared for a "C" to be analytical in asking questions in the conversation. You need to be prepared to be on your A game to answer those questions.

Once you get familiar with how to adjust your behavior, your speaking, and your communication with those four different styles, you'll be much better off in creating win-win engagement for everybody.

**NUMBER 2 — you need to understand the VAK (visual, auditory, kinesthetic).** Visual is what you see. Auditory is

what you hear. Kinesthetic is what you feel. There's one important factor we need to understand regarding the auditory component. Only 20 percent of people are auditory, which means, if you're conducting a meeting with 10 people on a Monday, and you tell all 10 of them what you need by Friday, but you don't ask them to repeat it back ("Okay, what exactly are we going to have on Friday when we sit down again?") or write it down ... how many are going to have that item completed on Friday? The answer is only two of the 10 since only 20 percent are auditory and are truly listening.

By not knowing this statistic, how much frustration and misunderstanding does that create in an organization? You, as a leader, ask people for something and they don't deliver. You're thinking, do they not have ownership? Do they not take accountability? Are they not listening? Do they even care? Understanding that eight out of 10 people are not auditory and they're not actually listening forces you to change your approach.

What's a better way? You could ask them to repeat it back: "What action steps are we going to take? Please repeat back exactly what we're going to have done by Friday. Perfect. Thank you. Have a great week."

**NUMBER 3 — be present.** Yes, be present. Very simple. How many conversations have you had where you were thinking about what you had to do next? We've all done it. If you're a leader of an organization and you're giving instructions to someone on your team and, however, you're in a rush and thinking about something else — what you have to do next and where you just came from — they're not going to get the proper information because you

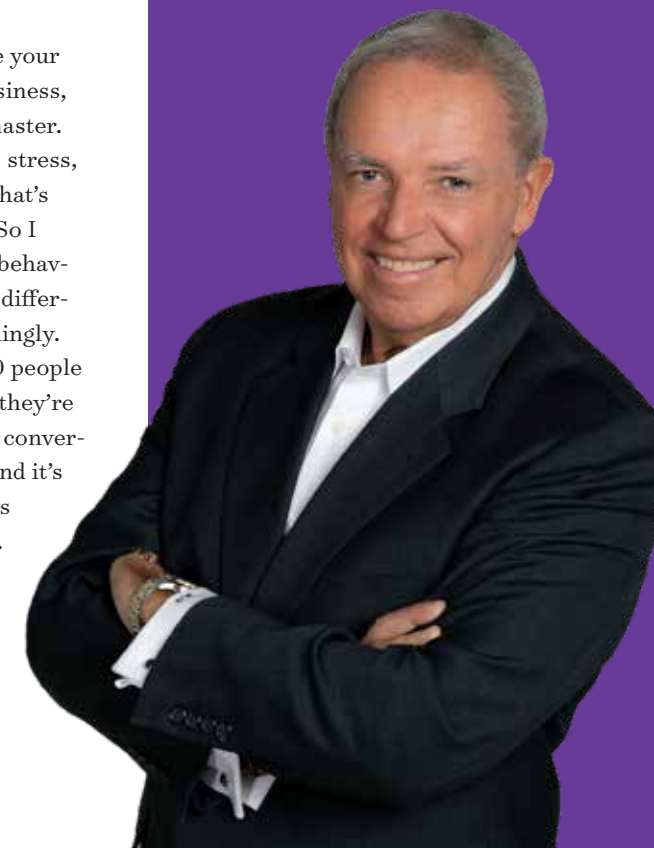
actually weren't present in the conversation. We spend so much time going back again and again and again, telling people the same things because we just weren't present in the conversation the first time. This kills productivity in the workplace.

**NUMBER 4 — remember that it's just a conversation.** So many people get wrapped up in speaking to different people about certain things. They actually already have a story in their head of how they might react or what's going to happen. Unfortunately, we create sabotage before we even start the conversation. As I said, it's just a conversation. It's two people sitting down, having a conversation. How do we take number 4 to the next level? Implement number 5.

**NUMBER 5 — ask permission.** "Is it okay if I speak freely? Is it okay if I ask you a question?" Always ask for permission when you're in a conversation, and by asking permission and getting them to say, "Yes," it takes their guard down. It opens up the conversation. They're now open to receiving what you have to say.

These are five ways to improve your communication because, in business, this is something we need to master. If we don't, it's going to cost us stress, time, energy, and money, and that's something we all can't afford. So I encourage you to master your behavioral assessments, understand different behaviors, and shift accordingly. Understand that eight out of 10 people really aren't listening because they're not auditory. Be present in the conversation you're having. Understand it's just a conversation. And always ask permission to speak freely.

Coach Michael Dill is an award-winning Certified Business Coach, global speaker, and published author. He is a proud Action Coach Franchise partner as well as the president of Power & Ice Wealth Creation, a strategic leadership company that works with business owners, leaders, teams, and entrepreneurs to develop a systematized and structured organization while accelerating their mindset, efficiencies, and effectiveness to grow, both personally and professionally, to achieve extraordinary results. He brings more than 40 years of business and entrepreneurial experience in his leadership, team training, and mentoring practice. [BusinessCoachMichaelDill.com](http://BusinessCoachMichaelDill.com)







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# lauren MAXWELL

The Maxwell Team at CrossCountry Mortgage

►► partner spotlight

By Zachary Cohen  
Photos by Michelle Reed



Lauren Maxwell with (from left to right) daughter Montana, grandbaby Phoenix, son Hunter, and daughter Alexis.



## Take Nothing for Granted

As successful as Lauren Maxwell is today, she also knows what it is like to struggle. She understands what it takes to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

One fateful morning in 2007, Lauren Maxwell arrived at her office to a shocking message: in the wake of the economic collapse, the mortgage company she worked for was being closed down.

“It took me 20 minutes to realize, ‘Oh my god, the company is really shut down. The whole world crumbled in front of my face,’” Lauren remembers.

By this time, Lauren had already been in the mortgage business for 20 years. Year after year, her success grew.

“But in 2007, that came to an end literally overnight. Everything I built, I lost.”

...





“  
You just keep on going... It was never even a thought  
I would give up. It came apart, but I wasn't going to quit.  
I had to support my kids. There was never an option.”

Lauren Maxwell and her husband, Daniel Kowal.

Lauren lost 90 percent of her income. The stock market crashed. She couldn't afford to pay the monthly payments on the seven investment properties she owned, and with the market in freefall, she couldn't rent them, either. Lauren was a single mom at the time, and with two young kids at home, she was faced with a stark new reality.

In a time of such great challenge, Lauren showed her true colors. She picked up the pieces and rebuilt everything she had spent the prior two decades developing — and with even more success. She displayed impressive perseverance and dedication.

“I had to start from scratch. But little by little, it gradually happened, and today, I do five times the amount I ever did back then,” Lauren says. “You just keep on going... It was never even a thought I would give up. It came apart, but I wasn't going to quit. I had to support my kids. There was never an option.”

Fifteen years later, Lauren is once again an industry leader. She is the Executive Vice President at CrossCountry Mortgage and leads the Maxwell Mortgage Team. The same level of perseverance and dedication that she displayed in 2007 shines through in her work today.

We sat down with Lauren to hear more of the wisdom she's gained in her 35 years in the mortgage business.



...  
**Q & A** WITH  
**LAUREN MAXWELL**

**Naples Real Producers:** You've been in Florida for a long time, but you grew up in Massachusetts, right? Tell us about that.

**Lauren:** I grew up in Framingham, Massachusetts, and moved to Florida in October of 1988. In a quest for blue skies and year-round sunshine, I chose Naples. It felt like home to me right away. For me, it's all about the weather. I love waking up to a beautiful sunrise. Then, there are the people. Naples is an amazing place to raise a family. My husband Daniel and I have a blended family of six children. They range from 12 to 29. We have recently been blessed with a new grandson as well. We are both lucky to have each of our parents, who also live in Naples. Two of our sons and my father actually all work for me. We have met amazing friends who have become like family. So between our children, our parents, our friends, and the sun, what is there not to love about Naples?

**Naples Real Producers:** What lessons did you learn after the 2007 collapse?

**Lauren:** I had to sell my house. I lost my home and had to short-sell seven others. So I learned to live below my means. I save 50 percent of everything I make, and it doesn't get touched. I don't buy things unless I can afford to pay cash. I don't have to work today. People say, 'You closed over 1,000 loans a year. You could slow down.' But I never take it for granted. Every deal is just as important. I still live that way today.

**Naples Real Producers:** You've been in the mortgage business for an impressive 35 years. What advice would you give to your peers and partners in the real estate industry?

**Lauren:** Answer your phone, answer your emails, and be accountable. Don't ignore clients when you have obstacles. Share what is going on, and work

together with your client and your team. One thing I do when faced with adversity is to immediately look for solutions when we run into issues. We can always solve them! We are all busy. I have two assistants who help me with all phone calls. This is extremely important to be reachable. People are making the largest purchase of their lives. They would like to talk to a human being while they are in the midst of buying their home. Get excited along with them and be in the moment. Make sure you have a team of like-minded people who really care about the clients. Buying a home is an exciting and scary time for your clients. We are there to make them feel good and confident that we can get their loan closed. REALTORS® and clients share with me that they are always impressed that they can always reach someone in my office. Hence, this may be why I close over a thousand loans a year. We are communicators — plain and simple! Next, when I go home after a very long day, I am all-in, and I spend quality time with my family while I have assistants who cover for me at work. I have people covering for me so that everyone feels important when I am not available. When I am at work, I am all-in.

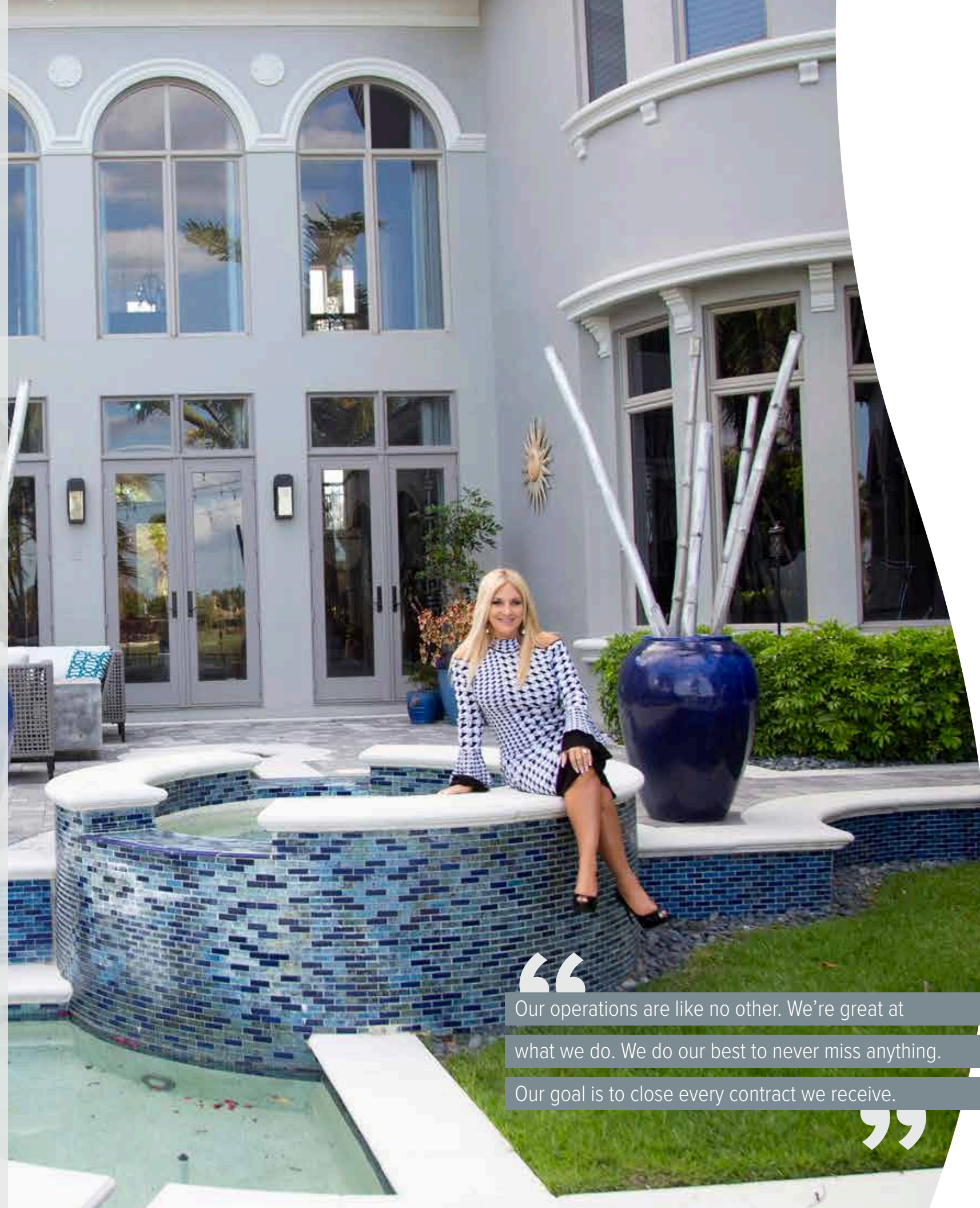
**Naples Real Producers:** What does the future of the real estate market look like?

**Lauren:** If I knew that, I'd be a fortune teller. I live in the moment. I don't worry about the future because nobody can predict that. When COVID happened, I thought it would be a repeat of 2007, and I was prepared. However, it turned out to be the exact opposite. So we just don't know. When you have the business, appreciate it, work it, and be consistent. Be approachable. Be transparent.

**Naples Real Producers:** Is there anything else we shouldn't miss about you?

**Lauren:** Lauren Maxwell — Lauren loves loans. You should never miss that. I believe we are the best, and the reason I believe that is we have a well-oiled machine. Our operations are like no other. We're great at what we do. We do our best to never miss anything. Our goal is to close every contract we receive. If you aren't currently working with our Maxwell Team, give us a try; you'll be glad you did!

For more information, visit [www.MaxwellMortgageLoans.com](http://www.MaxwellMortgageLoans.com).



“Our operations are like no other. We're great at what we do. We do our best to never miss anything. Our goal is to close every contract we receive.”



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# The Importance of a LISTING AGREEMENT

Some things in life should be self-explanatory. If you are a professional basketball player, you should know how to make a free throw. If you are a professional golfer, you need to know how to hit a draw and a fade. If you are a listing agent, you need to know the “in’s and out’s” of a listing agreement!

Simply put, a listing agreement is an agreement to provide services. These services need to meet the owner’s “reasonable expectations” — a level that is set by the listing agent during the listing stage. If the owner’s expectations are not met, the owner has good cause to terminate the agency. This reasonable expectation includes making a diligent effort to analyze and market the Property. Listing agents should always keep evidence of diligence by keeping detailed records, including, but not limited to, records of all solicitations, contacts, money spent, advertisements placed, buyers contacted directly or indirectly through their agents, etc. Here is a practice tip: Keep a physical file and electronic file separately maintained on each listed property. That way, you will be able to have some back-up to solidify the work you put into the transaction.

While a listing agreement does not technically need to be in writing to be enforceable (unlike any Contract for the transfer of an interest in land, i.e., Statute of Frauds), it is highly advisable that such be in writing. Florida Statute 475.25(1)(r) requires that a written listing agreement include: (i) Definite expiration date; (ii) Property description; (iii) Purchase Price and terms; (iv) Broker compensation; and (v) Seller and broker signature. Importantly, the written listing agreement cannot contain a provision requiring the Seller to notify the broker of the intention to cancel the listing after the expiration date. Hopefully, it goes without saying that any listing agreement must comply with Florida law if a Florida real estate licensee is involved.

There are three different types of residential Listing Agreements used in Florida — each that serves its own purpose. These should only be used with residential real property (there is a separate listing agreement to be utilized for Commercial transactions). Florida Statute 475.278 defines a residential sale as: (i) the sale of improved residential property of four units or fewer; (ii) the sale of unimproved residential property intended for use of four units or fewer; OR (iii) the sale of agricultural property of 10 acres or fewer.

**1. Exclusive Brokerage Listing Agreement** — a listing agreement granted by the seller to the listing broker, authorizing the listing broker to sell the property and to offer cooperation to other agents and/or transaction brokers *but* also reserves the right to sell the property himself/herself.

**2. An Exclusive Right of Sale Listing Agreement - Non-Representation** — a listing agreement granted by the seller to the listing broker, granting the sole right to sell the property. The agreement requires the right to cooperate with buyer’s agents and transaction brokers.

**3. An Exclusive Right of Sale Listing Agreement - Single Agent** — a listing agreement granted by the seller to the listing broker, granting the sole right to sell the respective Property. The agreement requires the right to cooperate with sub-agents, buyer’s agents, transactions brokers, and non-representatives, and also includes the duties required by statute of the single agent.

Typically, for a Listing Agent or brokerage to be able to obtain a commission on a transaction, they are required to be the “procuring cause.” The National Board of REALTORS® defines procuring cause as “the interplay of factors which together demonstrate that the unbroken efforts of a specific broker [that] were responsible for the buyer making the decision to consummate the sale on terms which the seller found acceptable.” Essentially, a listing agent and broker need to be responsible for the consummation of the sale. There are a variety of factors that go into determining if a listing agent or brokerage was the procuring cause of the transaction, including, but not limited to: (i) the nature and status of the transaction; (ii) roles and relationships of the parties; (iii) continuity and breaks in continuity (i.e., the length of time lapse, break in negotiations, etc.); and (iv) conduct of the buyer and seller.

Finally, where Listing Agents can really find themselves in hot water is regarding disclosures. It should be understood that agents are under a mandatory duty

to provide all legally required disclosures (i.e., Association Disclosures, etc.). Back in 1985, the Florida Supreme Court announced a new rule of law to replace the venerable rule of caveat emptor (or Buyer Beware), at least with regard to residential real estate transactions. *Johnson v. Davis*, 480 So. 2d 625 (Fla. 1985), was, indeed, one of those decisions unarguably entitled to be included in the list of those anointed as “landmark” cases, which provided that a Seller of residential property is under a mandatory obligation to disclose items that have a material effect on the value of the Property and are not readily observable to a Buyer. Sellers are required to provide a Broker with any such information on the listing agreement and at the outset of the transactional relationship. What brokers may not understand is that this obligation can also extend to a seller’s real estate broker.

For example, back in 2016, the court in *Goodman v. Rose Realty West, Inc.*, 193 So. 3d 86 (Fla. 4th DCA 2016), held that a real estate broker can be liable for the acts of his or her sales agent (where, in this case, the Seller was also acting as the listing agent and on behalf of the brokerage) in failing to disclose defects in a home which materially affects the value of home. This can prove to be a slippery slope and can, understandably, cause brokers some heartburn. However, while this liability would presumably come with a higher burden of proof, it is vital for listing agents to understand the Property that they are working with and recognize what constitutes a material disclosure under Florida law. These disclosures go further than simply defective items in the Property as stated above. If you and the Seller are aware that there is a gigantic special assessment coming down the pike, such may likely have a material effect on the value of the Property and needs to be disclosed.

If there is ever a question of “Should I disclose this or not?” ... here is a piece of advice: Disclose it! You do not want to find yourself in litigation over something you thought you should have disclosed (or worse, *knew* you should have disclosed) but didn’t.



*Born and raised in Naples, Florida, Samuel Colburn is an associate attorney at Woods, Weidenmiller, Michetti, & Rudnick, where he concentrates his practice in the areas of commercial and residential real property transactions, as well as corporate and commercial lending.*





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# ERICA EISTER

NEVER  
GIVE  
UP

Erica Eister first entered the real estate world through her work for a real estate investment trust. In the early 2000s, she was transferred from Nashville, Tennessee, to Southwest Florida, where she continued working her way up the corporate ladder. Erica specialized in leasing apartments; she found success, but she also desired more in her career.



» featured agent

By **Zachary Cohen**  
Photos by **Sun Services**  
**SW Photography**





Erica Eister and her husband, Brandon.

...

“In 2007, I started to really think about my future and the fact that I could be doing more with real estate,” Erica reflects. “I remember writing in my diary that by the time I was 30, I wanted to be a real estate broker, and that hadn’t happened. But it was still alive within me.”

By this time, Erica had met her now husband, Brandon. Erica desired flexibility that her 9-to-5 role couldn’t offer. So just after the birth of her second child (the couple’s first), she headed to real estate school. Brandon watched their newborn while Erica took the first step in her dream of becoming a broker by obtaining her real estate license.

“With a second parent and a partner, I was able to take the time and do what I really wanted to do, which was become a REALTOR®. A month after my daughter was born, I passed my real estate exam. It was time to spread my wings.”

#### The Birth of a Vision

Erica embarked upon a unique path. Brandon, a luxury home builder and general contractor with over 20 years of experience, already held his real estate broker’s license for his own investments. Erica wanted the flexibility of working for herself.

So the pair founded Eister & Company, and Erica got to work. Amid a recession, she found a way to flourish.

Erica believes her tenacity and commitment have allowed her to succeed.

“I don’t give up. Ever. I’m a tough person. I’m brutally honest and may not be everyone’s cup of tea, but the people that commit to using me as their broker get a 100-percent five-star treatment. That is something I take very seriously,” she says.

“

THE FUTURE IS  
**BRIGHT.**

I’VE BEEN BUYING  
NEW CONSTRUCTION  
AND RENOVATING  
GULF ACCESS  
PROPERTIES AND  
REPRESENTING SOME  
AMAZING CLIENTS  
IN THE SALE OF  
THEIR PROPERTIES.

”



Erica began by telling everyone she knew she was a real estate agent. She leveraged her rental background to begin leasing units in the gated luxury community she lived in and then began sitting open houses for other agents. Soon enough, she had leads she was able to turn into clients and referrals.

“I became the Rapallo girl. I lived in that beautiful community for five years, and one other agent and I were the two people that everyone called. It was great. I sold and leased probably 50 units in that community,” Erica explains. “I leveraged social media in a way that wasn’t being done at the time, and then I turned those leads into clients.”

#### A Real Estate Family

Erica never intended to grow Eister & Company into a large brokerage. Rather, she intended to build a boutique

...







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I'M BRUTALLY HONEST  
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A 100-PERCENT  
FIVE-STAR TREATMENT.

Erica Eister founded Eister & Company  
with her husband, Brandon.

concierge brokerage. So after working as a solo sales associate for several years, she obtained her broker's license and began to fill out her team. Today, Eister & Company includes Erica, Brandon, Erica's mother-in-law Patty, her son Isaac, and two additional agents. Erica and her team focus on luxury real estate, specifically in the new construction arena and Gulf access markets.

"Isaac is building some new homes, and he'll be the Cape Coral new construction guy. I've been doing new construction and resales throughout Bonita Springs and Naples. I still help many investors with rentals as well as buying and selling portfolios, 1031

exchanges, acreage, beach properties, homes in gated communities, lots of Gulf access — really anything that I believe in. Our other agents are each doing their own thing."

Outside real estate, most of Erica's time is spent with her kids, who are now 11, 12, 16, and 20. They enjoy traveling, grilling, water sports, skiing, boating, and just about anything outdoors. Erica also has a thriving real estate investment portfolio.

"The future is bright," Erica smiles. "I've been buying new construction and renovating Gulf

access properties and representing some amazing clients in the sale of their properties. I'd like to continue to do that. I think the future, for me, is selling as much real estate as possible and always staying on top of the trends. I'd like to see the business continue to grow and would like to see my son flourish in the industry.

"For myself, I strive to be the best mom I can be, somebody my kids can look up to and be proud of. I want them to see that women can work and be a good mother with no excuses and do as much as any man. I want them to know they can do anything they want to do. Whatever your dreams are, you can accomplish them."

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» pro tips

## How Partnering with the **RIGHT LUXURY BUILDER** Can Drive Your Real Estate Business

By Paul Widhalm

**Real estate professionals and builders can work together in harmony because they have the same goals: sell more houses and get more referrals.**

Think of it this way, your real estate knowledge plus a builder's custom-building expertise equals 1) a winning partnership, and 2) a scenario that benefits your client the most. Continue reading to learn how forging powerful partnerships with your local builders will elevate your business.

### **WORK WITH A CUSTOM HOME BUILDER YOU CAN TRUST**

As a real estate professional, you may be concerned about working with a custom home builder. Will my clients be treated professionally? Will they get a fair deal? Will my commissions be protected? Will the transaction go smoothly? The right luxury builder will understand the time and energy you put into each and every client and will strive to protect both you and your client through the entire transaction.

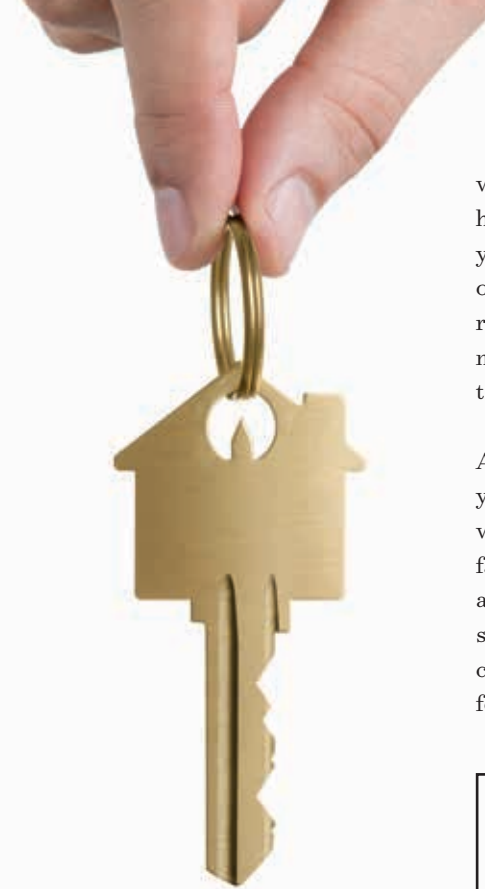
### **FIND JUST THE RIGHT BUILDER TO BUILD YOUR CLIENT'S DREAM HOME**

REALTORS® hold the most significant place when it comes to selling a custom home. The relationship between you and a client is quite involved, and as a real estate professional, you put your valuable time and energy into finding just the right builder for your clients. Partner with a builder who respects this relationship and is dedicated to a positive homebuilding experience for all parties involved. With most builders, this relationship may be conceived as a less viable option. The right builder will want to work with you and your client to build them the home of their dreams and won't steal your commissions in the process.

### **BUILD AN IDEAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP**

Like any other business collaboration, trust is key when taking on a new partnership. The right partner will be open to anyone looking at their credentials and how their custom homebuilding services provide value to clients.

If you are thinking about partnering with a specific builder, ask them to provide you with more information about how trustworthy and reputed they are in the industry. They should be happy to invite you to their office so that you can meet the staff and discuss the ways where you both can benefit each other.



Also ask to see one of their newly built homes to get an idea of what type of homes they are building. You will be provided with an estimated cost so you can bring potential buyers. Most builders are also open to purchasing available lots, should you have a lot for sale.

When real estate professionals and builders work towards the same goal, it doubles efforts when you merge expertise from both sides, allowing you to take your business to a new level. The right builder by your side will be trustworthy and will have systems in place that make it easy for you to sell in less time.

### **CREATE A WINNING PARTNERSHIP FOR YEARS TO COME**

Finding the right home for a client is the Realtor's job, which involves various factors, including their needs and budget. You can help builders gain information on comparable homes within the area. Similarly, collaborating with a builder will open up a new horizon for Realtors

when it comes to the number of homes available for sale. What you will get is a huge catalog of featured properties that are ready to sell. It is up to you how much effort you put into selling these properties.

A builder's expertise can serve you, the Realtor, in numerous ways. It can also serve as the key factor to your success. Combining an enthusiastic real estate professional with a builder's expertise can create a winning partnership for years to come.



With over 40 years of experience in the construction industry, Paul Widhalm, co-owner of Signal

House Builders, began working on his craft in his home state of Nebraska. He later took his skills to New York City for well over a decade, and eventually made Florida his home, where he has been able to use his communication skills, attention to detail, and creativity to make a name for himself. Having acquired his GC license in 2003, Paul especially enjoys forging strong relationships with clients, keenly listening to their wants and needs. He then works closely alongside Signal House's team of design experts to make these ideas work seamlessly with one another, creating custom living spaces that can be enjoyed for generations to come.

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By Zachary Cohen



Photo by New Frame Photography



Photo by New Frame Photography

# DOVILE “D” COLLINS & MILDALAUCE

*Multiplying the Joy,  
Dividing the Stress*

When Dovile “D” Collins and Milda Lauce first met in 2005, they never imagined that they would one day run a real estate business together in Florida. At the time, the two women were both studying real estate management at university in their home country of Lithuania. D was a couple of years ahead of Milda, but they formed a lasting bond.

The women not only bonded over their mutual interest in real estate; they both formed strong connections with Florida. During her time in school, D spent time in Florida, as her husband was born in Key West. Later, Milda traveled to the United States and fell in love with the state.

In 2009, D’s life led her to move to Naples, and in 2013, Milda once again followed suit. They worked side by side in residential real estate until finally teaming up as partners in late 2020. D and Milda have proven to be a powerhouse team.







...  
Dovile “D” Collins. (Photo by New Frame Photography)

“We are so happy to work together. We’re not only doing business; we’re having a great time,” Milda beams.

#### The Road to Florida: D Collins

Real estate has been D’s passion since high school.

“I knew then that was the field I wanted to find myself in,” she reflects. “Math was always my favorite subject in school. I could do math for fun, which is very unique. And I wanted to do something with homes, to be an architect or in real estate. Real estate, it was a perfect fit for my personality.”

D obtained a bachelor’s degree in real estate management and a master’s degree in economics. She began working for one of the largest commercial real estate companies in Lithuania, but when the recession of 2008 hit, it didn’t just affect those in the U.S.; it was a global meltdown. D was faced with a commercial real estate market that had all but dried up.

“That was the breaking point for me. My husband, he was born and raised in Key West, so we decided to pack up and move to the United States in 2009.”

D promptly got her real estate license and familiarized herself with her new surroundings.

“We didn’t have commercial skyscrapers and malls. It was limited, but residential real estate was thriving. So I decided to switch my path to residential real estate, and that’s what I’ve been doing since.”

#### Beginnings: Milda Lauce

“I always wanted to study architecture,” Milda explains. “However, in 2004, when I began school, real estate was booming. They opened this new program for students to study real estate management, and that sounded very exciting.”

During her time at university, Milda had the opportunity to travel to the U.S. via an exchange program, and she fell in love with Florida.

“It was an amazing experience getting to know the culture, the people, the language,” Milda remembers. “Florida was totally different from where I was born, and I just fell in love.”

After graduating in 2008, Milda worked in sales and marketing for one of the premier hotels in Lithuania, but she missed Florida dearly. So in 2013, she followed her heart across the ocean. By 2015, she was living and working full-time in Naples.



...  
Milda Lauce.  
(Photo by  
New Frame  
Photography)

“

We are so happy to work together. We’re not only doing business; we’re having a great time. ”



Photo by New Frame Photography



... Teaming for Success

D and Milda worked side by side at different premier brokerages for many years. In late 2020, they determined the time was ripe to partner up.

“Having a team multiplies the joy and divides the stress,” D says. “So for us, it’s fantastic having a partner, having somebody to bounce ideas off of. And we have very different personalities — true yin and yang,” D laughs. “I’m a little more social, outgoing, and Milda is a true class act and wealth of knowledge. Her creativity, background in luxury marketing, and studies in interior design are a huge asset.”

D and Milda share all listings and buyers. D also holds a leadership/mentorship role for newer agents on the Caine Luxury Team. In 2021, D and Milda doubled their personal production, and in the first three months of 2022, they secured \$19 million in business.

“Starting last year, we did everything together, and our business is skyrocketing.”

For the Joy of Life

Outside real estate, D spends most of her time with her family. She and her husband, Matt, have two kids, Livia (12) and Lukas (10). Baseball is a big part of D’s family life; her son has played baseball since he was 4, and her husband is the president and a head coach with the local Little League.

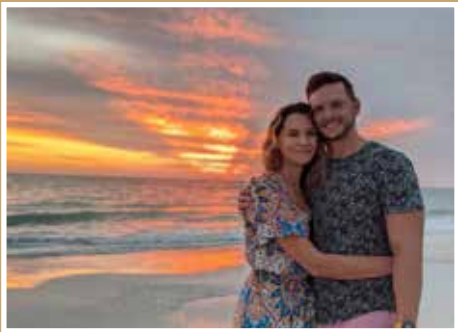
Milda and her husband, Edgaras, have a passion for travel. They also enjoy just about anything outdoors, from walking to paddle-boarding to beach-going.

“I’m in the business to help people and to have fun too. It’s my lifestyle and my passion. I’m super happy where I am now,” D says.

“D and I, we were friends first. It’s such a pleasure to work with someone that I have known for a long time,” says Milda.

As partners and agents, D and Milda have high aspirations. Perhaps their biggest goal is an emotional one; they aspire to touch the lives of those around them.

“Real estate is my biggest passion. It’s exactly where I want to be. I love touching lives,” D says. “Milda and I, we are the same in this way. The dollar sign does not motivate us. Touching lives and making dreams come true — that motivates us.”



Milda Lauce and her husband, Edgaras.



D Collins with her husband, Matt, and children, Lukas and Livia.



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►► making a difference

By Ellen Buchanan

Photo by Alessia Marcin

# ALESSIA MARCIN & THE BIG CATS at Kowiachobee Animal Preserve

"IT'S DEFINITELY NO SECRET THAT I'M A CRAZY CAT PERSON," ALESSIA MARCIN BEGINS WITH A LAUGH. "AND I'VE ALWAYS LOVED THE BIG CATS. MY FAVORITE MOVIE, STILL TO THIS DAY, IS *THE LION KING*."

Alessia, owner of Balanced Images, a *Naples Real Producers* partner business, has been working with and photographing the big cats at Kowiachobee Animal Preserve in Naples, Florida, for the last two and a half years.

"One of my really good friends sent me a photograph on Instagram of a lion," Alessia recalls. "And she said, 'This is in Naples.' So I automatically assumed that it was the zoo. But I dug and dug and did a bunch of research and found this preserve. I sent them an email and said, 'Hey, I came across your page; I'd like to come in and meet you guys.'" And so began Alessia's journey with Kowiachobee Animal Preserve and a deep dive into the fascinating world of one of her big passions — big cats.

Started in 2001 by husband and wife team John and Grace Slaby, the Kowiachobee Animal Preserve was originally intended to be a big cat preserve. (Kowiachobee means "big cat" or "screaming big cat" in Seminole.) They started with a pair of black leopards in May 2001, and added a spotted leopard six months later. Today, however, the Preserve has become home to all kinds of injured or abandoned animals in need — from horses and ponies to reptiles, birds, and a host of other animals. In total, the Slabys currently have seven big cats and over 100 other individual animals, and run the Preserve as a sanctuary with a



Alessia Marcin and her calico, Leona. (Photo by New Frame Photography)

conservation and education mission. They rely on financial donations and volunteers who dedicate their time to caring for the animals.

When she reached out to the Preserve, Alessia told the Slabys that she was calling to specifically volunteer her time to work with the big cats. "The owner asked if I had any experience working with these kinds of animals," she says. "I told him I did not, but when he

saw my first interaction with a female tiger, he was like, 'Okay, you're good to go.'"

Alessia began visiting the Preserve for three hours at a time, two days a week, to help with feeding and cleaning cages. One of the other long-term volunteers trained her on the locks and gates and what and how to feed the big cats.

...





Phoenix, a male Florida panther, is one of the two cats Alessia Marcin developed a special relationship with. (Photo by Alessia Marcin)

“At the time, there were nine big cats on the property. I wanted to feel out every cat and personality, and really get to know them,” Alessia says. “I was there three months cleaning and feeding before I even brought my camera,” she says.

Alessia got her start in photography capturing the incredible Southwest Florida sunsets and founded her Balanced Images business four and a half years ago. Her special interests eventually expanded to include landscapes, exotic cars, and, of course... exotic cats. The images Alessia captures are infused into aluminum,

creating beautiful, sophisticated works of art that she calls ‘Balanced Images.’

Asked if she’s ever been in danger with the cats at the Preserve, Alessia says, “Oh, yeah. I’ve definitely been grabbed by one of the cats with its claws. There’s definitely been a few moments like that. The most important thing is to stay calm. At the end of the day, it’s a wild animal. You can form a bond and connection with these animals ... but should you be surprised when the wild animal comes out? Absolutely not.”

Alessia did form bonds with the big cats, and developed particularly special connections with two of them — an 18-year-old male African spotted leopard named Rellium, who has since passed away, and a male Florida panther named Phoenix.

“When I initially started there, I was told to be careful with Rellium because he was the most aggressive. So instantly, I was like, ‘Game on. I’m going to make this guy my friend.’” With her calm, cat-lady energy, Alessia was able to build a strong relationship with Rellium over time, based on mutual trust.



**FUN FACT**  
Alessia would like to own a leopard one day.

“I developed such a bond with Rellium,” she says. “I’ve already done the hours to own a leopard. When the time is right...”

Rellium (now deceased), the African spotted leopard that Allesia loved. (Photo by Alessia Marcin)

“Everyone was like, ‘He’s not that way with anyone else,’” she says. “The bond and relationship that I formed with that leopard ... he was like my best friend. It was heartbreaking when he passed. I loved him.”

Phoenix the Florida panther, the other cat Alessia formed a special relationship with, was also known to be aggressive. “Both he and Rellium were definitely the most aggressive toward people, especially Phoenix. He was the first to try and grab people. It took me two months before he would let me touch him. I still have a little fear in me with him,” she admits. “He can move quickly...” While Alessia is protected behind a barrier, there is a part

of the fence just large enough to put an arm through. “I’ve definitely had my whole hand in a leopard’s mouth,” she laughs.

Once she’d gotten a feel for the cats and they’d learned to trust her, Alessia began photographing them. The incredible, powerful images she gets capture the essence of each individual cat in a very intimate way. “It’s important to respect their space,” she explains. “I very much communicate with them. I talk to them and tell them to smile for the camera. They like the camera now, and put on a show.”

In addition to volunteering her time, once Alessia started photographing the cats and



Alessia gives back 10 percent of every purchase of a Balanced Image of one of the big cats to the Preserve for the care of the cats.





Alessia Marcin photographing Rys, a friend's bobcat, at PRIMO Detailing Studio in Naples.



Phoenix at the Kowiachobee Animal Preserve. (Photo by Alessia Marcin)

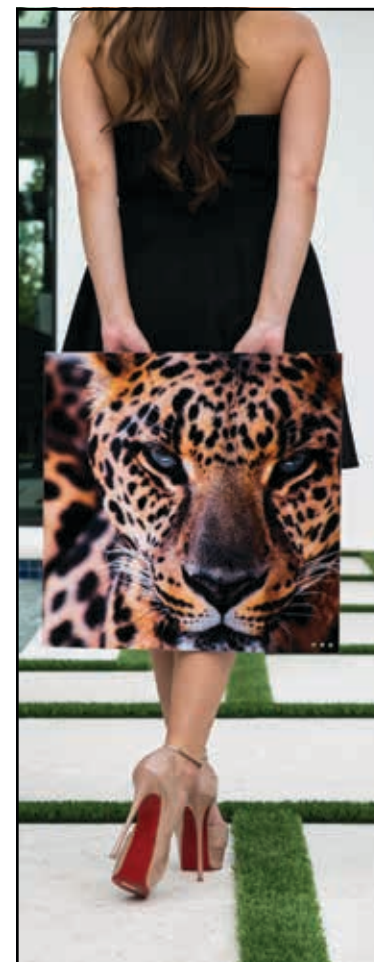
...

incorporating them into her business, she decided to give 10 percent of every purchase of a Balanced Image of one of the big cats back to that individual cat as another way to give back to the Preserve — and to the cats she's grown to love.

Kowiachobee Animal Preserve is not open to the public; but people are able to schedule a personalized special

visit, can volunteer to work on the property, and are encouraged to donate financially. Another way to support the big cats is to purchase a Balanced Image — a unique and striking piece of art with 10 percent of the purchase price going directly to support the cats. To see examples of Alessia's big cat Balanced Images, visit the "Feline Friends" album on her website, [www.balancedimages.com](http://www.balancedimages.com).

To get involved or to donate financially to the important conservation work being done at Kowiachobee Animal Preserve, contact office manager Brandy Verder at 239-438-1377 or visit [www.kowiachobee.org](http://www.kowiachobee.org).



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# Christel J·O·H·N·S·O·N

► cover story  
By Zachary Cohen

## Making an Impact

Photo by Michelle Reed

Photo by Michelle Reed

In 2000, Christel Johnson and her family underwent a major transition. They picked up their lives and moved from Arkansas to Southwest Florida, where Christel's husband was launching an airline. Christel had been a stay-at-home mom for several years after a long career in retail, and with her two sons in school full-time, she desired a return to the workforce. Her husband suggested she give real estate a shot.

"My husband wanted me to get into real estate, but I didn't want to," Christel remembers. "I wanted to do something more noble in my mind. I wanted to make a difference in the world."

“  
I’m guided  
by a force  
that’s bigger  
than myself.”

Despite her resistance, Christel got licensed and began to build a business. And then, as she says, “some pretty miraculous things happened.”

“I wanted to have a positive impact. I wanted to serve. Then, all of a sudden, I realized it was a noble job. I realized that no matter what you do, you can have a purpose that rises above — in any industry, but especially real estate. So I fell in love with it.”

### Finding Meaning

In her 15-plus years in real estate, Christel has found that she can make a tremendous impact in the lives of others through her work. As her business grew, she expanded her circle of service to include her peers, as well as her clients.





Christel Johnson founded Paradise Coast Property Team in 2015. (Photo by Michelle Reed)

“In the early days, I started taking people for the ride. I started mentoring agents, allowing them to shadow me. I think that’s the best way to learn — be coached, be taught,” Christel says.

Christel began building a team in 2011. Eventually, her mentees began to encourage her to open her own brokerage, and in 2015, she did just that, founding the Paradise Coast Property Team.

As a leader, Christel continues to put service at the forefront of everything she does.

“There are wonderful things we are able to do in real estate,” Christel

smiles. “Prayer and God are in the fabric of our company and what we do. Every decision, we try our best to make sure it’s the right thing. In all things, be honest.”

Today, the Paradise Coast Property Team has 25 agents. Each one is devoted to the team’s culture: Never leave any rock unturned. Be a humble servant. Work together as a tight-knit family.

“If you do real estate correctly, it’s about being a humble servant. It’s all about the client. I want the client to get service like they’ve never had before,” Christel says.

#### Living with Heart

Outside of real estate, Christel lives a family-oriented life. Her oldest son, Collin, passed away in October 2021, and her younger son, Christopher, is now 24 years old. Collin’s passing has been both a tragedy and a gift.

“At this time, the worst chapter of my life, the outpouring from other people — many past customers, people I’ve worked with, people from my church, everyone from my entire lifetime showed up. I can cry thinking about it. The love from the world — amazing. When I think about that, it lifts me,” Christel says.

“ I wanted to have a positive impact. I wanted to serve. Then, all of a sudden, I realized it was a noble job. I realized that no matter what you do, you can have a purpose that rises above — in any industry, but especially real estate. ”



Photo by Michelle Reed





If she's not with her family or selling real estate, Christel can be found playing guitar or at her local church, where she volunteers as a youth group leader. In all aspects of her life, she centers her intentions on her faith.

"I think that the reward, the ultimate reward, is how we live our life... What if we just say, what's the right thing to do for this person? So they are really difficult. They must have a hard life. So how can we serve them? How can



From left to right: Christel Johnson's daughter-in-law Dana Curry with grandson Alexander, son Collin (decd), granddaughter Gabi, Christel, and son Christopher.

“Our collaboration in all situations leads to solutions that sometimes one person alone may not discover. This is why ‘team’ is a part of our culture.”



we make the goal that they feel like someone cares about them? And personally, for me, maybe if they learn about who God is because of how you treated them. Maybe that's even more important than getting a house sold. That's life-changing. I don't go around preaching. I just try to be that.”

“I wanted to have a positive impact. I wanted to serve. Then, all of a sudden, I realized it was a noble job. I realized that no matter what you do, you can have a purpose that rises above — in any industry, but especially real estate.”

“Our collaboration in all situations leads to solutions that sometimes one person alone may not discover. This is why ‘team’ is a part of our culture.”

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# This Mother's Day, FOCUS ON MOM'S HEALTH

**Mother's Day**, the day we set aside to honor and celebrate motherhood and, above all, the women most cherished in our lives. This holiday also marks the beginning of **National Women's Health Week**. As we all know, women tend to fall into the role of caregiver, whether for young children, a spouse, or elderly relatives, and this consuming work often necessitates putting the needs of others before their own, especially related to health and wellness. This Mother's Day, show love for the special mama(s) in your life by educating yourself about the following health matters (and ensure you are taking good care of yourself if that mama is you!).

**Become more physically active** – Women should strive for 30 minutes or more of moderate physical activity at least three days of the week. Regular physical activity can lower the risk of heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, unhealthy cholesterol levels, type 2 diabetes, breast cancer, and depression, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

**Schedule routine screenings and checkups** – Screening tests can detect diseases, such as breast cancer, cervical cancer, high cholesterol and blood pressure, diabetes, osteoporosis, and sexually transmitted infections, when they are most treatable. Consult with your health care provider to discuss age-appropriate testing and immunizations.

**Eat healthier** – To achieve a well-balanced diet, women should choose fruits, vegetables, grains (particularly whole grains), fish, lean red meats, eggs, and nuts to help prevent heart disease and stroke. Foods high in saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, and added sugars (as well as alcohol)

should be consumed rarely or in moderation.

**Ban unhealthy habits and risky behaviors** – Smoking and not wearing a seatbelt should be verboten.

**Focus on mental health** – We all acknowledge the impact mental health has on overall wellness, and studies show depression is becoming more and more common in women, particularly postmenopausal women. If anxiety and sadness are impacting a woman's daily functioning, lifestyle changes and professional help should be introduced. Managing stress and getting adequate sleep are key elements in maintaining excellent mental health.

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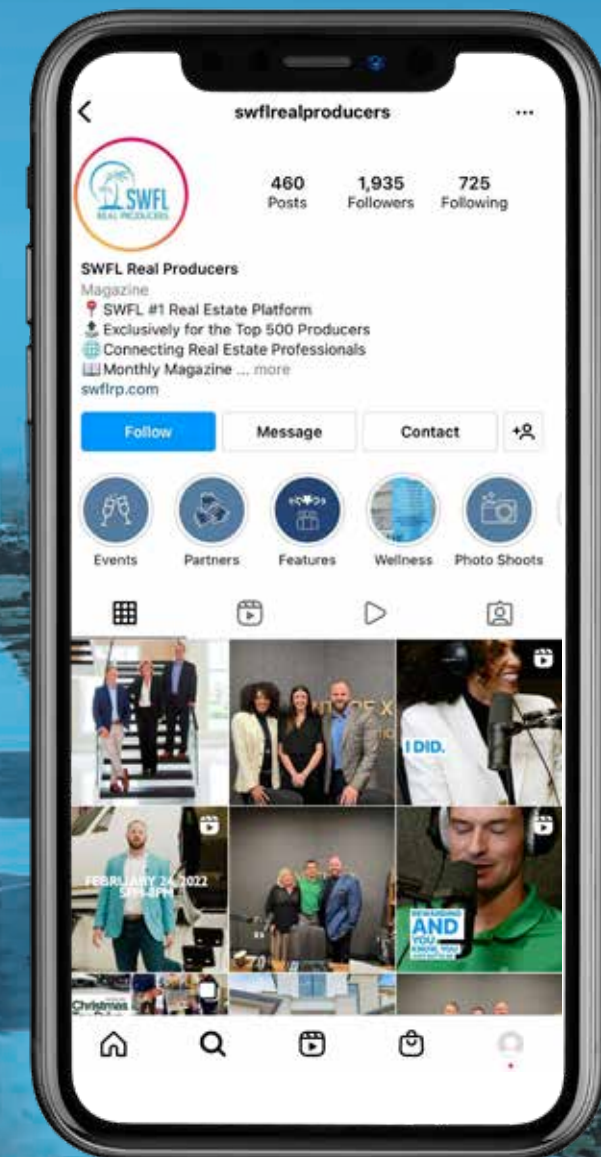
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