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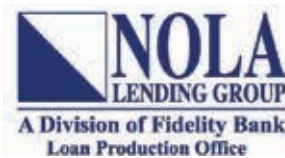
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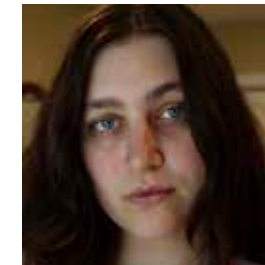
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▶ making a difference

By Danielle Kidwell

Photos by Haley Ponx Photography

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Lisa Pizzalato

A Heart for Home

“I’ve always loved real estate in general, driving down the roads at dusk, seeing the warm lights in the windows, wondering about the lives of people who live there and what it looks like inside,” says Lisa Pizzalato. “I love the concept of ‘home’ and the stability and comfort it represents.” It made sense that she would become a REALTOR®, getting her real estate license in 2008 and her broker’s license in 2015. As the broker-owner of Zatta Real Estate Group with a career volume of over \$52 million, Lisa has been in the top 10-15% of REALTORS® in the Greater Baton Rouge market for the past four consecutive years, and her total volume since the first of 2021 topped \$17 million. She’s good at finding homes for people, and that is rooted in her compassion for children who lack the stability that a safe home provides. •••



“Since I was a teenager, I’ve always had a heart for children who don’t have a home,” Lisa says. “I was a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) before I knew I would adopt, even when I was in my early 20s with a toddler.” CASA is dedicated to ending the cycle of child abuse and neglect, one child at a time. This is a cause close to Lisa’s heart.

“We took in a family member’s baby who had been bounced around for the first year of her life,” Lisa explains. “We filed for legal custody shortly before my marriage dissolved, so it was a time of great uncertainty.” At this time, Lisa already had one adult child who didn’t live at home and another teenager who did. She decided to “pick herself up by her bootstraps” and continue this journey, whatever that may look like, walking by faith and not by sight. Soon thereafter, she met Darin Pizzalato.

“**LIFE IS A DAY-BY-DAY JOURNEY, AND I TRY TO GIVE EACH DAY, MY BUSINESS, AND CHILDREN THE BEST I CAN WITH NO EXCUSES.**”



“I had legal custody of Mia,” Lisa says. “Darin and I had decided we would merge our families and get married but hadn’t set a solid wedding date yet when the time to file for adoption was approaching.” She was on a call with the adoption attorney (on speaker so Darin could participate), and the attorney explained that if Darin were to also be Mia’s legal parent, they had to be married. “Before I could respond, Darin spoke up and said we could be married in two weeks so he could be her legal father,” she says tearfully. “We knew we were going to get married, but I didn’t know until that call that he wanted to adopt her also!”

The couple got married in their kitchen with all of their kids present, with Darin’s three children rounding the family up to eight. They’re all between the ages of 17 and 26, with Mia being the caboose at 6 years old. “Initially, I took custody of her during a very unpredictable time in my life, which I mention because I think it’s a common misconception that in order to be a foster parent or to adopt, you have to be perfect and life has to be perfect,” Lisa says quietly. “These children aren’t looking for nor needing perfect parents; they just need to be loved and provided for.”

Lisa speaks from experience. It’s unusual for her to talk about her history of polycystic kidney disease and her diagnosis when she was 32 years old. “I will soon be on the transplant list at Tulane, and it’s a huge challenge for me to work at the level I do, plus managing my family and working with serious health challenges,” she says. “I continue to hustle and power through it every day, never wanting to be a victim of my circumstances, and I have started to listen to my body and honor what it’s telling me.” She continues, “I simply didn’t know what kidney disease looked like for me when I took Mia in or even had my own children for that matter, but life is a day-by-day journey, and I try to give each day, my business, and children the best I can with no excuses.”



Lisa encourages everyone to consider volunteering in some way with CASA, whether as an advocate, foster parent or supporter. One way she stays involved is by organizing annual holiday collections for toys and necessities for foster children through CASA. “I’d love to encourage people to step up for children who aren’t as fortunate, no matter which ‘category’ they put themselves in, no excuses,” Lisa says. “Frankly, my life felt far from perfect when I took Mia in and filed for custody, with lots of tears, struggles and stress, but it all worked out in the end and was worth it.” Mia’s adoption was finalized on May 13, 2022.



There were 3,672 abused and neglected children in foster care within the state of Louisiana in 2022. Of those, Louisiana only has 1,613 certified foster homes and desperately needs more homes! Foster parents can be single, married, divorced or widowed. Related or unrelated to the child. Most foster homes are served by a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). CASA is dedicated to changing the lives of abused and neglected children by advocating for their best interests in juvenile court. Also, through establishing, supporting and expanding quality CASA programs throughout the state of Louisiana.

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Rebecca Braun

Everyone Calls Her Mom

Rebecca Braun's favorite story to tell is that of her "Walmart baby." Lying in bed one night, she received a text message with a picture of an infant and a plea for help from her adopted daughter's biological mom. Rebecca recalls jumping out of bed and heading over to Walmart, assuming she would be buying diapers and formula for a baby in need. "Once I got there, she explained that this baby was pawned off on her, the baby wasn't safe and she trusted I would do the right thing, and told me to take her home." Rebecca took the baby back home to shock the household with a new infant in tow. "I'm probably the only person in the world who can go to Walmart and come home with a baby," she jokes. She then notified the Department of Children and Family Services and divulged the details. "Walmart baby" has since been adopted and is now 5 years old.

A foster parent since 2011, Rebecca now has a plethora of kids to whom she plays the role of "mom." Six children currently live in the home with her and her husband of 19 years, Brandon, and they have grown children, as well as three grandchildren. They have raised and played a part in many children's lives, stating that they have had over 36 kids come through. "I met a foster mom at an event, and it lit a spark in my heart," she recalls. "Brandon wasn't as easy to convince but is now absolutely on this journey with me; he's 'Mr. Mom!'" Brandon and Rebecca

had two biological children at the time and were trying for another baby. Rebecca says, "He was a little apprehensive, but after he went to one class and saw the need, he couldn't say no." She was a personnel coordinator for Albertsons Stores, and she recognized that she would need more time than her demanding schedule allowed. Rebecca got into real estate so she could have more flexibility for her kids. Her sister was a mortgage broker and encouraged her to get into the industry.

Rebecca explains that foster care often has a negative stigma because people think the children are troublemakers or "bad," but she has found that is rarely true. "Kids aren't always damaged; in fact, they're resilient," she says. "Neglect, abuse or the death of a parent are all reasons they end up in foster care, but some children return home or go to family placement, and that is the goal." Her very first placement was just under 2 years old when she got him. "He was reunified with his family a year and a half later," she says. "He still calls me 'Mom,' and I get to see him and his family quite often." She says that contrary to popular belief, foster parents are encouraged to build relationships with the reunified families to serve as parents, grandparents and mentors,

as they generally have fragile or no support systems. In fact, Rebecca enjoys babysitting for reunified families and being an active part of their lives. Rebecca balances her work as a REALTOR® and the busyness of family life by recognizing when she needs to take time for herself to regenerate. She loves to travel alone, going to the springs in Florida or a beach for a few days to regroup. "I have a really great support system at home that allows me to balance both real estate and foster care," she says gratefully. "I remember that I'm only one person, so I schedule what I can do and just wing it!" Her support system is Brandon, their moms, Rebecca's sister, and one of her biggest helpers is her older son, Tyler (20), who still lives at home and gives his parents a hand with the kids. Rebecca enthuses, "He's an empath like his mom with a heart of gold — he's awesome!"

Rebecca encourages her fellow agents and industry partners to consider becoming foster

or adoptive parents, saying, "The need for open hearts and open homes in our communities is vital." If fostering isn't for you, there are other ways that you can get involved with helping our foster kids. Becoming a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) advocate is one way and offers much less commitment but a very essential role in the court system to advocate for what is best for the child.

- A child is removed from their home and placed into foster care every two minutes in our country.
- There are over 117,000 children in the United States freed for adoption and waiting for a family to call their own.
- Statistics show that less than 50% of children will reunite with their birth family.

To get involved or for more information on adopting, fostering or advocating, check out the following resources:

- www.dcfsls.la.gov
- www.adoptUSkids.org
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cover story
By Breanna Smith
Photos by Ace Sylvester

JENNIFER RICHARDSON

PARTNER IN GRIME

Baton Rouge native Jennifer Richardson is a real estate agent with Latter & Blum that brings a unique, refreshing zeal to everything she sets out to accomplish. Whether it's the city's litter problem, negotiating a property purchase or helping women build wealth through real estate, she tackles every obstacle with grace, tenacity and a laugh. Jennifer does not accept the status quo; she works to change it. "I'm an ordinary person until I'm provoked," she said with a chuckle. "When I'm provoked, I can do amazing things I surprise even myself with."

Getting Started Early

Jennifer began learning the ropes of real estate at 19 years old. "I bought my first house at 19, and when I sold it 18 months later and made \$18,000 — I was hooked." She spent much of her early career flipping real estate across Baton

Rouge. Soon after, she started selling real estate to support herself and her young children as a single mom. Every month, she laid out her bills on the dining room table alongside a notepad to diligently record them — these were the days before electronic payments, after all. With the sign of a cross and a simple prayer, she would subtract each one from her latest commission check. "Every month, I had a speck of money left over to last me until the next closing, and I did better and better." That was 30 years and countless property purchases ago. "I've been buying property every chance I get since then because I believe in it. I love helping people, especially women who need a source of income because owning real estate and investment properties is life-changing — and almost everybody I sell to comes back eager to make another investment." ●●●





A New Kind of Investment

In 2021, Jennifer knew it was time to make an investment of her time and energy into the city she loves most. She set her sights on Baton Rouge's litter problem. "I was complaining a lot, and I got tired of listening to myself complain, so I decided to roll up my sleeves and do something about it."


According to Keep America Beautiful, in 2021, there were 152 pieces of trash on roadways and in waterways for every U.S. resident. Litter tells visitors and residents that there is little care or respect for our city, and Jennifer knew that the status quo could not stand. She put a call out on Facebook inviting anyone willing to join her for a Saturday morning clean-up on Essen Lane and Jefferson Highway. She arrived before sunrise, equipped with only a box of garbage bags, loaned litter grabbers and her "housewife tools." "I wasn't even sure anyone would show up," she said. "I told myself, 'I'm going to do this by hook or crook.' So there I was in the dark, pulling up weeds and beer cans and everything else you could imagine."

To each passerby that rolled down their window and asked what she was up to, she proudly proclaimed, "I'm cleaning up this filthy city!" Soon, a crew of litter warriors arrived, and perfect strangers circled back around to provide professional landscaping equipment and other supplies. "Within three hours, in that small section of

Baton Rouge, we picked up 43 contractor bags of garbage." Just like that sale of her first house, Jennifer was hooked. "We were euphoric," she recalled. "We all agreed we had to do this again." On the spot, the group arranged a clean-up for the following Saturday. "And we've been doing it again for two years."

Grassroots Growth

Keep Tiger Town Beautiful has grown steadily and substantially since its quiet launch that Saturday morning on Essen Lane. The group boasts 3,400 members on its Facebook page and about 75 litter warriors who regularly attend clean-ups. The group thrived as a "loaves and fishes" organization for more than a year, with businesses and residents willingly donating time and equipment. "We've never had to buy one thing because the citizens of Baton Rouge and local businesses, even knowing we were not a non-profit and they would not get a tax deduction, have given freely to us. They have made Keep Tiger Town Beautiful what we are today."

Donors and volunteers leave a steady stream of contractor bags on Jennifer's front porch, even showing up to clean-up sites with equipment to donate. "I couldn't show properties in my car because it was loaded with litter clean-up supplies since we do clean-ups every day now," Jennifer said. 

♦♦♦

“So I posted asking if anyone had an old truck that they would sell me or donate.” The next day, a man showed up to a clean-up with a brand new 16-foot covered trailer. “This man jumped out and said, ‘Jennifer, this is for you because every time I go down a street, and it’s beautiful, I know you’ve been there,’” Jennifer recalled. “It’s been a God thing. People come out of the woodwork, total strangers, to support our mission.” Not only has Keep Tiger Town Beautiful grown, it has thrived. Governor John Bel Edwards and Keep Louisiana Beautiful awarded the organization the Let Louisiana Shine award and *inRegister* named Jennifer a 2022 Woman with a Cause, among many other recognitions.

Official Litter Warriors

Jennifer was forced to turn down national awards and grants because Keep Tiger Town Beautiful was not registered as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit — until now. Keep Tiger Town Beautiful officially became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit earlier this year and has garnered support from local businesses, including Worley Engineers, Lamar Advertising, Cajun Electric, Sola Pharmaceuticals, Mockler Beverage, Ole Mill, Cadence Insurance and Women’s Council of REALTORS®.

The organization’s latest step towards a litter-free Baton Rouge was the installation of dozens of donated trash cans at intersections throughout Baton Rouge that volunteers maintain daily. “The finest people in this city are out every day

picking up litter in Baton Rouge.” Soon, litter warriors will team up with the United States Army for a clean-up along the Mississippi River. Jennifer invites any and everyone to join her mission, no registration, equipment or experience necessary. “The best thing to bring to a clean-up is a good sense of humor,” she said.

When Mark Twain wrote about Baton Rouge in his book *Life on the Mississippi*, he noted that “Baton Rouge was clothed in flowers, like a bride — no, much more so; like a greenhouse.” Jennifer holds tightly to Twain’s recollection of Baton Rouge as she works tirelessly to maintain the city she calls home. “I was born here, I pay taxes here, and I’m going to fight for my city. It’s worth it.”

Tiger Town is beautiful, as long as we all do our part to keep it that way. Jennifer encourages everyone to reduce plastic and Styrofoam use, tie off garbage bags properly, opt for reusable water bottles and shopping bags, and, of course, to always look for a trashcan.

Everyone is welcome to join her mission, to set a new status quo. Whether with litter or in life. If Jennifer can fight to make it better, she will.

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LARHONDA THOMAS

A First Time for Everything

►► rising star

By **Danielle Kidwell**
Photos by **Ace Sylvester**

LaRhonda firmly believes God showed her that all the years she thought she was missing out were just storing up the blessings he would give her in overflow, saying, “I had my first buyer within my first month of being licensed, my first listing my second month and another listing a month after that. Four months after I got my license, I had closed close to a million dollars and had over a million under contract for the following year.”

LaRhonda Thomas knew she wanted to be a REALTOR® since childhood. “It all started when I was in second grade and my parents purchased their first home,” she explains. “They were some of the first homeowners in our family, and I couldn’t believe we had our own yard, I had a place to ride my bike, and there were neighborhood kids to play with.” She remembers not knowing what “about to close on our house” meant until they showed her the keys after the closing, when it dawned on her that the home was really theirs. She recalls, “They said they couldn’t get me Christmas gifts that year because they were closing on her home, but a week after closing they had a little leftover and I got all the gifts they couldn’t while the house was being purchased.”

Years later, when she was in high school, LaRhonda had a close family member who was about to lose their home, and she watched their agent help sell it to protect their credit. “I knew right then and there I wanted to be a REALTOR®,” she says. “My parents were friends with their REALTOR® at church too, and I saw how hard she worked.” LaRhonda knew she could do the job and that helping people find homes and assisting them in digging their way out of financially unstable situations was her calling. “Two weeks after I graduated high school, I started real estate school and passed the classes with flying colors,” she says. “But I was 18 years old and kept putting off the licensing exam.” A year later, she passed the state test but failed the national exam and wanted to give up. She says, “I was so afraid of the exam I kept running from it.” ●●●



...

Having hit the pause button on her real estate dreams, LaRhonda found fulfilling work in the health care industry before starting a cleaning company. Still, she always felt a little jealous when she heard about others who were getting their real estate license. Thirteen years after she failed the national exam, she and her fiancé were having a conversation about dreams, and she admitted that she was scared of the national real estate exam. “He talked me into the dream,” she says. “My cleaning business was booming and I was doing really well, but he convinced me to just get the test over with.” He paid her bills so she could focus on school and encouraged her when she felt like “running” again. “He told me I was going to be as successful in real estate as I was in my cleaning business,” she remembers. “I passed both tests on the first try and have been rolling ever since!”

With just one year in the business, how does LaRhonda do it? Her formula is very simple — she cares. She cares deeply about the community in which she was raised, the people who have guided her, and the people she has helped and has yet to help. “I believe in treating everyone with the love of God and being their shoulder to cry on since everyone



needs an extra boost sometimes,” she says. “By treating people equally, you can help them see the possibilities because sometimes they don’t know they can get to where they want to and don’t realize they need an extra push.”

LaRhonda is truly grateful for the opportunities afforded to her and is passionate about serving her clients. “Clients know real from fake, and they know I won’t treat a millionaire any differently from someone else,” she says. “Most of my business comes from client referrals, many of whom weren’t

LaRhonda doesn’t just leave it up to kindness and equality but works hard to advocate for her clients. She interviews each client thoroughly to understand their situation, then matches them to the right lender. She works with a multitude of lenders and believes in going above and beyond to get approval. “Don’t look at your clients as a number,” she advises. “Even if I can’t help someone at the moment, they’ll remember when the time is right and refer their friends to me as someone who is honestly invested in their best interest.”

While God gets credit for LaRhonda’s success, she is quick to thank her husband, Kerwin Thomas, who believed in her enough to help her believe in herself. She laughs, “Even now, I doubt myself sometimes, and he reminds me every transaction is different and that I am killing it!” LaRhonda credits her children, Makhi (10) and Royalty (5), for keeping her grounded. Between basketball games and art lessons, going out to eat and watching movies, the family has a busy life. When they have the rare time to get away together, LaRhonda loves Las Vegas, and Kerwin favors Chicago, where they love to travel to different restaurants as a destination.

ready at the moment but they can send me a new client.” She gets new referrals daily, and she takes the time to coach them and hold their hand. It’s about building relationships, which is how she approached her cleaning business as well, saying, “Passion for God and compassion for people.”





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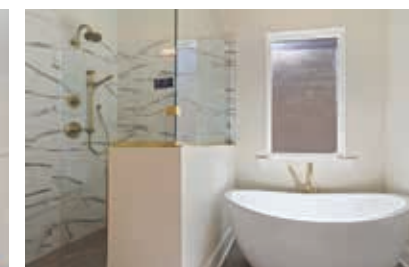
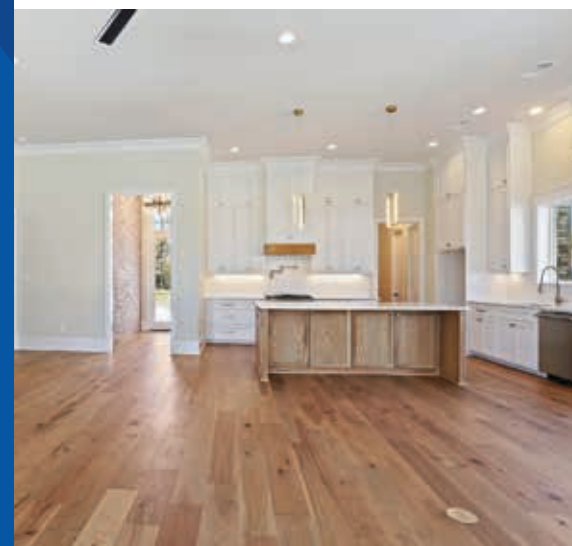
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