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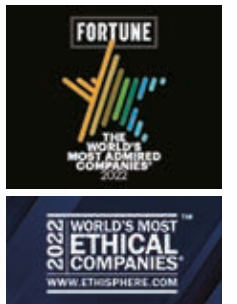


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CAJUN COOLERS



If you had told Branden Brignac that he would grow up to be an HVAC professional and own his own company, he would have looked around and said, “Yep. That makes sense.”

“Everyone in my family is either an electrician or mechanical technician,” he said. “And my mom and stepdad are entrepreneurs.” Branden has enjoyed tinkering with mechanical projects for as long as he can remember. From dirt bikes to lawnmowers and anything else he could get his hands on, he wanted to know how it worked and make it work faster, more efficiently, or simply better. As an HVAC technician, business owner, husband and father, that same passion for doing his best and solving problems still drives him.

Made for This

Growing up, Branden raced motocross and spent many afternoons in the garage with his dad tinkering with various projects. He started a lawn care business in high school, spending the long summer days mowing and man-icuring landscapes throughout town.

“I did that to fund motocross,” he said. “It grew and grew, and since then, I always knew I wanted to own my own business.” He nods to his mom and stepdad for nurturing his entrepreneurial spirit and showing him what’s possible as a business owner.

In pursuit of bettering his business acumen, Branden enrolled at Southeastern Louisiana University. And the lawn care business continued to boom. Soon, he faced a crossroads - He could focus on the lawn company full-time or continue classes at Southeastern. “My parents told me not to give up,” he said. “I could slow down, but my dad especially did not want me to leave college without something to show for it.”

He forged his path through the middle of the crossroad, enrolling in night classes and spending days maintaining the lawn business while a bigger and better idea formed. Through that experience, he refined his business and technical skills and prepared for his next venture. “It was time to get out of the lawn business,” he said. “As soon as I got out of school, I started

working on building what would become Cajun Coolers.”

Worried he lacked the “real-world” experience necessary to succeed in the residential and commercial HVAC industry, his dad stepped up to lend a hand, offer advice, and impart wisdom. “Then we got so busy, and my dad was still working full-time as an operator in local industrial plants. He taught me a lot, and then it was a natural progression. I was on my own. I’ll always have him to go to for knowledge, but that’s when it truly became my business.”

Around 2010, Cajun Coolers became official.

Little Things Make a Big Difference

After over a decade of early mornings, afternoons spent in South Louisiana attics, and more than a handful of phone calls to his dad, Branden has built the reputation of Cajun Coolers as one of Baton Rouge’s most reliable HVAC contracting companies. The high-quality service comes from a small but mighty team.

The Cajun Coolers crew comprises Branden, Josh, Matt, and, most recently, Tyler, who joined as a technician in the Spring.

Because he focuses on providing the best and most knowledgeable service to clients, Branden has opted to grow slowly and is highly selective of his team. "I never take lightly that people trust me and my team to come into their home," he said. "People count on us to do things right. An HVAC system can impact your air and breathing quality, and knowing what's going on with a system is investment protection." The right people have been placed in his life throughout the journey, helping him grow the business while remaining true to his values of honesty, integrity and making things better.

Matt joined Cajun Coolers around 2017, doubling the size of the company crew. "I've known him for a long time, and he told me he was interested in becoming a technician. He's been pivotal in the success of Cajun Coolers ever since."



"I met Josh when he owned his lawn company," Branden recalls. "He was mowing my grass one day and joked that he would sell the business and come work for me. I said, 'I'd hire you.'" Josh didn't have the technician certification or experience working with HVAC systems. "That's the easy part," Branden assured him. "You can go to classes and get a certification. Not to mention that with the technology now, I can help someone fix an AC over FaceTime. But being a good person? That's how you're built."

Matt and Josh, technicians with Cajun Coolers, had no previous HVAC experience when Branden hired them. "But they had the qualities I can't teach," he said. "They care about people, take pride in their work, and have a desire to learn. Everything else can be taught, but being willing to help make someone's day better by going the extra mile, that's way more important to me than the technical skill." Together, they have developed a reputation for honest, fair and detail-oriented service and established Cajun Coolers as the go-to HVAC contractor for many clients and Realtors.

"Everyone deserves to know exactly what they're buying," Branden said. "I'm on your side, I'll fight the insurance or help you any way I can, but I'm never going to lie to you or for you." The little things make all the difference in air quality, good service, and life.

InteGRITY

As the pace of Branden's business has picked up, so has his life at home. He and his wife Amanda have two sons, Bennett, 6, and Beckham, 3. Amanda works full-time as a maternal newborn nurse at Woman's Hospital and part-time as a professional photographer. "We stay busy," Branden said with a sigh and a smile.



The boys both play baseball, with Bennett playing coach's pitch and Beckham just starting tee ball. "It's just a blast watching them play," Branden said. "They are definitely outside kids." They enjoy fishing, though they have yet to venture onto the boat. "I'll have to get dad to plan a short day for taking them," he said, smiling. "My dad prefers to bass fish, but when we have the chance, we find a spot and see what we catch."

Most of all, Bennett and Beckham enjoy riding their small dirt bikes in the acreage behind their home. Watching them ride through the lot with the wind in their hair elicits both nostalgia and a renewed perspective for Branden. "I don't know if they'll follow in my footsteps with motocross," Branden said. "It's pretty dangerous. But as long as they're involved in an activity they enjoy, I'm happy." In raising his boys with Amanda, and as a business owner, Branden is guided by his faith and integrity, with his sights set on the little things that make all the difference.

HVAC Tips For Real Estate Agents & Their Clients:

1 New Home, New Filter. Advise clients to change their air conditioning filters immediately after moving into a new home. "The process of moving in and out of a home can stir up and let in a lot more dust than usual," Branden explains. "We get a lot of calls from clients who recently moved into a home and are experiencing problems, and 95% of the time it's a filter that needs changing."

2 Encourage Pre-Inspections. Home inspections are not HVAC inspections! During an HVAC inspection, technicians connect directly to the system to find errors and malfunctions a general home inspector may not find.

A professional HVAC contractor can assess the system's condition, recommend any necessary repairs or upgrades, and provide documentation of maintenance history

3 1 inch = 1 month. The thicker the filter, the longer it will last. But not every system will function efficiently with a thick filter. Consult with an experienced HVAC contractor on the best filter for your system.

4 An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. That goes for HVAC systems, too. Routine maintenance and repairs are smart investment protection. Cajun Coolers offers quarterly

and annual maintenance packages to keep systems running optimally all year long and help homeowners anticipate costly repairs and replacements.

5 Address HVAC concerns during negotiations. During the negotiation phase, be prepared to address HVAC-related concerns or issues raised by potential buyers. If repairs or upgrades are necessary, work with a reputable HVAC contractor to obtain estimates and present viable solutions to all parties involved. Proactively addressing these concerns can help close deals more smoothly and alleviate buyer apprehension.

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By Breanna Smith
Photos by Ace Sylvester

THE JOURNEY *of the* *Butterfly*

KIMBERLY CHRISTOPHE

Kimberly Christophe didn't know what she would face after speaking up about being a victim of domestic violence. As a successful real estate agent and business owner, she didn't fit the narrative of a domestic violence victim often portrayed by the media. She put on a brave, smiling and confident face and wore the many hats required of a Realtor. Despite the difficulties she faced at home, she was determined to build a successful business and create the life she wanted to provide for her children, Kelvin, 20, Haylie, 14, and Drayce, 10.

For years, Kimberly feared that speaking up would change people's perception of her or even jeopardize her business. The darkness felt all-consuming after losing her mother to cancer two years ago. She leaned on her faith, family and friends to keep pushing forward.

All the while, the invisible threads of life prepared the cocoon from which she would emerge, spread her wings and finally feel the wind beneath them. Now, she's speaking up for women across the community and breaking the stigma by sharing Her Story.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Kimberly's determination to change the narrative, dissolve the stigma, and encourage women to engage with available resources is a pursuit that has led her far outside of her comfort zone. It was time to lean into vulnerability. It was time to tell her story.

In April 2023, Kimberly hosted the first annual *Her Story: The Journey of a Butterfly*.

"We planned for 75 people, then we opened it to 100 people, and when the day came, we had 130 people there," she said.

While her passion and excitement bubbled, so did her anxious thoughts and feelings. "When it comes to my personal life, I'm very guarded, so to get up there in front of 130 people and tell my story as a survivor of domestic abuse, all the things I've gone through in life, and losing my mom to cancer in the midst of it all, that was hard. But it's also necessary. I cried. I went to the doctor. I was so anxious because here I am about to put 14 years of my life on front street."

She tapped into her mission, revealed her truth and let it set her free.



**BEFORE
I WAS SO
ANXIOUS
ABOUT SHARING
MY STORY,
I ALWAYS KEPT MY
GUARD UP. AND NOW,
I'M WALKING
IN MY TRUTH,
EVERYONE
KNOWS IT, &
I AM OKAY.**



"I talked about how my life has been one thing after another, and so many people were able to relate to how I felt and the experiences I lived through," she said. Kimberly received an outpouring of love she never expected and dozens of texts and calls from women who shared their stories. "People tell me about what they have gone through, and all I can say is 'you have to share this. We must get your story out there because you are not alone.'"

Her Story became bigger than Kimberly ever imagined, with more than a dozen sponsors and resource vendors showing up for women from across our community. "People are already asking for more," she said, her eyes getting big. "I know God has a plan for Her Story, but it hasn't been fully revealed yet," Kimberly said with a laugh.

After leaving a violent relationship and starting a new chapter in her life, Kimberly didn't expect her life to change again within a few years. Always trusting in God's plan, she's done everything she can to help those around her and play her part in making their life a little easier.

FLYING HIGH

Before Kimberly began building her career in real estate, she worked as a hospice nurse assistant for over 8 years. There, she learned the intricacies and nuances of the dying process. Friends still call with questions as their loved ones move toward the end of their life. "They want to know what to expect and find out what their loved one is experiencing," she said. "And I make sure to tell them I'm not a nurse, but I can help them understand it better."

When Kimberly's mother, Debbie, was diagnosed with cancer in 2021, Kimberly's world stopped. "I put my life on hold again to take care of her," Kimberly said. "I did everything for my mom. She knew I was her person, her caretaker. She wouldn't agree to a test, surgery, or anything unless I was there. The doctors wouldn't talk to anybody unless it was me. I had them trained," she said with a smile.

Kimberly ensured her mother was treated by the best oncologists and team of medical providers, and took her into her home to care for her full-time. Kimberly and her Aunt Mel, known affectionately as "Crybaby" to her family, took turns caring for her. "We call them Frick and Frack," Kimberly said, laughing. "They talked on the phone every morning on the way to work and did everything together. Their bond was unmatched."

Debbie's doctors reported grim news to Kimberly less than two months after her cancer diagnosis.

"And then came the point when they told me there was nothing else they could do." After hanging up the phone with the doctor, Kimberly raced to her mom's bedside in the hospital. "When I got to her room, I was quiet. She asked me three times what was wrong, and I just started crying. In the 42 days that my mom was ill, I never cried in front of her. I was always her strength and her rock. And at that moment, I broke down crying, but I never answered her. I didn't have to say it. She knew."

Debbie broke the silence with a short but powerful message that Kimberly will always hold dear. "She said, 'Thank you for everything you've done for me.' I'll never forget that moment with her."



Doctors released Debbie to be with Kimberly and her family, and Kimberly knew all too well what would come next. "It was time to administer morphine, and not everyone is strong enough to do that. Of course, you have the hospice nurses there, but they aren't there 24/7. So one family member has to take on that nurse role."

The family gathered, with everyone taking time to speak with Debbie and say their goodbyes. That's when Kimberly's brother, Mike, asked if he should pick up a cake. "A cake?!" Kimberly asked with a raised eyebrow. "It's Mel's birthday tomorrow," he reminded her.

"I knew I had a choice to make," Kimberly said. "I had to go tell mom it was time. She rolled her eyes at me so hard I felt the slap. See, I had to tell her there was no way she could go on Mel's birthday, she would never celebrate another birthday if she lost her big sister that day, so we had to prepare for today. She shook her head and said 'ok' and the meds started rapidly at that point."

FLOAT LIKE A BUTTERFLY...

After Kimberly and Ricki Davis shared their stories and prayed with the attendees at Her Story, Kimberly had one more surprise waiting.

Everyone gathered outside with small packets in their hand, and Ricki led a prayer asking God to help each woman there release the fears holding them back and the stories they have to tell. They said amen and opened the packets, releasing a kaleidoscope of butterflies into the breezy afternoon air.

"No one knew we were going to do that," Kimberly said. "Seeing their faces light up as they fluttered around was breathtaking."

In that moment, Kimberly felt overwhelming relief wash over her. "Before I was so anxious about sharing my story, I always kept my guard up," she said. "And now, I'm walking in my truth, everyone knows it, and I am okay."

She carries the words of Roy T. Bennett with her on her new journey. "If you want to fly, you have to give up what weighs you down."

"I don't know where God is leading me, I might be at the State Capitol with a bill in a year. I don't know. But I know that something has to be done in our community, and first, we must acknowledge that there is a domestic violence problem."



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Bethany GRUBBBS



▶ rising star

By Danielle Kidwell
Photos by Ace Sylvester

Cars have always been a part of Bethany Grubbs' life, as her dad was into old cars, so it's no surprise she fell for her husband, Wes, an avid racing enthusiast. "We lived in a small, rural Mississippi town," she laughs. "The local teenager hangout was simply a parking lot, and that's where we met." Married for 18 years, Bethany and Wes share their enthusiasm for racing with their 17-year-old son, eponymously named Grayson. Bethany says, "My maiden name is Gray, so his name carries deep meaning." The family is active in endurance racing, specifically, a race called 24 Hours of Lemons, a series of endurance races held on paved road race courses across the United States. The series holds the Guinness World Record for the "Most participants in one race". The Grubbs own a race car and along with Wes' father, three generations of their family are involved in the sport. It was racing that nudged Bethany into real estate.

"We rented when we first moved here, then bought a house," Bethany recalls. "But Wes and Grayson were driving back and forth to Mississippi where we kept the car, so we decided to buy a piece of land and build a house with a workshop." Bethany's love for design and attention to detail became evident as she took an active role in customizing her own home. She discovered that she loved the process and decided to begin a career in real estate. In August 2019, she completed an online course and passed the licensing exam in October on her first attempt. Bethany has learned a lot in the first three-and-a-half years of her career.

"I joined the mentorship program at Keller Williams," she explains. "But I also had to figure out a lot on my own." Nowadays, she mentors new agents just getting into the business. She advises, "Do your research and learn as much as you can, but don't be afraid to dive in and learn as you go." That piece of advice was one of Bethany's hardest lessons, as she likes to know

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Do your research and learn as much as you can, BUT DON'T BE AFRAID TO DIVE IN AND LEARN AS YOU GO.

something completely before speaking about it. "A lot of people are scared to make a mistake instead of trying to make something work," she says. "But every transaction is a learning opportunity and I have learned the value of patience and asking questions." That probing, patient approach is something she naturally developed in her previous career.

"I was a stay-at-home mom with various side jobs for ten years," Bethany says. "Before that, I worked for ten years for a private practice psychiatrist." She learned a lot of valuable lessons interacting with people who were in varying states of vulnerability, stress, and angst. "In the world of psychiatry we believed that people need to know you understand them," she says. "You don't always have to argue your point, instead listen to where they are coming from and work to find a resolution." She continues, "If they're upset and you can





understand and solve it, then it's over."

Empathy and compassion are strong skills, but they aren't the only reasons for Bethany's success. She has a strong work ethic and put in long hours building her business when she first started as a real estate agent. "It's not easy and you have to keep plugging along and putting yourself out there," she says. "I didn't do my first deal for nine months." Bethany remembers when she first got her license, others advised her to keep calling people. She says, "I didn't know how to make the first call, who to call, or what to say." While she admits it was difficult, she gained some valuable local knowledge as well. "I had lived here for 13 years but didn't know my way around that well," she recalls. "When I got into real estate I spent the first few months getting to know the area better as I worked to build my business."

Bethany loves our area and all it has to offer. "I love Louisiana because there is always something to do, and there are plenty of new places to explore," she enthuses. "We live five miles outside of the city so it still feels more rural like my hometown, but we get to experience the vibrant, big-city vibe when we go into town." Bethany is proud of the country home that she designed and built, and is particularly pleased with the pool she recently completed. "Just this last year I designed and built our pool," she says proudly. "My real estate career has afforded me the ability to pay for extra luxuries like the pool and other custom designs that I love to do."

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Laura Buck Smith can brighten a room with her infectious smile, intuitive curiosity, and expertly styled furniture staging - as seen on HGTV. No, really. Laura has appeared on HGTV two times, once on “Bang for Your Buck” and once on “My Lottery Dream Home.” She has a true love for homes and home design, and finding the perfect home for her clients.

SPouses Selling Houses

Laura and her husband Steven are the Team Leaders at Team Smith and owners of The Market Real Estate Co. “Yes, we do work together, but we aren’t literally showing and listing houses together, we would probably get in each other’s way!” Laura laughs. She and Steven work together but in their own spheres of the business. He is the Broker/Owner of The Market Real Estate Co., and Team Leader of Team Smith and Laura is also Team Leader of Team Smith and owner of The Market Real Estate Co. “We are both really hard workers and risk takers, and our attitude is ‘sure, we can do it!’ When we started selling real estate almost 20 years ago, we started with pretty much no money in our account. But, we both believed in ourselves, our work ethic, and in each other and said, ‘Let’s do this.’

They have always enjoyed working together and discussing real estate, a career Laura

“always saw herself in.” In 2004, they earned their licenses and got to work. “He got into real estate three months after me, so I tease him that I’m more experienced,” Laura says. Now, they are at the helm of The Market Real Estate Co. brokerage and Team Smith, with offices in Louisiana and Alabama. The idea for growth to an Alabama office started when Mary Birch, a top agent on the team, relocated to Mobile for her husband’s job. “She came to us about starting an office for Team Smith there, and we said, “We’ll support you in whatever you do.” Laura continues, “Steven got his broker’s license in Alabama, so now we have The Market and Team Smith in Alabama and Louisiana!” she says with a clap.

Laura and Steve stay busy with their 16-year-old daughter Wesleigh, a sophomore at St. Michael High School, and three bonus blessings -Blayde, Blayne and Leah. Laura says, laughing. The kids have brought so much joy

cover story

By Breanna Smith
Photos by Ace Sylvester





“

I was always the kid at school whose mom made cookies for all of the janitors, lunch ladies and support staff. She always encouraged me to look around and ask, *‘Who can I help today?’*

to the Smith household. “Tonight we have Fancy Family Dinner Night - That includes candles down the table, everybody must dress up with the boys wearing suits, and they want the girls to be dressed up and to be beautiful, and for dinner- the kids want tacos. I said, ‘Okay, I think we can make that work!’

The family also enjoys weekly Linner, lunch and dinner, with Wesley and Laura’s Dad, Gordon Buck, known fondly as Grampa to everyone. Steven and Laura love spending weekends on the water taking out their party barge, where they often stop to pray at Our Lady of Blind River Chapel, a tiny church accessible only by boat. During the week, they are a well-oiled machine, shuffling kids to their many extracurricular activities while balancing the real estate business and the demands of everyday life. “We don’t miss a beat,” Laura says, beaming.

GIVING & GROWING

“Steven and I started The Christmas Give about 15 years ago out of our garage, with the goal of adopting a needy family for Christmas in our community who may otherwise get overlooked,” Laura explains. “We went to a house, with a family that was in need, to deliver Christmas goodies and we were so disappointed by what we personally brought - we brought a Christmas cake from Ambrosia and a bunch of toys...but they were starving and cold. They were so poor they literally locked their front door with a rubber band on a nail. What the kids really wanted and needed was socks, blankets and food. Steven and I stood in that front yard and cried, then we went to Walmart and came back with things they truly needed.” The annual Christmas Give began. Since then, the Smiths have connected hundreds of families to resources and necessities during the Christmas season with the help of dedicated volunteers who come back year after year to serve. “We now have

over 150 incredible volunteers, plus one stand out volunteer Christie Viso who helps The Christmas Give also be able to adopt an entire school for Christmas. The Renaissance Hotel also lets us use a large ballroom each year to accept, sort and coordinate donations. “The Christmas Give is huge. It’s way bigger than Steven and I now, and it’s been such a blessing to watch it grow!” She adds, “Jesus tells us in the Bible (Matthew 25:40) that when you pass up helping someone hungry, lonely, cold or in prison, you passed a chance to help Him, and I am not passing up Jesus!”

FINDING YOUR SUPERPOWER

For Laura, real estate is a career she feels blessed to get to do - helping people solve problems happens to be what she loves doing. “Today, I was sitting with my dear clients whose house flooded years ago during Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. I helped them get a high and dry house in Gonzales 16 years ago, and now they are moving back to New Orleans to be closer to family. For them to call me back again, to now sell their home is such an honor, it’s truly an honor to be with them through all of these stages in their life. And I always say, ‘I can’t believe I’m in a career where I get to do that, and I get paid’, because I would have done that anyway. I love helping people!”

Laura has searched for ways to be a giver for as long as she can remember. It’s an outlook on life instilled in her by her mother, who recently passed away. “When I was growing up, my mom would always look for those that had the least among us and to be kind to them,” she says. “I was always the kid at school whose mom made cookies for all of the janitors, lunch ladies and support staff. She always encouraged me to look around and ask, ‘Who can I help today?’ That simple question guides how she does business and leads Team Smith with The Market Real Estate Co.



“ I want everyone to find their superpower. ”

Tuesdays are a big deal at Team Smith. That's when everyone meets for prayer and devotional, grabs a cup of coffee in the custom, personalized mugs Laura had made for everyone, and discusses upcoming listings, current market trends, problem-solving, and real estate training. "I want everyone to find their superpower," Laura says. God gave each of us gifts, and I want to encourage each agent on our team to use their personal gifts and talents so that we can serve and help our clients to the best of our ability.

In their nearly 20 years in real estate together, Laura and Steven have seemingly done it all –from bringing alpacas to the office to spread some cheer, to establishing a massive annual donation drive, to renovating beautiful office space and expanding into other markets. Team Smith has checked all of the boxes consistently ranking as a top-producing real estate powerhouse in not only Louisiana and Alabama, but in America as ranked by Real Trends America's Best Top 1% producing teams across the country year after year.

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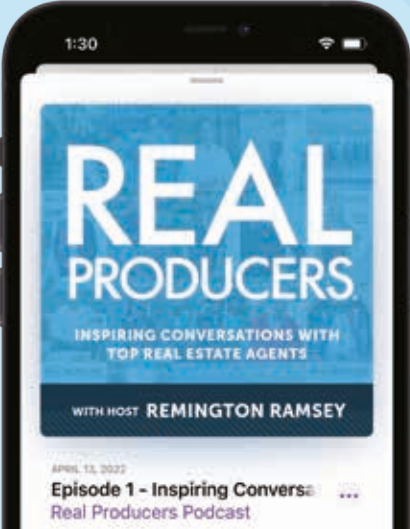
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