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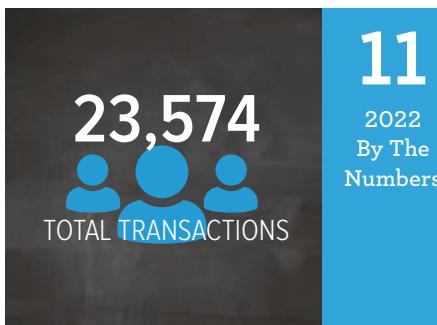
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▶ cover story

Written by Nick Ingrisani Photography by Marissa McCutchan



MAURICE WATKINS

FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS IN BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA TO A STORIED CAREER IN THE MARINE CORPS, MAURICE WATKINS' LIFE STORY IS ONE OF RESILIENCE AND TRIUMPH. NOW HE'S BECOME A STAPLE OF THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA REAL ESTATE MARKET.

Maurice had a challenging upbringing in Louisiana. For four years he slept on his friend's back porch, dreaming of owning his own place one day and that he'd do something important with his life. He just didn't know what it was at the time.

He decided to join the Marine Corps in 1995 and had a 22-year career there, earning the rank of E8 First Sergeant. While at the Marine Corps, he also earned an Associate's degree, two Bachelor's degrees, and a Master's degree in human resources. He also taught various classes in the Marines including subjects like war fighting, essay writing, and mentorship.

Then in 2011, a friend told him that he'd make a good real estate agent. He was skeptical at first, but when he saw how well his friend was doing in the industry and also how poorly his own agent was when he bought his first home, he decided to make the jump and get his license in 2016.

The first five months were a struggle to build a foundation, but he steadily built up his presence on social media. Then he thought back to when

he was buying a home and how he didn't understand VA home loans at the time. "I knew that if I didn't know about it that there must be other veterans who didn't either." Maurice began teaching about VA home loans to his network of veterans and that helped him grow tremendously. By 2019, he'd tripled his business.

Now he's the leader of the Warrior's Group – a dynamic real estate team of 15 people who are mostly retired Marines, active duty, or Marine Corps wives. "My team is my backbone. I would not be anywhere without my team. These guys have stuck with me since the beginning and believe in me even when I don't believe in myself."

The discipline instilled in Maurice from the Marine Corps gave him a tenacity and drive that propelled him to real estate success. He dedicated himself to knowing all the ins and outs of the industry and his education shows in every client interaction. He's aware that not every day will be good – the important thing is to keep moving forward despite all obstacles.

**“ MY TEAM IS MY BACKBONE.
I WOULD NOT BE ANYWHERE
WITHOUT MY TEAM.**

These guys have stuck with me since
the beginning and believe in me even
when I don't believe in myself.





**I want to be that go-to
guy to help people
invest and make a
future for themselves.**

One of Maurice's main hobbies these days is real estate investing, which he got into in 2020. By diving into real estate investing for himself, he can share that knowledge with thousands of other veterans who aren't aware of the benefits they can receive for their service. "I want to be that go-to guy to help people invest and make a future for themselves."

Looking into the future, Maurice plans to continue scaling his business and helping the people who work under him grow theirs

as well. He's also a loan broker and is aiming to scale that nationwide while continuing to grow his real estate footprint in the Southern California market.

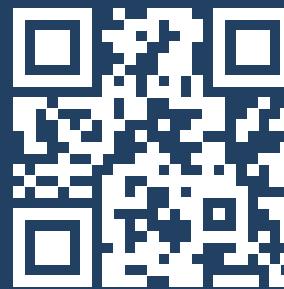
He also cherishes time spent with his family and shuts down his business at 6:30 p.m. every day, no matter what. Financial success is great, but when asked what success means to him it's clear what's most important in life: "Success is when everyone that I care about loves me. That I'm in loving relationships with the people closest to me."



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Green Home SOLUTIONS

A California native with a passion for eco-friendly home solutions, James brings a Minnesota “nice” mentality to his business and life. He’s a dedicated family man and entrepreneur who’s driven to continue helping clients in the Inland Empire and beyond.

James grew up in Laguna Beach, CA, but his family roots are from the Midwest in Minnesota. He played soccer growing up and ended up getting to a semi-pro level. Then he studied at San Diego State University and met his wife who was going to the University of San Diego. They got engaged in Rome while traveling through Europe for nine months after college, thanks to the flight discounts his mom got from being a flight attendant.

After traveling he moved to Los Angeles to work in financial services in 2000 and continued until 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the traditional way of conducting business. With a long-standing desire to be a business owner, James seized the opportunity presented by the pandemic.

He had experience flipping houses and once encountered a massive mold problem in one of his properties. That experience showed him the importance of proper remediation and the health hazards associated with indoor air quality. Using funds he had accumulated from a successful investment, he decided to purchase a Green Home Solutions franchise location in 2021.

James continued working in financial services while growing Green Home Solutions for that first year. By 2022, the company had grown tremendously thanks to his detail-oriented approach, consistent work ethic, and Minnesota mentality of niceness. “They always taught me the importance of helping people, doing honest work, and standing by that work.”





“

Happier employees do better work and can go home at the end of the day and spend time with their families.

THAT'S BEEN A GREAT PART TOO. TO HIRE PEOPLE AND BENEFIT THOSE FAMILIES AS WELL.

”

The company's focus on eco-friendly solutions was a natural fit for James, who recognized the harmful effects of chemicals left behind by traditional cleaning products, especially for families with children and pets. While some property managers just hire the company for remediation or air quality testing, James notes that Green Home Solutions can do it all. They offer the full spectrum for clients which includes testing, inspection, remediation, and testing again to ensure that the problem is solved. They also offer home inspection services and have a probiotic quarterly spray that brings beneficial bacteria into a home to eat the bad bacteria and keep viruses at bay.

James' approach to the real estate business and working with agents is centered around being responsive, organized, and available. Since everything is on a tight timetable in real estate, he's intent on getting back to people as fast as possible and getting the job done right every time. The faster they

respond to an issue, the easier it is for everyone involved. “It's just the way I'm built. I like to make sure everyone is in the right place at the right time and get everything done as quickly as possible.”

James currently owns Green Home Solutions Inland Empire and is working on opening another location in South Bay. He takes pride in being able to hire good people and offering an enjoyable work-life balance. “Happier employees do better work and can go home at the end of the day and spend time with their families. That's been a great part too. To hire people and benefit those families as well.”

Outside of his business, James enjoys traveling with his family, spending time on soccer fields to support his kids' high-level athletic pursuits, and spending time on the beach. He has three kids, two dogs, and a big extended family with thirteen nieces and nephews, so they're always coming together for large family gatherings.

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“That helped spark my entrepreneurial side and definitely made it that I always want to work for myself.”

► rising stars

Written by Nick Ingrisani
Photography by Marissa McCutchan

CLAUDIA ANDY SOTO

CLAUDIA IS PART OF THE FIRST GENERATION OF HER FAMILY IN THE UNITED STATES – HER MOTHER IS FROM MEXICO CITY AND HER STEP-DAD IS FROM GUATEMALA.

Growing up in and around her parents' upholstery business, Claudia began working at a young age. Since her parents' English wasn't very good, she'd often be the main person at the front desk, even when she was just 12 years old. “That helped spark my entrepreneurial side and definitely made it that I always want to work for myself.”

Claudia went to the University of California Riverside and married her husband, Andy, at that time. Andy was in the military, which brought them to Texas for a few years before returning back to Southern California. Real estate was always on Claudia's radar, so with their basic needs taken care of by Andy's military service and a growing family, they decided it was time to jump in.

Andy and Claudia both got their real estate licenses in the summer of 2019 and went all in

on real estate together. In the beginning, it was harder than they expected, but they enjoyed learning about the business and all the flexibility that came with it. They also worked through initial challenges together to establish clear boundaries between their business and home life and find a steady groove.

Claudia's father passed in 2021 and her mother's health was declining shortly after due to stress and the loss of her husband. But she was adamant about the potential of “turning tragedy into something positive.” She and Andy put even more effort into growing their business and by the end of 2021 were getting more consistent deals coming in. Then in 2022 they really saw the fruits of their labor and knew they had something special. In the spring of that year, they had made enough money to retire Claudia's mom.



They've spearheaded their real estate business with a strong social media presence and leveraging their existing network in the area. Now, 90% of their business is from social media with an emphasis on new construction clients. Like them, most of their clients are first-generation Americans living out the dream of their ancestors. This helps them to relate to many of their clients on a deeper level and establish a quick rapport.

Above all, it's their unwavering dedication to each client's best interests that has helped them build such a positive reputation in their area. "If you have a good heart and look out for your clients' best interest, it's going to open up way more doors for you than if you're just looking out for yourself."

Since Andy and Claudia homeschool their kids, flexibility is incredibly important to their lifestyle. Their goal for the future is to build up their business to a point where they leverage it and spend as much time as possible with their kids. Ultimately, their business serves their desire to have a good life with their family.

“If you have a good heart and look out for your clients' best interest, it's going to open up way more doors for you than if you're just looking out for yourself.



Leanne Austin is a top-producing agent who grew up in the Inland Empire. In 2019, she opened her own brokerage with another top agent, Tina Hambleton. By merging their 40+ years of combined expertise, they have built a thriving business centered on putting their clients' needs above all else.



LEANNE AUSTIN

Written by Nick Ingrisani Photography by Marissa McCutchan

Leanne was born and raised in the Inland Empire. Her interest in real estate was sparked at 10 years old when her parents bought their home in Riverside. Her father was a contractor, so she got to watch him build walls, repair electrical issues, and renovate the home. But she was also part of the process. Leanne created wall treatments, made curtains, and stripped and repainted original brass hardware... whatever she could get her hands on, she learned the ins and outs of the process. And the family did it all again together with another home.

When she was 19 years old she interviewed with several brokers and was told she'd need to cut her hair and wear a suit, but she wasn't into the idea of changing her personality or appearance to fit in. Leanne put the idea on the back burner but continued learning everything she could about home design and real estate. After getting married, she designed and remodeled every inch of their first home. She then had the opportunity to work for a couple of local contractors, expanding her knowledge in home construction and developing a discerning eye for design and décor.

Once her kids were all in school, she decided it was time to combine her passions and knowledge into a real estate career. She got her license in 2004 and has since built a thriving real estate business.

Leanne met Tina Hambleton in 2014 while serving on the Agent Leadership Council. Tina grew up in Pittsburgh and has been living in Riverside, CA for over 30 years. She got licensed in 2002, so the duo now has a combined 40+ years of experience in the industry. They quickly discovered that they had a similar approach and mindset toward the industry, along with an affinity for working with senior citizens.

"We both really value our clients and put them first and just have a different work ethic and mentality about the business than many agents do." They decided to join forces and become a team shortly after.

Although they help buyers and sellers at all stages of the real estate process, they've chosen to specialize in probate, trust sales and distressed sales, and working closely with banks, attorneys, and conservators.

Leanne's design experience offers sellers the opportunity to sell their homes in a turnkey, updated condition to maximize their investment.

66

**WE BOTH REALLY
VALUE OUR CLIENTS
AND PUT THEM FIRST**
and just have a different
work ethic and mentality
about the business than
many agents do.

But only if it truly makes sense for their financial situation. "We help them work through all the details of the design process. If we put this dollar amount in, will it create a return for the client or not? We only recommend updates to a home if it's beneficial to the client. I'm very hands-on with what needs to happen and take care of all the project management for them." Tina also has property management experience and is their managing broker.

Leanne refers to their partnership as yin and yang. Tina brings a more direct, business-focused approach to clients, while Leanne offers more empathy and guidance through the process. Together, they offer a personalized and enjoyable experience for every client, no matter their background or needs. "We give clients the best of both worlds."

In 2019, the duo decided to take their business to the next level and open their own brokerage called Box Properties. They have a gorgeous office in the heart of Riverside in the Brockton Arcade where they host many community meetings. Although there are few other agents on the team, Leanne and Tina plan to keep the team small so they can stay hands-on with their clients. They're hyper-focused on each client always having an exceptional experience at every step of the way.

"It's not always about getting the sale. Some home buyers are so excited about finding a home that they will let a cool feature or a redone kitchen distract them from the big picture. If it's not the right house for the individual, then it's not the right one. A lot of agents will write the offer right away, but I'll talk people out of it if it's not a good idea."

Overall, it's their unique blend of expertise, commitment to clients, and complementary partnership that makes them a standout real estate team in the Inland Empire. No doubt, the future is bright for Box Properties.



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Coming from humble beginnings, Loren's journey into real estate is a testament to his work ethic and adaptability. Whether he's supporting youth development through his baseball program or helping clients in real estate, he's intent on giving back to his community.

Loren's upbringing in Orange, California, was far from privileged. Raised in a low-income apartment in a small Oregon town called Muddle Point before moving to Orange, he learned the value of hard work and determination early on. Even when attending Villa Park High School, a place often associated with wealth, Loren's background was more modest than people would assume.

He went into business right out of high school, stumbling into an opportunity to sell sports cards under his company, Loren's Sports Card Connection. It began with him selling out of a display case in a sports apparel store and then evolved "into a business I wasn't expecting".

Loren sold sports cards for a while then went to work for Coca-Cola in their sales department. In his time there, recruiters would often try to get him to become a loan officer. Eventually, he got recruited by Coors to join their sales team and decided to try home loans on the side in 2004. If you worked for a corporation you didn't need a license to be a loan officer.





But once Loren looked into getting his license, and the higher commission that comes with it, he decided to make a shift. He transitioned to working for a broker handling both real estate and home loans and obtained his license in 2010. Loren's expertise in real estate finance became a valuable asset, allowing him to provide comprehensive guidance to clients.

He's always been passionate about marketing and the strategy behind it, which he used to market to buyers, sellers, and for his own business. "Get your phone ringing and your door swinging – that was always fun for me. Any agent can put a home on the market, but very few can actually market your home."

When combining his passion for marketing with his broad background in customer service, sales, and home loans, he was in a great position to be a real

estate agent. He joined Keller Williams in 2014 and has been steadily growing his business with them ever since.

Away from his real estate business, Loren indulges in his other passion: being Coach Loren in the La Sierra Little League. Each Spring and Fall, he gets revved up to lead his eager 4 to 8-year-old players through another fun season. Loren relishes in the annual ritual of seeing the familiar, smiling faces returning for another season

“
It's been beneficial to be able to answer people's financial questions and not have to refer them out.
I've gained more credibility with buyers that way.
”



while looking forward to a new group of kids wanting to learn the sport. If you ask him, Loren will recall how this part of his "dream life" started like it was yesterday. "If a kid becomes passionate about something it develops character. They learn so much of life's lessons and the family really bonds and it brings them closer together."

Although he didn't plan to market his real estate business there, it's been a serendipitous game-changer for his business

and a fantastic way for him to expand his sphere of influence in the area. "Over time those people would request me on Facebook and see the Facebook business page where I put up all of my listings and videos congratulating people who just closed. It just grew from people taking notice of what I was doing."

In 2020, Loren took the exam for his loan originator license. "It's been beneficial to be able to answer people's financial questions and not have to

refer them out. I've gained more credibility with buyers that way."

Now Loren has a small team of people supporting his business, including his wife. Outside of work, he enjoys going to Dodgers baseball games – especially traveling to see them play in other stadiums. He also loves getting out into nature to camp or fish. He and his wife have four daughters and four grandchildren, so spending time with family is meaningful whenever they can.

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