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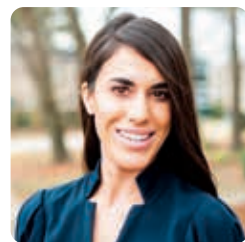
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<p>08 Meet the Peninsula Real Producers Team</p>		<p>10 Real Producer: Momo Hlaing</p>		<p>18 On the Rise: Lacey Whitaker</p>
	<p>22 Partner Spotlight: Craig Smith, Kitchen Tune-Up</p>		<p>26 Featured Agent: Maria Christian</p>		<p>31 FAQ</p>

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► real producer

Story by Maddie Podish
Photos by Susan Fowler, Fowler Studios

Hi Momo Hlaing

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From childhood, Momo Hlaing, Associate Broker, Bell Tower Real Estate Team powered by eXp Realty, learned the value of honesty from her parents, who raised her in Burma, a Southeast Asian country. “They told me honesty is the best policy,” Momo explains, adding with a chuckle, “It will be best if I stay truthful inside and out as I am an open book and cannot hide how I feel. Honesty is the foundation of my business now, and I’m grateful for my parents instilling it in me early.”

Her honesty and straightforwardness naturally gravitated her to math. “Numbers don’t lie, and understanding almost everything when we can quantify the subject matter is easier — from PICRA repairs to RBC counts to how thick the tarmac needs be,” she explains. Her Bachelor of Economic Statistics later led her to the position of Development Model Data Analyst for the United Nations. Driven to shine a light on the darker side of her home country, Momo looked past the fear of imprisonment and helped translate political prisoners’ letters so the world would know the truth. Her parents were unaware of her actions until her boss’s unfortunate arrest. Within two weeks of the news breaking, her parents, fearing for her safety, obtained a passport for her and flew her to Singapore without a single goodbye to those she knew. “During these years, I lived out of two suitcases and would country hop when not working,” Momo shares. “My friends and I would compete to see who could have the most stamps in our passports. We would bus across the borders just to get a visa stamp.”



After four years, Momo moved to the United States as a political asylee. For the past 25 years, she has developed a deep appreciation for our country and the endless opportunities it offers. Among these opportunities was building a business in Washington, DC, where she ran multiple gift shops along Pennsylvania Avenue while attending classes to complete her master's degree in accounting. "Then came one wonderful yet extremely challenging baby, and I had to sell my share to my business partner and stop the school," she explains. When her husband's job relocated them to Williamsburg, she knew she needed to decide between finishing her degree or rebuilding the business while still taking care of her family. "My neighbor was a REALTOR® and said, 'Momo, why don't you become a REALTOR®? You only work during appointments.' He lied," Momo laughs.

Overwhelmed by a challenging first year, she regained her confidence upon securing a position as a buyer's agent with Mike Remy's team. "I was on the verge of leaving the industry, and Mike and Danielle truly saved my career," she states. "I am eternally grateful for the Remy's team." Balancing a healthy work-life balance was also an early challenge for Momo. "Learning to delegate tasks is an art itself," she explains. "I think as REALTORS®, most of us have Type-A personalities, which make delegating to gain some hours back difficult."



Custom Builders C. Roger McLellon (left) and Brian McLellon (right), Marquee Homes, Inc.

Now running a team of seven agents, Momo knows how hands-on training and having an accountability partner can change the trajectory of a career. At the core of her team's operations lie trust and honesty, fostering an environment where team members can rely on one another for support. This approach is rooted in her success, which enabled her to forge long-standing client relationships. "My clients respect my honesty," she comments. "They may not like what I say, but they know I am telling them the truth. I have gained friends I would never have known through real estate."



Momo's love for knowledge drives her to proactively educate her clients. Her business has evolved during the 19 years she's been licensed, and she predominantly works with investors. "I'm helping my previous clients build their rental portfolios and guide them through one of the longer processes of real estate," she notes. "I can look at the numbers and know what will and won't work. I fell in love with the research and math that came with my degree and have come full circle by being able to apply that to my clients' investments."

Describing herself as a simple person, Momo defines success as happiness. "Success to me is being happy where I am and where I see myself going," she smiles. Spending time watching movies, hiking and visiting museums with her family are a few of her favorite activities. "I'm a huge fan of hiking," she mentions. "Whether it's freezing, raining or beautiful outside, that's where I can recenter myself." A love for numbers runs in the family; her husband, Myat, is a network systems architect, and the challenging baby, Zaw (now 21), works as a state auditor in Richmond. The only family member who does not work with numbers is her fat gray cat, who would do anything to get Doritos for a snack.

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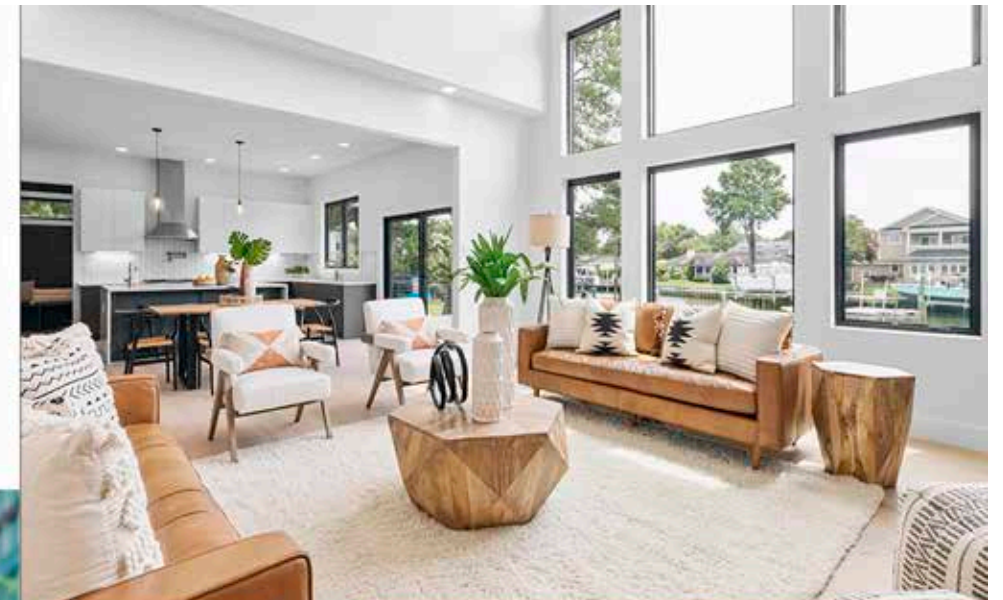
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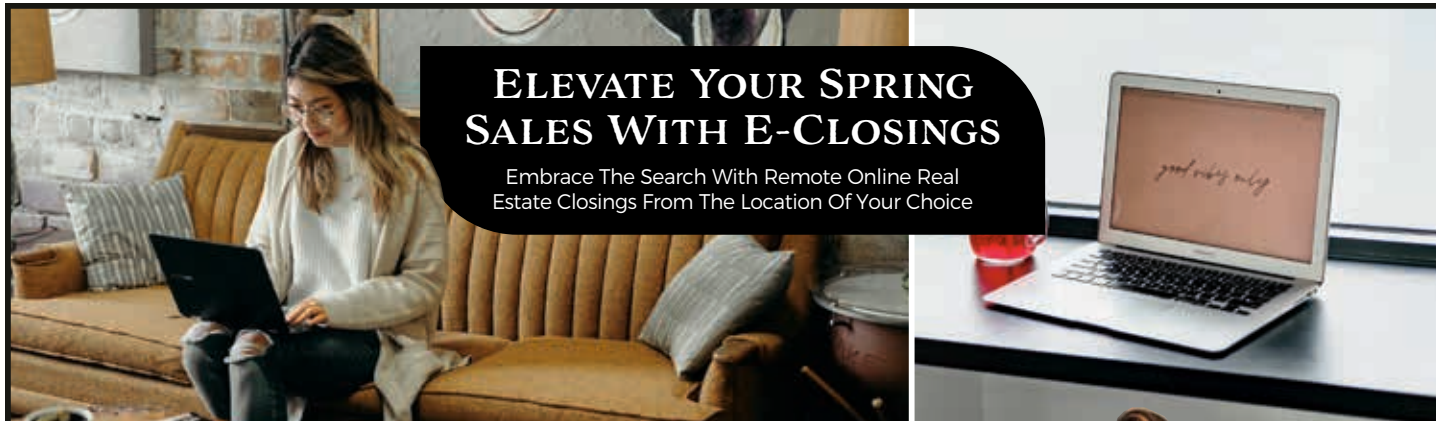
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LACEY AWEIGH Real Estate WHITAKER

▶ on the rise

Story by Dan Steele
Photos by Charles Townsend Photography

Military life presents unique challenges, with relocating often accompanying new duty orders. Buying and selling a home is one of the most constant and complex hurdles that service members and their families face. As a veteran and current active-duty military spouse, Lacey Whitaker understands the obstacles they face from personal experience. “My husband is active duty, and we lived overseas for seven years,” she relates. “Prior to that, I was in the Army for six years.”

Originally from Hawaii and having lived in South Korea, Japan, Alaska and North Carolina, Lacey is deeply familiar with the difficulties of moving, which fuels her passion for helping families, especially those in the military, find safe and affordable places to live. “They are being forced to move into an unknown place that, for most of them, is more expensive than the last,” she explains, “and they trust me to find them homes that are safe and sound and are not going to fall apart in the short time they are living here.”

With the average tour of duty lasting three to five years, most military members and families Lacey helps are only in the area for the short-term. While housing is available on base, many wish to avoid it because the quality is better off base. “Many have poor maintenance and heavy mold, which isn’t healthy,” Lacey states. “In addition, those in base housing



have little to no agency on the state of their dwelling; they can’t modify or improve it and must live with what they are assigned.” Her clients must approach real estate differently than many civilians because they will likely have to sell before long, and she is there for them. “I am passionate about being the resource they need and trust,” she says. “My mission is to make sure they aren’t just giving away money but, instead, find place to live where they are free to do as they please, with their money going into an investment that can yield them rewards in the future that they can use for their next home.”

Lacey found real estate and the opportunities it presented during one of her military moving experiences. Transferred by the military to the North Pole, AK, when she and her family purchased their home there, the REALTOR® recognized that she had the right personality for a career in real estate and asked her to become a showing agent for him. “He wanted vacations out of Alaska,” laughs Lacey. After a year of training and working alongside him, the first day she obtained her license in 2021, Lacey put two homes under contract, a sign of things to come. “So much for being a showing agent, right?” she muses. “Things just exploded from there, and real estate quickly became a career.”

The knowledge that she is helping families invest in their future is the most gratifying part of her work. Her empathy for her clients’ situations drives her to treat every family she serves like her own, and she understands what home means to her clients. “Just this year, I had a new client reach out to me about finding a home,” Lacey explains. “The military was moving them here, and the husband’s mom, Pat, was here locally. I would meet her at the homes to see them.” Bonding with Pat over their



mutual love of art and baking, Lacey helped the family find a beautiful house that backed up to the woods so the daughters could run around and play in nature. “But do you know the best part?” Lacey relates elatedly. “The house was walking distance to Pat’s. In this military life, you are rarely near family. Just knowing we found a home for them where they grow up surrounded by the love and support of their Grammy gave me goosebumps.”

Lacey prides herself on building relationships and always being available for her clients, with no set work hours and striving to always respond to clients who contact her. In her eyes, clients are more than just clients; they become friends, and she wants them to remember her as agent who always goes above and beyond. To this end, as a closing gift to every client, she gives a personalized serving tray and a one-year home warranty. “It helps alleviate financial strain if something goes wrong in the home in that first year,” she comments.

When she is not working hard for her clients and their dreams, Lacey loves to travel and spend time with friends, but most of all, she treasures time with her family. “I am very busy, so when I get free time at home or on the weekends, I fill it with as much family time as I can,” she shares. “I have an amazing husband, Daniel; two amazing daughters, Brookley and Amelia; and my mother-in-law, Donna, who just moved in with us.” Together, Lacey and her family love to bake, watch the Carolina Panthers and take trips to Busch Gardens and the beach.

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CRAIG SMITH

▶ partner spotlight

Story by Maddie Podish
Photos by Susan Fowler, Fowler Studios

Kitchen Tune-Up

Ready to give your clients the “tune-up” of a lifetime? Say hello to Craig Smith, owner of Kitchen Tune-Up and Bath Tune-Up. Originally from Mississippi, Craig has experienced the struggles of relocating while working for FedEx as an executive for 20 years, a job that moved him to a new location every two years. After retiring from FedEx, he received an offer to be the CEO of a privately held transportation company. With his three children and six grandchildren in Virginia, he retired from his position after 15 years to be closer to them.

Retirement didn't last long for Craig. In 2020, the opportunity presented itself to purchase a franchise, something he had always wanted to do. Kitchen Tune-Up and Bath Tune-Up in Williamsburg has become a family affair. Craig smiles, “Our daughter, Jordan; son, Tyler; and son-in-law, Sam, work in the business with me and my wife, Shelley. She is the boss. Our third child, Andelyn, lives in Waynesboro, VA, but will hopefully be in the business one day.” When not helping homeowners bring their dream kitchen or bath to life, the family enjoys relaxing together, frequently over meals or while boating.

The Kitchen Tune-Up team prides itself on delivering a comprehensive suite of remodeling services tailored to enhance clients' kitchens and bathrooms. “We can ‘tune up’ and restore wood-stained cabinets, install new cabinetry, paint, reface kitchens and redoor with new color and style,” shares Craig. Additionally, their provision of countertops, backsplashes and flooring and adeptness in managing electrical and plumbing tasks exemplifies a commitment to providing a holistic remodeling experience. By offering everything under one roof, they simplify the process for customers, making it convenient and hassle-free to achieve their desired renovations.

The company's craftsmanship and core values set it apart. Craig elaborates, "Our core values drive every interaction and service we offer. We listen, arrive on time, respect your home and instill an open line of communication." Above all, they are committed to delivering outstanding customer service, going above and beyond to exceed expectations. "Seeing a client's face light up after a remodel is complete and pure joy," Craig describes.

Recognizing the paramount importance of their clients' time, the team provides tune-ups in one to five days, swiftly and affordably revitalizing kitchens and bathrooms. With this rapid completion time, sellers can confidently set their homes apart without fear of delaying their listing going live. For buyers and homeowners looking to upgrade a kitchen or bathroom, this efficient process allows them to seamlessly incorporate their style without disrupting their daily lives or exceeding their budget.

A recent Google review from a client encompasses everything Kitchen Tune-Up sets out to be. "Hiring Kitchen Tune-Up to remodel my kitchen was one of the best decisions I have ever made! They were extremely responsive to my questions and concerns. Craig, Tyler or Sam were always available and never made me feel like I was expecting too much. All of their employees and subs were hardworking and polite and never left anything completed that wasn't done well. I am already thinking of a bathroom remodel, and without any hesitation, I will be contacting KTU! No reservations about giving them 5 stars — would give 6 if I could!"

Craig and his family have found success by helping others achieve their goals and dreams, allowing them to flourish in a home that truly fits them — or prepare one for sale quickly.



For more information about what Craig and his team can offer your clients, please call 757-221-0999 or email csmith@kitchentuneup.com. You can also visit the business online at kitchentuneup.com and bathtune-up.com.



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Story by Jacki Donaldson
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EXP REALTY

Maria Christian



One of Maria Christian's most memorable moments as a REALTOR® happened when she was one of five agents interviewing with a client who had to choose just one to assist in her real estate journey. Maria's contenders were top-producing, successful professionals, and she was nervous. "I was sweating bullets," she emphasizes, "but I got it." Ecstatic about winning the opportunity, Maria asked the client why she chose her. "I asked what I said or did differently, and she told me the other four agents gave her tasks to accomplish and instructed her to call them when she was ready. She then said, 'You said that you'd help me and guide me through step by step, which brought so much relief.' I promised her that I would make her proud."

Maria first started making clients proud after earning her real estate license at age 18 and representing rental clients in New York City. While attending college full-time, she worked three days a week at a bank and at a small boutique real estate brokerage where her mother worked as a REALTOR®. After graduating from Baruch College of Business in Manhattan, Maria's full-time professional journey began. Rather than serving real estate clients, though, she served in the entertainment industry at New World Entertainment, a TV distribution company.

Initially hired as a filing assistant, Maria's dedication caught attention. Promoted to Executive Assistant to the VP, she handled schedules and travel arrangements. Amidst the whirlwind, she encountered industry giants like JFK Jr. and contributed to international sales for popular shows like *American Idol*. When Rupert Murdoch's Fox acquired the company, her boss moved to Universal Studios in Los Angeles and insisted she join him. Maria wasn't sure what to do. "I'm Italian," she laughs. "I don't leave home unless I'm in a coffin or a wedding dress."

Scared out of her mind, Maria left her Queens, NY, hometown for the Hollywood glitz and glamour, beginning her journey at Universal Studios working in international TV distribution. From walking the Oscars red carpet to running premieres, she experienced the thrill of the industry. When her boss was bought out, she transitioned to managing his affairs and then worked at Sony Pictures. After three years, she returned to New York. Her boyfriend (now husband), Jay, whom she met in The City of Angels, would also leave Los Angeles for his home state of Virginia. Upon returning to New York, Maria worked at BMG Music before relocating in 2002 to be with Jay. The lovebirds married in 2003 and have two beautiful children, Aiden (17) and Gabriel (15).

While working as a financial specialist in 2005, Maria was referring her clients to other REALTORS®, and

she established relationships with several area brokerages.

After taking a brief break from work to start raising a family, Maria joined Liz Moore and Associates, where she quickly earned Referral Agent of the Year honors. She then earned Rookie of the Year in her second year as a licensed Virginia agent. “After 13 years at Liz Moore, I transitioned to eXp Realty, where I’ve been for nearly three years now,” says Maria, who treats her clients like family, which is no surprise. “Everyone who reads this story and knows me knows family comes first. The highest I’ve ever sold was about \$13.5 million, which is a nice lifestyle, but what’s most important to me is my family.

While some REALTORS® enjoy socializing and going out, I prefer to spend my time at home, cooking, keeping the house clean and creating a welcoming environment for my loved ones.

Last year, Maria closed about \$8 million. She aimed to do more, but life had other plans. Her ailing mom moved in with her, and her son was diagnosed with epilepsy. Still, she maintained her top-producer status as a solo agent who does everything herself. She’s not one to back down from a challenge — during COVID, she tripled her business, and although she and her husband had to sell a bottled-water business they owned, they pivoted and opened self-storage facilities, which have proven to be a lucrative venture with three consistently full buildings.

Crediting her real estate success to prioritizing genuine connections over paid leads, Maria, a student of Buffini & Company, is proud to be 100% referral-based and is grateful for her loyal clients. “Guiding clients through major life events like buying a home is a privilege, and I’m deeply honored by their trust in me,” she expresses.

Looking ahead, Maria enthusiastically reveals her biggest goal in real estate: to grace the cover of Real Producers. “I know I can do it, but I’m choosing to prioritize my family for the next few years,” she explains, mentioning that she has just three years until her youngest graduates from high school. “Family is the center of my world,” shares Maria, “and I’m working really hard to teach that to my children and instill in them the Italian culture and traditions that I grew up with.” Her love language is



“NOW, I FIND THAT MY CLIENTS OFTEN BECOME MY EXTENDED FAMILY HERE IN VIRGINIA, AND I AM ALWAYS PROUD TO SHARE MY CULTURE AND TRADITIONS WITH THEM.”

”



cooking, which she also enjoys sharing with her clients. “Growing up in New York with a big extended family always present at holiday dinners, weddings, etc. was a big part of my life,” she smiles. “Now, I find that my clients often become my extended family here in Virginia, and I am always proud to share my culture and traditions with them.” Maria also enjoys spending time in the family’s permanent camper on the beach in the Outer Banks and is still basking in the glory of a recent family trip to Italy.

Maria is no longer nervous about earning potential clients’ business. Her reputation for helping and guiding folks precedes her, and when she promises to do her clients proud, she delivers.

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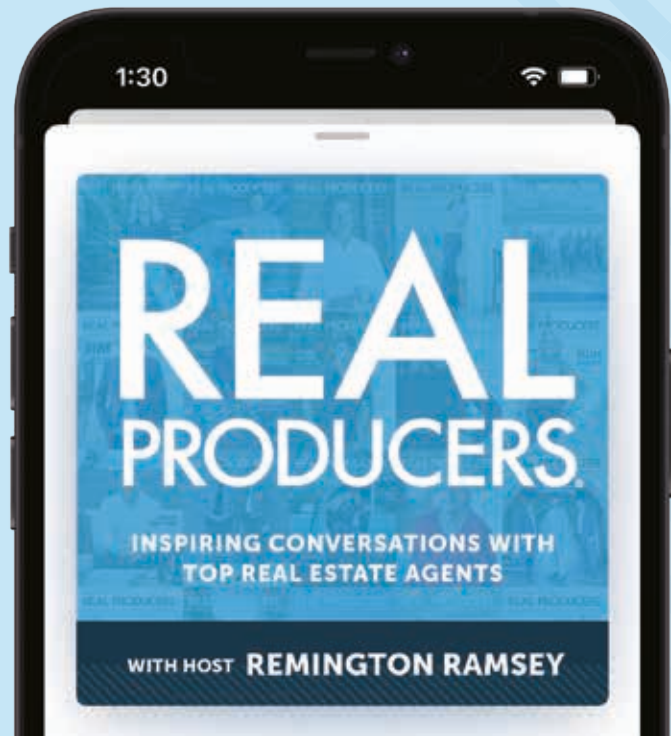
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FAQ



WELCOME TO REAL PRODUCERS!

Some of you may be wondering what this publication is all about, which is why we have created this FAQ page.

Here, we will answer the most commonly asked questions from around the country regarding our program. My door is always open to discuss anything regarding this community — this publication is 100% designed to be your voice!

Q: WHO RECEIVES THIS MAGAZINE?

A: The top 300 agents on the Peninsula in Hampton Roads, VA. The Peninsula is defined as from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel in Hampton to the greater Williamsburg area and everything in between. We pulled the MLS numbers (by volume) from January 1, 2023, through December 31, 2023, in the Peninsula and Williamsburg area. We cut the list off at #300, and the distribution was born. For this year's list, the production level for our group was between just below \$5 million and \$50 million in 2023. The list will reset at the end of 2024 for next year and will continue to update annually.

Q: WHAT IS THE PROCESS FOR BEING FEATURED IN THIS MAGAZINE?

A: The process is simple. Every feature you see has first been nominated. You can nominate REALTORS®, agents, affiliates, brokers, owners or even yourself. Office leaders can also nominate real estate agents. We will consider anyone you bring to our attention because we don't know everyone's story, and we need your help to learn more. A link to our nomination form is on our Facebook page (facebook.com/peninsularealproducers).

Q: WHAT IS THE COST TO FEATURE A REALTOR®, AGENT OR TEAM?

A: Zero, zilch, zippo, nada, nil. **The feature costs nothing**, my friends, so nominate away! We are not a pay-to-play model. We share real stories of real producers based on achievement and nominations.

Q: WHO ARE THE PREFERRED PARTNERS?

A: Anyone listed as a preferred partner in the front of the magazine is a part of this community and will have an ad in every issue of the magazine, attend our quarterly events and be a part of our online community. We don't just find these businesses off the street, nor do we work with all businesses that approach us. One or many of you have recommended every preferred partner you see in this publication. We won't even meet with a business that you have not vetted and stamped for approval, in a sense. Our goal is to create a powerhouse network for the REALTORS® and agents in the area and the best affiliates so we can grow stronger together.

Q: HOW CAN I RECOMMEND A PREFERRED PARTNER?

A: If you have a recommendation for a local business that works with top real estate agents, please let us know. Send an email or text to joni@realproducersmag.com or call 757-348-7809.



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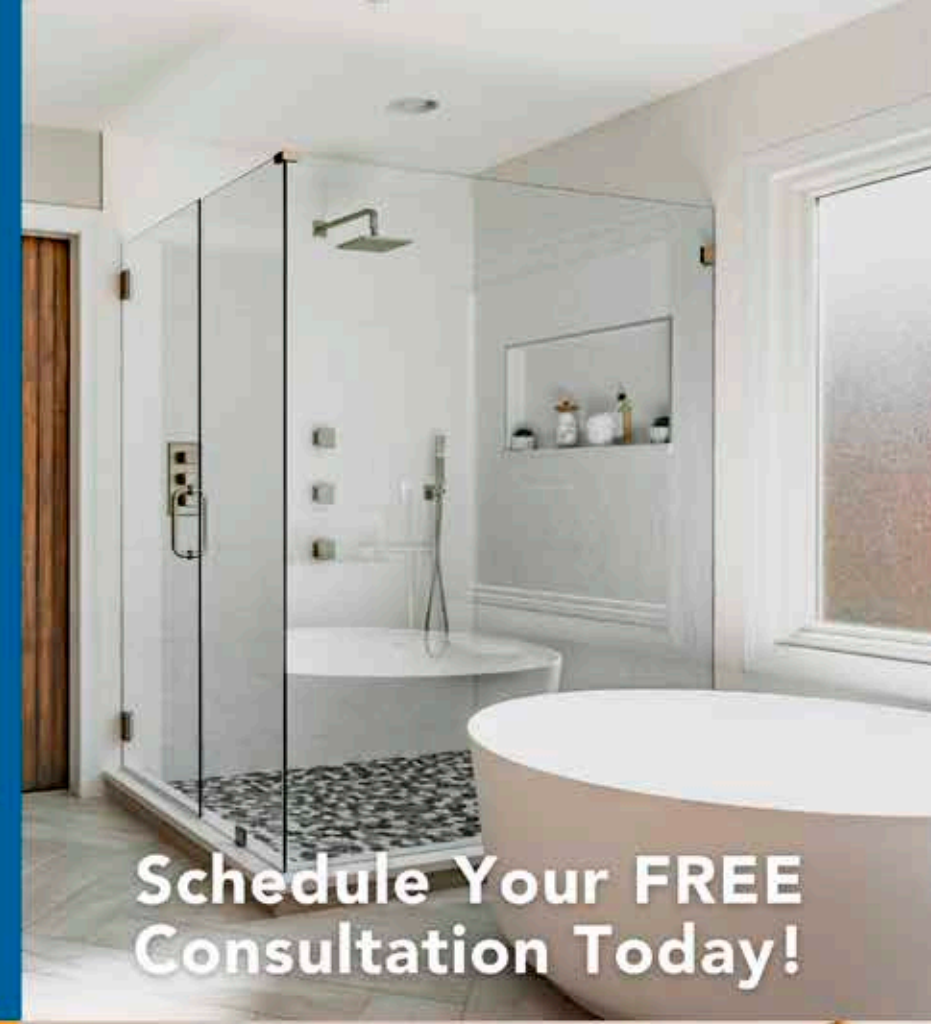
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