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▶▶ top producer

By Amanda Matkowski  
Photos by Jacob Harr with harr Creative LLC



# FILLORETA BALAJ-ELEZI



## DRIVEN BY THE DESIRE TO SUCCEED

Filloreta Balaj-Elezi is an extremely driven individual who is constantly striving for success. She has also always been an entrepreneur with a few avenues of income, so when she decided to become a real estate agent in 2020, she was up for the challenge. “Real estate just felt like the next natural step for me,” she said. “It has been the best personal business decision I could have made.”

Filloreta was born in Kosovo, but in 1999, she fled the country with her family to escape a war. When they arrived in Chicago as refugees, they survived on food stamps and lived in state housing. “At that time, I promised myself that I would make it in this

country, and I would bring honor to my family and make my father proud,” Filloreta recalled.

Filloreta credits her father as someone who heavily influenced her strong work ethic, and although he unfortunately passed away in 2023, his memory still drives Filloreta to be a better person than she was yesterday. “My dad, Uka Balaj, is the strongest man I know,” she shared.

In 2006, Filloreta and her husband, Nezir, had a wedding in Kosovo. When they returned home, they moved to Grand Rapids from Chicago and only had \$2,000 in their pockets. Not deterred by hard work, Filloreta got a job at Art Van Furniture and became their #1 sales associate. Nowadays, Filloreta and Nezir are business partners who sell cars and invest in real estate. They own 18 properties — one of which is located in Kosovo and three are in Albania — and have completely paid off 14 of them. “Sales has always been in my blood,” Filloreta said proudly.

“ **REAL ESTATE JUST FELT LIKE THE NEXT NATURAL STEP FOR ME. IT HAS BEEN THE BEST PERSONAL BUSINESS DECISION I COULD HAVE MADE.** ”

A real estate agent and REALTOR® at eXp Realty, Filloreta has found fast success in the past three years. She achieved over \$23 million in sales in 2022, which has contributed to her total career volume of over \$42 million. In 2021 and 2022, Filloreta was also awarded the #1 Individual Agent in the State of Michigan and an ICON Agent by eXp Realty.

Although Filloreta doesn’t work with a team of other agents, she is grateful that she has her great transaction coordinator, her photographer and a sign installation company to assist her in the business. “All of these individuals help to make the process seamless, and I am so grateful for what they do and how they do it!” she said.

Filloreta’s success isn’t much of a surprise based on her previous sales experiences, but when she was trying to enter the industry, she had plenty of doubters who told her that she was wasting her



“  
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THINK OF  
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THE BRIDGE  
LEADING THEM  
TO THE NEXT  
CHAPTER OF  
THEIR LIVES.*  
”

time — especially since she had failed the salesperson license exam 16 times. Filloreta, however, had faith in herself that she'd pass one day. “You sometimes have to be your biggest cheerleader,” she said. “Keep pushing, and do not stop.”

As an agent, Filloreta enjoys working with clients and helping them make their dreams come true. She understands that buying a home is one of the biggest investments a person can make, and she loves seeing her clients in a better position in life than when they started their homebuying process. “I like to think of myself as the bridge leading them to the next chapter of their lives,” Filloreta said, smiling.

Filloreta feels blessed that she can be a guide to people as they positively change their lives with a home purchase — even though she is also a landlord. “If I can help families move into their own home and not rent, that is a win for me,” she admitted. “I am a landlord myself, but I am against renting if you can own.”

Filloreta is so passionate about real estate that she finds it difficult to view it as her job, but outside of taking care of her clients and managing her rental properties, she loves to spend time with her family. “It's a blessing that I am able

to have my office at home,” she shared. “There's nothing better than being here for them and to hear about their day.”

Filloreta and her husband have been married for 17 years and have two beautiful children — Bledion, 14, and Blerona, 11. “Nezir is a great chef. We love to enjoy good food with good company,” Filloreta said. “We have worked so hard throughout our lives that we really cherish the quality time that we get to spend together.”

Filloreta hopes that people will remember her for her kindness as well as for her dedication to the people in her life and to her goals. For new agents, she recommends that they have confidence in themselves. “Look at those who do well, but what will make you great in this industry is when you are you,” she said.

“Do not limit yourself with your thoughts,” Filloreta added. “I have always had the mindset that I can have it all. If you can dream it, you can achieve it.”



Photo submitted by Filloreta Balaj-Elezi

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# ASPIRING FOR MORE TIM UPDYKE

## ▶ agent on the rise

By Amanda Matkowski  
Photos by Jacob Harr with harr Creative LLC

Tim Updyke was preparing for his role as a real estate agent long before he finally became one in 2017. Although he doesn't look like the typical agent with his piercings and tattoos, he has a tenacious mindset and was determined to overcome all of the hardships that were thrown his way early in life. Through it all, real estate helped him strive for bigger and better things, and Tim hopes to use his experiences to assist others in their real estate goals as well. "Buying or selling is a huge deal, and I want to see people make great decisions," he said.

Born in Muskegon, Tim was raised by a single mom who struggled financially while he was growing up. At age 15, he got a job at a shop, and instead of heading off to college like his classmates after high school, he continued working there because he knew that he couldn't afford the courses. To earn extra money, Tim began flipping cars. His boss would let him borrow money from time to time so he could properly restore the cars, but in 2009, Tim purchased his first rental house for \$1,000 in Muskegon Heights.

"The home needed a lot of work, but I did it all by myself and paid him back with the rental income," Tim explained. "Because I paid him back, he eventually would loan me a little bit more and more, which let me do a few more rentals, some flips, and eventually, enough cash so I was able to finance my own deals."

A few years later, Tim and his business partner had a terrible experience with a real estate agent who committed fraud. Although it set them back financially for a while, it inspired Tim to get licensed through online classes. "It took us several months to recoup our losses, and with the market turning, I decided it was best to just go get my own license to help with our flips, rentals and real estate needs," he recalled.

While Tim was completing his pre-licensing education, he began making great connections with people within the industry and learned a lot about properties and contracts. Soon, he realized that he could use his knowledge of flipping houses and managing rentals to make sure that clients wouldn't get burned by an agent like he once experienced.

“  
I’VE NEVER BEEN AFRAID  
TO FAIL BECAUSE I STARTED  
FROM THE BOTTOM AND  
KNOW THAT I CAN  
**RISE AGAIN.**  
”



appreciates being able to be there for his family, but he also knows that his adjustable schedule is a benefit for his clients. “I’m not much of a planner, so being able to move quickly when a buyer or seller is ready is really nice and something I do enjoy,” he said.

Tim and his family currently live in Norton Shores in a house they recently built. “We do just about everything together — a lot of traveling, exploring, hiking and car events,” Tim said, smiling. He and his wife, Alison, have two sons — Law, 11, and Jones, who was born in August of 2023.

When Tim isn’t immersed in real estate or spending time with his family, he likes to work on cars and come up with crazy ideas for them. “I have a pretty extensive car collection, which includes a few Jurassic Park movie vehicles, a Batmobile, a Dodge Viper and some other modified cars,” he shared.

Music has also been a large part of Tim’s life. He grew up around musicians and learned how to play bass guitar at the age of 12, which led to him joining bands while he was in high school and has even performed all over the state of Michigan and beyond. Years later, Tim and a bandmate at the time owned a successful DJ business together. They employed eight people and expanded to include a few photo booths and party buses. After the pandemic, they decided to go their separate ways — for Tim, it was to focus more on real estate — and sold the company to an employee.

When it comes to his real estate business, Tim hopes people will remember him for his honesty and integrity. “I take pride in being very transparent with everyone, even if it’s sometimes at my expense,” he said. “My goals are to provide excellent service, communicate well with people, and help them to not only understand the entire process but also make great financial decisions.” Tim emphasized that new agents should remember to build their communication skills. “Buyers, sellers and colleagues will all appreciate someone who takes the time to acknowledge them,” he added.

Over the years, Tim learned to multitask very well while he balanced multiple jobs and has put systems in place to streamline everything. Now that he can incorporate those skills with his fierce determination to succeed — in addition to his years of real estate knowledge — he wouldn’t trade being an agent for any other career.

“I’ve never been afraid to fail because I started from the bottom and know that I can rise again,” Tim explained. “I love what I do, and I love that I can continue doing this for just about as long as I want.”

“My initial goal was to focus on my business; however, I have never been one to do anything half-done, so I started a Facebook page and website and started working hard to get my name out to just about every prospective buyer and seller out there,” Tim said.

Now an agent and REALTOR® at Five Star Real Estate, Tim has spent the past seven years successfully building his reputation in the industry. He obtained \$9 million in sales in 2022, but he barely spends any money on advertising and feels honored that he receives a lot of repeat business. “The most rewarding part of my business is seeing people happy in their decisions,” Tim explained. “Watching them grow their portfolio, sell their home for a massive profit or buy a place at the best possible price is the name of the game for me.”

For Tim, one of his favorite aspects of being an agent is the ability to have a flexible schedule. Like many other agents, he

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## CAPTURING DREAMS

In the world of real estate visual marketing, Fresh Start Studios in Rockford, Michigan, has become known for its excellence. Jen Smits — the dynamic owner, photographer and videographer — has steered the ship for over 17 years with remarkable acumen. The journey to its high distinction is marked by rebranding, evolving services and building client relationships, and it showcases the power of passion and adaptability, and a steadfast commitment to quality.

For Jen, what began as a childhood fascination for photography blossomed into a full-fledged career. “My great uncle nicknamed me ‘Shutterbug’ because there wasn’t a family gathering I wasn’t taking pictures at,” she recalled. Jen’s passion was firmly rooted, and a trip to Europe further solidified her calling as she captured the excursion with a high-end Canon camera. “From that moment on, I knew what I wanted to do with my life,” she added.

In 2007, Jen earned a bachelor’s degree in photography with a minor in communications from Grand Valley State University, which laid the foundation for her career. She launched her first studio, Shutterbug Photography, and captured weddings, families and business events. After a rebrand in 2020, Fresh Start Studios was born,

and with it, a newfound dedication to real estate visual marketing.

Fresh Start Studios offers an array of services, including photography, videography, aerial imagery, floor plans, 3D virtual tours, virtual staging, and branding services for real estate agents. According to Jen, the defining factor of her business is building relationships. “We work hard to build relationships with our clientele,” she said. This personal touch and customization have made Fresh Start Studios a trusted partner for agents of all sizes, offering them not only striking visuals but also branding support and social media services.

The road to business success, however, has been rife with challenges, especially while navigating a pandemic-stricken market. “We started in the middle of a pandemic where open houses were not permitted,” Jen explained. To adapt,

Fresh Start Studios emphasized quick turnaround times and introduced services like 3D virtual tours. “We work really hard to stay one step ahead of the market,” she added.

It’s not just business for Jen: It’s a way of life intertwined with her family’s passions. Her free time is filled with baseball games featuring her son, Asa — who is a history buff enamored with World War II. Family boating adventures, skiing trips, and travel — both domestic and international — round out their collective pursuits. Jen’s faith also plays a pivotal role, and she volunteers her vocal talents at her church.

As for what she envisions her legacy to be, Jen aspires to be remembered as a trailblazing female entrepreneur who overcame obstacles, nurtured relationships and never shied away from challenges. “I hope that someday, when he is ready to step into the career world, he sees me as a role model,” Jen said, speaking about her son’s future.

With the addition of new team members who have a palpable passion for their craft, Fresh Start Studios is primed for further growth in the years to come. Jen and Fresh Start Studios stands as a testament to the power of resilience and the pursuit of excellence in an ever-evolving industry.

For more information about Fresh Start Studios, please visit [freshstartstudios.com](https://freshstartstudios.com) or check them out on Facebook @FreshStartStudiosbyJen or on Instagram @fresh.start.studios



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# Stacey

# PUMMILL



## INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

By Amanda Matkowski  
Photos by Jacob Harr with harr Creative LLC

For Stacey Pummill, real estate has been woven into the fabric of her life. Although she had other career plans as a young adult, being a real estate agent allowed her to work part time while raising her four children, and later, she leveraged her real estate knowledge to invest in rental properties. “Real estate has truly changed my life, my husband’s life, and most certainly, my children’s lives,” Stacey said. Other than utilizing real estate to better her family’s quality of life, Stacey is grateful that she can also use her experiences to help others with their own real estate goals. “Real estate is in my heart, and changing lives through homeownership and investing is truly a passion of mine,” she added. “It is so rewarding knowing that I made a difference in where my clients call home, where they make their memories. It is the best feeling!”

Stacey has always lived in Grand Rapids, but while she was growing up, her family struggled financially. When she was 11 years old, her parents divorced. “Neither of my parents

ever owned a home in their entire lives,” Stacey recalled. At age 20, she did what her parents could never do: She bought her first house. “I was very proud. That was definitely part of why I love helping others attain homeownership,” Stacey said.

Three years later, in 1997, Stacey was dating a man who wanted to start investing in real estate properties, so she decided to get her real estate license to help streamline the process. “Up until then, it had never occurred to me to sell real estate. I had always wanted to be a teacher,” she admitted. As fate would have it, Stacey and her boyfriend broke up shortly afterward, but she decided to remain in the industry anyway. She began her career at Westdale Better Homes and Gardens.

Over the next few years, Stacey met and married her husband and began to have children. At age 27, she decided to return to Grand Valley State University to pursue her desire of becoming a high school teacher

— especially if it meant that she could have summers off and spend her evenings with her family. “That was short-lived after I realized that I could sell a few homes a year to supplement income as a stay-at-home mom,” she said.

Stacey spent many years as a part-time agent while raising her children. In 2013, she officially went full time. Through it all, she spent most of her career as a full-time agent at Five Star Real Estate; however, in 2021, she wanted to start her own brokerage in Michigan as well as in Florida, so she launched Blue Sky West - eXp Realty. Since becoming a full-time agent a decade ago, she has achieved over \$100 million in sales.

In 2005, Stacey and her husband, Dennis, began their adventure into real estate investing. They started by purchasing four duplexes and held onto them through the recession, selling them through the process of a 1031 exchange to begin purchasing short-term vacation rentals. In

Photo submitted  
by Stacey Pummill



2015, the couple bought their first short-term rental property in Grand Haven. “It was always a dream of mine to own a home across from the state park where I camped as a teenager. It was very run down, and my husband and I renovated the entire home,” Stacey explained. “That was the beginning of our journey into owning several short-term rental properties.”

In 2019, Stacey and Dennis bought their first out-of-state rental property in Florida. “I am passionate about helping my Michigan clients purchase retirement homes in Michigan and Florida so they can rent them out to supplement their income,” Stacey said. “To own a home that is paid for by vacationers is my idea of the American Dream. I encourage people to consider real estate investing as a way to finance their retirement.”

When it comes to having a successful career, she highly recommends time-blocking. This life-changing strategy helped her immensely as she adjusted to being a full-time agent who was dealing with mom guilt, and now, she has learned to protect the boundaries that she has formed between her personal life and work-life. “If I get a request to show a home during a ‘family time-blocked period,’ I ask my client if another time could work. If not, I ask another agent to show the property for me. Family has to come first, and my clients understand that,” Stacey said.

“If you live your life with the mindset of gratefulness and abundance, everything else seems to fall into place,” Stacey added. “Success monetarily is different for everyone, but joy and gratefulness are universal!”

When it comes to her family, Stacey and her husband have four

boys — Riley, Nicholas, Lucas and Jack. Together, they love to travel. “I bought a timeshare when I was 22, and that helped us see so much of the country on a young-family budget,” Stacey said. They have always been “pool people” as well, but in the last few years, they have really fallen in love with boating.

“When we bought a short-term rental on Smith’s Bayou in Spring Lake in 2017, we decided to buy a wake boat. Up until then, we had never talked about or desired to own a boat,” Stacey shared. “After that summer, we decided to move up to a larger boat that would allow us to travel the Great Lakes. Seven years later, it is safe to say that we are ‘boat people.’ We are currently on our fourth and fifth boat — one in Michigan and one in Florida.”

When Stacey isn’t with her family or on the water, she also likes to bike — she tries to bike at least 40 miles a week during the summer — and do Zumba. “I have been dancing with the same group of women for over 16 years. Much of my business has come from those special women in my life,” she said.

After spending 26 years in the real estate industry, Stacey encourages new agents to listen more and speak less. “It makes people feel good when they get to tell their story and are heard,” she said. Stacey recommends that agents should stay in touch with their clients and create a database with details about their clients’ lives. “Put in as much information as you can for each client — birthdays, anniversaries, kids’ names, pet names,” she explained. “I am invested in my clients and their real estate futures. We are not here for one sale: We are their trusted real estate advisers for life.”



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