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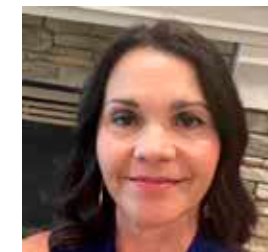
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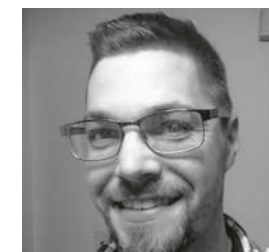
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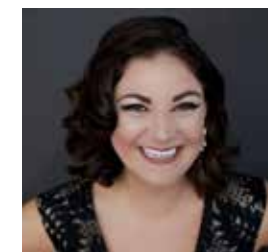
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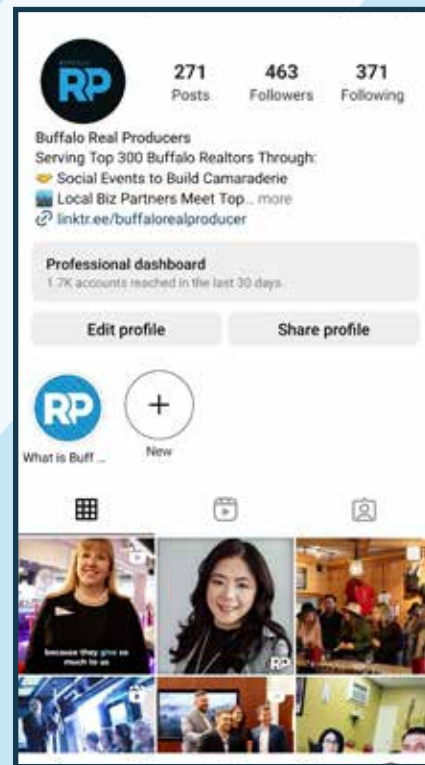
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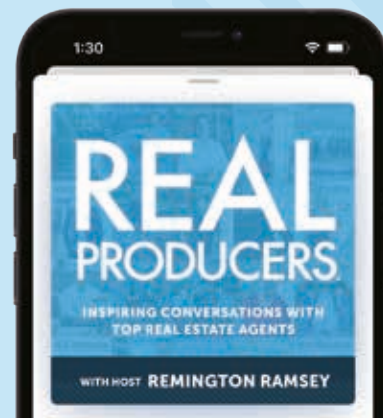
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As one wise person once said, “A goal without a plan is just a wish.” Suffice it to say that Realtor Josh James, owner of The Josh James Team at Keller Williams Realty, doesn’t spend a lot of time wishing.

Already a highly successful agent for Keller Williams before launching his team in 2018, he’s made consistent appearances on Premium Mortgage’s annual Top 100 Agents list for Western New York and won Keller Williams’ top award for sales professionals, the Platinum Award, multiple times. He and his team have also ranked in the top 1 percent of agents nationwide.

Perhaps the most prestigious award he’s received was being chosen as one of the Top 30 Real Estate Professionals Under 30 by the National Association of Realtors when he was 29. But at the same time, he was finding outward success can have its drawbacks.

“I was getting to the point where I was handling so many houses as a solo agent that I had less time for my family, and

we had three kids then,” he says, “I knew I had to get some help, so I hired my first assistant and started the team.”

The team was an immediate success and Josh has been able to prioritize more time with his family.

“While I’m sure a lot of Realtors say the same thing, we are very much a family at work,” he says, adding the workplace is a fast-paced, exhilarating environment where agents avail themselves of first-rate training and mentorship.

In addition to the wealth of sales experience Josh brings to leading his team, he also brings a wealth of practical, hands-on real estate knowledge gained from flipping homes and building a healthy rental portfolio with his wife, Emilee.

“We’ve really done most aspects of real estate, so we definitely practice what we preach.”

Co-owner of Haven Homes Lifestyle Vacation Getaways with Emilee,



THE JOSH JAMES TEAM



the couple offers short and long-term rentals of homes they own in Nashville and Buffalo as well as three on Lake Ontario.

Growing up in Clarence Center and always living in Western New York, Josh had a plan for his future when he was just 16 and read Robert Kiyosaki's Rich Dad Poor Dad. He says it opened his eyes to the possibility of buying assets versus liabilities.

"So I kind of knew that I was going to start buying properties when I turned 18," he says, and he then put a plan into action to accomplish that, first building a solid work and credit history.

He met Emilee a few years later while attending the University of Buffalo and working as a server/bartender at a Red Lobster where she was a hostess. And while she wasn't a part of 16-year-old Josh's original plan, she quickly became an integral part of his success.

"She manages it all. She raises the kids and homeschools them. She hosts our rentals and handles all the short-term rentals," he says. She also owns a staging company, E James & Co, and designs the renovations for their properties. On top of that, she's a member of The Josh James Team as their Client Relations Manager.

"She's just a remarkable woman."

“ I’M OF THE OPINION THAT MANY THINGS DON’T REALLY GO ACCORDING TO PLAN, BUT I’M A HUGE PROPONENT OF PERSISTENCE AND GRIT IN BOTH MY BUSINESS AND PERSONAL LIFE. ”



Their four children—Esmia, 3, Judah, 6, Elijah, 8, and Alexa, 9—are homeschooled and involved in swimming, piano and other sports and activities. And all of the kids, with the exception of the youngest, take Taekwondo.

"It's been very valuable," Josh says of the coordination, respect for authority and confidence the Korean martial art is building.

Travel is also important to the family, he says, not just for the joy it brings but also for the role it can play in the children's education. "They learn about it in a book and then they go see it in person," he says. On a planned trip of several weeks to Costa Rica, they'll be exploring volcanoes and other things the kids have studied.

Their faith being the most important aspect of their lives, the family attends and is active with NorthGate Christian Community, a well-known church that has a campus in both the second richest and second poorest parts of Western New York, with the mission of knowing Christ and making him known.

In addition to Josh and Emilee, other members of The Josh James Team include Transaction Coordinator Abby Longwell, who he says "really runs the operations of the team." Handling marketing for the team is Taylor Van De Mark joined by sales agents John Balcerzak, Isabelle Kozlowski, Jenna Abbott, Mathew Derenda & John Hogenmiller.

As for the future, Josh is already planning it.

"We are definitely going to keep growing," he says, saying he hopes to buy properties and launch sales teams in as many as 10 other markets around the country.

"I'm of the opinion that many things don't really go according to plan," he says, "but I'm a huge proponent of persistence and grit in both my business and personal life. We run into obstacles and hurdles all the time and, as it's said, 'the righteous man falls seven times and rises again,' so it's just a matter of us getting up again and again and to keep growing and keep learning and pushing forward."

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» REALTOR® on the rise

DARIEN SMITH

Article by: David Cornwell
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TO CALL REALTOR DARIEN SMITH A RISING STAR IN REAL ESTATE IS MORE THAN A BIT OF AN UNDERSTATEMENT. HOW ABOUT CALLING HIM A SHOOTING STAR OR A COMET INSTEAD?

Just shy of \$10 million in sales in his rookie year as an agent on the Sokody Sales Team at Howard Hanna, Darien expects final figures for his just-finished sophomore year to be about the same.

“I can’t believe I did that much and was probably more shocked than happy,” he says of the 2022 numbers that earned him Rookie of the Year honors. “But what a great shock to excel far more than I hoped or expected.”

To anyone just knowing Darien’s story, his success might also seem a little shocking, but to anyone knowing Darien himself, it’s no surprise at all.

“Growing up was kind of tough for me,” he says. “I grew up very, very poor. There were times when we didn’t even have a place to stay and lived in shelters or with family members. So yeah, growing up was pretty tough.”



Far from just accepting and giving into his circumstances, however, Darien used them to fuel his success and leave those circumstances behind.

“I kind of take all the stuff I went through and make something out of it,” he says. “I thrive off of that and never want to be in that position again.”

After high school, he landed a decent paying office job and by the time he was 22, was ready to purchase something he had rarely known growing up, a home.

As it happened, the Realtor he worked with purchasing that home, Maya Wertheim, was then a member of the Sokody Sales Team and told Darien that with his personable personality, he was a natural for the business. She suggested he get his license, and he did.

“I’m very good talking to people and always put them first before the house or anything else,” he says.

“Really for me it’s not the commission checks that are the reward as much as it is just making clients happy. Seeing them happy and satisfied is more than any paycheck could ever be for me.”



It's that deep level of caring and a personal understanding of just how much a home means that help Darien stand out from other agents.

He's particularly proud of his success in how it shows even long established agents that age is no factor in achieving success. "I'm young and proof that you can be successful no matter your age, as long as you work hard for it."

A major contributor to his success, he says, are his fellow team members on the Sokody Sales Team and team leader Jason Sokody.

"The best decision I've ever made was joining The Sokody Team when I first started," he says. "I work with a group of people who are more like a family than business partners, a family that is very supportive and resourceful."

When he's not working, you're likely to find Darien at the gym, with his three "puppy kids" or shopping. "I love to shop. I guess you might say I have a huge shopping problem."

The kids he refers to are Gizmo, 7, a long-haired chihuahua, Nala, 5, a Pomeranian and Ezra, 2, a German shepherd husky mix.

"People who don't have pets probably don't understand the relationship you establish with them," he says. "I would be devastated if anything ever happened to them. They're family."

It's pretty much the same with his clients. They're family, too.

"Especially when you're working as a buyer's agent, you're working with clients for a long period of time and building a relationship with them," he says. "It often becomes more of a friendship than work and I've had many clients who are now my friends."

As for the future, Darien wants to further explore his own investment opportunities and hopes to grow his already impressive social media presence and in turn his business using the same formula he's used to get where he is: hard work.

And, of course, he plans to continue setting an example to those who might follow that youth and circumstances don't have to be roadblocks to success.



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ANDREW SCOTT



Article by: David Cornwell
Photography by: Adore Studio

For Realtor Andrew Scott, the line between businessman and community advocate is often nonexistent.

“Fair housing, democracy and black homeownership are more than just buzzwords to us,” Dru says of the Scott Realty Group, of which he is a partner with his father, André. “They’re what Realists (members of the National Association of Real Estate Brokers) are all about.”

A native of Buffalo and known to many by his nickname, Druski, Dru’s roots grow deep here. Himself a passionate community advocate, his father is a retired police officer and a minister.

“My Dad has always been a community servant and that’s how we were raised,” Dru says. “In the community and in our business, we put stewardship before anything else.”

His father first asked him to join the business when Dru was 19, but it was another nine years before he did. In the meantime, he found himself working 80 hours a week between two full-time jobs, his workaholic ways helping bring his marriage to an end.

“I had no control over my own time and knew I had to make an immediate change or be destined to continue that horrible cycle,” he says. After a good deal of self-evaluation, he began looking into entrepreneurial opportunities, deciding real estate was the best fit after all, and joined his father.

“I’m a natural fit for the real estate space. I’ve always been able to sell things,” he says. “I’ve always been able to talk to people and love talking in general. And I especially love dealing with communities.”

▶ REALTOR® spotlight



In addition to other community and professional activities, Dru has served as chairperson of the Buffalo chapter of the Urban League Young Professionals, working to empower young black professionals. He is co-founder and local board president of the Erie-Niagara Board of Realist, which is the local board of the National Association of Real Estate Brokers (NAREB). For 75 years, the organization has led the charge to advance black real estate professionals and the black community. Dru also serves on the inclusion board of the Buffalo Niagara Association of Realtors.

While he believes progress has been made with regard to real estate and the black community, he says more progress is needed, pointing out that before the spring of 1968, people of color could



“
Because of our long community presence, there’s a high level of integrity associated with our last name and we can’t allow it to be diminished. So we hold ourselves to the highest levels of integrity and accountability.
”

not own homes in certain market areas and blacks weren’t allowed to be a Realtor.

“So black people could not help other black people buy homes, even in areas they might be able to purchase them,” he says. “What’s so unsettling is that it wasn’t too long ago.”

Black home ownership is an area about which Dru is particularly passionate, and for good reason.

In its 2023 State of Housing in Black America (SHIBA) report, the NAREB found that while the national rate of black homeownership had fallen to 40 percent, that figure is even lower in Western New York at 33 percent. Other troubling local issues are various reports finding Buffalo one of the country’s most segregated cities.

“I want to make it clear that when reports say segregated, that doesn’t mean racist,” Dru says. “They’re just reporting the statistics. But what’s scary is that we’re used to it and just accept things the way they are.”

Not accepting things the way they are and his love of community are two of the reasons behind his and Scott Realty Group’s success.

“Because of our long community presence, there’s a high level of integrity associated with our last name and we can’t allow it to be diminished,” he says. “So we hold ourselves to the highest levels of integrity and accountability.”

“For a lot of people coming into this business, it’s a kind of side hustle,” he says. “Major brokerages may have thousands and thousands of agents, but

we’re the actual face of our company. So there’s definitely a higher level.”

With four children ranging in age from ten to 17, Dru says he has renewed efforts to not let work consume him again.

“The goal now is to make sure that I’m not missing this again. For my children, it’s imperative that I get it right this time.”

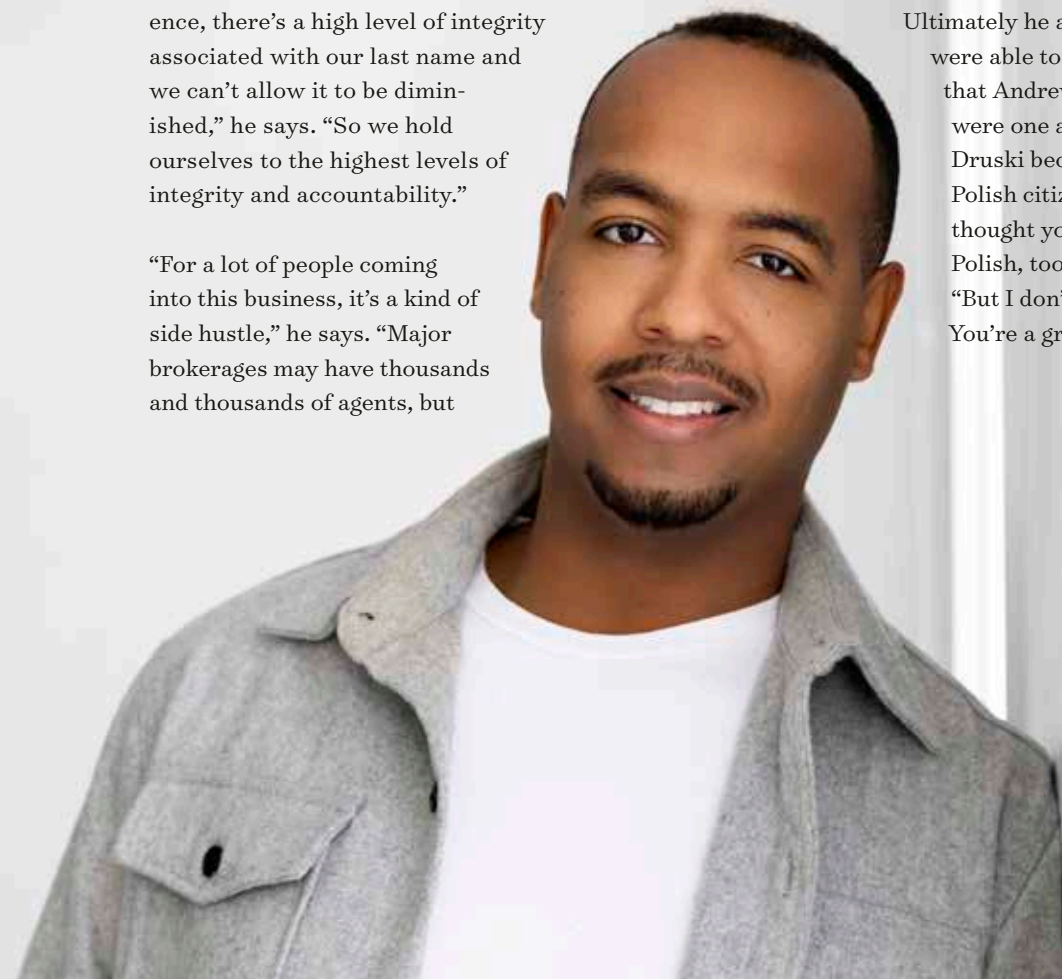
A musician and avowed foodie, Dru owned a food critiquing service for a number of years and for two years was a judge for Taste of Buffalo.

As for that nickname, Druski, by which many if not most folks now know him, it remained just a family nickname for years until his Polish girlfriend heard it, loved it and started using it in lieu of Dru.

So at a gathering of his girlfriend’s family, everyone was waiting to meet her new boyfriend Druski, including one of her uncles who was very hard of hearing.

“I realized they were expecting somebody different and felt like Sidney Poitier in Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner,” he says. “At one point, the uncle said, ‘Listen here fella, there’s no way you’re a Druski.’”

Ultimately he and his girlfriend were able to convince everyone that Andrew Scott and Druski were one and the same. And Druski became an honorary Polish citizen that night. “I thought you were going to be Polish, too,” one aunt said. “But I don’t care what you are. You’re a great kid.”



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WOMEN'S COUNCIL OF REALTORS

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▶▶ preferred partner spotlight

Article by: David Cornwell
Photography by: Adore Studio

Women empowering women is at the heart and soul of the Women's Council Of Realtors Buffalo-Niagara.

Incoming president, Nicole Leistner, a member of the Sokody Sales Team with Howard Hanna, is honored and proud to play a part in carrying on the organization's 85-year legacy. Comprised of more than 250 local and state chapters in nearly 40 states, the Women's Council is a volunteer organization run by a volunteer board working to help its members succeed in real estate and become strong business leaders. In the process, it has become an industry leader in training, networking, political action and women's empowerment.

The Council was established in 1938 at that year's National Association of Realtors convention in Milwaukee. It has

continued as an affiliate of NAR, with more than an 80-year history of partnership and collaboration. That first Council with 37 members from nine states has since grown to a national membership of 13,000 real estate professionals. In the 1980s, men were invited to become members in support of women in business, and in 1989, the Buffalo Niagara Chapter was founded. It has thrived ever since.

Leaders and members of the Women's Council of Realtors Buffalo Niagara have also assumed leadership roles in professional and community organizations such as the Buffalo Niagara Association of Realtors, RPAC (Realtor Political Action

Committee) and many local charities and nonprofits. In addition to being a source for community leaders, giving back to the community is another important aspect of the Council's work. Each year the president gets to choose which charities the Council will support and Nicole is very excited to announce hers.

This year, she has chosen the Western New York Make-A-Wish Foundation to benefit from the Council's annual charity gala each fall and The P.U.N.T. Foundation to receive general support throughout the year. The Make-A-Wish Foundation creates life-changing wishes for children with critical illnesses and the P.U.N.T. Pediatric Cancer



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This past year, the charity gala raised \$14,000 for the JDRF Diabetes Foundation.

The gala is just one of many events the Council sponsors throughout the year. Plans for 2024 events include a builders' trade show, wellness fair, a community volunteering event, training sessions and continuing education classes. And, of course, the Council's events are invaluable resources for education and networking. "Our events provide our members networking opportunities with top agents and the top business professionals in our industry," Nicole says. "By belonging, our members get valuable education along with the most up-to-date industry knowledge."

Among the other perks of Council membership are exclusive savings to national suppliers, sources of

gifts for clients, office products and other services. Members also receive discounts at major retailers, and hotels and can avail themselves of an array of travel benefits. Those partners include attorneys, lenders, inspectors, cleaning companies, insurance companies, photographers and many others. The Buffalo Niagara Association of Realtors, New York State Commercial Association of Realtors and the Buffalo Niagara Mortgage Bankers Association are partners as well.

Officers of the Woman's Council of Realtors Buffalo Niagara Board this year are:

- President, Nicole Leistner, Howard Hanna
- President-Elect, Jill Dorr, Evolve Realty
- 1st Vice President, Allyson Matlock, Keller Williams
- Events Coordinator, Lauren Arnone, Metro Roberts
- Membership, Amanda McCrady, 716 Realty Group
- Treasurer, Adrianna Redman, Howard Hanna

"We are the new era of real estate and the Women's Council," Nicole says. "We look forward to bringing progressive ideas to the Council to take it to the next level." Perhaps one of the best advertisements for the Council is what it has meant for Nicole's own professional development and success. "As a new agent, I met amazing people and have formed great relationships in our industry," Nicole says of joining the Council and serving on its Board for four years. "The information I've gotten from top agents and partners in our industry has been invaluable to my success, and the support through my journey has been incredible. Now, my mission as president is to provide even more value to our members and partners through events and activities that continue to provide the same education and insights that have meant so much to me," she says. "Our hashtag is 'leaders made here' and I am determined to make more leaders."



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