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Strategic
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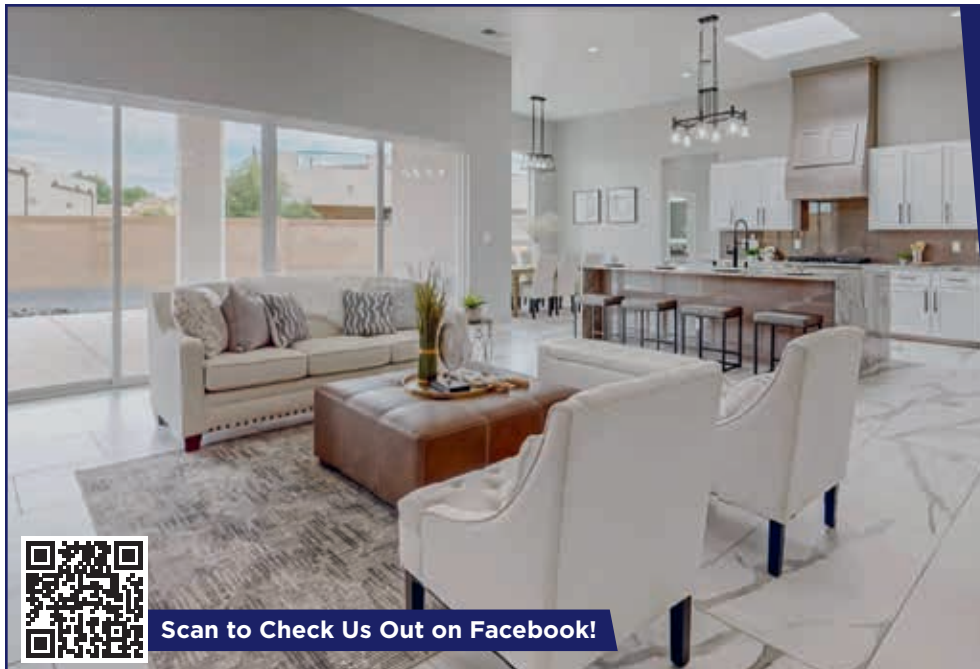
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A collage featuring the Ponic Photography logo (a circular seal with a signature), the text "PONIC PHOTOGRAPHY", and several Polaroid-style photos of a wedding, a man holding a "SOLD" sign, a couple with a dog, and an interior room.

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BENITO ORTIZ, OWNER

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Whether it's helping someone open a business or buy a car, I get to be the good guy in the scenario. I'm here to help people achieve their goals.



By Beth McCabe
Photos by Liz Lopez Photography

"I always knew I wanted to own a business," says Benito Ortiz. "In high school, I even wrote a business plan to open a gym. That's what I wanted to do." While his path changed, Benito's entrepreneurial spirit stayed strong, ultimately leading him to launch Strategic Insurance Group.

EARLY ROOTS

Born in Salt Lake City, Utah, Benito moved to Albuquerque, where he's lived for the past sixteen years. "My childhood was great. I wrestled in high school and played football as well," he smiles. His competitive drive and determination were evident from a young age. Although his whole family was in the medical field, Benito envisioned a different future for himself. As he says, "Entrepreneurship caught my eye."

A go-getter, Benito jumped into the workforce immediately after high school, working at a print shop for seven years, and worked his way up to the vice president of the company. But Benito knew he wanted more.

"I left the print shop to start my own thing and jump into entrepreneurship," he explains. His first venture in insurance was as a Farmers' agency owner, where he worked for three years. While it was a valuable experience, Benito felt a pull to create something more aligned with his vision of customer service and growth.

PIVOTING DURING THE PANDEMIC

In April 2020, Benito founded Strategic Insurance Group, launching the business during one of the most challenging times—the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since then, Benito has helped thousands of clients, from home and auto insurance to insuring over 100 startup businesses. "I've had the privilege of watching small businesses grow from startup to thriving companies hiring new employees. It's a really cool experience."

Benito's passion lies in guiding people through their important life decisions. "Whether it's helping someone open a business or buy a car, I get to be the good guy in the scenario. I'm here to help people achieve their goals." With over seven years in the insurance industry, Benito emphasizes the





The best advice I've received is that you don't have to be the hero of the story; you can be the guide. That's the approach we take with our clients. We guide them through the process and make sure they understand every detail.

importance of being a guide rather than a salesperson.

"The best advice I've received is that you don't have to be the hero of the story; you can be the guide. That's the approach we take with our clients. We guide them through the process and make sure they understand every detail," he says.

GROWING HIS TEAM

Benito is equally passionate about growing his team of nine agents in personal development. "I enjoy watching my team grow and take on more responsibilities," he says proudly. His commitment to nurturing his employees has led to milestones like team members purchasing homes and even one getting married. "I encourage my team to build their own success stories."

Community involvement is also a cornerstone of Strategic Insurance Group's culture. "We're very focused on being present in the community," Benito says. Hosting and attending networking events helps the company stay connected and foster relationships.

CATERING TO REALTORS®

"It really matters who you work with in insurance," says Benito. He and his team focus on helping REALTORS®

and making sure things go smoothly for them and their clients.

"We as a company put customers first," stresses Benito. "We service our own clients and answer the phone. You are not getting transferred to a 1-800 number. We do a lot of leg work to get the best coverage and the best pricing." He and his team go above and beyond for their clients with their availability and accessibility.

A DEDICATED DAD

While business keeps him busy, Benito's greatest adventure is being a father. "I have two kids, a 6-year-old son and a 2-year-old daughter, and balancing my responsibilities as a Dad and a business owner has been both challenging and rewarding." Benito's wife, Amanda, whom he married right out of high school, is his rock and business advisor, though she's not involved in day-to-day operations. "Our life revolves around sports," Benito laughs. "I coach high school wrestling, a junior wrestling club, and my son's flag football team. From October to February, our weekends are filled with tournaments."

LEAVING A LEGACY

With everything that he does, Benito is making an impact on his clients and his community. That's important for this successful entrepreneur.

"I want to be remembered as a valued member of the community," he comments. He connects others and helps them to achieve their dreams.

Benito Ortiz and Strategic Insurance Group are not only shaping the future of insurance in New Mexico but also making a difference for others. Benito lives a life of purpose and passion, a bright light in the world around him.

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By Dan Clark
Photos by Ponc Photography

MARK Rickert

Rickert Property Group | Real Broker

“
It’s about exceeding expectations. I want my clients to feel like they’re part of the family, not just another transaction.

Mark Rickert, co-founder of Rickert Property Group at Real Broker, isn’t your typical real estate professional. His path to success has been anything but linear, winding through the Navy, high tech, and even a stint fixing copiers in a suit and tie. This diverse background has shaped him into the compassionate and dedicated broker he is today, one who prioritizes relationships over transactions and believes in going above and beyond for his clients.

Mark’s tale began in Detroit, Michigan, where he was born. His childhood was marked by instability and challenges, including his parents’ divorce when he was a toddler and a period of rebellious behavior that led to a less than proud period of his life. Despite these early struggles, Mark found

his escape in sports and excelled at basketball and track during his high school years at the prestigious Monteverde Academy in Florida.

After serving in the Navy where he worked on helicopters aboard the USS Independence aircraft carrier, Mark found success in the tech world. Initially, he worked as a copier repairman but believed in dressing for success. He notes, “I was wearing a white shirt, Italian clothing – working on copiers and no one could ever believe how I kept so clean.” This led to a career with a global semiconductor manufacturer and eventually, he even started his own IT company in Silicon Valley. Yet, something was missing. He felt a pull toward real estate, a passion sparked by his father’s career as a real estate investor.

In 2011, Mark took the leap of faith, selling his tech company and relocating to New Mexico with his wife, Karla. Leaving the high-tech industry behind, he embraced his true calling, obtaining his real estate broker license in 2015.

Since then, Mark has thrived in the real estate world, but his approach is distinct. He views real estate as more than just transactions; it’s about building lasting relationships and understanding his clients’ needs on a deeper level. This philosophy, combined with his hands-on experience in construction and real estate investing, gives him a unique edge.

“Most agents shy away from the nitty-gritty of construction,” Mark explains. “But having renovated many properties and even tackled ground-up





We all have a responsibility to help those in need and I'm in the seed planting business, not the outcomes business. Whether it's mentoring a troubled teen or lending a hand to a local charity, every act of kindness makes a difference.

construction projects, I can spot potential and expensive issues that others might miss. It's about providing real value and peace of mind to my clients." This commitment to going above and beyond is evident in every aspect of his business. Mark invests significantly in his listings, often paying for staging, cinematic property videos and even cleanings to ensure his clients' homes are presented in the best possible light. He believes in providing a concierge experience, offering thoughtful touches like high-end chocolates and customized closing gifts tailored to each client's preferences.

"It's about exceeding expectations," Mark says. "I want my clients to feel like they're part of the family, not just another transaction."

Mark's success is reflected in his impressive sales record and the loyalty of his clients. But his impact extends beyond the realm of real estate. He actively mentors at-risk youth in lock-up facilities, drawing on his own experiences to guide them toward a better path. He also dedicates his time to various non-profit organizations, embodying a spirit of giving back to the community.

"We all have a responsibility to help those in need and I'm in the seed planting business, not the outcomes business," Mark believes. "Whether it's mentoring a troubled teen or lending a hand to a local charity, every act of kindness makes a difference."

Mark Rickert's story is an inspiring testament to one's ability to overcome challenges and achieve success. He is more than just a real estate broker; he is a community leader, a role model and a testament to the power of empathy and dedication in building a truly fulfilling life - something we all strive to achieve.

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JOSHUA Christensen

Christensen Properties | R1 New Mexico

By Dan Clark | Photos by Liz Lopez Photography

Joshua Christensen is comprised of grit, determination and unwavering commitment to service. His journey, which began in the heartland of Iowa, has led him to become a cornerstone of the real estate industry in New Mexico, and his story resonates especially deeply as we approach Veterans Day.

Joshua's path wasn't always clear-cut. Growing up in a family with limited means, the prospect of college seemed daunting. In a bid to secure his future, he enlisted in the Navy straight out of high school. Although a medical discharge cut his service short, the military instilled discipline and a strong work ethic in him.

After a few years of exploring different fields, Joshua found his footing in the financial world. He began as a bank manager in the mid-1990s and quickly rose through the ranks, eventually taking over the residential mortgage department in 2001. However, the housing market crash of 2008 dealt a devastating blow, eventually watching his income dwindle and his dreams crumble. "We lost everything," he recalls, "We weren't the only ones. That entire time affected a lot of people in the mortgage industry."

Despite the hardship, Joshua saw opportunity rise from the ashes of chaos. He began flipping houses in 2012, a venture that reignited his passion for real estate. Encouraged by a friend, he obtained his real estate license and closed his mortgage company, marking a pivotal turning point in his career. Joshua has been a licensed Qualifying Broker with Realty One of New Mexico since 2015.

Today, Joshua is a seasoned veteran of the real estate industry, specializing in creative financing deals – particularly owner financing. His expertise in this niche area has proven invaluable in a market where traditional sales have slowed.

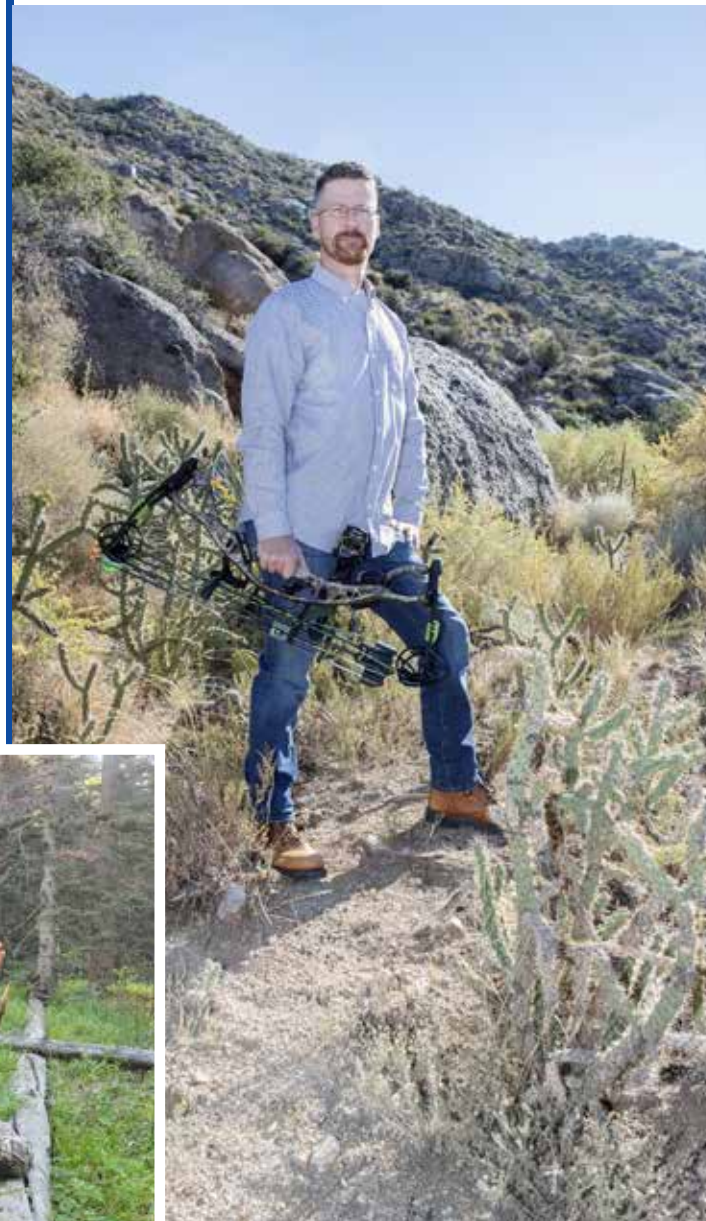
"I've talked to all my sellers, showing them how they could sell their house faster for about 30% more using owner financing," he explains.

Joshua's success isn't just measured in sales figures. He's built a thriving team, mentoring two associate brokers and establishing a small property management company. He's also an active investor, with over 400 units and a 124-unit apartment complex in Stillwater, Oklahoma having closed recently.

His ambitions extend beyond transactions and portfolios, though. Joshua is venturing into the realm of real estate education, aiming to share his wealth of knowledge and experience. He's authored a book, *Get UNBROKE*, which focuses on mindset, skill-set, real estate knowledge and passive income. He's also developing courses on some of those topics, as well as courses in underwriting and creative financing, hoping to empower both aspiring investors and homeowners looking to navigate the complexities of the market.



This foray into the education perspective of real estate stems from his time in the Navy. His medical discharge left him unable to complete his initial training while in the Navy. He was appreciative of the experience and expertise gained. As a result, he has always thrived in a mentorship role. Whether educating his clients, or other brokers, you can be sure that Joshua is most certainly in his element in a leadership role. And he's more than happy to share his knowledge with clients and colleagues, alike. Ultimately, Joshua's story is a testament to the power of perseverance and the enduring value of service, both in the Navy and in the real estate world.



As we celebrate Veterans Day, Joshua's story serves as a powerful reminder of the resilience and adaptability of our veterans. His journey from Navy nuclear electrician to real estate mogul exemplifies the American dream, fueled by hard work, determination, and an unwavering belief in the power of education and service. As Joshua himself puts it, "It's been this long, convoluted path. Things just flowed from one to the next." And as he continues to blaze new trails in real estate, we can't help but anticipate the exciting chapters yet to be written in his remarkable story.

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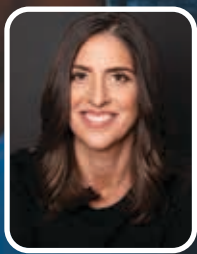
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RICHARD Gonzales

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Answering the Call



Ask not what your country can do for you –
ask what you can do for your country.

– JOHN F. KENNEDY



On September 11, 2001, a moment of profound tragedy reshaped America, and for Richard Gonzales, it was a defining event that set him on the path of military service. The Las Vegas, New Mexico native was a high school senior at Robertson High School.

“I watched live when the second plane hit the Twin Towers with my classmates,” he recalls. “Many of us vowed then and there we were going to enlist in the military. I signed up at 17 years old with my local Army National Guard Recruiter and departed for basic training in Fort Knox, Kentucky, in 2002. That’s where the drill sergeants prepared us for our imminent deployments to the Middle East in a wartime situation.”

After completing training, he served on Operation Noble Eagle, where he secured high-profile military facilities for Homeland Security. However, his desire to serve on the front lines led him to volunteer for deployment at 20. In 2005, he deployed to Baghdad, Iraq, with the 126th Military Police Company, training Iraqi police forces to secure their neighborhoods and fight terrorism. Richard is a Combat Veteran who says the real heroes are those who gave their lives for our freedom.

Upon returning home, Richard continued his service in various active-duty roles. He worked in the Contracting Division at the United States Property and Fiscal Office and later at the Regional Training Institute. His leadership and dedication earned him a permanent full-time assignment as a Recruiting Retention NCO, where he found his calling in helping fellow New Mexicans join the military. Richard served in multiple leadership roles before retiring in 2022 as a Master Sergeant after 20 years of distinguished service.

He also took the chance to further his education, earning a Bachelor of Business Administration in Human Resources from Ashford University in 2014, while still on active duty.

Richard’s dedication to the military was deeply ingrained from a young age. “I always knew I would join the military,” he says. “My grandfather Orlando ‘Speedy’ Gonzales served in the USMC, and all his brothers were decorated combat veterans. Their service during the Korean War and World Wars made a lasting impression on me.”



A New Chapter

After retiring from the military, Richard embarked on a new journey, launching his career in real estate. He began as a part-time broker in 2016, in anticipation of his retirement. “I wish I had known earlier how scalable a part-time real estate career could be,” he says. “There’s so many aspects of the business you can start with. It’s not just all in or nothing. Team structures are awesome and vitally important for new brokers and part-time brokers.”



“
I wish I had known earlier how scalable a part-time real estate career could be. There’s so many aspects of the business you can start with. It’s not just all in or nothing.”

Now the proud Qualifying Broker and Owner of OSO Elite Realty, Richard serves Central and Northern New Mexico. “We just opened OSO Elite Realty as an independent New Mexico brokerage, and we have associate brokers ready to help our fellow New Mexicans. My goal is to grow our capabilities by adding more like-minded brokers who are ready to provide excellent service and results to our deserving communities. I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to our associate brokers who have chosen to be in business with us, and to all our clients who have trusted us with their real estate goals.”

This veteran-owned local brokerage helps clients with their real estate dreams in the Land of Enchantment. Richard built his business on the Scripture of Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Expect excellent communication, transparency, and honesty.

Family + Fun

Outside of his professional career, Richard enjoys spending time outdoors—camping, fishing, hunting, and volunteer coaching. But his greatest joy comes from his family. He credits his wife, Yvonne, with transforming his life after returning from Iraq.

“When I met Yvonne, I was a 21-year-old young man with a lot of misplaced energy. I had just come back from the most dangerous city in the world at the time and was ready to volunteer for another deployment. Instead, God had other plans. Yvonne helped me see everything I had and all I could be for our family. She’s my rock, and our children, Thiago and Tasia, are my everything.”

Looking back on his 20 years of military service and forward to his career in real estate, Richard defines success as being a good husband, a supportive father, and a leader who inspires others to reach their full potential.

An Inspiration

Richard is an inspiration. He answered the call to serve his country and now he serves his clients. A man of vision, hard work, and dedication, he continues to honor others with the same sense of duty that began on that fateful day in 2001.



I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

- PHILIPPIANS 4:13



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