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▶ publisher's note: dees hinton

CONNECTING, ELEVATING, INSPIRING

Let's talk *Elevating!*

In a world often characterized by competition and individualism, the act of elevating others can be a transformative force. Elevating others involves recognizing their successes, providing support, and fostering an environment where they can grow and thrive. One of *Central Mississippi Real Producers* main mission is to elevate our REALTORS® and Preferred Partners!

When individuals support one another, they create a network of trust that enhances well-being, promotes a sense of belonging, and creates increased success – personally and professionally.

CMRP Elevates Our Community by:

- **Sharing the Stories** of our REALTORS® and Preferred Partners.
- **Recognizing Achievements and Successes** within our community.

- **Providing Opportunities for Connection** with others in the Central Mississippi Real Estate world.
- **Sharing resources, connections, or platforms** to help showcase business, people and services.
- **Encouraging Collaboration** which promotes business growth and teamwork.

Elevating others is a powerful and essential practice that can lead to significant positive change. By fostering an environment of support and empowerment, we not only enhance the lives of those around us but also contribute to a more compassionate and collaborative society. In the end, when we lift others, we elevate ourselves as well, creating a brighter future for everyone.

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▶ top producer

Written by Susan Marquez
Photography by Abe Draper Photography

NITA



DURRELL

NITA DURRELL NEVER TAKES
SUCCESS FOR GRANTED

NITA DURRELL had dreams of being a morning anchor on *Good Morning America* in New York. While she didn't reach the Big Apple, she found significant success in the broadcast industry by anchoring, producing, and shooting video for the news at WCBI News in Columbus after graduating from college. "I was determined to turn my internship into a full-time job, and I made it happen."

As a child, Nita moved around a lot because her dad was in the Army, even living in Germany for a time. But her home base was always Crystal Springs. She and her three siblings thrived in Copiah County. Nita was a cheerleader, played the clarinet in the band, ran track and served on the student council. "I was a well-rounded social butterfly."

She attended Mississippi State where she majored in communications and was a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. While at MSU, she met her now-husband, Greg Durrell, who was an architecture major.

Nita was serious about working in television. "I learned as much as I could about every aspect of the station, from engineering to sales and understanding how the money flowed."

She left north Mississippi after a long courtship with Greg. "He got a job in central Mississippi at JH&H Architects." Nita went to work at Fox 40, where she was a producer and did some reporting. She and Greg married in 2007.

While working on a story at the capitol, Nita met a consultant who asked if she was interested in getting into political public relations. "I believe God prepares us for every season we are in." She went to work at the House of Representatives, sitting in on various conversations between those in political power, "It absolutely pulled the veil back for me."

She met Erin Barham, communications director of Mississippi State Medicaid, and began doing PR work for the agency. "I worked in communications and built programs the administrative staff used across the state." It was rewarding for Nita to see that through the programs she developed employees were able to learn new skills and receive pay raises.



But in 2011 she made a career change. “I got my real estate license in 2011.” The seed for change was planted when Nita and Greg had a good experience when purchasing their first home in Clinton. “I felt I could provide a service to other people. I could help them understand how important home ownership is. It strengthens a community.”

Nita attended real estate classes in Flowood. “I had an amazing instructor - John Phillips. I still carry the things he taught with me.” As she looked for a broker, Nita met Clay Beard. “He taught me so much.” When she decided to branch out on her own, Clay was very supportive.

She got her broker’s license in 2017 and launched Durrell Realty Group. “I value my husband’s opinion, because I know he wants to see me thrive and do well. He turned to Habakkuk 2:2, “Write the vision and make it plain upon tablets, that he may run who reads it.” Greg told me to put my vision on paper, and in writing my plan I began to appreciate how he made me slow down and think and pray about it.”

Durrell Realty Group now has thirteen agents. “I intentionally try to keep it small, because I’m very hands on,” Nita states. “I think it’s important to have a good balance. I try to help my agents navigate the world as a mom, wife, and agent. I’m very family-oriented and I treat my agents like family. When one wins, we all win.”

Nita and Greg have two daughters, Addison Grace (11) and Ariel Faith (10). “My oldest is a dancer, singer, and musician who is on a competition dance team, sings in the choir, and plays the saxophone. She wants to be a lawyer. My youngest is our creative one. She is rough and tumble, funny, and plays soccer. She has such a big heart, and like her dad, she loves to draw.”

Between her children’s activities and open houses, Nita says she stays busy. The girls often attend open houses with her. “I want them to see our work ethic and to realize that nothing is given to us.” Greg now owns his own architectural firm, Durrell Design Group in Jackson.

When time allows, the family enjoys taking trips. “We love to travel when we have the opportunity. I want my girls to experience other places while teaching them to love Mississippi. The girls were amazed how people walk a lot in Washington, DC. And we loved the food and culture in Hawaii. It’s been amazing for me to experience as a mom.”



“Family is so important to me. That’s what drives me.”



Friday nights at the Durrell home are reserved for movies. “We make popcorn and pile up on the couch with blankets and snacks. It’s the best time for me.”

The family attends church at PineLake in Clinton. “Family is so important to me,” Nita says. “That’s what drives me. I want to see them do well.” She loves her work, although it can sometimes be emotionally draining because it’s not just a job, she is passionate about her clients real estate goals “I believe it’s important to surround myself with the right people and I have done that. I pray, push forward, and take a rest when needed.” Greg is Nita’s biggest cheerleader. “I wouldn’t be where I am today without him. He looks out for our family with such a big heart and he gives us the tools we need to push forward.”

There is a scripture that Nita holds on to, Jeremiah 29:11. *For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

Nita’s recipe for a good life is a simple one. Work hard. Dream big. Do what you love. “And most of all, thank God every day. Be grateful. I don’t take any of this for granted.”

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LAJESCA WOODARD



▶▶ rising star

Written by Susan Marquez | Photography by Abe Draper Photography

HELPING PEOPLE ACHIEVE THE AMERICAN DREAM



LaJesca Woodard knows how to work hard to overcome obstacles. It's a lesson she learned in high school, when she was a junior at St. Joseph Catholic School in Madison. "We returned to the school about midnight after playing a basketball game in Wesson," she recalls. "We were starting a tournament the next day. I told my coach goodbye and the next thing I knew, I woke up in intensive care at UMMC."

LaJesca had been hit head-on by a drunk driver just after turning out of the school onto Highway 463. She suffered massive injuries, returning to school several weeks later in a wheelchair. Her faith, strength, motivation, and the support from family and friends helped her to not only survive and heal, but to thrive.

In May of 2005, two weeks after graduating from Tougaloo College, LaJesca started in the Master of Biomedical program (PortalTrack). She was doing well until she became overwhelmed while studying for a gross anatomy class. "Between my junior and senior year, I never had a break - I needed electives that conflicted with my chemistry classes, therefore I took both sessions of summer school. I took the test, and was convinced I did poorly." It turns out she had passed the exam with flying colors, but at that time she knew she needed to step back and reassess. She went to work in the call center for BankPlus on the day before she and her husband, John, Jr., closed on their first home, July 30, 2006.

LaJesca quickly moved up through BankPlus. Within six months she was a teller at the Jackson Street branch in Ridgeland. Six months later she was a customer service rep at the Gluckstadt branch. At the same time she was working on her MBA. "I finished in eleven months with an online accelerated program. I got my MBA in November 2007."

Fall of 2008, LaJesca decided to get a Master of Art in teaching from Belhaven. "My original plan was to teach before I decided on the dental school route. John was already teaching, so I assumed it would be better for me to do something different."



LaJesca taught for a few years before she was exposed to real estate when she and John were looking at moving. “Joshunda Purvis, a member of our church at the time, was a REALTOR® and showed us houses. I realized how much I loved touring them and I asked a lot of questions. She said she thought I’d make a good Realtor(R).” June of 2015, LaJesca took classes at the Real Estate Training Institute (RETI) in Brandon and studied like she was back in school. “I took it very seriously.”

On the last couple of days of the course, different brokers came in to talk with the class. “The late Ron Ainsworth from Keller Williams came in and explained that they would train for success. I felt it was a great fit for me.” She got her real estate license in August 2015. She honestly thought it would be a side-gig for her, but she went



a full year without doing anything with it. “I simply didn’t have the balance of time. I thought about it and realized I like real estate and I enjoy helping people. After talking with John, I decided I could make a go of it if I could spend more time on it.” LaJesca says she has learned and grown a lot at Keller Williams, and she has made many connections, and because of that she has received referrals from agents in other states.

“It’s so rewarding to me to see people achieve part of the American dream. To know they put their trust in me, and that I have a part in helping them make one of the biggest financial decisions of their lives is an honor. I love seeing the look on a seller’s face, too, when they are selling a home and moving up - or even down-sizing. They trust me with their memories and family history. And to see a new homebuyer go from renting to owning, especially when they are the first in their family to own a home, is extremely rewarding. I think that’s the part of real estate I enjoy the most. But the residual perk is being present with my kids and being involved with their activities.”

Between her husband, her children, her mother, and their church, LaJesca’s days are full. “I realize life is brief, so I cherish each moment I have with them all.” LaJesca and John have been married for 22 years. “Second to Jesus, he is the love of my life. He has been with me through the best of the best and the worst of the worst. He’s truly my God-send.” John works with the Mississippi State Department of Education as a Federal program specialist and serves as Pastor at the Ark of Safety Ministry in Canton. They share three beautiful children together. John, III (Tre’) age 16, Abigail (Abbi), age 12, and James Andrew (Andy), who is seven.

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▶▶ partner spotlight

Written by Susan Marquez
Photography by Abe Draper Photography

With a Focus on Knowledge and Trust

Josh Smith began his career as a commercial diver, working offshore all over the world. “I went to a commercial diving school, and for fifteen years I was based out of Houston.” He was in Africa when his son started walking, and determined not to miss more milestones, Josh went back to the drawing board. “I had to figure out what I could do to stay home.”



The Richton native met his wife, Bridget, in Hattiesburg. “She’s a chemist and works as the technical director of Westlake Chemical.” Her job requires her to travel a good bit.

“I had no idea what I was going to do, and I was scared to death.” With money he had saved, Josh took several classes to get licensed as a home inspector. “I went into this with the mentality that this had to work.”

He started his business, Smith Home Inspections, LLC eight years ago and he has never looked back. “I first started looking at houses, and took classes on mold testing, water, radon testing, and I also invested in digital equipment so I can also shoot elevations in houses if folks are concerned about foundations.”



If people know they can trust you, they know you will do a good job.



When he started his business, Josh says he tried to meet as many REALTORS® as he could. “I developed relationships with them. If people know they can trust you, they know you will do a good job. I want to know that I am helping clients get the best house they can and that they know as much about it as possible.”

Real estate agents know that Josh is going to work with them every way possible. “I want to get a deal to the finish line as much as they do.” While he is checking everything he can on a home, Josh says he tries not to scare clients. “There is no such thing as a perfect house. What I do is try to explain the solutions to any problems I may find. A lot of times my role may hold up a closing and I am very sensitive to that. But if I know I have inspected a house that someone can’t buy, I have to say something. I also offer a discount for the next inspection.” He offers same day reporting, because he doesn’t want anyone waiting on him.

Josh explains that some homeowners will have a pre-listing inspection to avoid surprises down the road. “All

inspections work on the same standard of practice.”

When inspecting a home, Josh says they look for mold throughout the house. “We also offer products and services that protect homeowners, including Sewer Guard that covers the main line from the house to the road, and the Platinum Roof Protection Plan that comes with a low \$500 deductible. We also offer RecallChek, which covers the air conditioner, dishwasher, oven, refrigerator, etc. The company also offers free ADT security system set-up.

Smith Home Inspections also offers a concierge service that provides utility set-up. “It’s a great service for people who are moving in from out of town.”

In order to stay on the top of his game, Josh attends conferences to gain more knowledge in areas that can be beneficial to his clients.

Josh and Bridget have three children, Isaac (10), Claire (8), and Emma (4). They live in Madison County, north of Canton.



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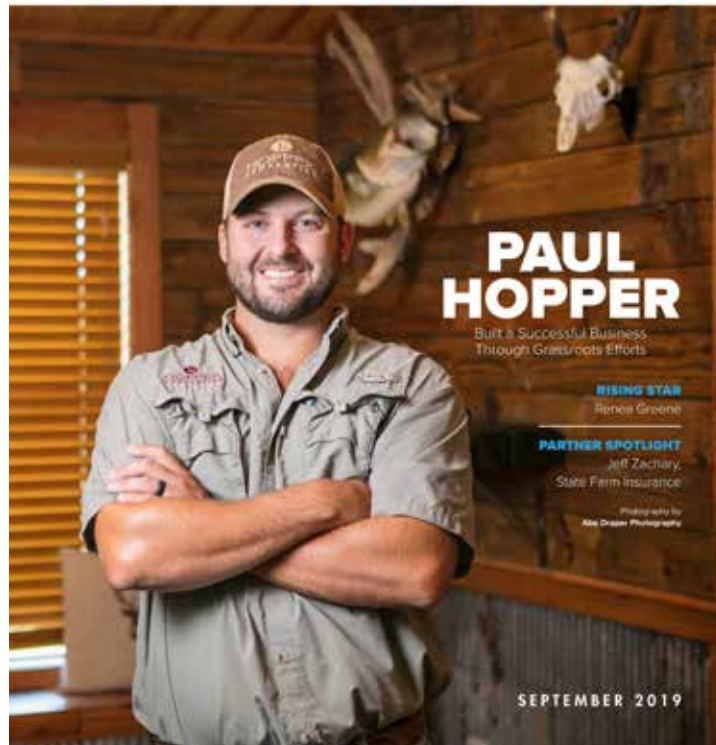
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PAUL HOPPER

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Paul Hopper was our featured Top Producer in the September 2019 issue. He is continually growing and building Hopper Properties. Investing in other and new ideas seems to be a big key to his continued success!

WHAT CHANGES HAVE OCCURRED IN YOUR CAREER SINCE YOU WERE FEATURED?

I have been involved in land development since 2011, but in the last 5 years I have integrated that as part of our retail brokerage. This addition has played a vital role in our company's growth over recent years and continues to set us apart in the industry.

WHAT CHANGES HAVE OCCURRED IN YOUR PERSONAL LIFE SINCE YOU WERE FEATURED?

Gina and I now have 3 kids: Hayes (5), Eva (2) and Trace (<1).

We built a home on acreage out in Flora, MS about 2 years ago and have not missed the neighborhood life one bit!

WHAT DO YOU THINK HAS CHANGED THE MOST IN THE INDUSTRY IN THE PAST 5 YEARS?

The Covid craze created the highest of highs in regards to home/land values and multiple offer situations. With interest rates nearly tripling in such a short time period afterwards, we are now experiencing a swift change in inventory and days on market. The analogy of a roller coaster is often used in describing the volatility of different industries. In real estate right now I think it's safe to say "Welcome to Six Flags!"

WHAT ARE YOUR REAL ESTATE GOALS FOR THE FUTURE?

My goal is to continue to build the Hopper brand through innovative marketing and investing in our team of talented agents. We never set out to be the largest firm and I have no desire to change that mindset now. As we continue to move towards a buyer's market, I think it will be an opportune time to double down on our future through hard work and determination.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY IS YOUR SECRET IN YOUR CONTINUED SUCCESS?

It seems elementary to me, but just doing the right thing in every situation. I do not headhunt or recruit agents simply out of respect for other brokerages. Always remain forward thinking and keeping a growth mindset. Do not wait for things to

come to you or you will just end up watching someone else get it. Treat others with respect and give back to those that helped you along the way. Stay humble and be vulnerable, always asking questions striving to learn more.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO NEW OR ASPIRING REALTORS®?

Don't do it. No, I'm kidding! Spend a lot of time learning as much as you can about different elements and topics in whichever asset class you want to focus on. Having a knowledge of not only the current market values but also the complex issues will translate as value to your potential clients.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE BEST ABOUT THE REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY AND WHY?

The diversification from homes, land and commercial properties that provide countless niche opportunities and income avenues. Also, the ability to be available at random times for family functions is priceless to me.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE LEAST ABOUT THE REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY TODAY AND WHY?

The expectations of being available 24/7 can be taxing in a world of instant gratification. Knowing when to take a break from the hamster wheel has always been tough for me.

HOW DO YOU ACHIEVE A WORK/LIFE BALANCE?

I have not always been able to check this box if we're being honest. Financial discipline over the years though has allowed me to invest in passive income properties such as office, warehouse, single family rentals, farm leases, etc. That has allowed more time to spend with my family instead of chasing the next deal down and it has been very rewarding. It is something we must all constantly work on because we are trained to grind by trade and commission-based income stops when you stop.



DON'T DO IT. NO, I'M KIDDING!

Spend a lot of time learning as much as you can about different elements and topics in whichever asset class you want to focus on.

IF YOU WERE NOT IN THE REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY, WHAT WOULD BE YOUR CHOSEN CAREER AND WHY?

A trackhoe operator because I enjoy tearing stuff up!

DO YOU HAVE ANY NEW HOBBIES?

I recently got into chainsaw milling. I have a love for big trees and purchased a 54" Alaskan Mill. Gina hasn't really approved the new hobby yet though.

WHAT IS THE BEST VACATION YOU HAVE BEEN ON IN THE PAST 5 YEARS?

Taking our son Hayes on his first trip to the Rocky Mountains in Colorado this summer.

IF YOU COULD HELP ANY CELEBRITY BUY A HOME, WHO WOULD IT BE AND WHY?

Probably Donald Trump so I can go ahead and retire on the commission check.



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Pam McGehee, July 2019

Pam McGehee

Pam McGehee was featured as a Rising Star in the July 2019 issue. She was featured along side Christi Chandler. While they went their separate ways professionally for a while, they are both now working together again at The Chandler Group. Read more of Pam's life update here:

WHAT CHANGES HAVE OCCURRED IN YOUR CAREER SINCE YOU WERE FEATURED?

Christi Chandler and I went our separate ways and dissolved the team and went in different directions professionally. Then after a couple of years she finally opened up her new brokerage so then I went "HOME".

WHAT CHANGES HAVE OCCURRED IN YOUR PERSONAL LIFE SINCE YOU WERE FEATURED?

We moved from a house we had lived in for 12 years that we loved so and bought a smaller house so we could build our "Forever Home". Our oldest Tae' graduated from MS State and started her career as a Junior Designer in Dallas TX. And our two boys are in school Parker is playing football and Clayton is getting ready to play football.

WHAT DO YOU THINK HAS CHANGED THE MOST IN THE INDUSTRY IN THE PAST 5 YEARS?

Besides the normal contracts and forms just being more transparent about how Realtors are paid to our clients.

WHAT ARE YOUR REAL ESTATE GOALS FOR THE FUTURE?

To continue to grow my business and serve my clients well.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY IS YOUR SECRET IN YOUR CONTINUED SUCCESS?

Honesty! and always to be looking for your other opportunity.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO NEW OR ASPIRING REALTORS®?

Hustle and always market yourself.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE BEST ABOUT THE REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY AND WHY?

I love working with different people daily and that every day is different and every transaction is different. There is never a twin transaction in this industry.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE LEAST ABOUT THE REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY TODAY AND WHY?

When my clients are having to part with a home due to financial or personal reasons. And when a buyer finds out he cannot be approved due to credit.



HOW DO YOU ACHIEVE A WORK/LIFE BALANCE?

It's easy most of the time. I schedule my appointments around my personal life for the most part.

IF YOU WERE NOT IN THE REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY, WHAT WOULD BE YOUR CHOSEN CAREER AND WHY?

If I were not in the real estate industry I would go to school to be a holistic doctor. 11 years ago I was diagnosed with Hashimoto's which is an autoimmune disease. Since then, I researched and fought for my health! Seeing a Functional Medicine doctor is what saved my life! Other doctors would not hear of the medicines they gave me were not working although my blood work said they were. Functional and Holistic medicine and healthy lifestyle is my 2nd passion.

DO YOU HAVE ANY NEW HOBBIES?

Besides being with my family and watching football and baseball I do love to travel when I can. But my family is my biggest hobby.

WHAT IS THE BEST VACATION YOU HAVE BEEN ON IN THE PAST 5 YEARS?

Gosh that's a hard one. New York City was amazing because I got to experience the city life with my entire family but also going to Alaska with my husband and experiencing that beauty was also AMAZING! I love my girl trips also! They all have their special memories - that's for sure!

IF YOU COULD HELP ANY CELEBRITY BUY A HOME, WHO WOULD IT BE AND WHY?

Nick Saban! Because I feel like we share a lot of the same values and I love him and his wife and what they do for community! And we both LOVE SOME ROLL TIDE!





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