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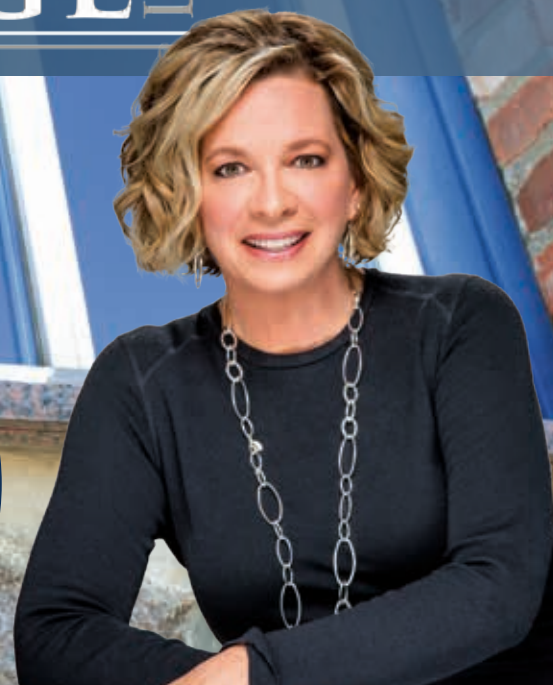
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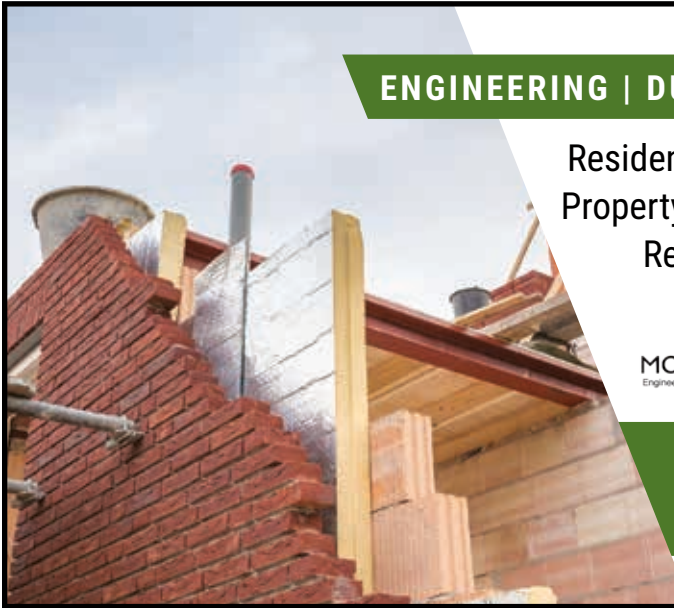
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# Meredith TANNER

## One Honest Step at a Time



PHOTOS  
BY JARVIS  
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Meredith Tanner did not set out to reinvent her life. She didn't wake up one day inspired by change or motivated by reinvention. What happened instead was quieter and much harder to prepare for.

Meredith Tanner did not set out to reinvent her life. She didn't wake up one day inspired by change or motivated by reinvention. What happened instead was quieter and much harder to prepare for.

"I found myself in a place I never thought I'd be," she said. "I'd spent my entire life dreaming about a perfect marriage, a perfect family, a perfect life. Then one day it shattered."

Almost overnight, she became a single mom of two daughters.

There was no gradual transition, no careful planning. There was the immediate reality of needing a place to live, a way to earn money, and a way to support her girls. Underneath all of that was something less visible but just as heavy.

"It was a massive identity crisis," Meredith said. "I had no choice but to figure out who I am and how to get up every day and figure out what the next tiny step would be."

Starting over is rarely clean. It often comes with loss layered on top of loss. For Meredith, that included the quiet unraveling of community.

"I've always loved figuring things out on my own," she said. "I always say, 'Everything is figure-out-able.' But for the first time, I couldn't figure it out. I was too lost, too tired, too upside down."

Some of the community she had built during her marriage technically remained available to her, but staying connected meant reopening wounds that had not healed.

"Every interaction was a reminder of what I'd lost and what I'd left," she said.





“Everything was a reminder of what used to be, and it was incredibly painful.”

What remained was smaller but steadier. Her immediate family. Two close friends. People she could reach with the simplest message.

"I remember sending text messages simply saying, 'Hey. I'm not okay.'"

Before real estate, Meredith worked in ministry. She had spent years being the person others leaned on during their hardest moments. Becoming the one who needed help required learning something new.

"I had no idea how to be the one that wasn't okay," she said. "Now having been that person, I look back and grieve the ways I did or didn't show up for people who were hurting because I simply didn't get it."

Real estate was not a romantic calling. It was a practical decision shaped by motherhood, time, and necessity.

"I've got to be really honest here because the truth isn't glamorous at all," she said. "What drew me to real estate was honestly that problem I have with thinking I can do pretty much anything decently well."

“I was never salesy. I was just their friend who happened to be able to help them find a home.”

She knew agents who had flexibility. As a single mom, flexibility was not a luxury. It was non-negotiable.

"I was not going to work in a job that was going to cost my kids more than it gave them," she said. "If they could do it, I figured I could too."

The learning curve came fast. The 2023 market offered no softness. Early optimism collided with reality. Still, something shifted after her first few sales.

"I remember saying to a fellow agent, 'Wait, what if I can actually do this?!'"

That moment mattered.

"It was no longer 'I hope this works out,'" she said. "It became, 'It is absolutely going to work out.'"

Refusing mediocrity became a quiet line she would not cross. Not because she was chasing status, but because settling had already taken too much.

"I realized I had a choice," she said. "I could sell some homes and pay the bills and feed my kids, or I could put in the work to build an absolutely beautiful life for them."

Momentum came from consistency, not intensity.

"I decided early on I would do something for real estate every day," she said. "I also chose to think of myself as a business owner. I'm running my business."

She works almost every day. She also protects time with her kids, time at the gym, coffee with friends. None of it feels performative. It feels intentional.

Her background working with people became her advantage.

"I was never salesy," she said. "I was just their friend who happened to be able to help them find a home."

Loss reshaped how she sees clients.

“When my world turned upside down, I learned pretty quickly that people are hurting,” she said. “Even the strong ones.”

That awareness keeps her grounded.

"I have no choice but to see clients as people who are trying to navigate this really big thing that is scary and kind of unknown," she said.

Motherhood sharpens everything.

"I'm not just rebuilding for me," she said. "I want them to see what self-respect and courage look like."

She wants her daughters to learn that hard seasons do not get the final word.

Redefining what “enough” meant took time.

"Staying small feels safer," she said. "But it costs you everything."

Giving herself permission became an act of repair.

"I didn't need permission or validation from someone else," she said. "I can make choices today that redeem those years."

When Meredith speaks to people who feel stuck, her words are steady, not dramatic.

"My life looks nothing like I thought it would," she said. "But looking back, I'm so grateful for the opportunity to stop, to sit in the discomfort, and ask, 'What do I want my life to look like?'"

She doesn't frame starting over as failure.

"You don't have to burn your life down to build something better," she said. "You just have to be brave and take the next honest step."

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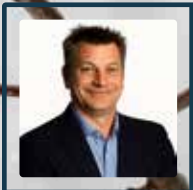
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BY CHRIS  
PAPPALARDO

# How to Stay Focused in February When the Market Is Slow and It's Cold Outside

February is the real estate equivalent of leg day. Nobody's excited, everyone's sore from January optimism, and the weather is doing its best to convince you that the couch is a solid career plan. The market is slower, daylight is limited, and motivation feels optional. This is exactly why February matters.

Great agents aren't built in spring—they're built now.

When the market slows and the cold sets in, your biggest enemy isn't inventory or interest rates. It's distraction. February tests your discipline, your routines, and your ability to work without applause. If you can stay focused now, you'll be dangerous when things heat up.

1. Shrink the Time Horizon

February feels long because agents think too far ahead. Stop obsessing over the next six months and focus on winning today. One focused day beats a month of half-effort. Set daily non-negotiables: contacts made, follow-ups completed, and skills practiced. If you win the day, the month takes care of itself.

Momentum doesn't come from motivation—it comes from action.

2. Treat Slow as Strategic

A slow market isn't dead time; it's preparation time. This is when you tighten systems, clean your database, refine your messaging, and sharpen your skills. Most agents wait for business to "force" them into action. Pros build capacity before demand shows up.

February is where you plant seeds that bloom in April and May. Ignore this, and you'll be scrambling later.

3. Control Your Environment

Cold weather kills energy if you let it. Shorter days mean routines matter more, not less. Get up at the same time. Get dressed like you're going to work—even if you're working from home.

Move your body daily. You don't need to train for a marathon, but you do need circulation and oxygen to your brain.

Your environment either pulls you forward or drags you back. Choose wisely.

4. Double Down on Conversations

When transactions slow, conversations must increase. February is prime time for relationship building—check-ins, value-based outreach, and genuine connection. People are still thinking about moves; they're just quieter about it. Be the professional who shows up consistently, not the one who disappears until spring.

Silence now costs you listings later.

5. Remember Why You Started

February strips away external validation. No headlines. Fewer closings. Less excitement. That's good. It forces you back to your "why." Freedom. Income. Impact. Growth. Whatever drives you—revisit it. Write it down. Read it daily.

This month isn't about feeling good. It's about becoming better.

**Bottom line:** February rewards discipline, not enthusiasm. Stay focused, stay consistent, and keep building when it's uncomfortable. The agents who win the year are the ones who refuse to hibernate.

Spring doesn't reward potential—it rewards preparation.

And February is where that preparation happens.

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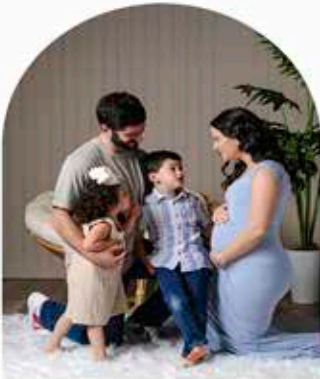
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# The Difference Between HOPING & KNOWING

BY RJ MEYERHOFFER, VP OF MORTGAGE LENDING



One of the most common breakdowns in a real estate transaction has nothing to do with the house, the seller, or even the market.

It's timing.

More specifically, it's buyers delaying preapproval.

Somewhere along the way, preapproval became optional in the minds of consumers. Buyers assume it's stressful, invasive, or something they should wait on until they "find the right house." The problem is that waiting doesn't reduce friction later—it increases it.

And when it shows up, it shows up on your side of the deal.

Let's clear something up.

Getting preapproved is not a binding commitment. It's not locking a buyer into a loan. And it's certainly not something that should feel intimidating or overwhelming.

In reality, it's one of the most effective tools you have to protect your client and the transaction. Still, hesitation is common — and not hard to explain.

After decades in this industry, it's clear why buyers procrastinate on



preapproval. It does make people anxious. Whether it's a first home, a move-up purchase, or a third trip around the homebuying block, the unknown feels uncomfortable. Most buyers aren't avoiding the process — they're avoiding the stress they assume comes with it.

Preapproval isn't about deciding to buy a house. It's about confirming the buyer is actually positioned to write a clean, competitive offer.

Here's why delaying preapproval creates problems downstream.

When buyers skip this step, they often fall in love with homes outside their comfortable payment range, underestimate the cash required to close, or assume their credit profile is "fine" without verification. That uncertainty doesn't disappear—it compounds. And it usually surfaces after a contract is written, when timelines are tight and leverage is limited.

That's when deals wobble.

The irony is that preapproval today is easier than most buyers expect—and far easier than cleaning things up mid-transaction.

It's free. It uses a soft credit pull, so there's no impact to a buyer's score.

And it gives everyone clarity before decisions are made emotionally.

Here's what actually happens when a buyer gets preapproved with your lender.

The buyer completes a short online application. No pressure. No commitment. Because the credit review is a soft pull, there's no damage to their score and no sense of "point of no return." It's simply a snapshot of where they stand right now.

Next, they upload a few standard documents so the lender can give real guidance instead of estimates:

- Last two years of W-2s
- Two recent pay stubs
- The last two months of statements for down payment and closing funds
- And for self-employed buyers, the last two years of federal tax returns

That's it.

Once everything is reviewed, the lender walks the buyer through the details—real numbers, not ranges. Rate options, estimated payments, required funds, and the smartest path forward based on timing and goals. Whether the buyer is ready now or planning ahead, they leave with clarity instead of assumptions.

And that clarity benefits everyone involved.

Most buyers feel relief after preapproval—not pressure. Because uncertainty is far scarier than facts. When buyers understand their numbers early, they write stronger offers, move faster with confidence, and are far less likely to panic once under contract.

Preapproval doesn't slow the process—it stabilizes it.

For Realtors, it means fewer surprises, cleaner negotiations, and transactions that stay on track. For buyers, it means confidence and control. And for the deal, it means fewer last-minute issues that could have been avoided.

Before the offer, before the showing, before the emotion—preapproval.

It's not a commitment. It's a plan. And it simply makes every transaction better.



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# The Untapped 50%

## Why Top Agents Are Pivoting to Tenant Representation

BY ALEKA DEGRAAF



In the dynamic real estate landscape of the Triad, the numbers tell a story that many agents overlook.

Statistics show that our local housing market is split almost evenly: **roughly 50% of residents are homeowners, and 50% are tenants.**

For the traditional real estate agent, focusing exclusively on the “buy-sell” transaction means effectively ignoring half of the potential client base. In a market where inventory can be tight and interest rates fluctuate, the most successful agents are diversifying. They are realizing that the path to a robust, recession-proof business involves bridging the gap between sales and leasing.

**At Fortified Dreams Property Solutions**, we view buy/sell agents not as competitors, but as vital partners in the housing ecosystem. We believe that by adding **Tenant Representation** to your repertoire and learning how to seamlessly collaborate with modern Property Management (PM) firms, you can unlock immediate income streams and build a powerful pipeline of future buyers.

**The “Tenant Agent” Strategy: Incubating Your Future Pipeline**  
Becoming a “Tenant Agent” isn’t just about unlocking a door for a renter; it is about applying your fiduciary expertise to the leasing process. Renters today face a fragmented market filled with scams, unresponsive landlords, and confusing terms. They are increasingly willing

to pay for professional guidance to navigate this landscape.

Here is why this pivot is a strategic win for your business:

**Immediate Cash Flow:** Sales commissions are great, but they can be months in the making. Tenant representation fees offer a faster turnaround, smoothing out the “feast or famine” cycle of commission-based income.

**Incubating Future Buyers:** When you help a client find the perfect rental, you earn their trust and loyalty. By maintaining that relationship, you position yourself as the only agent they will call when their lease expires and they are ready to buy. You aren’t just finding them a rental; you are securing

a listing or buyer contract for 12 to 24 months down the road.

**Market Authority:** By understanding rental rates and neighborhood nuances, you become a more well-rounded advisor to your investor clients who are looking to buy rental properties.

### The Mechanics: Negotiating Fees and Mastering NC Forms

Many agents hesitate to enter the rental space because they are unsure of how to get paid. Unlike the MLS sales cooperation, rental commissions aren’t always guaranteed or standardized. This is where your negotiation skills and form knowledge are paramount.

**Secure Your Commission:** Never work on a handshake. Just as you wouldn’t drive a buyer around without an agreement, you should utilize the **NC REALTOR® Form 530 (Exclusive Buyer/Tenant Representation Agreement)**. This form allows you to negotiate your fee directly with the tenant—whether it’s a flat fee or a percentage of one month’s rent (often 50-100%)—ensuring you are compensated for your time and expertise.

**Protect Your Client:** Familiarize yourself with **NC REALTOR® Form 410-T (Residential Rental Contract)**. Even if a property management company uses their own lease, understanding the standard protections in the 410-T allows you to advise your client on what is standard and what is a “red flag.”

### Partnering with the “New School” of Property Management

The old days of chasing down an on-site property manager to borrow a physical key are fading. Companies like Fortified Dreams Property Solutions are moving toward an agile, tech-forward model that actually makes your life as an agent easier.

We have removed the friction from showing rentals:

**Tech-Enabled Access:** We utilize advanced self-showing platforms and smart lockboxes. This means you can show your clients our multi-family units on their schedule—even after hours or on weekends—without coordinating with an office manager.

**Referral Confidence:** We stay in our lane. We are property managers; you are the sales expert. When you refer an investor client to us for management,

or a tenant client to one of our units, we respect your relationship. We manage the asset, but when that client is ready to sell or buy again, we send them back to you.

### Join the Movement: Monthly “Agent & PM Partnership” Classes

We are passionate about bridging the gap between agents and managers to elevate the industry standard in the Triad. To facilitate this, Fortified Dreams Property Solutions is now hosting monthly classes exclusively for real estate agents.

In these interactive workshops, we cover:

**“The Art of the Tenant Rep”:** detailed strategies on how to price your services and pitch value to renters.

**“Navigating the PM Relationship”:** best practices for showing managed properties and communicating with property managers.

**“Forms & Compliance”:** A deep dive into using Form 530 and Form 410-T correctly to protect your license and your income.

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## 5 **HOT** Tips to Warm Up Your Winter Sales

- Focus on Serious Buyers**  
Winter buyers are motivated. Encourage pre-approval early so they're ready to make competitive offers fast.
- Embrace the Cozy Factor**  
Help sellers stage for warmth — think soft lighting, neutral tones, and a welcoming vibe that photographs well even when the sun sets early.
- Use Low Inventory to Your Advantage**  
Fewer listings mean less competition. Position your sellers strategically for quick, strong offers.
- Plan for Spring Now**  
Start building your spring pipeline. Prepping buyers and sellers now gives you a head start when the thaw hits.
- Partner with a Proactive Lender**  
A trusted mortgage team can make or break a deal — especially during winter holidays or end-of-year crunch time.

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# Sabrina Woods

## of Triad Aerial Arts

*Where  
Movement  
Becomes  
Connection*

STORY AND  
PHOTOS BY  
JASON WEBER

**W**hen you walk into Triad Aerial Arts, the equipment stops you for a second. It's beautiful in the way serious tools are beautiful, the kind of setup you only see when someone has spent years refining what they do and investing in doing it right.

Silks, lyra, straps, trapeze, spirals, ropes, all of it set up for real training, not display. Then you notice the rest: the height, the light, the quiet charge in the air.

Sabrina doesn't greet you like a salesperson. She greets you like someone who already knows you, like you've been friends for years and just haven't seen each other in a while.

"This is a collection of 30 years of my effort to make everyone else fit and stay fit, too," she told us, looking around the studio like she could still remember each phase of her work hanging in the air. "But I'm really concerned about how my client thinks and feels, what their feedback is, and how they're doing. That actually matters to me. They're not just a metric. They're a person I want to be friends with, and I want to make happy."

That's the difference you feel immediately. In a lot of fitness spaces, you're a number, or a before-and-after waiting to happen. Here, you're a person having a day. That matters, because aerial arts looks intimidating from the outside. You see performers on fabric, upside down like gravity is optional, and it's easy to assume you need to be a certain kind of body to even try. Alexis came in with that exact hesitation.

"My takeaway from session one was that I felt very, very deterred thinking about myself up on these objects," she said. "I thought back to these lovely girls I saw performing aerial arts at the Second Harvest Food Bank event, and I remember thinking, this is not going to look pretty."

And that's where Sabrina is at her best. She doesn't talk you out of your fear. She simply builds trust in real time. She watches your range of motion, notices what you do when you're



Alexis  
Brinkley  
and Sabrina  
Woods

unsure, then gives you something you can succeed at, with just enough edge to make it interesting.

"I'm looking at what you're doing to decide what the next move should be," she explained, "so you feel somewhat comfortable, but I can also take you a little out of your comfort zone and teach you things you didn't already know."

By the end of the session, Alexis wasn't performing. She was present. You could see it in her posture, her shoulders dropped and her face softened once the work was done.

"I'm impressed," she said. "I feel like it was a really excellent workout and stretch, and I feel grounded. While I was doing it, it felt hard, but I didn't feel like I was exercising in the orthodox way. Now I feel toned, I feel stretched, and it feels good."

Sabrina noticed something else too, and it wasn't about form.

"I was impressed by you because you were able to let go of the fabric and trust my instructions," she told Alexis. "Normally with a new person, I come off the apparatus a lot more."

One of my goals is to build trust, because when we have that, we maximize our time and learn more from each other."





“

**One of my goals is to build trust, because when we have that, we maximize our time and learn more from each other.”**



That phrase, maximize more time, kept coming up. Sabrina talks about fitness the way an operator talks about systems. She’s not interested in workouts that look cool but don’t carry over into real life. She wants the work to show up when you’re not in the studio. For people to move with big range of motion and stay dynamic, instead of becoming stiff. To feel better, look better, and stay capable as they get older.

“I think it’s important to mention how possible this is after forty,” she said, then looked at Alexis with genuine surprise.

And she meant it. She’s trained people long enough to see what happens when adults give up on their bodies because they assume it’s too late. She’s also seen the opposite, which is the real point of her studio: people can do more than they think, especially when they’re supported.

“I’ve had moms bring their daughters in, and I end up training both,” she told us. “They had no idea they could do anything close to what their daughter

could do, and they ended up enjoying it and having quality time together.”

Over time, that became a theme in her work: aerial arts as connection, not just exercise. Sabrina has built groups around shared threads, the way real communities form.

“I’ve had three generations of clients going at once,” she said. “The granddaughter, the mother, the grandmother. I use my studio to host family-type events, as well as events for certain causes or fundraising efforts. Friends are just a great way to approach exercise in general.”

She even has a name for it, and it stuck with me because it’s so simple it almost sounds obvious once you hear it: Aerials with Friends.

“It has to have a common thread,” she explained. “It might be colleagues who are physicians, electricians, dentists, or Realtors. People already have their professional or family group, and then they get to share an activity together.”

Alexis lit up when we talked about that idea.

“After this experience, I’m convinced it’s possible to get a group of adults together and do something like a mastermind,” she said. “Not everyone has to engage physically. Some people could watch, and we could still hear from you.”

Sabrina didn’t hesitate.

“I do groups like that all the time,” she said. “Everyone gets to stay in their comfort zone, but they’re around people they like. With friends, people become supportive and patient, and it’s charming.”

That word, charming, might sound small, but it’s the right one. There was a lightness in the space. Nothing forced or showy. Just the feeling that comes when adults realize they’re still allowed to learn something new.

Sabrina told us her own story too, and it matters because it strips away the myth that people like her were born fit.



“My parents were pretty unhealthy,” she said. “Smoking, drinking, eating cheap food. We were poor. My first year of college, I was borderline high cholesterol, so I decided to do a complete 180. I became a group fitness instructor, worked my way through college, and I never looked back.”

That’s what Triad Aerial Arts feels like. Not a place for perfect bodies, but for people making a turn. People who want to feel alive again. People who want strength without ego, flexibility without self-consciousness, and movement that doesn’t feel like punishment.

When we left, I kept thinking: most people aren’t avoiding fitness because they’re lazy. They’re avoiding it because they’re bored, intimidated, or tired of pretending they enjoy what they hate.

Sabrina said it best early on, almost like she was describing half the adults in this area without trying.

“For some people, they’re just bored out of their mind with conventional exercise and want to do something different,” she said. “They don’t realize it’s just as hard.”

The difference is that here, the hard part feels meaningful. You’re not grinding through something you hate. You’re learning as you go. You’re trusting the process. You end up laughing with the person you came with, and for a lot of people, that’s the doorway back into taking care of themselves.

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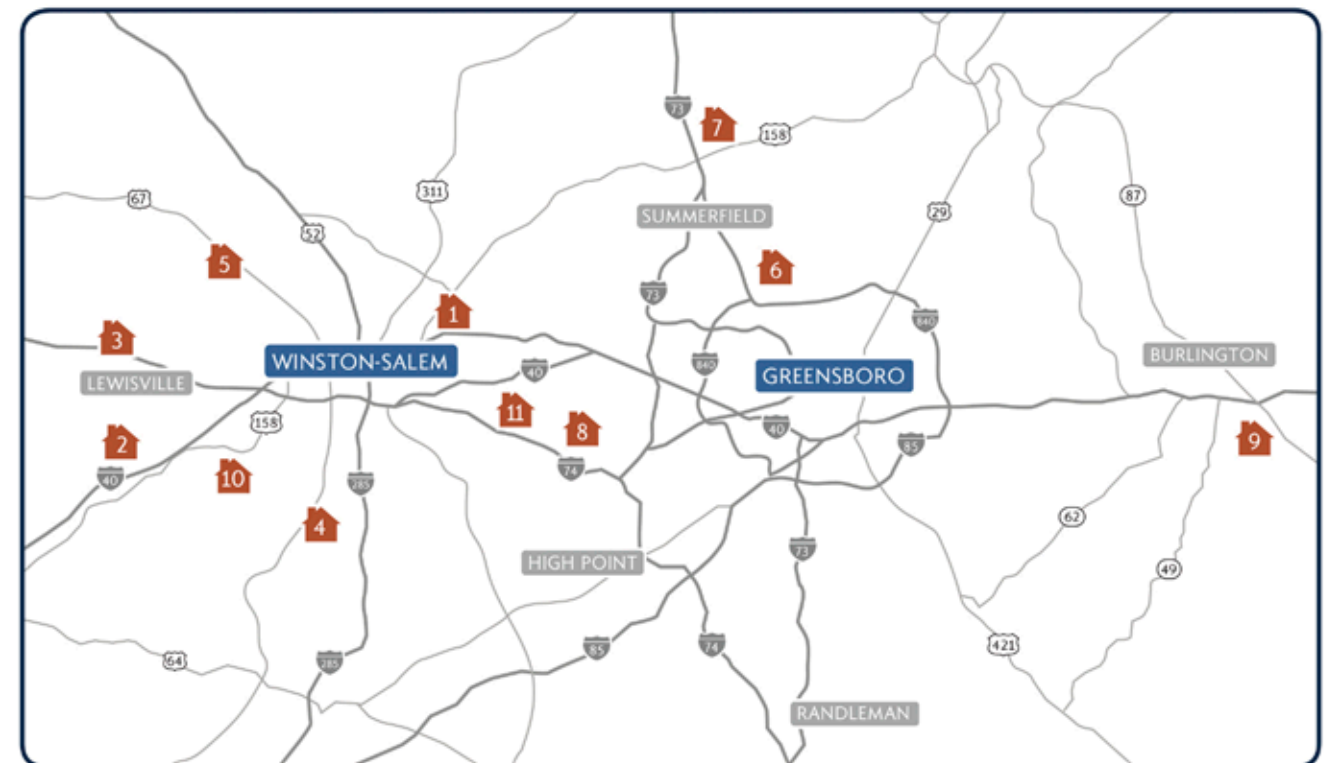
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# The Conversations That Matter Most

BY JOE LARZ

Joe Larz in conversation with Sarah Faude, Maria Cervantes, and Elizabeth Newsome | Movement Mortgage

Most buyers don’t reach out because they feel ready.

They reach out because they’re unsure, excited, nervous, sometimes all at once. That’s where these conversations usually begin.

When I sat down with Sarah Faude, Maria Cervantes, and Elizabeth Newsome of Movement Mortgage, the conversation didn’t go where you might expect. There was no talk of “closing loans.” Instead, they talked about people: the stress, the fear, the responsibility, and what it really means to guide someone through one of the most emotionally charged decisions they’ll ever make.

Joe Larz: What do buyers underestimate most about the emotional weight of buying a home?

Sarah Faude: “I think people underestimate just how vulnerable the process feels. You’re supplying documents, signing disclosures, going through underwriting. It can feel like drinking out of a fire hose. And it doesn’t matter if you’re a first-time buyer or someone who’s done this before. That stress still shows up.”

Joe: When timelines tighten or something unexpected comes up, how do you stay present for clients?

Sarah: “I try to bring solutions before I bring concerns whenever I can. But even with planning, things happen. Appraisals fall short. Situations change. When that happens, my priority is making sure my clients know they’re heard and supported. I put myself in their shoes. They don’t buy a home every day. It’s my responsibility to make sure they feel comfortable and confident from start to finish.”



Elizabeth Newsome  
Sarah Faude  
Maria Cervantes  
MOVEMENT MORTGAGE





**“They don’t buy a home every day. It’s my responsibility to make sure they feel comfortable and confident from start to finish.”**



**“I tell them to think of me as their mortgage doctor. I’m here to diagnose and guide, not judge.”**



**“Confidence comes from trust and understanding. Second-guessing usually comes from fear or outside pressure. Education helps quiet that noise.”**



**Joe: What does it actually look like to advocate for a buyer, not just process their loan?**

**Sarah:**

“My most meaningful transactions are with clients who don’t fit into standard lending scenarios. People who’ve been told no without being given any guidance. I don’t tell clients no,” she said.

“It’s usually ‘not yet,’ and then we build a plan.”

She shared one example that still stands out.

“I had clients who needed a bigger home because their family was growing, but they’d accumulated credit card debt due to health issues. Instead of putting all their proceeds toward a larger down payment, we reduced the down payment, paid off higher-interest debt, and helped them build emergency savings. Their mortgage payment was higher, but they saved about \$1,500

a month overall. I always try to look beyond the transaction.”

**Joe: How do you handle the hard conversations, when a loan can’t move forward?**

**Sarah:**

“Those are never easy. Especially knowing there are costs clients can’t get back. I focus on transparency. I give them space to express frustration, then we step back and look for another path forward. Most of the time, there is one. And if there isn’t, I know I did everything I could and helped set them up for the future.”

**Joe: Maria, when buyers first reach out to you, what emotional space are they usually in?**

**Maria Cervantes:**

“They’re usually excited and eager, but also nervous. That nervousness almost always comes from not knowing where they stand. Credit. Income. Affordability.

Once we talk through those things, a lot of that fear softens.”

“I really value those first conversations. I ask about their current housing, what payment feels comfortable, where they want to live, whether they’re first-time buyers. By the end of that call, I want them to feel informed and confident.”

**Joe: Buying a home brings fear around money and commitment. How do you help clients move through that?**

**Maria:**

“Education is everything. Qualifying and affordability are not the same thing. Just because you qualify doesn’t mean the payment fits your lifestyle. I walk clients through the loan terms in detail so they understand the long-term responsibility. Confidence comes from clarity.”

**Joe: What do buyers worry about but rarely say out loud?**

**Maria:**

“A lot of them worry about being judged. They’re opening up personal finances. I explain why we ask the questions we ask. I tell them to think of me as their mortgage doctor. I’m here to diagnose and guide, not judge.”

**Joe: Elizabeth, many buyers struggle with knowing when they’re truly ready. How do you help with that?**

**Elizabeth Newsome:**

“We talk through what ‘ready’ actually means. Savings, down payment options, credit, income stability. I remind them that being nervous is normal and that they shouldn’t let the market push them. My job is to guide, not pressure.”

**Joe: What separates confident buyers from those who second-guess?**

**Elizabeth:**

“Confidence comes from trust and understanding. Second-guessing usually

comes from fear or outside pressure. Education helps quiet that noise.”

**Joe: How do you personally measure success?**

**Elizabeth:**

“I feel successful when clients tell me they felt supported the entire way. I never take it lightly when someone trusts me with such personal details about their life and finances.”

**Joe: Sarah, what’s a moment that’s stayed with you?**

**Sarah:**

“I worked with a single mother of three whose builder’s preferred lender couldn’t close her loan two weeks before closing. Her lease had ended and she didn’t know what to do. I reviewed her file and was able to close the loan. She cried at the closing table. She was just grateful someone fought for her.”

**Joe: When buyers look back years later, what do you hope they remember?**

**Sarah:**

“That I cared and made the process as simple as possible.”

**Maria:**

“That they felt confident and informed.”

**Elizabeth:**

“That they felt supported every step of the way.”

None of them focused on rates, speed, or winning.

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- *Jill M.*



"Don and his team were excellent in every aspect. They were professional and patient. In this climate where great customer service is rare, I can vouch for this team. Anthony was consistent and courteous... If you're reading this and are considering this company, stop searching, it will not get any better than this."  
- *Robert D.*



"Don and his team were all wonderful to work with. As a first time homebuyer Don took the time to explain everything as many times as it took, in addition to giving invaluable information pertinent to my success as a home owner. I would recommend the team to anyone and truly could not have asked for a better experience!"  
- *David H.*



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## WHEN IT MATTERS MOST

# JENNIFER *Washburn*

BY JASON WEBER  
PHOTOS BY  
BRIAN ANTHONY

Jennifer Washburn is usually waiting on a call. Not in a dramatic way—just with the awareness that at any moment, someone will need something. A client with a question they don't yet know how to ask. An inspection that didn't go as planned. A situation that needs calm more than urgency.

That's the rhythm of her days: quiet responsibility, showing up, and carrying more than most people realize.

She didn't plan on a career in real estate. She's clear about that. "It really wasn't some big dream of mine," she says. The beginning was simple, almost accidental. Years ago, she was sitting by the pool at her friend Tracy's parents' house. Tracy was already in the business—running her own brokerage, handling foreclosures, grinding it out. At some point, Tracy looked at her and said, "Why don't you just become a real estate agent?"

Jennifer remembers laughing, then getting practical. "I told her, if you can guarantee I'll make my investment back, I'll do it." Tracy didn't hesitate. She said she knew Jennifer could. Jennifer took the class, passed the exam, and within two weeks of getting licensed, received a referral that paid back her investment. "That was it," she says. "Ever since then, I've been in this business."

Before real estate, Jennifer followed a familiar path. She graduated from UNCG with a degree in economics and stepped straight into sales. "If you graduate with a business degree and don't go get a master's or doctorate, you end up in sales," she says matter-of-factly.

Wells Fargo Financial came first—long days filled with cold calls, refinances, and loans that barely made sense on paper. After that came payroll sales in downtown Greensboro. "I've always been in sales, so that part came naturally," she says.

What didn't come naturally was the idea of living on commission. "I never thought I'd be in a 100 percent commission role,"



she admits. "At first, it's hard to wrap your head around. And honestly, it's still hard." Every month carries uncertainty. "December might be great. February might be nothing. You're always wondering, what am I going to do?"

When she started in real estate, she didn't jump in all at once. For years, she worked a full-time job while treating real estate like a second full-time job at night and on weekends.

"If I had gone all in right away, I don't know that I would've made it," she says. "I focused on money. I had to." Eventually, the numbers shifted. "When I was making more part-time in real estate than full-time at my job, that's when I quit."

She went full-time shortly after her daughter was born. Sophia is eleven and a half now, and everything Jennifer talks about eventually comes back to her.





“I’m a single mom,” she says plainly. “It’s been a blessing and a challenge all at once.” During a five-year custody battle, she spent years in the court system—an experience she describes as make-or-break. “That was one of the biggest struggles of my life,” she says.

That period changed her in unexpected ways. Through the legal process, she built relationships with attorneys, one connection leading to another. “I didn’t even realize that was a part of real estate I could step into,” she says.

Today, she does significant work tied to divorce situations and understands just how emotionally charged those moments can be. “When people are going through the worst time of their life, I get it,” she says. “I’ve been there.”

She’s since served as an expert witness in real estate in Guilford County—something that grew directly out of lived experience, not strategy.

Ask Jennifer what’s contributed most to her success, and she doesn’t hesitate. “I’m patient,” she says. “And I really believe if you care about people first and put their needs ahead of your own, the rest will follow.” She’s quick to clarify what that looks like in practice. “I

honestly don’t care if someone buys the house. I care if it’s the right fit.”

During due diligence, she pushes for clarity, even when it costs her. “Sometimes it kills the deal,” she says. “They walk away. But I’d rather that than have someone buy something they don’t understand.”

She knows that approach can cost time and money. “Sometimes you lose the deal. Sometimes you lose the client. Sometimes you lose both,” she says. “But if your intention is truly to protect people, most of the time they see that.”

Four years ago, Jennifer moved to RE/MAX, a shift she describes as a turning point in both her career and her life. The change gave her something she hadn’t had before: support.

Josh Mann stepped in to handle night and weekend showings and manage backend paperwork, allowing her to be more present at home. “He doesn’t get the spotlight,” she says. “But he’s the reason I can be home for dinner and bedtime.”

That support extended beyond business. When her father passed away, the office carried her workload for a month

“IF YOU’RE A GOOD AGENT, YOU WEAR A LOT OF HATS. YOU’RE THE THERAPIST, THE ADVOCATE, THE PROBLEM-SOLVER.”

without hesitation. “That’s family to me,” she says.

She still speaks warmly about Tracy Shrouder, the friend who started it all. “She got me into real estate, and she’s still one of my biggest supporters,” Jennifer says. “She’s rooted for me for fifteen years.”

Jennifer doesn’t seek attention. “I don’t like the spotlight,” she admits. She turned down being featured for years, and being on the cover made her uncomfortable. Over the past four years, she’s ranked number one in her office for volume and units—but she mentions it carefully. “That’s not just me,” she says. “That’s who I work around.”

Outside of work, her life is small and intentional. “My biggest hobby is my kid,” she says with a smile. Family. Friends. Church. Serving together. Time outside. “That’s really it,” she says. “That’s the day.”

When people say real estate agents just open doors, Jennifer shakes her head. “If you’re a good agent, you wear a lot of hats,” she says. “You’re the therapist, the advocate, the problem-solver.” By the time she gets home, she’s often quiet. “I’m not mad,” she says. “I just don’t have anything left to say.”

For Jennifer Washburn, success isn’t measured in headlines or projections. “My goals always come back to my kid,” she says. “Providing. Being present. Giving back when I can.”

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