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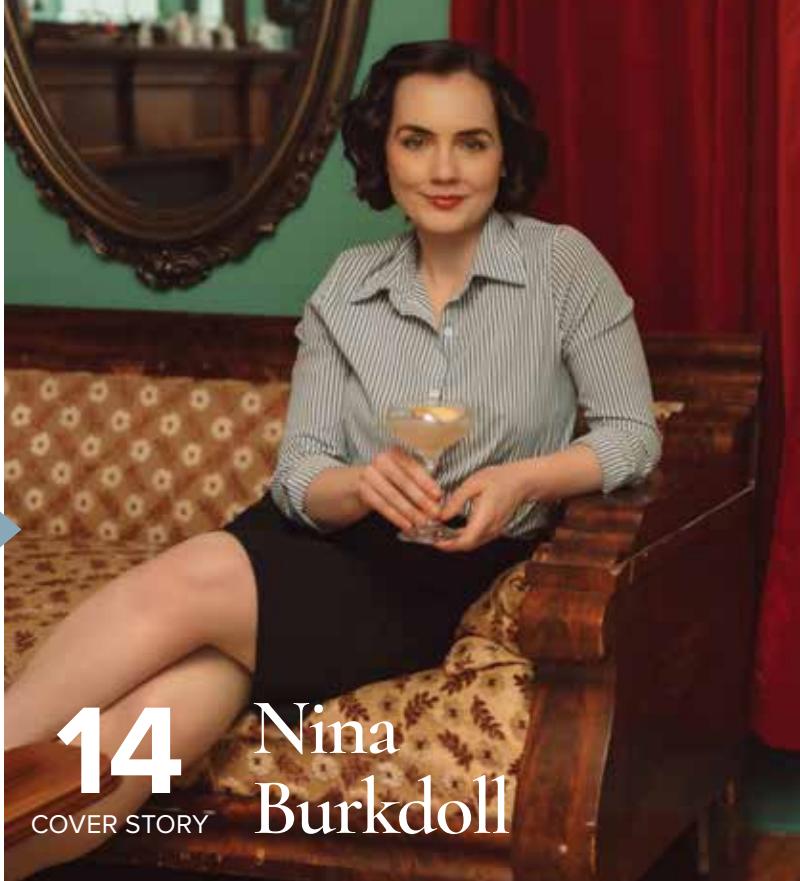
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COVER STORY

Nina
Burkdoll

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NINA Burkdoll

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WRITTEN BY ELIZABETH MCCABE
PHOTOS BY ALLIE SANTOS, AT OAK
HOUSE DISTILLERY & SPEAKEASY

Born in Thailand to missionary parents, Nina Burkdloll grew up as number six of thirteen children in a family of eight girls and five boys. She attended Thai school, studied traditional Thai dance, and her family had the honor of performing for President Barack Obama during his visit to Thailand in 2012, all while being immersed in a rich, multicultural environment that shaped her understanding of people and culture.

At 20 years old, Nina moved from Thailand to the United States alone with just two suitcases and 1,000 dollars to attend school. She worked multiple jobs while earning her degree and moved between a couple states before eventually settling in Athens, Georgia.

A season of profound loss ultimately led her to real estate. She lost two sisters, and in 2020, Nina's father was diagnosed with Stage 4 brain cancer, and her family lost him just a few months later. Because of COVID restrictions, she and her siblings were unable to be by his side at the end, a reality that left a lasting imprint on her heart. As he was taken off life support, something within her shifted, and a defining belief took root. "I realized I was living my life for other people instead of listening to what I truly wanted," she reflects. "If my Dad and my sisters had another chance at life, they wouldn't be afraid. They would take chances and do hard things. I decided to live that way in their memory and to give everything I had. That decision is what ultimately moved me into real estate."

When Nina earned her license in March 2021, she stepped into the industry with no safety net and no built-in sphere. She had just moved to a new city where she did not know anyone, yet she was determined to build something meaningful from the ground up. "I had no backup plan in real estate," she says. "I just jumped in. I had to make it."

From the very start, Nina understood that if she wanted to build something extraordinary, she could not do it alone. Shortly after getting licensed, she began





“

It's about how you treat your clients, how you pour into newer agents, and how you give back to the real estate industry.”

coaching with Brandon Mulrenin, whose focus on skill, strategy, and mindset transformed the way she approached her business and, just as importantly, herself. At the same time, veteran REALTOR® Ellen Purvis of Coldwell Banker Upchurch Realty took her under her wing, modeling what it looks like to build a career anchored in ethics, honor, and integrity, and those two voices together became the compass that has guided Nina's path ever since.

“I sold 34 houses in my first year,” she says with a smile. That year, she also earned “New Face of the Year” at her local association and “Rookie of the Year” at her brokerage, clear confirmation that she had found her calling.

In her second year, Nina set her sights on planting deep roots in Athens. “I was truly starting from scratch,” she recalls. With no existing sphere and no built-in connections, she relied on one guiding belief. “If I can give someone the best experience possible in customer service and keep their best interests at the center of every decision, I can build a business,” she says. That philosophy led to 40 homes sold in 2022.

Her commitment to clients is also shaped by her own difficult real estate experience before she ever became an agent. “I purchased a property and did not receive the best representation,” she shares candidly. A situation that underscored how vulnerable buyers can be when they do not have a strong advocate. Today, protecting clients from unseen issues and guiding them through potential pitfalls is one of the things Nina does best; she turned a disappointing chapter into a promise that her clients would always be fully informed, supported, and genuinely cared for.

Year three brought one of the highest honors in her career: being named REALTOR® of the Year, an achievement many agents never experience in their lifetime. The award is especially meaningful to Nina because it is not about production. “It's about how you treat your clients, how you pour into newer agents, and how you give back to



the real estate industry,” she explains. “To be recognized for those values means more to me than any number on a scoreboard.” It was another reminder that showing up with integrity, even on the toughest days, is always worth it.

Each year, Nina has continued to evolve both professionally and personally. In 2024, she stepped far outside her comfort zone and embraced social media. “Before that, I was a hater,” she admits. “My coach told me, ‘If you don't start making videos, I'm going to fire you.’ I had no idea what I was doing.” She showed

up anyway. The result? Twelve clients came directly from social media that year. In 2025, that number doubled to 24 social-media clients, and she closed a remarkable 76 homes, bringing her total to more than 250 homes sold since getting her license. What began as something uncomfortable and intimidating became one of the greatest catalysts in her business.

Nina has built her business without buying leads or running ads. “It's all organic growth,” she points out. “Video is a big part of my business now, and



“

If I can give someone the best experience possible in customer service and keep their best interests at the center of every decision, I can build a business.”

I feature my listings there. My clients really love being showcased in that way.” Her content blends real estate, community, and lifestyle, creating an authentic connection with the people she serves. As her business grew, so did her platform: she has had the honor of traveling and speaking on stages, panels, and at brokerages around Georgia, sharing about lead generation, mindset, and the power of consistency. Along the way, she has built a strong nationwide network of agent referral partners, turning relationships into a steady stream of trust-based business across the country.

A big part of Nina’s heart belongs to Athens itself. The people, and the local businesses that define the area she serves. “Athens is special,” she says. “The energy, the creativity, the way people show up for each other.

Outside of work, Nina describes herself as a devoted homebody. “I love art, music, cooking and spending time with my animals. I’m a dog mom to four pups,” she says warmly. She is also passionate about supporting local businesses, frequently featuring local restaurants and shops in her videos, giving them free exposure and

celebrating the community she loves. “Restaurants will DM me and say, ‘So many people came in after they saw your video,’” she shares. For Nina, using her platform to uplift others is just another way to invest in the place she calls home.

Nina reflects on just how much she has learned in a few short years. Her priorities going forward are clear: to help people and agents see the incredible opportunity that real estate represents. “I want them to know it can change their life like it changed mine,” she says. “Hard things will always be part of the story, but if you are willing to take chances and do the hard things, they can become the very fuel that pushes you into a future you never thought possible.”

When she looks back at her journey, one truth stands out. Leaping into real estate without a safety net was one of the best decisions she has ever made. “If I had listened to every naysayer, I would have never gotten my license,” she reflects. Today, she continues to rise in the industry, fueled by purpose, gratitude, and an unwavering commitment to the people who trust her with their futures.

“We are all dealt different hands in life, but how you play your hand is up to you.”

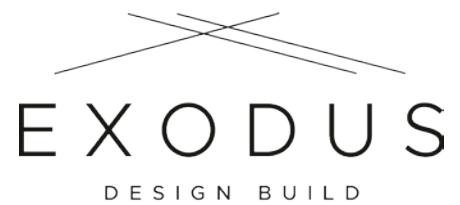


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AURIELLE + RYAN BILLINGS

BY JESS WELLAR • PHOTOS BY JACOB JONES

When The Stars Align

"The core of what makes us good Realtors is that it was our dream to live here. Now we get to live it and love it every day!" Aurielle Billings grins. "Every door we open, we get to make those same dreams come true for others while embracing everything this Hallmark-card mountain town offers."

That dream is exactly what makes Aurielle and her husband, Ryan Billings, such a natural fit in Blue Ridge. They're part of Compass' E+E Group, but with clients, they operate as a married team within the team — two different strengths with one shared mission that

Ryan aptly sums up this way: "Living here is a dream come true for us and if it's our client's dream also, we would love to help them make that true."

From Doulas to Fairways

Before real estate, Aurielle spent four years as a birth doula and also worked in the service industry for years — the kind of work that teaches you how to stay calm and genuinely tuned in to what people need.

"I think being in the service industry is a humbling business while working with a team and customers to meet

their needs," she explains. "Our approach is very caring and genuine and that translates."

Ryan's early path took a harder turn.

"I was going to be a 4th generation pest control guy but my dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer so we moved back to Sarasota from Jacksonville," he shares. "After he passed, I decided not to continue into the family business."

From there, Ryan chased his passion for golf for years and learned a different kind of discipline.



“

REAL ESTATE felt like a natural fit for us both and really was an answered prayer.”



“Golf is all about work ethic and putting in the time — hours spent and trying to perfect an imperfect craft,” Ryan says with a chuckle.”

The Hike That Opened the Door

The Billings’ eventual pivot to real estate has a plot twist that starts with Ryan lacing up his hiking boots. He left his full-time assistant superintendent position at a golf course in Florida in 2020 to go on what he describes as a “life journey” with his brother.

“This involved walking the Appalachian trail for 45 days,” Ryan recounts.

“During this time it was my wife and I’s prayers and hope to move to the North Georgia area.”

And then came the moment that felt like divine timing with a God wink.

“Every 10-12 days you need to get off the trail to resupply, so you get accustomed to hitch hiking.... And that’s how I met Mike Dalton one day,”

Ryan recalls. “Mike gave me a ride

and during that 30-minute car ride, we had a great conversation and he mentioned I should get my real estate license and join him since he

might have an opportunity for me in North Georgia.”

Ryan called his wife from the trail shortly thereafter to share the good news and she was not only supportive, but immediately decided she would switch careers as well. And in September 2021, the couple obtained their license and made the career jump together.

“A lot of stars aligned for us at the time to come up to North Georgia,” Ryan smiles. “Real estate felt like a natural fit for us both and really was an answered prayer.”

Constant Presence

The Billings entered the industry during the COVID boom, learned fast, and stayed steady. Once they got licensed and moved to Blue Ridge, another key relationship formed — this time with E+E Group leaders. They are both quick to credit their team as a big part of why they’ve grown the way they have: “We love our team!” Aurielle acknowledges gratefully. “And Laura Elleby and Thomas Echea are our team leads that are always encouraging and inspiring us forward.”

Last year, the pair closed 24 transactions together on just north of \$7.6 million in

volume — and did it while stepping into the biggest personal transition of all: becoming parents.

Their clients benefit from the duo’s different personalities and distinct styles, and the simple comfort of knowing someone is always reachable.

Ryan praises Aurielle for her natural relational skill — and admits this career has stretched him in the best way: “Aurielle is the outgoing people-person but I have surprised myself by growing into that role in this career,” he elaborates.

“And on the building and construction side, I have some experience in that industry and it’s been enhanced through many inspections,” he continues. “So I bring a lot of that building knowledge and helpful resources to the table.”

On tough days, their motivation stays rooted firmly in knowing God has it under control. That unshakeable faith shows up in the way they handle stress, treat clients, and keep perspective. “It’s an everyday part of our life and our foundation,” Ryan affirms. “Real estate can have its ups and downs with lots of uncertainty at times. We rely



on our faith to get us through stressful situations and have so much gratitude for what God has done for us."

A New Chapter Begins

At home, life is louder and fuller than ever. Ryan and Aurielle will celebrate 10 years of marriage this month, and last June, they welcomed their first child, Poppy Grace. Their two dogs, Avery (a Jack Russell) and Chaunci (a Chiweenie), round out their household and never get left behind for a spontaneous boat ride.

Beyond the office, the Billings family leans hard into the outdoors with

a love of boating, hiking, camping, golfing, hunting, and fishing — plus plenty of time with friends and family. They're also involved with the Young Professionals of Blue Ridge, staying connected to the community that made their dream possible.

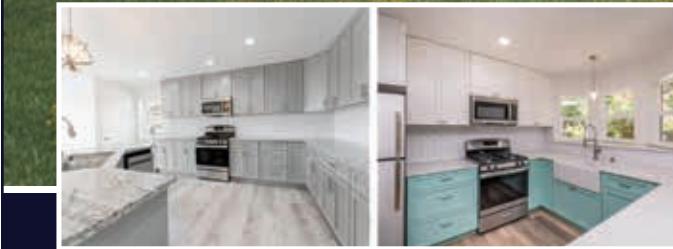
As the couple looks to the horizon, their priorities stay clear: "Raising our daughter with a love for the outdoors and the opportunities this area has to offer is our goal," Ryan shares. "Personally, we also look forward to investing in more real estate and continued YOY business growth."



“
THE CORE of what makes us good Realtors is that it was our dream to live here. Now we get to live it and love it every day!”

Likewise, Aurielle keeps the door open for whatever comes next — because that mindset has served them well so far. And when it comes to advice, she brings it right back to the heart of how they operate.

"Embrace the people in your circle," she concludes. "We rely so much on our relationships with our team and our partners every single day to get the right answers for our clients. You must work hard and collaborate to make something happen."



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WELCOME TO YOUR **AI** ADVANTAGE



I'm Steve Neville, founder of MPower, and I've spent the last few years helping businesses leverage AI and automation to work smarter, not harder. Each month in this column, I'll break down how artificial intelligence can give you a competitive edge in real estate, without the tech jargon or complexity.

What to Expect

Every month we'll cover:

- **Actionable Tip** – Something you can implement today
- **AI Tool Spotlight** – One practical tool you can start using immediately
- **Latest AI News** – Updates that actually matter for your business
- **Reader Q&A** – Your questions answered

This Month's Tip: Better Descriptions in 60 Seconds

Try this prompt in ChatGPT (chat.openai.com) or Claude (claude.ai):

"Write a compelling 150-word listing description for a [bed/bath] [home type] in [neighborhood]. Highlight: [3-4 key features]. Target buyer: [buyer type]."

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Drew Friedrich

Example: "Write a compelling 150-word listing description for a 3bd/2ba cabin in Blue Ridge. Highlight: mountain views, stone fireplace, creek access. Target buyer: weekend retreat seekers."

Edit to add your voice, and you're done.

AI Tool Spotlight: Listing Description Generators

Pedra (pedra.ai) – Completely free AI tool designed specifically for real estate listing descriptions. Simple, fast, effective.

ListingAI (listingai.com) – Free and paid tiers. Beyond descriptions, it offers social media templates, virtual staging, AI-generated videos, and market reports. Great all-in-one option if you want to expand beyond just listings.

Let's Make This Useful for You

What AI topics do you want covered? Email me at steve@supermpower.com or connect on LinkedIn at linkedin.com/in/realstevenneville/. Your input shapes future columns.

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KELLER WILLIAMS

North Georgia Partners

A Region Ready For Prime Time

BY JESS WELLAR
PHOTOS BY ALLIE SANTOS

There's a difference between opening an office because it looks good on a map and opening one because the market demands it. Dawsonville and the surrounding tri-county area didn't suddenly become desirable overnight; the growth has been quietly accelerating for years as the area has steadily been pulled into Atlanta's sprawling orbit.

Seizing the opportunity to provide infrastructure, Keller Williams North Georgia Partners officially launched this month with a clear purpose in mind: to serve an emerging market that has officially outgrown its "rural" label.

Based in Dawsonville and covering Dawson, Lumpkin, and White Counties, the brokerage is the first national real estate franchise to formally plant roots in the region — a milestone that signals both confidence and long-term commitment.

For brokerage co-founder Nick Taylor, the launch was a natural next step to fill the gap.

"We have been serving that tri-county area from our Cumming sister office





so it made sense to better serve more people in the area and be closer by opening an office nearby,” Nick explains.

The expansion is easy to understand once you look at the numbers.

“Affordability has driven this growth north from the suburbs of Atlanta,” Nick offers. “For the price point, you get more space. New construction in the \$400,000–\$500,000 range is flourishing in the area, as those same homes would cost well north of \$700,000 just a bit farther south.”

Add proximity to Highway 400 and a manageable commute into The Big Peach, and the equation becomes obvious. For buyers and agents alike, the region has shifted from overlooked to undeniable.

A Proven Model

Nick isn’t building the new brokerage in a vacuum. He is working alongside investor Jacqueline Arthur, who is also the Operating Partner of the highly successful Keller Williams office in Cumming — one of the most dynamic and successful Keller Williams offices in the country.

“Our sister office in Cumming was the largest brokerage by agent count in Dawson and Lumpkin counties prior to the launch,” Nick notes with pride. “And they currently have the highest per agent income for the entire award winning Southeast region with KW.”

“Even within the KW system model, our sister office is a thriving, highly successful and consistently ranked office on the national scale of performance and standards,” he adds.

Nick’s own career path significantly shaped how he views brokerage infrastructure. Licensed in 2015, he joined a small luxury boutique firm, an experience that gave him clarity on limitations. For him, the KW franchise isn’t about branding, it’s about giving agents real leverage.

Better resources and training matters, especially as the industry grows more complex. Keller Williams’ national

platform brings built-in systems, advanced education, and proven models that allow agents to focus on production rather than patchwork solutions.

Culture Is the Framework

In addition to national cache and resources, equally important to Nick is the high-energy office culture agents can expect. Success to him isn’t measured solely in an agent’s transactions, but in sustainability, building businesses that support full lives, not consume them.

“We are a company of culture that truly believes in God, Family, and then Business,” Nick states. “That is a standard motto at KW.”

“We’re all here to grow thriving businesses of course, but we also want to live a life of design and help each other and the community,” he continues. “We achieve this by having a standard of living that allows you to live your best life with loved ones while also living it with likeminded individuals.”

Thankfully, the Cumming office has already set the tone.

“Our sister office is known as a champion of culture,” Nick affirms. “We give back, help with charities and are involved in many local organizations. We do a significantly higher amount of that type of work compared to other brokerages and want to continue that tradition in our new office.”

Built for Agents, By Agents

Perhaps the clearest differentiator at Keller Williams North Georgia Partners is how leadership views the relationship it has with the agents who decide to hang their hat with them.

“A lot of brokers go into the brokerage business to build their own brand,” Nick explains. “But we look at our success as the agents’ success — so if they’re not succeeding, we are doing something wrong because they are our clients.”

That perspective informs everything, from support systems to expectations.

At its core, KW North Georgia Partners focus is deliberately centered on helping agents define and reach their own version of winning within a supportive, values-driven environment.

As Nick sees it, leadership isn’t about spotlight or scale, but support:

“Every agent defines their success differently,” he offers. “Some are driven by making a million dollars a year, some just want to augment their income to save for retirement or go on a nice trip. Regardless, it’s our job to come alongside them and support their goals.”

On The Horizon

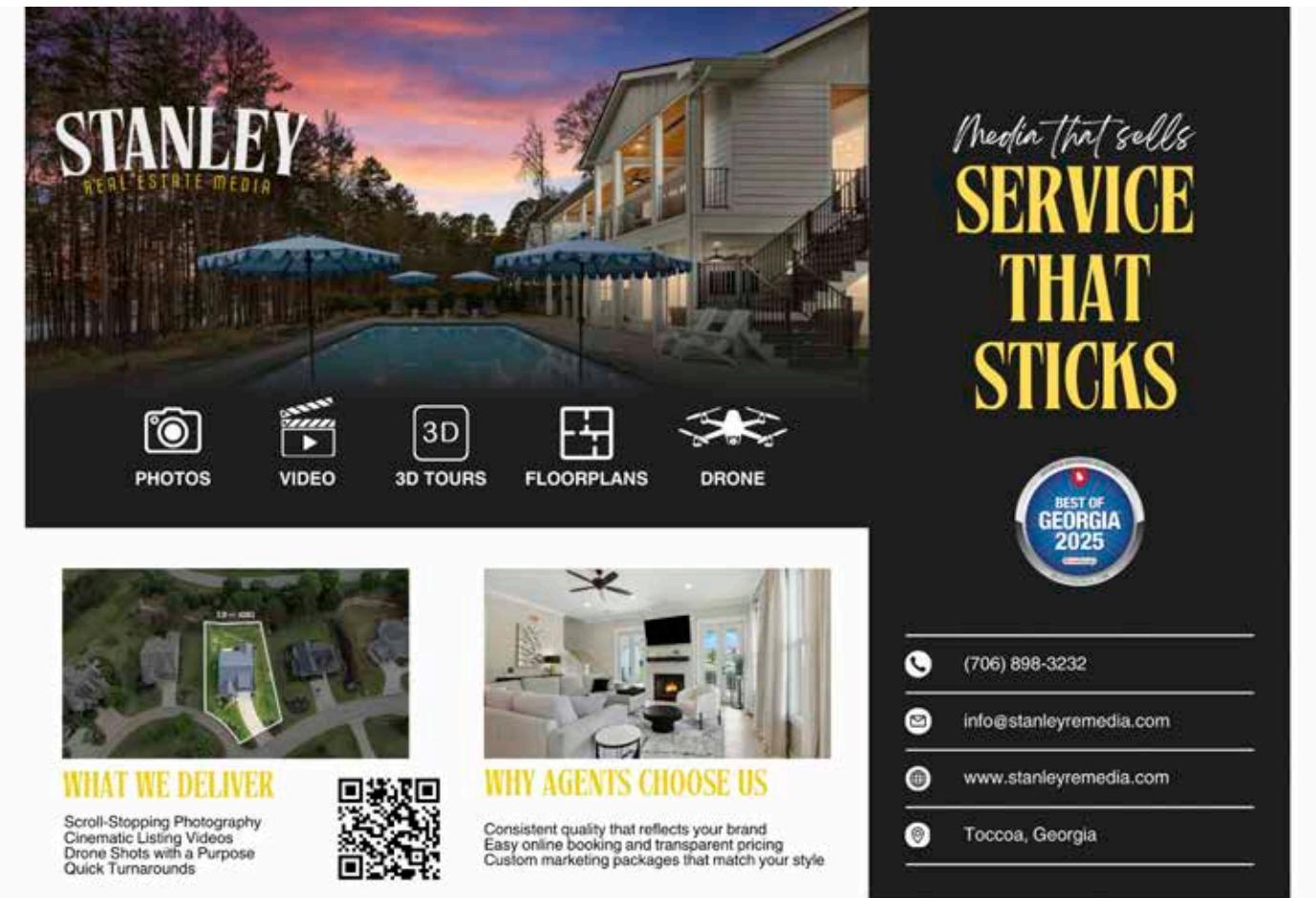
Growth will come, but Nick emphasizes it will be a natural expansion. He envisions 75 to 100 agents onboarding this year with a 150-200 agent roster

soon after — but only with the right people and it’s a high bar by design.

At the center of this vision is Keller Williams Luxury, which is setting a new standard for luxury real estate in the North Georgia mountains. This office is intentionally built to serve everyone but especially high-end buyers and sellers with elevated marketing, specialized expertise, and a refined client experience positioning it as the premier destination for luxury representation across the region.

“Agents that wish to grow their business and also want the resources of a national powerhouse are welcome to reach out,” Nick suggests. “But we also want agents who match our culture — agents who are moral people doing good business who desire to grow personally and professionally will be a great fit.”





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