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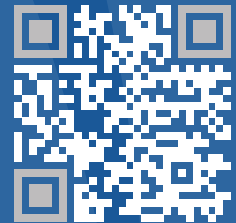


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MOMENTUM IS A CHOICE

Why the habits you reinforce now determine how strong the year becomes

BY GABRIEL CHANDLER

By the time May arrives, the year has revealed its direction.

The early goals have either turned into habits—or faded into intentions. The conversations you've prioritized are either compounding—or quietly disappearing. And the momentum you're carrying now will largely determine how the rest of the year unfolds.

Momentum isn't something we stumble into. It's something we **choose**—daily.

The most effective professionals don't wait for ideal conditions. They build rhythm. They protect their energy. They stay connected to people who elevate their thinking and challenge their standards.

That mindset is at the core of Real Producers.

Consistency Creates Confidence

High performance isn't built on one great month or one big win. It's built through consistent action taken in the right environment.

When you surround yourself with peers who are disciplined, driven, and intentional, your own standards naturally rise. Conversations become sharper. Decisions become clearer. Execution becomes more focused.

This community exists to support that rhythm—so success doesn't feel heavy, isolated, or reactive, but intentional and repeatable.

The Value of Staying Engaged

It's easy to pull back as schedules fill up and summer approaches. But the professionals who continue to grow are the ones who remain present—staying engaged in conversations, relationships, and rooms that matter.

Real Producers is not about constant motion. It's about meaningful connection.

Showing up consistently—whether through events, introductions, or collaboration—creates a long-term advantage that compounds well beyond a single transaction or season.

Setting the Tone for What's Next

This is the moment to assess what's working, refine what isn't, and recommit to the standards you expect from yourself and the people you surround yourself with.

If you've been engaged, keep building. If you've been quiet, this is the time to reenter with intention.

This platform exists to support your growth—not just this month, but year after year.

Momentum is built one decision at a time. Let's make the next ones count.



Gabriel Chandler
Publisher
Cape Fear & Brunswick Real Producers

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NORTH CAROLINA REAL ESTATE:

Key Changes & Agent Adaptation

The past year has brought one of the most significant disruptions to the North Carolina real estate industry in decades. While the state's Real Estate License Law has remained largely unchanged, the practical application of brokerage—especially compensation and agency—has shifted dramatically due to the National Association of REALTORS® (NAR) settlement and related policy changes.

1. The NAR Settlement: Restructuring Compensation

The most impactful change stems from the 2024 NAR antitrust settlement, which directly altered how commissions are

structured and communicated. Historically, sellers paid a total commission that was split between listing and buyer agents.

Under the new rules, buyer agent compensation can no longer be advertised on MLS systems, sellers are no longer expected to automatically pay buyer agent commissions, and commissions must be negotiated independently and transparently. This effectively dismantles the cooperative compensation model and introduces a true free-market pricing environment.

2. Mandatory Buyer Representation Agreements

A major operational shift is the requirement that buyers must sign written agreements with their agent before touring homes. This formalizes buyer agency in a way that previously was often informal or delayed. Buyers are now explicitly aware of agent compensation obligations, and agents must articulate their value proposition earlier in the relationship.

3. Increased Transparency and Consumer Awareness

The settlement emphasizes upfront disclosure of compensation structures and clear negotiation of fees between all parties. Consumers are more informed and often more skeptical about agent value, pushing the industry toward a consultative sales approach rather than transactional facilitation.

4. Pressure on Commission Rates

Despite expectations of significant reductions, commission compression has been modest. The larger shift is in how commissions are justified rather than the percentage itself. Agents must defend fees through service differentiation and results.

5. Increased Competition and Industry Shakeout

The removal of guaranteed compensation structures has increased competition among agents and placed pressure on part-time or low-production agents. The market is shifting toward a performance-based brokerage environment.

6. Emerging Business Model Changes

Agents are experimenting with flat-fee or à la carte services, buyer-paid compensation models, and hybrid brokerage structures. There is concern about affordability for first-time buyers, which may influence future policy or lending practices.

How Agents Must Pivot

To remain competitive, North Carolina agents must clearly articulate their value, strengthen buyer consultations, improve negotiation skills, leverage technology, and adopt a fee-for-service mindset.

Conclusion

While North Carolina's statutory framework has not dramatically changed, the practical reality of brokerage has. The NAR settlement has accelerated a transition toward transparency, negotiation, and accountability. Agents who adapt will be better positioned to succeed in a more competitive and consumer-driven market.



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Michaela Ciznarova

WRITTEN BY DAVE DANIELSON
PHOTOS BY BRADLEY STICKLAND

GIVING HER BEST

At 20 years old, Michaela Ciznarova boarded a plane with a one-way ticket and a brave heart. She left behind her small village in the Czech Republic in 2000, stepping into an unfamiliar world in the United States without knowing the language and with no safety net waiting below. Today, she is a thriving real estate broker with Coldwell Banker Sea Coast Advantage in Leland, North Carolina, a multiple award winner, and a proud American citizen—naturalized on July 4, 2016, in Southport. Her journey embodies the very dream she now helps others achieve.

From Small Village to Big Dreams

The early days in America were anything but easy. Michaela worked at a restaurant by day and took English classes at night, determined to build a future through sheer perseverance. Once she mastered the language, she enrolled at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, earning her associate degree in Medical Laboratory Technology in 2012.

Her career in the medical field was both technical and meaningful. She worked as a laboratory technician at Pender Memorial Hospital in Burgaw and New Hanover Regional Medical Center in Wilmington, analyzing blood, tissue, and fluid samples. It was precise, demanding work—work that required discipline and attention to detail. Yet even as she excelled in the lab, she felt a quiet pull toward something more personal and interactive.

A Leap of Faith Into Real Estate

Real estate had always intrigued her. Long before she owned a home, Michaela found herself scrolling through listings on Zillow, envisioning possibilities and dreaming of properties that felt like “the one.” Her husband, Aaron Dickey—who has over 35 years of experience in real estate, including a decade with DR Horton—recognized her natural instinct for the business and encouraged her to pursue it professionally.

In 2022, she made a bold decision: she left her stable job in healthcare to obtain her real estate license. Waking up unemployed each morning was intimidating, but she committed fully to her goal. After intense study and



preparation, she passed her broker's exam on the first try.

"These past four years have been incredible," she says, reflecting on the leap that changed her life.

Finding the Right Home Base

When searching for the right brokerage, Michaela was drawn to the warmth and professionalism she found at Coldwell Banker Sea Coast Advantage in Leland. Located conveniently near her home, the office at 481 Olde Waterford Way, Suite 104, offered not just proximity but a culture of collaboration.

"The support made all the difference," she explains. "Whenever I needed help, someone was there."

That environment allowed her to shorten the learning curve and build momentum quickly. As a single agent, she has achieved remarkable results, earning "Agent of the Month (Sales & Listings)" multiple times and being named "Best of the Best" for the third quarter of 2025. Her career sales volume stands at \$16,590,184, with \$6,219,730 achieved in the past year alone.

Precision Meets Personal Connection

Michaela's background in laboratory science still shapes the way she works today. Attention to detail, methodical analysis, and steady focus are hallmarks of her approach. But what truly sets her apart is her heart for people.

"I take the time to really listen," she says. "I'm never in a rush."

Whether guiding a first-time homebuyer or helping an older couple downsize, she walks clients through every high and low of the process. She answers her phone after hours. She adapts quickly to unpredictable situations. She treats clients like family.

Her former hospital coworkers were among her very first real estate clients—a testament to the trust she builds wherever she goes.

"I still remember how empowering it felt when I bought my first home. Seeing that joy in my clients—IT'S PRICELESS."





The Joy of Handing Over the Keys

For Michaela, success is not measured only in numbers. It is found in the moment a buyer receives the keys to their new home.

“I still remember how empowering it felt when I bought my first home,” she says. “Seeing that joy in my clients—it’s priceless.”

She views each transaction as a privilege: the opportunity to stand

beside someone during a life-changing milestone. Helping others achieve the American Dream feels especially meaningful to someone who fought so hard to build her own.

Rooted in Coastal Living

Michaela and her husband have created a life that reflects balance and gratitude. They live in Leland, embracing a coastal-country lifestyle that nourishes both work and home life.

Her mornings begin with coffee on the deck and a walk with Aaron and their beloved dog, Ellie. After returning home, she focuses on lead generation, emails, and appointments. Evenings often include client communication—or, if she’s lucky, time in the garden tending to their little homestead.

She loves traveling with her husband, exploring cultures and cuisines both domestically and abroad. Gardening and cooking with homegrown ingredients provide a grounding counterbalance to her busy professional life.

Advice and Ambition

Michaela’s advice to new agents is simple but powerful: “Don’t quit. Be patient, consistent, and keep going. Just when you think you can’t make it happen is when something great finally shows itself.”

Her own story proves that persistence changes everything.

Looking ahead, she plans to continue expanding her knowledge and becoming even more invaluable to her clients. She hopes to grow her portfolio of real estate investments as part of her long-term vision, while still embracing many productive years in the field she loves.

She credits much of her growth to the mentors who supported her along the way: her broker-in-charge Chris Royal, fellow agent James Diaz, and above all, her husband Aaron, who nurtured her interest and offered unwavering encouragement.

For Michaela Ciznarova, success is deeply personal. It is helping someone else find home. It is maintaining a happy marriage. It is building a life defined not by where you started, but by how boldly you move forward.

And for the clients she serves across Brunswick County, she is more than a broker. She is living proof that dreams—when pursued relentlessly—can indeed come true. ❏

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Donna SCHULZ

WRITTEN BY DAVE DANIELSON
PHOTOS BY JACOB SHNIDER



Making Her Own Path

By the time the sun rises over the Brunswick County shoreline, Donna Schulz has already claimed the quiet. The early morning light spilling across Sunset Beach finds her walking, praying, and preparing for a day that will likely stretch well beyond business hours. For Donna, real estate isn't a 9-to-5 job. It's a calling built on relationships, resilience, and a deep commitment to serving others.

A single agent with Coldwell Banker Sea Coast Advantage, Donna works out of the firm's Shallotte office. But her story begins far from the Carolina coast.

Buffalo Roots, Coastal Dreams

Born and raised in Buffalo, New York, Donna credits her upbringing with shaping the work ethic that defines her today. After earning her associate degree from Trocaire College in 1985, she built a successful career in healthcare administration, serving as Office Manager for the Departments

of Medicine and Neurosurgery at the University of Buffalo. Later, she embraced entrepreneurship, owning and operating a scrapbook and paper crafting store in Binghamton, New York.

Those experiences sharpened her organizational skills and strengthened her ability to connect with people—qualities that would later prove essential in real estate.

Interestingly, it wasn't a lifelong ambition that drew her into the industry. "There were two Realtors I had known for years," Donna recalls. "Both always suggested I should get my license. They thought I had the right personality." Eventually, she took their advice. In February 2020, she earned her real estate license and committed to the profession full-time.

Her timing, however, was anything but ordinary.

Launching in the Middle of a Pandemic

Donna joined Coldwell Banker Sea Coast Advantage in March 2020. Just one week later, COVID-19 shut down much of the world.

For a brand-new agent in a new area without an established sphere of influence, the timing could have been devastating. "I didn't have lifelong family and friends living locally to help kickstart my career," she says. "I had to build my business from the ground up."

In August 2020, she joined Frances Warner's team, where she remained until October 2024. Under mentorship and through sheer determination, she gained invaluable experience navigating transactions during one of the most volatile markets in modern history. In late 2024, confident in her skills and ready for a new challenge, Donna transitioned back to being a solo agent.



“We have to learn to manage our day and not have our day manage us. Network. Build relationships. GET INVOLVED IN THE COMMUNITY.”

treasures time on Sunset Beach and enjoys shelling on Holden Beach. Since 2017, she has volunteered with the Sunset Beach Turtle Patrol, walking the shore weekly from May through September to monitor sea turtle nests.

Watching a nest “boil”—when hatchlings emerge and rush toward the ocean—is, she says, a must-see experience.

She also supports Sea Coast Gives Back and participates in Brunswick County Association of Realtors community fundraisers. For Donna, community involvement isn’t optional; it’s essential.

Looking Ahead
Like many driven professionals, Donna admits that work-life balance remains a work in progress. Setting boundaries—such as scheduling vacations in advance and using “do not disturb” in the evenings—has helped her reclaim personal time. In 2026, she plans to dedicate more time to family and travel while continuing to help as many families as possible achieve their real estate goals.

Her advice to other agents is simple but powerful: “We have to learn to manage our day and not have our day manage us. Network. Build relationships. Get involved in the community.”

If there is one thing Donna hopes people understand about her, it’s this: she is hardworking and deeply dedicated to those she serves. From Buffalo beginnings to Brunswick County success, her journey proves that with faith, grit, and genuine care for others, you can build a thriving business anywhere—even in the middle of a pandemic. 🌊

Mornings are dedicated to phone calls and follow-ups; afternoons are reserved for appointments and showings.

Her husband, Greg, is her unwavering support system. “This is not a 9-to-5 business,” Donna says. “He understands taking calls and showings anytime, any day. I could not succeed without his support.” The couple shares a love of cooking—Greg crafts the meals, and Donna happily handles cleanup.

Their son Tyler lives in Charlotte, and their daughter Alicia remains in Binghamton. Family visits revolve around food, board games, beach time, and cheering on the Buffalo Bills. Though the miles stretch between them, their bond remains close.

Giving Back to the Coast She Loves
Donna has embraced coastal life fully. A self-proclaimed “beach girl,” she

The results speak volumes. In 2025 alone, she earned recognition in the Coldwell Banker International Diamond Society, was named to the Real Producers Top 300 Brunswick Realtors list, and received the Brunswick County Board of Realtors Rising Star award. She also achieved Coldwell Banker’s International President’s Club honors from 2020 through 2023. Last year, her individual sales volume surpassed \$8 million.

Experience as a Game Changer
For Donna, the biggest turning point in her business has simply been experience. “The number of transactions and the years I’ve been in real estate have given me so much knowledge to handle a wide variety of situations,” she says.
That growing confidence allows her to guide clients calmly through everything

from competitive bidding wars to delicate negotiations. Her goal, she explains, is to make her clients’ lives easier during the transaction—and to continue supporting them long after closing.
“I love meeting wonderful buyers and sellers,” she says. “Seeing how happy they are when the goal of buying or selling is achieved and their next chapter begins—that’s my favorite part.”

A Life Anchored in Faith and Family
While Donna’s professional accolades are impressive, success to her is defined differently. “First and foremost, to be a follower of Jesus Christ and be the best person that I can be to my God, family, friends, and others,” she says.
Her mornings reflect that priority. She begins with exercise—often a peaceful walk—followed by Bible reading.

CHRIS CREEKMORE



*Success
Through
Service*

WRITTEN BY DAVE DANIELSON
PHOTOS BY T.J. DRECHSEL

Chris Creekmore’s real estate career is anything but conventional—and that’s precisely what makes it powerful. As Team Leader of Creekmore Realty Group, based out of 926A Old Ocean Highway in Bolivia, North Carolina, Chris brings over three decades of experience, hard-earned perspective, and unwavering commitment to service into every transaction. His journey, shaped by resilience and self-reliance, has positioned him as one of the most knowledgeable and trusted real estate professionals in coastal North Carolina.

Born in Okinawa and raised across five states and two foreign countries, Chris learned early how to adapt, connect, and thrive in new environments. Though his roots are firmly planted in North Carolina, his upbringing gave him a broad worldview that continues to influence how he leads, serves, and builds relationships today.

From Hard Knocks to High Performance

Chris attended NC State University intermittently for five years, studying Business Management before choosing what he jokingly calls an education in “hard knocks.” Before real estate, he spent nearly seven years as a door-to-door

salesperson—known in the industry as a “rabbit.” It was grueling work, but it revealed a natural talent for sales and leadership. His success earned him the opportunity to travel cross-country training others, sharpening skills that would later define his real estate career: communication, grit, and accountability.





Burned out from the physical toll of door-to-door sales, Chris answered a newspaper ad—back when that’s how opportunities were found—and entered real estate in 1995. What followed was a career defined by scale, specialization, and staying power.

A Career Forged Through Markets and Cycles

Nearly half of Chris’s career was spent working with land developers in Tennessee. If there’s a lake east of Knoxville or west of Nashville, chances are Chris

either developed or sold land on it. Two years before the Great Recession, he launched his own sales, marketing, and consulting firm, Mountain Lake Properties. When the recession hit, Chris did what he’s always done—dug in, adapted, and kept moving forward.

After rebuilding post-recession, he returned to North Carolina to work with Carolina Plantations under Doug Terhune, where he spent eight years before once again stepping into ownership and launching his current

venture. Today, Creekmore Realty Group operates within eXp Realty, a platform Chris credits as the single biggest game changer of his career since joining in late 2020.

Production That Speaks for Itself

Chris’s accolades are extensive: five-time eXp ICON Agent, seven-time 55Places Platinum Club honoree, multiple top-referring broker awards with Compass Point and Brunswick Forest, and countless top-agent recognitions during his tenure with BlueGreen Corporation. His personal best production reached approximately \$25 million as a solo agent.

In recent years, his team has grown rapidly. Last year alone, Creekmore Realty Group closed over \$40 million across 101 transactions. The team has experienced year-over-year growth between 47% and 61% and is currently ranked #38 out of 316 eXp teams in North Carolina. Chris’s personal production exceeded \$18 million, reflecting a balance of leadership and hands-on performance.

Leadership Through Production and Coaching

Chris leads by example. His days are spent managing his own buyers and sellers while coaching and supporting his agents continuously. Availability is non-negotiable. His team knows he’s there—hourly, daily, whenever needed.

What truly differentiates Chris is his encyclopedic knowledge of the local market. There’s scarcely a community, pool, or amenity in the area where he hasn’t helped someone buy or sell. That experience flows directly into his team, elevating every client interaction and reinforcing trust.

Passion for People and Community

Beyond real estate, Chris is deeply involved in the Brunswick Family Assistance fundraising committee, an organization he calls vital to the health and sustainability of the community. He also supports the Shallotte Rotary Club and remains passionate about giving back to those in need.

Chris leads by example. His days are spent managing his own buyers and sellers while coaching and supporting his agents continuously. Availability is non-negotiable. His team knows he’s there—hourly, daily, whenever needed.





“

I love my team, and I love my clients.”

Professionally, he's invested in growth—not just his own, but others'. In 2024, Chris launched the CRG Growth Academy, hosting three workshops under the banner “Empowering Agents, Elevating Success.” Plans are underway for eight to ten workshops in 2026.

Life Beyond the Business

Chris and his wife Cindy have been married for six years. Cindy works with the Brunswick County Health Department, and together they love

traveling, cruising, and hosting friends and family at their home along the Little Shallotte River. With five grandchildren, family plays a central role in their lives. Cindy's sourdough focaccia has become legendary among friends, and their home is known as a gathering place filled with warmth and laughter.

An avid outdoorsman, Chris is also a Multi-Year Through Hiker on the Appalachian Trail, sharing the journey

with his brother. Their goal is to reach Katahdin, Maine by summer 2028.

A Business Built on Love for People

Ask Chris what matters most, and the answer is simple: people. “I love my team, and I love my clients,” he says. Through recessions, pandemics, shifting markets, and constant change, that philosophy has remained constant. It's the foundation of his success—and the reason Creekmore Realty Group continues to grow, thrive, and lead. ▀

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