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NOVEMBER 2026

+

Team Spotlight
KATY & CO.
Keller Williams
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Partner
Spotlight
BARTLETT TREE EXPERTS

Making a
Difference
NIL REAL ESTATE

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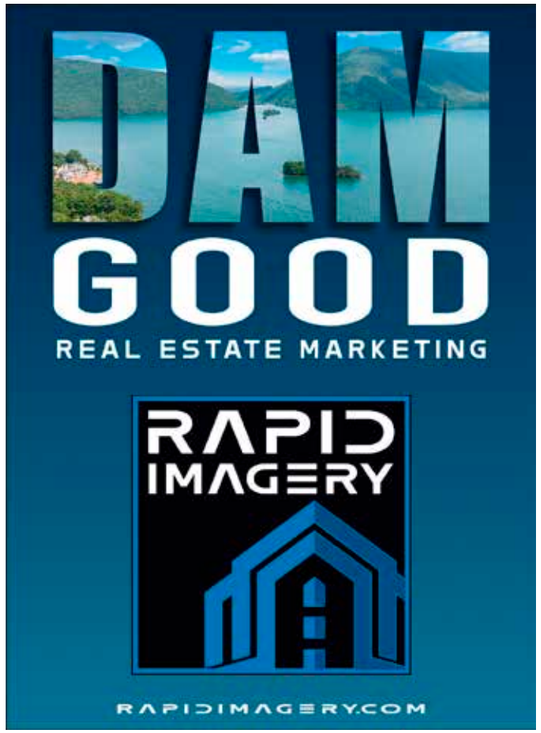
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MINDSET NOTES FROM THE SURVIVE & THRIVE BOOTCAMP

Every top producer you admire has survived a season they didn't think they would.

Slow seasons have a way of exposing everything. Your systems, your habits, your mindset, and your identity. The agents who come out stronger on the other side don't just work harder during the hard times. They think differently. They protect something most agents don't even know they're losing—their belief. Here's what we unpacked in our recent Survive and Thrive Bootcamp series.

Resilience isn't toughness. It's perspective. The agents who thrive in slow markets aren't the ones grinding themselves into the ground. They're the ones who zoomed out and remembered that every market cycle in history has turned. They stopped asking, "Why is this happening to me?" and started asking, "What is this preparing me for?"

Your slow season is your competitor's gap. While most agents pull back during tough markets, slow down on prospecting, and go quiet on social media, the resilient ones lean in. They show up more. They call more. They connect more. And when the market turns, they own it.

The story you tell yourself is the strategy. Mindset isn't soft. It's the most practical tool you have. Agents who survived their hardest seasons all share one thing—they refused to let the market write their story. They kept showing up as the professional their clients needed, even when the pipeline didn't reflect it yet.

Fear is a signal, not a stop sign.
Every slow season brings fear to the surface. Fear of failure, fear of judgment, fear of starting over. The Survive and Thrive mindset treats fear as information, not instruction. It tells you where to focus, not whether to move.

Discipline in the down season builds dominance in the up season.
The habits you protect when business is slow are the ones that create explosive growth when it picks back up. Top producers don't take breaks from their non-negotiables. They double down on them precisely because everyone else stopped.

Community is a competitive advantage. One of the most powerful things that came out of our bootcamp was watching agents realize they weren't alone. Isolation amplifies fear. Community neutralizes it. The agents who thrived most in hard markets were surrounded by people who refused to quit.

Slow seasons end. The version of you built during them doesn't. The most important thing we talked about wasn't tactics. It was identity. Every hard season is an opportunity to decide who you are becoming, not just what you are doing. Agents who survive well don't just recover; they emerge.

You don't have to just survive the slow season. You can use it. The Legacy Team is here to help you build the mindset and the business to thrive in any market.

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2025 BY THE NUMBERS

Here's what the Blue Ridge Real Producers Top 300 REALTORS® sold in 2025

$3.9 Billion
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10,127
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34
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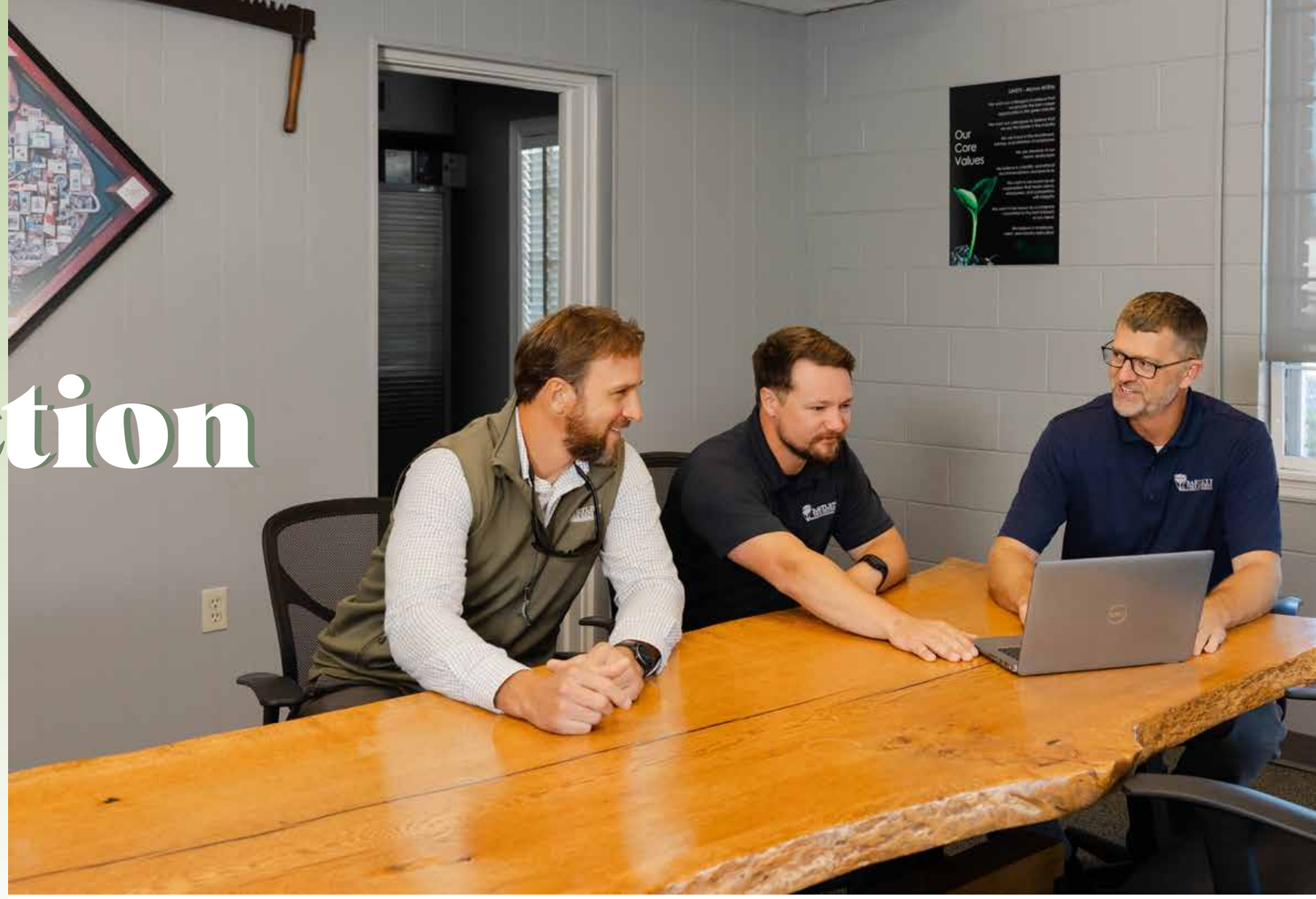
$13 Million
AVERAGE SALES VOLUME PER AGENT



When Trees Become Part of the Transaction

STORY BY JACKI DONALDSON
PHOTOS BY KRISTINA ROSE, KRISTINA ROSE PHOTOGRAPHY

Bartlett Tree Experts helps agents get to the root of landscape concerns before closing.



A property can look great from the street and still have questions hiding in the landscape. A mature tree may be one of the home's biggest assets, or it may raise concerns about safety, health, or future maintenance. For Bartlett Tree Experts, the work begins with understanding those concerns.

The fourth-generation, family-owned company has spent more than a century developing scientific approaches to tree and shrub care. Bartlett provides everything from pruning, removals, and planting to plant health care, insect and disease management, soil care, cabling and bracing, lightning protection, and tree risk assessments. For real estate professionals, that range can make Bartlett a useful resource when the landscape becomes part of a transaction.

The company's approach is "rooted" in research. Bartlett Tree Research Laboratories, established in 1926, supports its arborists with diagnostics and research in areas including plant pathology, entomology, soil science, and horticulture. The goal is to understand what is happening with a tree before determining the appropriate course of action.

That emphasis on knowledge has shaped the careers of the people serving Bartlett's local markets. Adam Braaten, who manages the Roanoke office, started with the company as a tree climber and plant health care technician after college. Bartlett's training program allowed him to move through different roles, eventually bringing him to Roanoke in 2004. More than two decades later, he still sees developing people as one of the most rewarding parts of the job. "I also find it rewarding to work with our production team and help them develop professional tree care skills," he says.

Some employees arrive without an arboricultural background and, over time, become professional arborists themselves. Cory Deniker came to Bartlett from a forestry background, discovering arboriculture while studying at Penn State. After a summer internship with the company, his career took him through public, private, and educational settings before he joined Bartlett in 2020 to serve the greater Lynchburg area. For him, the appeal has always been the combination of science, specialized trade skills, and the opportunity to work directly with people.



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Cory Deniker


Ryan Karroll

That people-first approach matters when Bartlett works with real estate professionals. Trees can influence curb appeal, safety, property value, and insurability, and a problem discovered late in a transaction can quickly become a headache for everyone involved. Bartlett's arborists can evaluate significant trees, help buyers and sellers understand potential concerns, provide documentation, and recommend care that protects the landscape before and after a sale.

Ryan Karroll, an arborist representative serving the Roanoke Valley, Smith Mountain Lake area, and surrounding communities, encourages agents to pay attention to the landscape early in the process. "Never overlook the landscape during a property evaluation," he says. Mature trees can represent significant value, while their condition can also affect future maintenance costs. Getting an ISA certified arborist involved before closing can give buyers and sellers a clearer picture of what they are taking on.

For agents, a tree question doesn't necessarily need to derail a deal, but it does need an informed answer. Adam's goal is to provide professional guidance, communicate with clients, and build relationships that continue after the immediate problem has been addressed.



That same philosophy runs through each man's definition of success. Braaten believes positive human relationships are central to business and says that when employees, clients, subcontractors, and professional contacts know you care about them, business success follows. Cory describes success through meeting people's needs, providing for his team, and developing lasting relationships. Ryan puts the emphasis on making a positive impact while maintaining integrity and a healthy work-life balance.

Outside of work, all three stay connected to the people and places around them. Adam and his wife, Shauna, are raising eight children and make time for fishing, hiking, and family projects. Cory enjoys spending time outdoors with his wife, Jenn, and their son, Cole, along with travel and youth sports. Ryan spends his free time around family, friends, and the outdoors, with boating, fishing, and hiking among his favorite activities.

> "Never **overlook** the landscape during a property evaluation."

The common thread in Bartlett's work is caring for something that belongs to someone else. Sometimes that means preserving a tree that has been part of a family property for generations. Other times, it means helping an agent answer a difficult question before it becomes a problem at closing or giving a homeowner a clear path forward.

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STORY BY JACKI DONALDSON
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KATY COOKSTON

Katy & Co., Keller Williams Salem Professionals



BUILDING HER DREAM TEAM

When Katy Cookston's son, George, was 8, he said something that shared the trajectory of her real estate career. He didn't want his mom to miss dinner because she was out showing houses.

By then, Katy had already proven she could build a business through determination. The Salem native earned her real estate license in 2016 while working in children's and family ministry at her church. She initially tried real estate part time but eventually realized she needed to commit.

When she went full time, Katy had enough money to cover two months of mortgage payments. She was raising two children and had married her husband, Matt, just a week earlier. She gave herself eight weeks to make real estate work. "I didn't have a choice," she remembers. "I had to succeed."

She took rentals, held at least eight open houses a month, and consistently promoted herself on social media. Her first closing check arrived eight weeks and two days later. She paid the mortgage and started again.

But George's comment helped Katy realize success could not depend entirely on her being everywhere. In 2019, she began building a team.

Today, Katy & Co. includes agents Jenn Paterson, Greg Alexander, and Austin Lovell, along with Director of Operations Christine Kelly. The team operates within Keller Williams Salem Professionals, the Salem brokerage Katy opened in 2025.

Jenn, a buyer specialist, met Katy when Katy was a Keller Williams career coach. "I learned so much from her by listening, hosting open houses, walking neighborhoods, and practicing contracts," Jenn says. "Eventually, she asked me to join her team. Her belief in me gave me the confidence to keep growing as an agent."

Greg joined looking for a place where relationships and growth mattered. "We support each other, push each other to grow, and genuinely want to see one another succeed," he shares.

Austin returned to the industry after taking time away and reached out to Katy to see whether they could work together. What he values now is simple: "Support, camaraderie, and being a part of something," he notes.

Behind the scenes, Christine keeps contracts, team operations, and office details moving. She had worked with Katy previously and transitioned from a corporate career when she needed flexibility to help care for her aging parents. Asked what she loves about the team, Christine states, "It's family. We help, support, and genuinely care about each other."

MEET THE HOME TEAM

Katy Cookston: Loves traveling, Buffalo Bills football, and family time with husband Matt, children George and Charleigh, and dogs Brutus, Hela, and Thor.

Jenn Paterson: Loves yoga, reading, tennis, and football. Bingo nights and bake sales make her "irrationally happy!"

Greg Alexander: Former volunteer firefighter, dad of eight, proud granddad, and Harley rider.

Austin Lovell: Enjoys music, the gym, hunting, fishing, and shooting. Played guitar at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium in high school.

Christine Kelly: Loves art, photography, gardening, and home improvement.



That support benefits clients, too. With multiple people available to step in, clients have a team behind them throughout the process. Katy & Co. works with buyers and sellers, with Katy especially enjoying opportunities to help first-time buyers. “I’ve helped people who’ve been told for years they couldn’t buy a home,” she says. “We celebrate every step with them.”

That sense of service reaches beyond transactions. Through Katy & Co. Cares, a portion of commissions goes back into community efforts. The team has supported Ronald McDonald House, children’s sporting events, meals for families, and other local causes.

Katy has also found a way to combine real estate with another passion: sports. She serves as a director with NIL Real Estate, an organization headquartered under Keller Williams that introduces college athletes to the real estate industry. Participating student-athletes begin as referral agents while pursuing their real estate licenses, giving them an opportunity to develop professional skills and prepare for careers beyond college athletics.

Katy currently works with football players from both Virginia Tech and Roanoke College, each bringing his own reasons for getting involved with NIL Real Estate. Among the Roanoke College players, George Casteel joined “for the opportunities it presented,” while Jack Camper saw a chance “to expand my knowledge and get into a new adventure.”

Ethan Berry was drawn to the people. “They invite you with open arms and make you feel like family,” he comments. Curtis Burns saw “a career and income opportunity while still being a student-athlete,” and Parker Chewning says he wanted “to try something new.” Connor Cox was drawn to the people and the possibilities NIL Real Estate could create for his future.

For Katy, mentoring athletes feels like a natural extension of what she has built in Salem. Her goal is to give young people opportunities and help position them for success, whether their future unfolds in sports, real estate, or both.

The career Katy once knew little about has become a way to bring together the things she values most. “I literally get to be myself,” she says. “I got to combine my love of sports and helping people. Everyone should get to live their passion. I am lucky to be doing it.”

BEYOND THE FIELD

George Casteel: Former Snowshoe ski team racer.

Jack Camper: Loves exploring, hunting, and the outdoors.

Ethan Berry: Can fly an airplane.

Curtis Burns: Passionate about giving back.

Parker Chewning: Loves golf, even if he’s “not very good.”

Connor Cox: Enjoys hiking and the outdoors.



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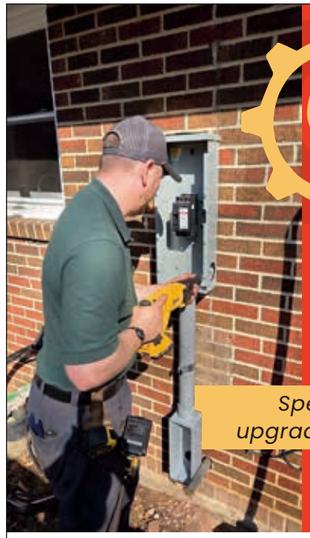


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HELPING COLLEGE ATHLETES WIN *Beyond the Game*



STORY BY
KATY
COOKSTON

When most people hear "NIL," they think of endorsement deals, social media posts, and college athletes promoting brands. But right here in downtown Salem, a different kind of NIL program is helping student-athletes earn income now while building something they can take with them long after their playing days are over. And the story started more than 2,000 miles away.

NIL Real Estate began when a real estate agent in Utah wanted to find a way to combine his love of real estate with his love of sports. After more than a year of brainstorming, planning, and working through all the ins and outs, NIL Real Estate was born.

The program first found success at BYU, and then it was replicated at universities across the country with the right agents and the right support. That's where I came in.

In the spring of 2023, I was approached about bringing NIL Real Estate to Southwest Virginia. The leaders weren't looking for just any real estate agent. They wanted a top-producing agent who also believed in putting community first and giving back.

After a lengthy interview and application process, I was selected, and Virginia Tech became one of the program's test schools in the fall of 2023. We succeeded, thanks in large part to the support of the Hokie staff, and the program continued to grow.

By spring 2024, NIL Real Estate had student-athletes at universities across the country, with Keller Williams agents nationwide helping support them. What started as an idea in Utah was quickly becoming something much bigger.

So, what exactly do we do? We help student-athletes get their Virginia real estate license. We enroll them in



the online real estate course, and after they finish the class and pass the exam, we help set up their licenses as referral agents with our main office in Virginia.

The best part? When someone an athlete refers to our network buys, sells, or invests in real estate, the athlete can earn a referral fee at closing. For college athletes juggling classes, practices, workouts, games, and travel, a traditional job isn't always realistic. NIL Real Estate gives them another option.

Roanoke College football player Landon Altizer saw the opportunity as a perfect fit with an interest he was already developing. "The reason I joined NIL Real Estate is because I thought it'd be a great opportunity to get my license and make some money while managing my super-busy football schedule," he shares. "Over the summer, I started to get into the real estate business with a friend, and I worked on houses and developed a huge interest in the investment side, so when Katy talked about this opportunity, it just seemed like a sign to take that route more seriously."

Then came another pretty big change. In January 2026, the creator of NIL Real Estate needed to take a step back. As one of the most involved agents in the program, I was approached about taking it over. That part was an easy YES!



> *"Football has taught me discipline, consistency, and how to work toward long-term goals, which are all important in real estate, too,"*

Moving a nationwide program from Salt Lake City, Utah, to Salem, Virginia, took a little more work—and a whole lot of prayer. But deciding where its new home should be was the easy part.

As a lifelong Salemite raising fifth-generation Salemites, I had no question about where I wanted to plant the roots of this program. Salem is home. It's the community that raised me, the community where I'm raising my family, and the community where I've built my real estate career. Bringing NIL Real Estate here gave me the opportunity to combine three things I truly love—community, sports, and real estate—while building something that could impact student-athletes across the country.

With the support of Keller Williams and the universities we work with, we made the move, and by May 2026, we were enrolling student-athletes in the Virginia real estate licensing course. Today, more than 1,400 student-athletes from more than 300 colleges and universities nationwide have enrolled in the online school.

How cool is it that a program reaching college athletes across the entire country is based right here in downtown Salem? But for me, the best part isn't just what the athletes can earn while they're in school. It's what we're helping them build for after college. They're learning about real estate, building relationships, making connections, and being introduced to investing and entrepreneurship. Some may choose real estate as a full-time career after graduation. Others may become investors or take what they've learned into completely different careers. Either way, they're building something for their future.

Roanoke College football player KJ Bratton sees a natural connection between what football has taught him and where real estate could take him. "Football has taught me discipline, consistency, and how to work toward long-term goals, which are all important in real estate, too," he says. "I see real estate as something I can build alongside football and eventually turn into a successful career and investment opportunity for my future."

Because eventually, every college athlete plays a final game, which is why NIL Real Estate is about giving them another tool to succeed tomorrow. Roanoke College football player Jack Camper explains, "Roanoke football is more than a team. The program has brought many great people into my life and has taught me how to be a Maroon Man. I've learned many life lessons and have had memories I will never forget. The maroon standard is to win games and the next 40 years of life after graduating."

And that's exactly why the license matters. Football is helping these young men learn how to win on the field. NIL Real Estate is giving them one more tool to help them win for the next 40 years after they graduate.

More than 1,400 student-athletes. More than 300 colleges and universities. Athletes across the country are preparing for what's next. And it's all happening right here in downtown Salem. Pretty cool, if you ask me.

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MITCH JEARLS

THE WINNING BET

The Jearls Home Team, MKB REALTORS®

STORY BY JACKI DONALDSON
PHOTOS BY JEREMIAH GUELZO

On April 1, 2021, Mitch Jearls was on spring break at the Bellagio in Las Vegas with his wife, Kristie, and their son, Connor, when he decided to place a bet. For years, Mitch had balanced real estate investing and sales with a corporate career. He had talked about making real estate his full-time focus, but that day, he decided he was done talking about it. “I decided to rip off the Band-Aid and bet on myself,” Mitch recalls.

He gave his notice and never looked back.

The decision may have happened in Las Vegas, but the path began years earlier with a horrible first home-buying experience. “I remember thinking that buying a home shouldn’t feel that way,” Mitch shares. “I wanted to help protect other people from having the same experience.”

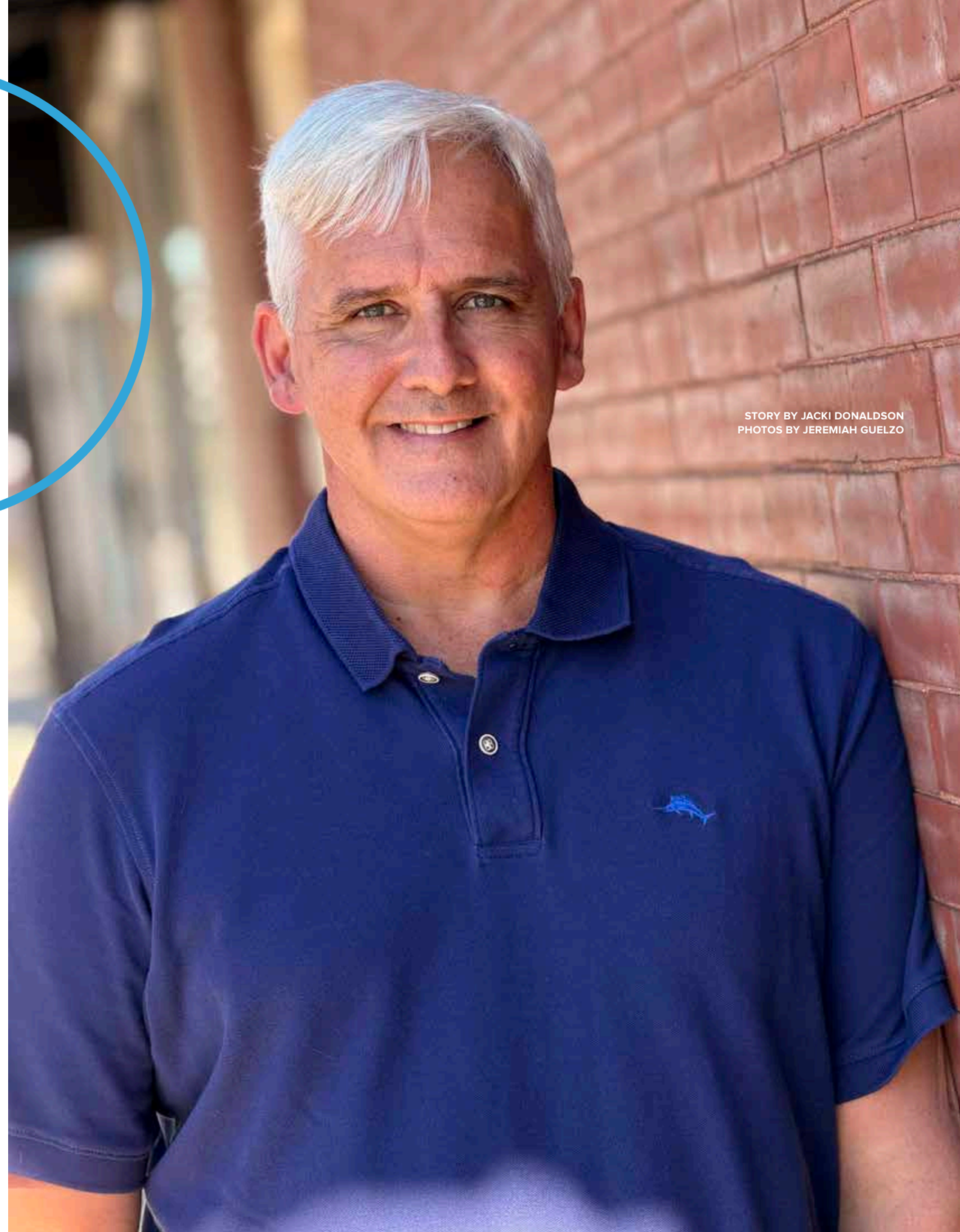
Real estate gradually worked its way into his life, although his career took a few turns first. After earning an accounting degree from Radford University, Mitch managed a Burger King for seven years before becoming a cost accountant. In 1999, he joined Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield as an agent and eventually became director of sales. Later, he served as director of administration for the architecture and engineering firm Thompson & Litton.

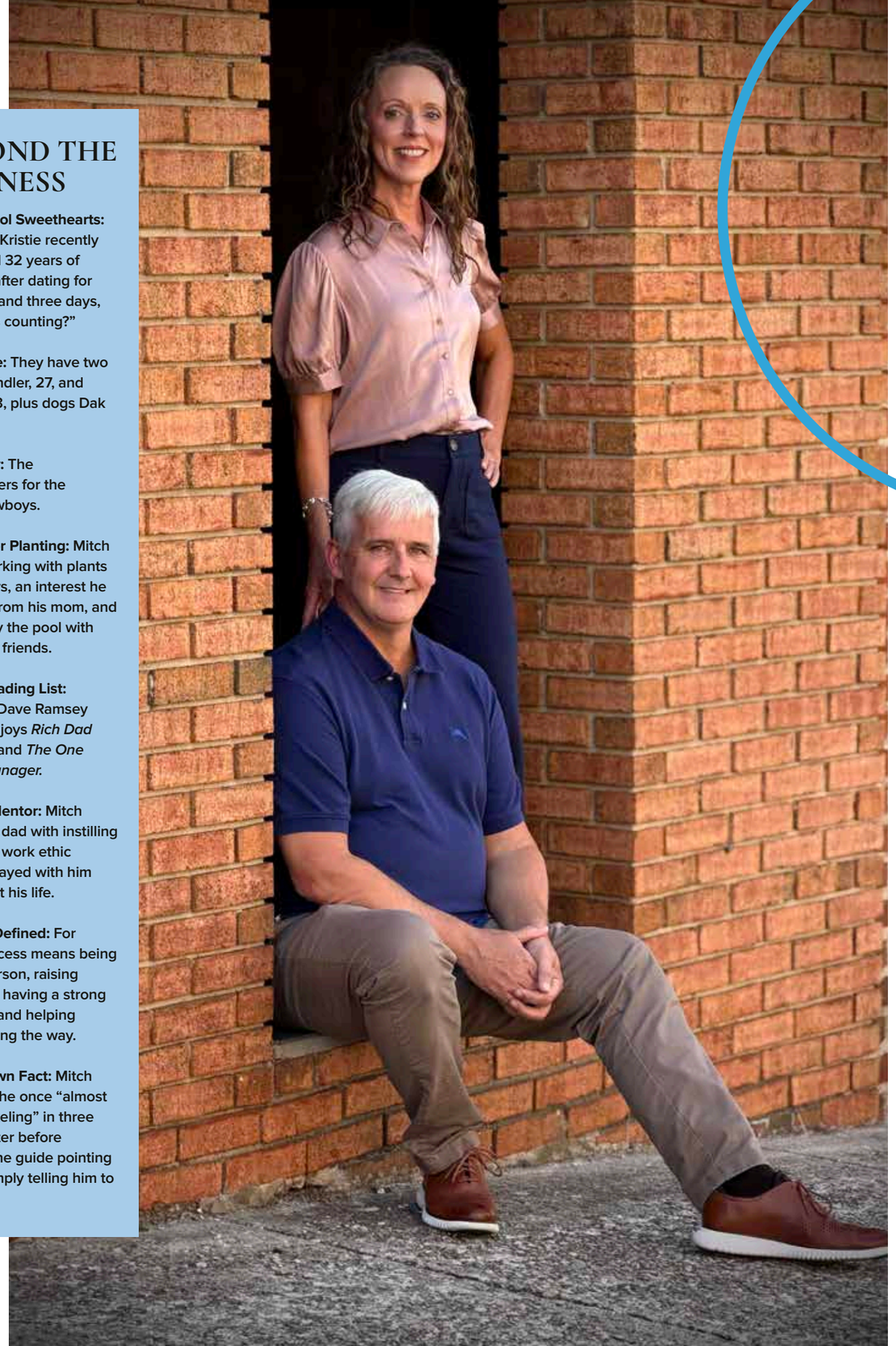
Meanwhile, he was investing in, renovating, and selling homes. Mitch first earned his real estate license in 2006, stepped away from the licensed side for a time, and became licensed again in 2014. By 2021, he was ready to give real estate his full attention.

His career took him from McCraw Real Estate to Nest Realty and then MKB. While considering MKB, Mitch spoke with Curtis Burchett and Kit Hale. Kit told him simply, “I want you on my team.” The words stuck with Mitch because he realized MKB genuinely wanted him there. “Today, I can say without hesitation: I am where I belong,” he notes. Serving clients is a big part of why.

During COVID, Mitch worked with a couple for nearly two years as they searched for a home. They were cash buyers, but even that did not guarantee success in the intense market. They made offers and repeatedly came up short. Mitch kept telling them, “The right home will come along.” Eventually, it did. He still remembers delivering the news: “WE GOT IT!”

The couple still lives in the home, and they now have three children. They have stayed connected with Mitch and are working with him again as they search for an investment property. “A transaction may be where the relationship begins, but if you take care of people, it can continue for years,” Mitch says.





BEYOND THE BUSINESS

High School Sweethearts: Mitch and Kristie recently celebrated 32 years of marriage after dating for five years and three days, "but who's counting?"

Family Life: They have two sons, Chandler, 27, and Connor, 23, plus dogs Dak and Ellie.

Game Day: The family cheers for the Dallas Cowboys.

Poolside or Planting: Mitch enjoys working with plants and flowers, an interest he inherited from his mom, and relaxing by the pool with family and friends.

On His Reading List: Mitch is a Dave Ramsey fan and enjoys *Rich Dad Poor Dad* and *The One Minute Manager.*

His First Mentor: Mitch credits his dad with instilling the strong work ethic that has stayed with him throughout his life.

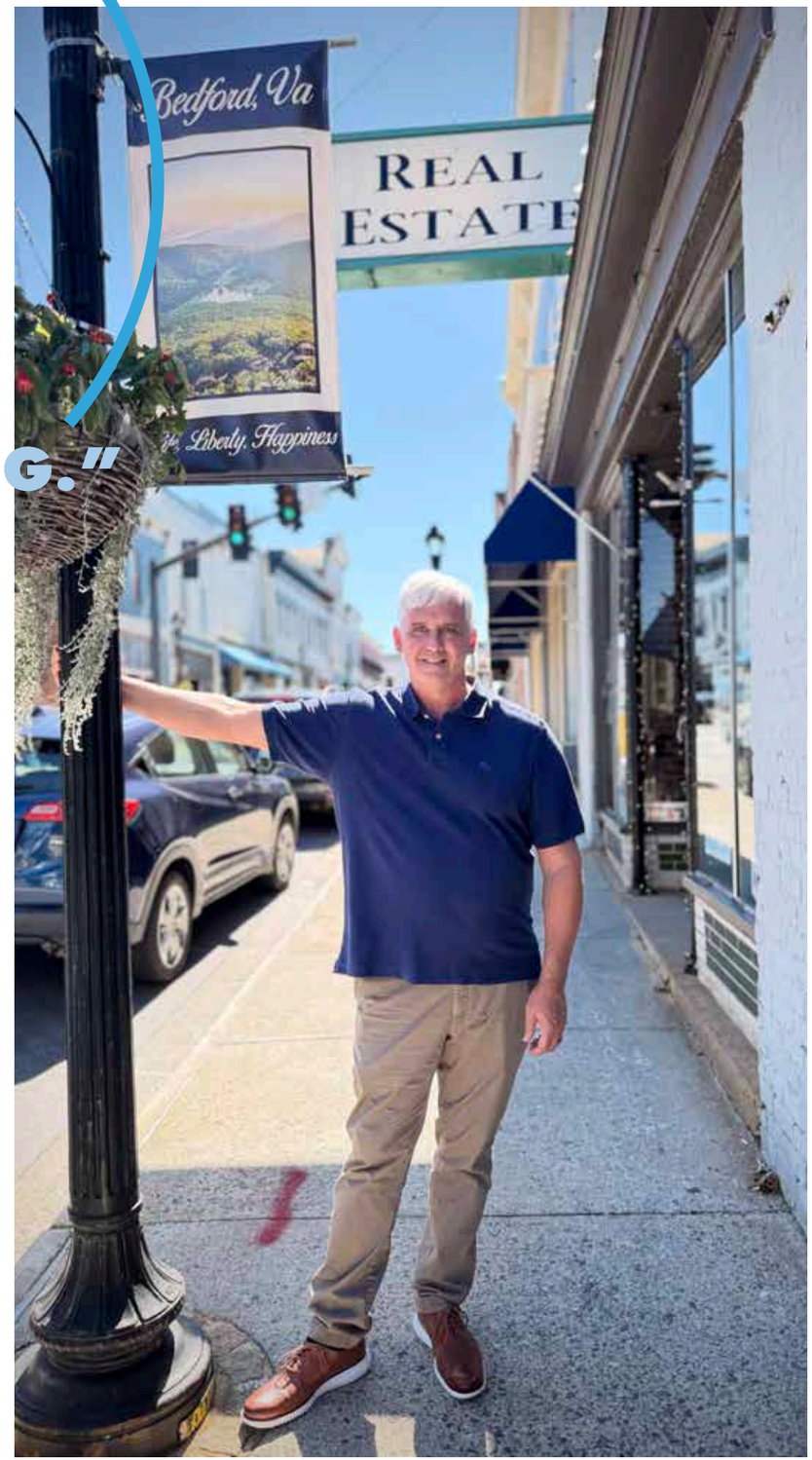
Success, Defined: For Mitch, success means being a good person, raising good kids, having a strong marriage, and helping people along the way.

Little-Known Fact: Mitch jokes that he once "almost died snorkeling" in three feet of water before realizing the guide pointing up was simply telling him to stand up.

"Today, I can say without hesitation: **I AM WHERE I BELONG."**

That philosophy may sound surprisingly sentimental coming from someone who readily admits he likes to win. "Spoiler alert: I'm very competitive," Mitch comments. That competitive streak helps him navigate real estate's highs and lows. He believes in owning both. "At the end of the day, the only person you have to congratulate, or be angry with, is yourself," he explains.

Years of buying and flipping properties, negotiating deals, and representing clients through different circumstances have shaped Mitch's approach. He commonly uses the phrase #ExperienceMatters. "Experience only matters if you use it to take care of the people who trust you," Mitch emphasizes. "My job is to use everything I've learned over the years to help my clients make good decisions, protect their interests, and guide them through the process with confidence."





Now, his next chapter has become a family affair. Mitch is growing The Jearls Home Team alongside Kristie, his high school sweetheart. Together, Mitch and Kristie want to build a business known for taking care of people and maintaining relationships long after closing.

And Mitch expects to have plenty of time to do it.

During an annual meeting, the couple's financial advisor once asked when Mitch planned to retire. His answer required little thought: "Never." He genuinely enjoys the work and doesn't see real estate as something he is working toward leaving. With Kristie beside him and The Jearls Home Team growing, he is excited about what comes next.

Nearly two decades after first earning his license, Mitch knows he took a winding route to the career that ultimately fit him best. If he could change one thing, he would have made the leap earlier. But on that spring break in Las Vegas in 2021, Mitch finally stopped wondering what might happen if he went all in.

He bet on himself.

> "Experience only matters if you use it to take care of the **PEOPLE WHO TRUST YOU.**"










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