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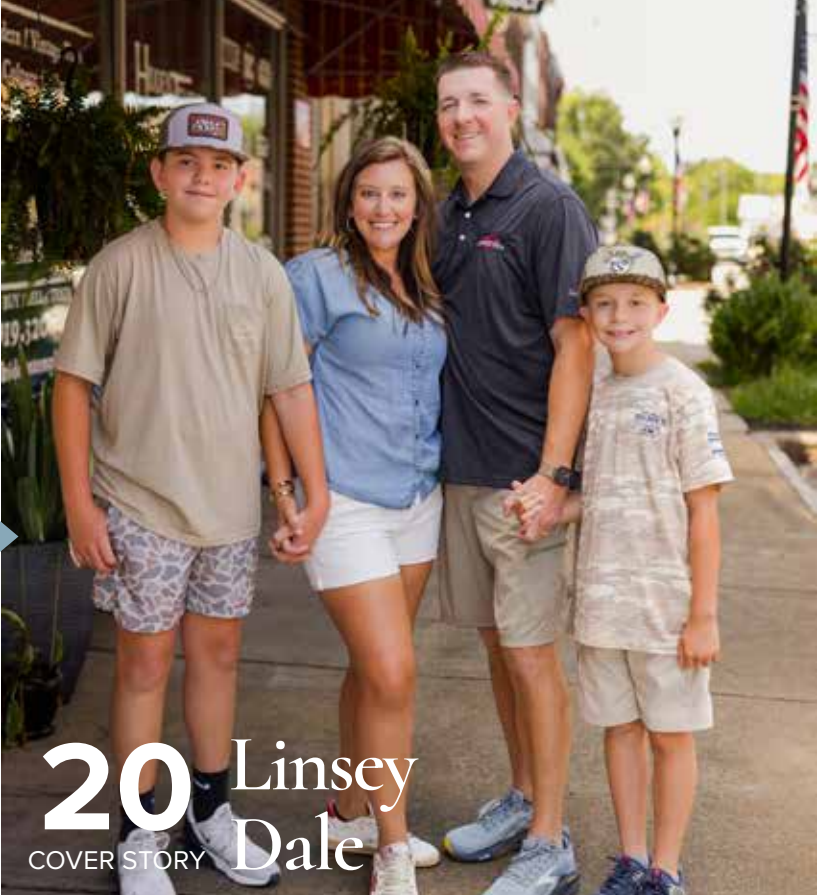


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COVER STORY

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Meet Robert Courts

Robert Courts is a longtime Raleigh business and community advocate with a passion for bringing people, businesses and the community together. He is a co-owner of Raleigh Downtown, a city guide and community media company focused on connecting businesses and residents throughout Raleigh.

Much of Robert's work has centered on supporting locally-owned businesses and strengthening the connections that make a community thrive. He has served in a number of community leadership roles, including with the City of Raleigh's Human Relations Commission and Raleigh Crime Stoppers, and has been actively involved

in efforts that support local businesses and give back to the community.

Robert also brings more than 30 years of experience in the mortgage industry, giving him a unique perspective on the people, businesses and relationships that make up the Triangle's real estate community.

Outside of work and community service, Robert is the proud father of two grown children, a daughter and a son. As assistant editor of *Triangle Real Producers*, he is excited to help tell the stories of the exceptional professionals who make the Triangle real estate community so special.



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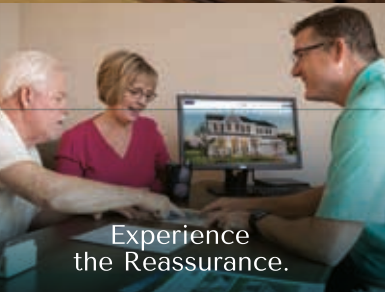


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Linsey DALE

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WRITTEN BY
ELIZABETH MCCABE
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PHOTOGRAPHY

Success didn't happen overnight for Linsey Dale. It was built through long hours, big risks, fearlessness, and a determination to create a better life for her family.

Today, Linsey is a top-producing agent and co-owner of HTR Southern Properties in Selma, preparing to launch HTR Eastern Properties in Goldsboro. But her story didn't begin in a real estate office. It began with a young married couple trying to make ends meet.

She married her husband, Cody, when she was just 18 years old. By 19, they welcomed their first son, Carter.

"You can imagine," Linsey recalls candidly, "we were broke as a joke with no plan whatsoever."

While Linsey navigated early career steps in banking, Cody entered the automotive industry, eventually spending 13 grueling years sacrificing 60 hours a week at a local dealership. That stability provided a critical safety net. It allowed Linsey to step away from banking, obtain her real estate license in 2018, and dive headfirst into the industry without the desperate

pressure of chasing an immediate paycheck.

She launched her career with a local team at Carolina Realty in Smithfield, under the wing of Broker-in-Charge Don Millard and his daughter, Joey Millard Edwards. Linsey credits Don for pouring foundational wisdom into her. "I was like a sponge," she says. "I wanted to learn anything and everything."

Her approach worked. In her very first year, Linsey closed multiple deals and had already become a top producer. "My mom always called me her rat on acid kid. I wake up every day with a mission: It drives Cody crazy.

"I got picked on a bit my first year because I was out there selling anything and everything, but it didn't matter to me," Linsey smiles. "Whether it was a \$20,000 property or a million-dollar home, I never saw the price tag. I just saw the people."

After transitioning to an independent agent and achieving explosive personal volume, corporate franchises began knocking on Linsey's door, trying to recruit her to open offices in the region. None of them felt right. Linsey resisted the red tape

of traditional large firms; she craved a true hometown, family-first environment.

The turning point arrived while leaving a closing in Clayton. Driven by a powerful, distinct gut feeling from God, Linsey pulled into the parking lot of Hometown Realty (HTR). She called Cody.

"I told him, 'Cody, I'm about to go into HTR, find the owner, and tell him I want to open an office for him,'" she laughs. "Cody was like, 'Wait, you need a plan! You need to prepare!' I told him I was already in the parking lot and walking in."

Linsey stepped through the doors, completely unaware of who actually owned the company. She was greeted by Diane—affectionately known as the "grandma of Hometown Realty"—and boldly asked to speak with the owner. Diane walked down the hall to check with Barry Woodard. To Linsey's surprise, Barry welcomed her into his office with a smile, saying, "I know exactly who you are."

Right then, a powerhouse partnership was born.

Barry asked where she wanted to establish her

outpost, and Linsey confidently pointed to downtown Selma. At the time, Selma was overlooked, but both Linsey and Barry recognized its latent potential. They correctly forecasted that as Clayton burst at the seams, the Smithfield-Selma-Princeton corridor east of I-95 would become the next major real estate frontier.

To round out the operational vision, Linsey brought in her close friend and mentor, Tracy Riba, to serve as the Broker-in-Charge of the Selma office. "Tracy says I'm the jumper—the 'let's go, let's do this' person—and she is the one who stops and ensures the Ts are crossed and the I's are dotted," Linsey notes. They grew the Selma branch into the second-highest performing office in the entire HTR footprint, rivaled only by the flagship Clayton location.

This new role came with growth not only with Linsey but it allowed her to grow her team. "We are now a team of six full-time agents," she says. "We are small but mighty! We have been thankful this year to grow a new construction division within the team where Molly Elioni and Darny Creech Cople have been able to

"There is no substitute for hard work."

- Thomas A. Edison

learn all things new construction and co-list subdivisions from the ground up! They have done an exceptional job in this role. And Veronica Lee and Alyssa Moore do a great job assisting clients!”

She continues, “We have a great group of ladies behind the scenes, too. Leslie Madden assists with operation roles and transaction support. Bridgette Pittman (long-time producing agent) is Linsey’s right hand and assistant. Valerie Poling handles all things marketing and social media! I couldn’t be more thankful for all of these ladies as every person plays a huge role with keeping the train on the tracks.”

Now in her eighth highly successful year in the business, Linsey is actively preparing the next phase of her professional journey: expanding into Wayne County with the launch of HTR Eastern Properties in Goldsboro. The expansion will feature a specialized Land and Farm Division and will bring new construction opportunities to the region.

“
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.....





Despite scaling an empire, Linsey's advice to emerging agents remains unmovable.

"I tell agents all the time: When you start chasing a dollar, you will fail. If you put your head down, hustle hard, and truly go above and beyond to help people, the financial side will take care of itself."

For the Dale family, the true reward of real estate is the freedom it bought back for them.

After 13 years, Cody stepped away from the dealership

lot a year ago this past September. Today, he manages the family's local investments, including a laundromat they own in Smithfield, a growing portfolio of rental properties, and the schedules of their two boys: Carter (14), a rising high school football and baseball player, and Carson (9), a passionate baseball and basketball player.

The ultimate turning point for the couple happened when Cody was held up late with a customer and missed their youngest son hitting his very first home run. That

night, they decided family simply had to come first.

"We started with nothing, and we can go back to nothing," Linsey told her husband that evening. "Our family dynamic will never change. Missing ball games isn't worth it."

Today, Linsey and Cody are completely aligned. Their family time is spent on the sidelines of local ball fields. To truly unwind and unplug, the family takes one or two cruises a year. It is the one place where the business phones

completely turn off, allowing Linsey to just be "Mom."

As Linsey looks to the future of HTR Eastern and Southern Properties, her mission is to cultivate quality over quantity, helping agents build highly successful careers while maintaining the down-to-earth authenticity that defined her own trajectory. "I always wanted an office where you can walk in, be completely yourself, and be loved on," Linsey says. Through hard work, grit, and keeping her priorities perfectly intact, she has built exactly that. ▀



“
I tell agents all the time: When you start chasing a dollar, you will fail. If you put your head down, hustle hard, and truly go above and beyond to help people, the financial side will take care of itself.”
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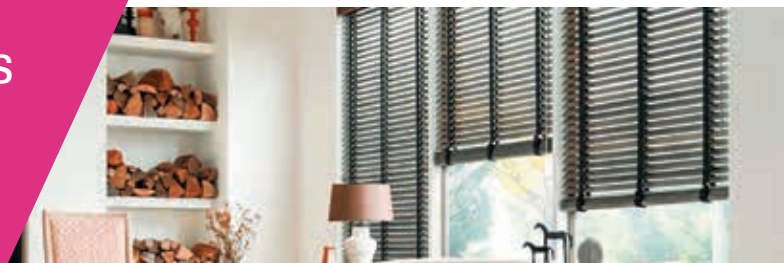
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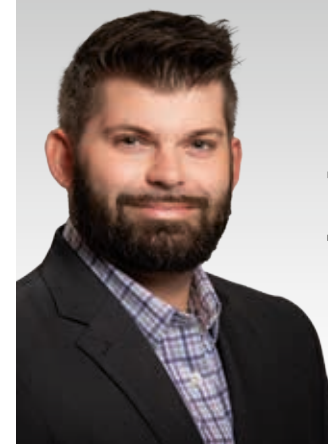
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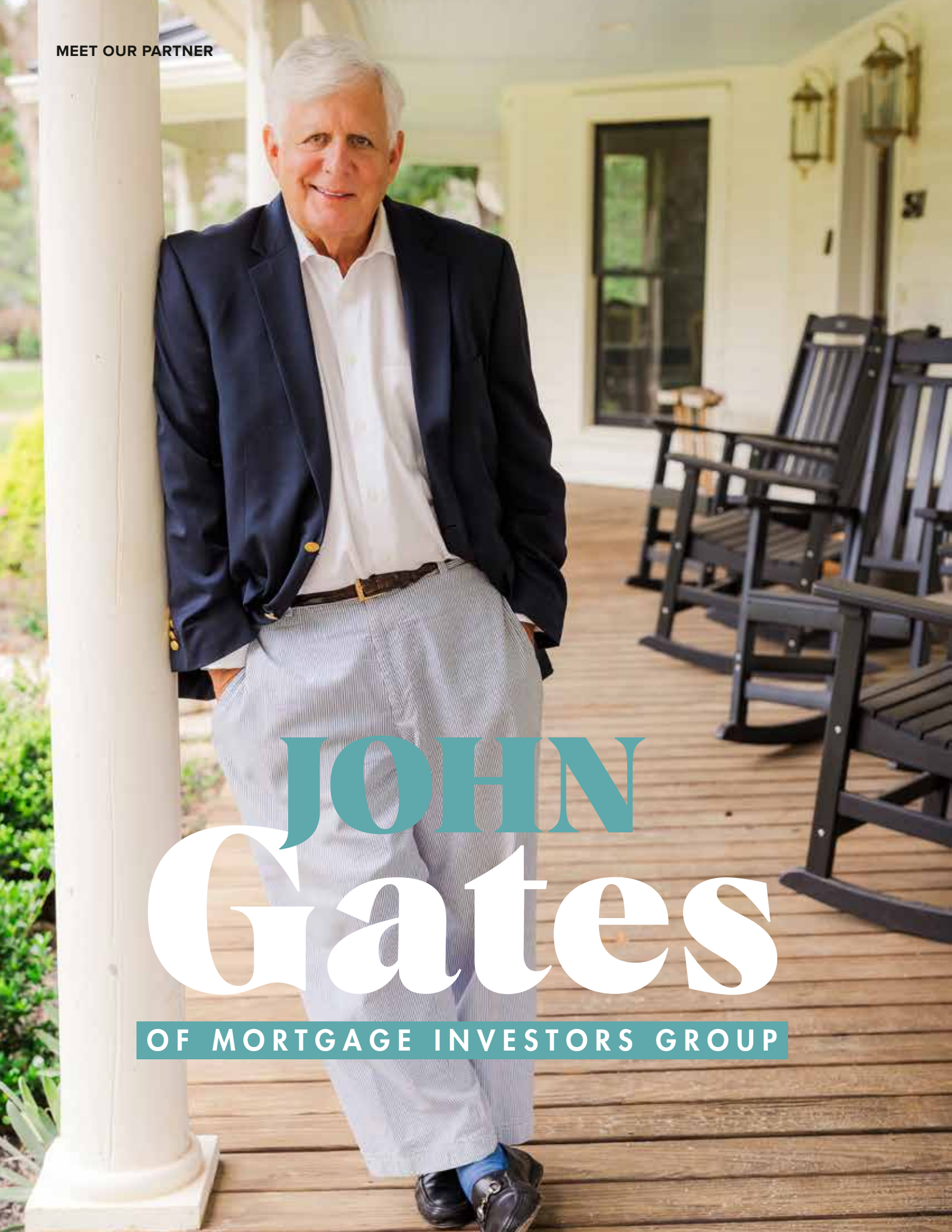
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Smooth Sailing

Robby Hasty, Loan Officer

After sailing the Caribbean and surviving more than three decades of mortgage upheaval, John Gates knows a thing or two about changing course. Before John ever navigated a mortgage market, he navigated the seas.

Not metaphorically. Literally.

While his twin brother was heading to medical school after graduating from UNC-Chapel Hill, John climbed aboard *Cambria*, a 134-foot J-Class sailing yacht, and spent the next two years sailing the Caribbean. Notably, Jimmy Buffet and Joni Mitchell spent a few days on board.

“Our captain played back-up guitar for Hot Tuna!” John adds.

John earned his U.S. Coast Guard captain’s license and later took the helm of *Southern Star*, a 70-foot sloop with its own brush with rock-and-roll history: Crosby, Stills & Nash filmed the music video for “Southern Cross” aboard the boat.

His brother became a doctor, but John became a yacht captain. And somehow, all these years later, the two paths don’t seem quite as different as they once did. His brother, Nevill, is retired and is sailing his 36’ Cape Dory cutter rigged sloop up and down the Atlantic Coast. It is currently moored in Little Compton, Rhode Island, before the trip down to North Carolina in September.

“My twin brother and I have always done life differently, but in our own way, we are made of the same cloth,” John says.

His brother helps people with their health. John helps his clients make some of the biggest financial decisions of their lives. But there’s something else John learned on the water that turned out to be surprisingly useful in the mortgage business: The wind changes, and you had better know how to change with it.

“The floor is always moving under our feet,” he says of an

industry he has called home for more than three decades.

John would know. He has lived through the savings and loan crisis, the dot-com recession, the 2008 financial collapse, COVID, and the dramatic rate increases that followed. He has watched mortgage companies boom, collapse, merge and disappear. He has seen products become wildly successful and then obsolete. Through all of it, John kept going.

“Only the strong survive,” he says. “Don’t succumb to mediocrity. Keep pounding.”

John charted his own route to mortgage lending. After his sailing years, he earned his MBA from Wake Forest University with a concentration in finance and joined North Carolina-based Hatteras Yachts in international sales. His territory stretched south of the U.S. border, and his job frequently took him into the Caribbean and Latin America.

John traveled for weeks at a time, visiting marinas, talking with fishermen and mechanics, building relationships and figuring out where opportunities existed. Over three years, he helped establish dealerships in St. Croix, Antigua, Venezuela, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic and Guatemala.

Then life changed. John got married and became the father of twins. “Twins take a lot of effort,” says John, who would eventually become the father of five, including two sets of twin boys with a daughter in the middle. “It is not something you leave one person to handle. It takes a team.”

The international travel no longer made sense. John returned home and went to work with a North Carolina yacht dealership. When recession hit in the late 1980s, and the dealership struggled, he remembered a mortgage company that had been recruiting him. John took the bait.

In January 1992, he originated his first mortgage. He never stopped. Within three years, John landed a



producing branch manager position. Over the decades that followed, he originated loans, managed and mentored loan officers and served for more than 10 years on the Raleigh Mortgage Bankers Association board, including two years as president.

But the education John values most didn't always happen in a classroom. It came from weathering the storm. He remembers working in the industry during the buildup to the 2008 housing collapse, when risky

mortgage products proliferated and easy money was everywhere.

"Did we make money? Heck yes, we did," he says.

But John says he refused to originate certain adjustable-rate loans unless he believed his clients could afford significantly higher payments if rates increased. The lesson he carried away from that era was blunt: "Greed will have no mercy on your long-term success."

Anyone can steer when the water is calm. John built his career in rough seas. Rising rates, collapsing lenders and shifting markets forced thousands of mortgage professionals to abandon ship. John stayed at the helm. His production fell during the industry's recent downturn, but sailing had taught him years earlier: Panic is rarely the right course.

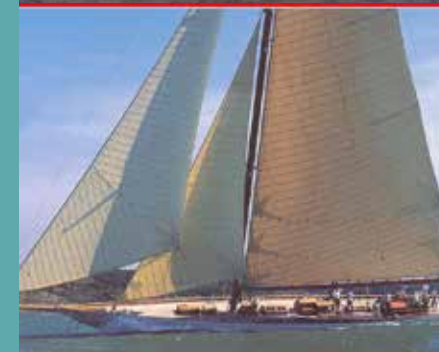
He doesn't hide those chapters because every captain eventually sails through bad weather. Over the years, John has collected many presidents club awards, branch volume plaques, and other awards that are in a cardboard box. "I realize my true value is not in my originations," he says. "It is my knowledge of the mortgage industry. It is what my mentors have passed down to me." It is all about my team and the client.

Today, John brings that same steady hand to Mortgage Investors Group, working alongside longtime partner Robbie Hasty. Together, they bring decades of experience, an experienced North Carolina team that backs them up, and a philosophy built on preparation, relationships, and trust.

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“THERE IS NOTHING LIKE THE SATISFACTION I GET FROM GOING TO A CLOSING AND WATCHING THE BUYER’S AGENT HAND OVER THE KEY TO A PERSON OR COUPLE BUYING THEIR FIRST HOME.”



jumbo, construction and renovation loans, 100% physician financing, DSCR investor loans, HELOCs and bridge loans, giving clients options when traditional financing isn't the right fit.

"There is nothing like the satisfaction I get from going to a closing and watching the buyer's agent hand over the key to a person or couple buying their first home," he says.

Away from work, John still finds himself drawn to the water. He fishes offshore and inshore, sails with his twin brother whenever he can, and enjoys following Carolina sports, grilling, and spending time with his family. Maybe that's because the sea never really leaves those who learn to read the wind.

John is continuing to navigate. Markets rise and fall. Rates change. Technology evolves. Just as the wind can shift without warning, so can the mortgage industry.

After more than 34 years, he doesn't expect smooth sailing. He expects change.

"I'm still in the game because I love the mortgage business," he says. "I still have the fire in my belly."

Perhaps that's the biggest lesson he brought ashore from the Caribbean years ago? You can't control the wind. You can only know your craft well enough to adjust your sails. John has been doing exactly that for more than three decades, making the lending process smooth sailing. 🦋

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Special thanks to Oak and Stone Custom Homes for providing the Dr. G.T. Sikes House for this photo shoot! It is a gorgeous Victorian property in North Raleigh that has been restored to its former glory, thoughtfully blending its historic character with modern elegance. From the original floors, soaring ceilings, grand staircase, Victorian trim and fireplaces to the beautifully updated kitchen, baths and living spaces, every detail reflects their commitment to preserving the home's timeless charm while creating a truly stunning modern residence. Oakandstonecustomhomes.com

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*“Where we love is home,
home that our feet may
leave, but not our hearts.”
- Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.*

Purposeful. Passionate. Patient.

Those are the qualities that define Sue Kerata of Century 21 Triangle Group, and she followed her heart into real estate in 2018. Since then, she has worked to help countless clients in their own real estate journeys.

“I have known in my heart that I would do real estate,” says Sue. “I would be a REALTOR® at some point in my life.” When she met real estate agents, she would ask them all kinds of questions about their career. “At the time, I was working in the corporate world as the Director of Global Travel Services for a software company. “I loved what I did, but it wasn’t my passion,” she says. “I’ve always had a real estate voice in the back of my head.”

She had her first daughter with her husband, Kevin, before staying home for a few years. “Then we worked on adopting our second child, which was a full-time job.” Navigating paperwork, due dates, and home studies wasn’t for the faint of heart. But Sue was up for the challenge. In 2015, they adopted Niomi, who was a welcome addition to their family.

“Once she was ready to start school, I knew it was time to pursue a real estate career,” she shares. The time was challenging. Kevin was in a time of transition, shutting down a company that he owned and looking for the next chapter. “We found ourselves in a difficult and interesting part of life. He was working to get back into the corporate world, and I was starting in real estate, which is slow in the beginning.” As any successful agent knows, it takes time to make money and grow your business.

Two major career transitions. One household.



“It was tough. Times were very tough. It was a struggle,” Sue reflects. “But we moved through it.” And on the other side of that season, things began to click. Kevin found his footing with *Triangle Real Producers*, while Sue’s business started gaining traction.

“I was very fortunate that the business grew, and I survived those first few years,” she says. “Where I was when I started compared to where I am now... it’s been amazing to be a part of it.”

Looking back, she doesn’t shy away from those early challenges. “I wouldn’t change any of it,” Sue says. “The blessing comes in the hard part when things are difficult and you’re not sure you’ll have a closing in the next month. But

you have faith that it will be ok.” That perspective shapes how she shows up for her clients today. “Now when I’m working with clients who are going through something difficult—a loss, a divorce, a new baby—I get so much joy from being part of that time in their lives,” she says. “I hope I’m able to make the process easier and less stressful. I can empathize. I’ve been through many of those seasons too.”

That emotional connection is what surprised her most about real estate. “How much I love people’s stories,” she says. “When you help someone buy or sell a home, you hear so much of their story. You’re trying to understand who they are before they move into the next chapter. That’s what I really love.”

She also discovered something else she didn't expect: collaboration. "My perception was that a lot of agents would be aggressive or difficult," she admits. "But that's been such a pleasant surprise. There are so many great agents out there who care about their clients." Instead of competition,

she found camaraderie. "Agents get it," she says. "We're all fighting for our clients, but when it's a win-win, we can work together to make it happen; it's a much better process for everyone." Since earning her license in 2018, Sue has experienced firsthand how quickly

the industry can shift. After a couple of years learning the ropes, the market changed dramatically during COVID. "That was jumping into the deep end," she says. But for Sue, that's part of the appeal. "One of the cool things about real estate is that it's constantly changing," she says. "There are always

new challenges and new ways of doing things. It's never the same."

Through it all, her motivation remains grounded in something simple: home. "Home is our safe place," she says. "It's where we feel comfortable, protected, and loved. Everyone needs that."

At home, Sue shares life with Kevin and their two daughters, Cate, a high school senior, and Niomi, now 12 and in middle school, along with their dog, Dash. Family time often means travel, beach trips, hiking around Raleigh, or trying out new restaurants. Both daughters are

involved in dance, and Sue and Kevin love watching them perform. They also prioritize giving back, volunteering with the Raleigh Dream Center, a Christian organization that supports individuals facing homelessness and addiction. Once



“
When you help someone buy or sell a home, you hear so much of their story. You're trying to understand who they are before they move into the next chapter. THAT'S WHAT I REALLY LOVE.
”



a month, they help distribute groceries, everything from packaged goods to fresh produce, and offer prayer to those who request it.

"It's a great way to get our kids involved, too," Sue says. As for the future, Sue is clear about what success looks like.

"I've grown my business to a size that feels really comfortable," she says. "I don't envision having a big team. I love being hands-on with my clients." She's the one at showings. The one guiding clients. The one walking alongside them through one of life's biggest transitions.

"I'm in a really good place," she says. "I can handle the day-to-day and still be fully present with my clients. That's exactly where I want to be."

She followed her heart into real estate and found the kind of fulfillment that makes all the hard parts worth it. ▀

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WRITTEN BY ELIZABETH MCCABE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY FLAVI HUFF PHOTOGRAPHY
LOCATION: AR HOMES MODEL HOME IN NORTH RIDGE

Buying a home is one of the biggest investments most people will ever make. Whether it's a charming 90-year-old bungalow or a brand-new custom build, every home has a story to tell. Gabe Ben-Or has spent his career learning how to read it.

"I've always loved construction," Gabe says. "I love how homes are built, how they work, and helping people understand what's going on behind the walls." That passion dates back to his youth. Gabe grew up around construction sites, following in the footsteps of his father, who was also

a builder. By age 23, he launched his own construction company, Signature Homes, along with his cousin, and eventually sold his cousin the company. After spending a year working alongside his father to learn every aspect of the business, Gabe started Dover Homes and continued to build homes for more than a decade before looking for a new challenge.

That opportunity came in an unexpected way.

"I had a home inspection done on one of the houses I built," he recalls. "I was really impressed." The inspection was performed by Pillar To Post Home

Inspectors. Inspired by the company's professionalism and thorough approach, Gabe attended a franchise expo in New York and signed on the very next day. Today, nearly a decade later, his business continues to grow.

Since opening in 2015, Pillar To Post Home Inspectors has expanded its team of inspectors while continually adding new services designed to simplify the buying process for both REALTORS® and homeowners. Rather than coordinating multiple companies, clients can schedule everything from one trusted source, including septic inspections, sewer scopes, termite inspections, water quality testing,

infrared scanning, and more. “Our goal is to make everything as easy as possible for our clients,” Gabe explains. “We’re trying to bring everything in-house so buyers and agents don’t have to search around for different companies.”

His construction background remains one of the company’s biggest advantages. As a licensed general contractor who still maintains his license, Gabe approaches every inspection with the mindset of someone who has built homes from the ground up. “I can look at a house from both an inspector’s point of view and a builder’s point of view,” he says. “It helps me explain to clients what’s going on and, more importantly, remind them that almost everything is fixable.”

That perspective often helps ease the anxiety many buyers experience during the inspection process.

“We’re not here to ruin a deal,” Gabe says. “We’re here to educate our clients about the home they’re buying.” Thoroughness is another hallmark of the Ben-Or Team. Inspections are typically scheduled within 48 to 72 hours, and reports are delivered the very same day while every detail is still fresh. Clients can schedule online or by phone, and each report

includes detailed photographs with an option for upgrades, such as immersive 360-degree images, and even measured floor plans that provide homeowners with a valuable blueprint of their property.

Sometimes, Gabe even fixes a tiny issue on the spot.

“If there’s a loose doorknob, it’s usually faster for me to tighten the screw than it is to write it up,” he laughs. Larger repairs, however, are another matter. “If I identify problems during an inspection, I don’t want to be the one offering to fix them,” he explains. “That doesn’t feel right. I’d rather keep those completely separate.”

One inspection in particular reminded Gabe why attention to detail matters. After adding sewer scope inspections to the company’s services, a buyer requested one for a brand-new construction home. Gabe admits he initially questioned whether it was really necessary.

“I thought she was crazy,” he laughs. But once the camera traveled through the underground sewer line, it revealed a pipe that had been crushed beneath the driveway during construction. The builder immediately

dug up the driveway and replaced the damaged line before closing.

“It just showed me that even on new construction, things can go wrong,” Gabe says. “She was smart to ask for it.”

That experience reinforced something Gabe tells every buyer: Never assume a new home is a perfect home. “No matter the age of the house, you should always have it inspected,” he says.

Away from work, Gabe enjoys spending time with his wife, their 10-year-old son, and the family’s black Labrador. Although two knee surgeries convinced him to retire from recreational soccer, he’s happily traded the soccer field for the hockey rink. His son now plays goalie for the Carolina Junior Hurricanes, and much of the family’s free time is spent traveling to games and cheering him on.

“It’s probably my favorite thing to do,” Gabe says. Whether he’s inspecting a home or watching his son stop slapshots, Gabe believes success comes down to preparation, experience, and paying attention to the details others might overlook. That’s exactly what has made Pillar To Post Home Inspectors a trusted resource for REALTORS® and homeowners alike. ▀

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Laura Ivey

LIVING
IN
COLOR



WRITTEN BY ELIZABETH MCCABE
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The real estate world is drowning in a sea of beige. From the predictably polished headshots to the identical, cookie-cutter listing descriptions, it's easy for independent agents to blend into the background. But Laura Ivey doesn't do beige.

With a vibrant brand, a razor-sharp wit, and a refusal to wear the same outfit as anyone else, Laura is injecting a much-needed dose of color and authenticity into the industry. That same authenticity carries into every client relationship, where honesty and clear expectations matter more than polished sales pitches.

Laura's passion for real estate wasn't an overnight realization; it was practically a childhood pastime. "My parents were great at recognizing an opportunity to make a property better, sell it, and upgrade themselves," Laura recalls. "We went to open houses a lot when I was a kid. I really liked it, and I always respected the REALTORS® that were their friends. I thought, 'Wow, that job seems pretty cool.'"

However, when she graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2009, the housing market was in freefall. Launching a real estate career as a broke college graduate wasn't just risky; it seemed impossible. So, Laura took a detour into software sales and management.

What was meant to be a temporary placeholder turned into a successful

12-year corporate career. Far from wasted time, those twelve years became the ultimate training ground. "It ended up being great prep work," Laura says. "I learned how to talk to people, manage complex personalities, and develop interpersonal skills. But eventually, I got tired of helping big corporations instead of helping actual people. It wasn't fulfilling."

When the timing finally aligned for Laura to make her move into real estate, life decided to test her resolve by serving up a massive wave of personal transition all at once. She didn't just change careers; she also navigated a divorce and relocated from Raleigh to Fuquay-Varina.

In just four years, Laura has helped dozens of families move throughout the Triangle while quickly becoming one of the area's rising producers. Today, when a transaction throws a curveball, Laura is known for staying calm. Her clients borrow that confidence because they know she'll find a solution.

"I stay grounded and don't panic when things go sideways. In business, you have to focus on the solution, not the problem. Something bad happened? Okay, fine. How do we fix it and move forward?" Walk onto Laura's Instagram page, and you'll immediately realize she isn't your average agent. Working closely with her social media manager, Stephanie Jenkins, Laura has built a digital presence that is a masterclass in modern, authentic branding. From humorous reels about being kidnapped by a client to

brutally honest commentary, her content is as educational as it is wildly entertaining.

"In a world of beige, color is a luxury. Color represents individuality, personality, and confidence. It's not about being flashy; it's about having the freedom to create a life and a home that reflects who you are." This philosophy underpins her current brand evolution. While her business initially featured a "cutesy" aesthetic with pink tones and a little ivy topiary, Laura is leaning into bolder, more vibrant imagery that matches her spirited personality. "You get to see exactly who I am before you hire me," she notes. "People hire people before they hire agents; they want to know the human behind the transaction."

Laura's success is anchored in two main pillars: meticulous expectation-setting and fiercely protecting her client relationships. "The key to everyone's happiness is setting good expectations early," she says. "I treat every client like they are my only client. I want to deeply understand their *why* so I can be their ultimate advocate. Buying or selling a home is a huge financial and emotional decision. People deserve to feel like they have someone completely in their corner advocating for them." She is also unapologetically transparent, a trait her clients find incredibly refreshing. "I'm brutally honest, but in a way that is productive. I don't want to waste anybody's time. Whether



it's good news or bad news,
I give it to you straight."

That authenticity has earned her lifelong loyalty, with a client roster that spans from childhood to college friends to internet leads who have since become monthly lunch dates. "My oldest friend is my oldest client," she adds. "We have been friends since kindergarten, and I helped her buy her first home in 2022."

When she isn't busy fighting for her clients, Laura and her husband, Mike Hobbs, love to escape the grind through travel, with trips meticulously planned up to a year in advance. "Mike is an ardent supporter of my business," explains Laura. "Even though he works full time as an engineer at a pharmaceutical company, he's always willing to jump in and move furniture, install signs, repair light fixtures, and take on other light handyman work when the need arises. He is my number one unpaid volunteer employee."

Back home, you can find her out in the yard. "I joke that gardening constantly humbles me, but that's exactly why I love it. It teaches patience, reminds me that growth takes time, and gives me a reason to put my phone down." As for the future of her business, don't expect Laura to build a massive, bureaucratic team. Having managed people for over a decade in the corporate world, she knows exactly where her strengths lie.

"I don't want to build the biggest business. I want to build one that people remember. If my clients feel cared for, laugh a little during the process, and can't wait to recommend me afterward, that's success." 🍋



*"If my clients feel
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Since opening its doors in 2021, Oak City Coatings has grown through referrals, repeat clients, and a reputation for delivering quality craftsmanship and exceptional service for both homes and businesses. Nick O'Keefe, the driving force behind the company, brings over 16 years of deep industry experience to the table, including a decade spent in sales and management with Sherwin-Williams.

Growing up in a DIY-focused family, Nick's passion for building and architecture naturally led him to the painting industry. He genuinely loves what he does, and that enthusiasm shines through in every project he oversees. Initially, Nick pursued an undergraduate degree in applied

mathematics from Appalachian State University. During his time there, he was a dedicated athlete, competing in track and field and cross country.

"I also worked part-time at the local country club, tutored other athletes, and proctored study hall," Nick recalls. "I helped a lot of students with math and did a lot of work for the Student Advisory Board. It taught me that there are different ways to find answers and different ways to get to solutions. Problems are always figure-out-able. "Those experiences taught Nick how to solve complex problems, think critically, and adapt... all skills that continue to serve him well as a business owner today. His true calling emerged during a pivotal interview

with Sherwin-Williams, which opened the door to his successful career in corporate sales and management.

"Sherwin-Williams had an intensive management training program," Nick explains, noting that the opportunity was instrumental in shaping his trajectory. "Following the management program, I went on to run multiple branches, and managed multiple sales territories in both residential and commercial markets."

Little did he know at the time that this extensive experience working directly alongside paint companies, architects, engineers, and general contractors was providing the exact foundation he needed to successfully

launch his own professional painting company, Oak City Coatings.

After years of learning the industry from the inside, Nick saw an opportunity to create something different; an experience built around craftsmanship, communication, and truly taking care of clients from start to finish.

Based in Raleigh, affectionately known as the “City of Oaks,” Oak City Coatings

offers a comprehensive range of residential and commercial painting services. Oak City Coatings places as much emphasis on preparation as it does on the final coat of paint, because a beautiful finish starts long before the first brush touches the wall. From surface preparation and product selection to application techniques and final walkthroughs, every step is designed to deliver results that last. Nick continually invests

in learning about new products, application techniques, and industry best practices so every project reflects the highest level of craftsmanship.

He also places a strong emphasis on using environmentally friendly products, including zero-VOC (volatile organic compounds) paints and GreenGuard-certified materials, helping create healthier indoor spaces while maintaining exceptional durability

and performance. Additionally, the company specializes in high-end applications, including mineral-based coatings and limewashes for exterior brick and fireplaces. Nick’s meticulous dedication to his clients is evident from the very first interaction. Oak City Coatings sets itself apart through detailed, custom estimates and an experienced eye for the details that others may overlook. Nick takes the time to

evaluate each property carefully, identify potential concerns, provide clear recommendations, and educate homeowners on their options so clients can move forward with confidence.

Throughout every project, clear communication remains a priority. Clients know what to expect, when work will take place, and who to contact with questions, creating a smooth, stress-free experience from

start to finish. That commitment to quality extends beyond the completion of each project. Oak City Coatings stands behind its interior and exterior painting services with warranties designed to give homeowners confidence and peace of mind. Beyond providing exceptional painting services, Nick is deeply passionate about empowering the team he has built. “I love the team that I have around me,” he says. Providing



“
**I LOVE THE TEAM THAT
I HAVE AROUND ME.**
”

a stable platform and meaningful opportunities to empower his team members to succeed is his true calling.

Today, Oak City Coatings has built a team of three dedicated paint crews and 15 professional painters who share the company’s commitment to quality craftsmanship and exceptional

service. Their color specialist, Tanya, helps homeowners make confident color decisions as they move forward with their painting projects.

Behind the scenes, a collaborative leadership team helps ensure clients receive a consistent experience from start to finish. Nick’s wife, Stephanie,

serves as Marketing Director, overseeing Oak City Coatings’ marketing campaigns throughout the region. For Nick and Stephanie, showing up well for their clients begins with taking care of themselves and staying connected as a family. Prioritizing health and fitness allows them to be fully present at work and at home. Outside of running a

bustling business, Nick enjoys an active lifestyle with Stephanie and their boys, ages nine and seven. Both boys share their parents' love of sports and the outdoors, making movement and adventure a natural part of their family life.

Family time is a top priority, and much of it is spent either at the baseball field or exploring the outdoors together. Both boys love baseball, and Nick coaches their teams, giving him the opportunity to help them grow in a sport they enjoy while also staying involved in the local community. "When we are not at the ballfield, our family can usually be found rock climbing, biking, skiing, or hiking. We love finding cool waterfalls and swimming holes that most people wouldn't want to hike to," Nick says. "We are definitely an outdoorsy, on-the-go family, and we're always up for a new adventure."

Whether they are surf fishing along the coast, escaping to the mountains, or simply spending an afternoon outside together, time in nature gives them a chance to slow down, reconnect as a family, and recharge from the demands of business ownership.

For Nick and the team at Oak City Coatings, success has never been measured by the number of homes or businesses transformed. It's measured by the trust clients place in his team, the relationships built throughout each project, the benefits to the local community, and knowing homeowners feel proud every time they pull into their driveway.

Under Nick O'Keefe's leadership, clients can feel confident knowing their property is in skilled, trustworthy hands and that the people behind the paint care just as much about the experience as they do the final result. ▼

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mentorship, and business opportunities that simply don't happen through traditional networking events alone.

Committee members also gain a front-row seat to what's happening in the industry.

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There is also the leadership advantage.

Serving on a committee develops skills that directly benefit your real estate business—public speaking, strategic planning, collaboration, problem-solving, and relationship building. These experiences build confidence and credibility that clients notice.

Perhaps most importantly, committee service increases your visibility.

When fellow REALTORS® know you personally, they know your professionalism. They know your work ethic. They know your expertise. In an industry built on relationships and reputation, those connections matter.

For newer members, committees provide an accelerated path to becoming involved. For experienced REALTORS®, they offer opportunities to give back, mentor others, and help shape the future of the profession. No matter where you are in your career, there is a place where your experience and perspective can make an impact.

If you've ever wondered how to become more connected within the Association, the answer is simple: get involved.

The perfect opportunity to explore your options is the **You Belong Here Expo & Block Party on Thursday,**

October 29. Meet committee and council leaders, learn how each group supports our members and industry, ask questions, and discover where your interests and talents align. It's a fun, welcoming event designed to help you find your place within RRAR—and perhaps discover the opportunity that helps take your business to the next level.

Your membership opens the door. Getting involved is what helps you make the most of it.

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Why Joining an RRAR Committee Is One of the Smartest Business Decisions You'll Make

BY: JOANNE WERSTLEIN, VP OF MEMBERSHIP & COMMUNICATIONS,
RALEIGH REGIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®

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The relationships built around the committee table often become some of the strongest professional connections you'll make. Working alongside REALTORS® from different brokerages creates trust that extends beyond meetings. Those relationships frequently lead to referrals, collaboration,

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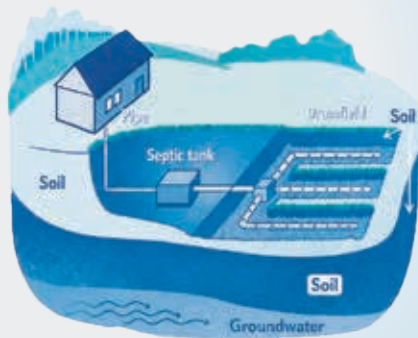
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ERIC LILES

WRITTEN BY ELIZABETH MCCABE
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Service First. Sales Follow.

Inside Riverside High School, a young Eric Liles wanted to give blood, but could not.

“I was so nervous,” he says. “It was my first time.” The fear of the needle got the best of him that day, and he walked away without donating. But the missed opportunity stayed with him. When the blood drive returned during his college years, Eric decided he was done letting fear dictate his actions. He conquered his anxiety, sat in the chair, and rolled up his sleeve.

As he stood up, someone looked at him and said, “Congratulations, you just helped save a life.”

That single sentence changed him. “I made a vow to myself that day,” Eric recalls. “I said, if I am financially

rich when I am older, I will give money. But if not, I’m going to give blood.”

Today, at 38 years old, Eric has donated blood an incredible 52 times, frequently giving double units. “Knowing that I am saving a life, and not expecting anything in return. That is the best feeling ever,” he says. “Giving back to me is very important. It is about putting other people’s needs first.”

This DNA of pure, selfless service is the driving force behind everything Eric does, seamlessly bridging his work as a youth mentor, a dedicated family man, and a top-tier real estate professional with Keller Williams Elite Realty and New Levels Realty. Before entering real estate, Eric spent years refining his

human-connection skills. His first job, at just 16 years old, was at Croasdaile Village Retirement Home, where he worked from 2005-2011. He was promoted to team lead just two years later at the age of 18. “Serving and waiting on residents age 55+ is where my true skill of communication, patience and serving others developed,” he says.

After he graduated NCCU in December 2011, Eric was encouraged to enter the high-stakes environment of a car dealership by a Croasdaile resident, who said he had a great personality for car sales. From 2012 to 2017, he was exceptionally good at his job, regularly moving 15 to 25 vehicles a month. But the financial blessings came at a steep cost. Working from sunup to sundown, often 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., he

found himself trapped in a classic dilemma: he was making great money, but he was missing the lives of his wife and four children.

“I stepped back one day and asked myself three things,” Eric says. “One, what can I do to get some family time back? Two, how can I still serve as many people as I can to make a difference in the community? And three, how can I still earn a good living for my family?” The answer was closer than he realized. Look at his uncle, Kevin, a successful REALTOR® of 30 years, Eric realized real estate could bridge the gap. He took the course in 2015, earned his license in May 2016, and leaped into his true calling. In the car business, Eric learned how to match and mirror different personalities, turning his energy up



or down to make people comfortable. In real estate, he elevated that skill into a deeper form of advocacy.

“You never have to convince anyone they need a roof over their head,” Eric notes. “We are not just real estate agents; We are life coaches, therapists, consultants, and legal guides. You have to know how to coach people through these life-changing moves, navigating both the business realities and the heavy emotional side of it.” Whether he is carefully listing a property to help a family fund their next stage of life, patiently guiding a first-time homebuyer through the biggest purchase of their existence, or encouraging renters to build their own equity rather than paying off someone else’s mortgage, Eric brings a level of empathy and patience that is rare in sales.

That patience also extends to his own career longevity. Early on, Eric learned the industry’s hardest lesson: Don’t take things personally. “Sometimes people just feel better with another agent for their particular situation,” he says. “It happens to everyone, even with people close to you. You have to have the grace to understand their reasons and keep moving forward.”

For Eric, the line between guiding a homebuyer and mentoring a teenager doesn’t exist. He has been a youth mentor since he was 19 years old, and he views both roles as an exercise in consistent communication and true care.

“Mentoring youth and real estate go hand in hand,” he



explains. “It takes patience, empathy, understanding, and the gift of communication. A lot of my blessings come simply because I check in on people.” Just as he calls home seekers to ask where they are in their journey and encourage them not to give up, he routinely checks in on his youth mentees to see how their goals are progressing. To help them overcome obstacles, Eric teaches them the power of visualization and a positive mindset. If a kid doesn’t have a journal to write down

their goals and flaws, Eric goes to the Dollar Tree and buys them one himself.

This year, Eric celebrates 12 years of marriage to his wife, whom he has been with since they were both 19. Together, they manage a beautifully busy household with four children aged 21, 17, 10, and 7. When he isn’t reading or mentoring, Eric is exercising and sports-training his boys, drawing on his own background as a high school football and basketball player.

As he looks to the future with New Levels Realty, Eric sees the name as prophetic. For his clients, it represents stepping into a new chapter of financial freedom, something he has witnessed firsthand when clients sell a starter home, walk away with life-changing equity, and use it to buy a dream home or launch a new business. For Eric personally, “New Levels” means a refusal to become stagnant. “There is no stage for complacency,” he asserts. “Never get too

comfortable. That’s when you start digressing.”

From the blood donor chair to the closing table, Eric’s life remains true to the simple scriptural truth he holds dear: When you truly put others first, the blessings take care of themselves.

“I firmly believe that when you give, you are blessed with something in return,” Eric says. “The more people you help, the more people help you.” It’s wise advice that has served him well. ▀



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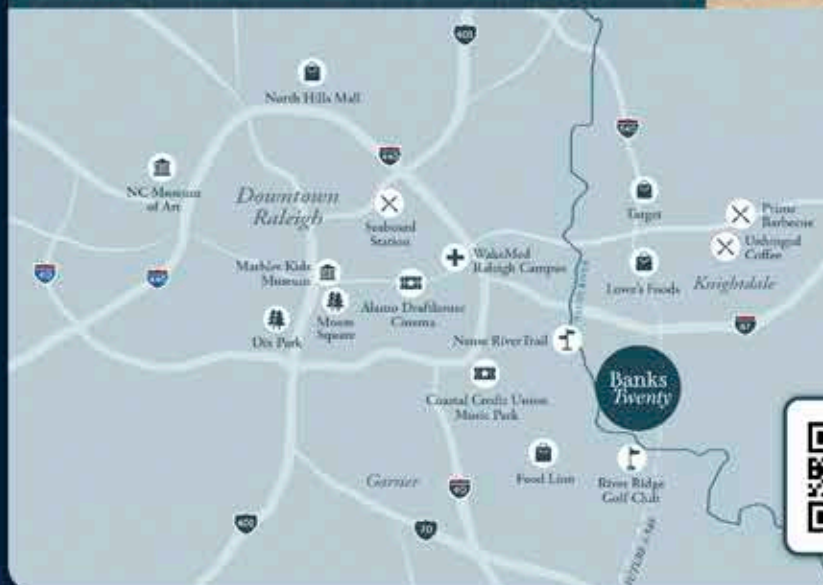
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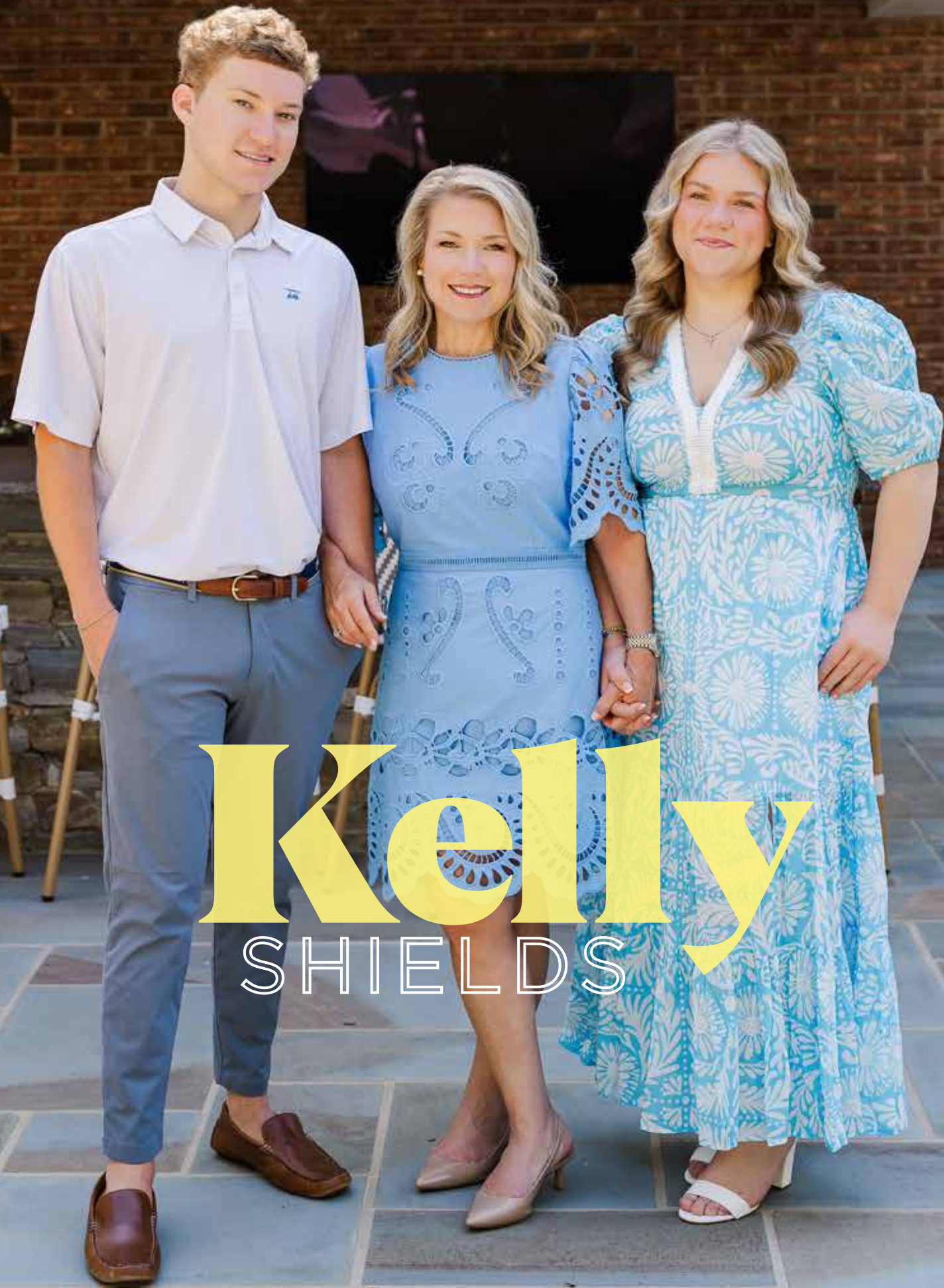


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Kelly

SHIELDS

WRITTEN BY
ELIZABETH
MCCABE
PHOTOGRAPHY
BY FLAVI HUFF
PHOTOGRAPHY

For nearly two decades, Kelly Shields helped people navigate some of the most difficult days of their lives. Today, she helps them step into some of the happiest. Armed with a Bachelor of Science degree in Biomedical Photographic Communications from Rochester Institute of Technology, she worked in medical imaging and research at respected institutions including the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University. Every day required a careful blend of technical expertise, compassion, and problem-solving.

What Kelly didn't realize was that those same qualities would eventually become the foundation of a thriving real estate career. Today, Kelly is one of the Triangle area's most respected real estate professionals. Her success was built the same way she approached patient care years ago: by listening carefully, paying attention to the details, and putting people first. "I've always loved homes and real estate," Kelly says. "And I've always loved taking care of people."

In 2018, she decided it was time for a new chapter. Like many new agents, Kelly quickly discovered that real estate was far more complicated than it appeared from the outside.

"I think everyone assumes it's about looking at beautiful homes and writing offers," she says. "But there is so much more involved." Fortunately, her background in research taught her how to analyze information and solve problems. Years of working with patients taught her how to listen, communicate, and remain calm under pressure. Most importantly, it taught her how to care. "I feel like I'm wired to take care of people," Kelly says.

Kelly launched her real estate career with what was then Allen Tate, now Howard Hanna | Allen Tate, where she found strong mentors, exceptional

training, and a leadership team that encouraged her growth. Looking back, she considers herself fortunate to have started with a brokerage that invested in her success. She speaks highly of the leadership team at Howard Hanna and especially Broker-in-Charge Carissa Tucker. "The belief in me and giving me the courage to push myself in ways I wouldn't have before has made a huge difference," Kelly says. Still, no amount of training can replace determination. "If there's a challenge, I don't stop," she says. "I figure out a solution."

That commitment to doing whatever it takes has become one of Kelly's trademarks. Once, during an initial listing consultation, she recommended that the seller repaint the interior before putting the home on the market.



The seller assured her the work had been completed. However, during a final walkthrough the day before professional photos were scheduled, Kelly discovered that while most of the home had been painted, one wall had been left unfinished.

The seller attempted to touch it up, but the repairs were noticeable and actually made the wall look worse. With photos scheduled for the next morning and showings about to begin, Kelly took matters into her own hands.

"I stayed until midnight repainting the wall myself to make sure the home showed its absolute best," she says. That determination is something she learned from healthcare. When a patient's diagnosis or treatment depended on obtaining critical images, giving up wasn't an option. The same mindset serves her clients today. Whether navigating a difficult negotiation, helping buyers compete in a competitive market, or finding creative solutions, Kelly remains focused on finding a way forward. That level of commitment has earned her relationships. One of Kelly's favorite parts of real estate is becoming a small part of her clients' stories. "I love that I get to be a little part of their life," she says.

She has helped buyers purchase homes where they later got married, welcomed children, celebrated anniversaries, and built lives they once only imagined. Over time, many clients become friends. Kelly has been invited to housewarming parties, birthday celebrations, and family gatherings. One client whose husband had passed away relied on Kelly while making one of the first major decisions of her life on her own. After the transaction closed, she knitted Kelly a blanket as a thank-you gift. “To be thought of that way is really an honor,” Kelly says. Moments like those remind her why she loves what she does. “People buy real estate from people they know, like, and trust,” she says. “I think showing who you are as a person matters.”

Behind Kelly’s success is a family she treasures deeply. She and her husband, Tyler, have been married for nearly 25 years after meeting as college sweethearts. Together they raised two children: Logan, who attends North Carolina State University, and their daughter, Lauren, a student at the University of Kentucky.

“My kids are why I do everything,” Kelly says. Now entering the empty-nester stage of life, Kelly and Tyler are embracing new adventures together. They enjoy playing pickleball, traveling, and spending time outdoors. Kelly is also an avid tennis player, a sport she credits with helping shape her confidence. “I wasn’t athletic growing up,” she says. “Tennis taught me to push myself.” That willingness to step outside her comfort zone has influenced every area of her life, including real estate. Giving back is another important part of Kelly’s story. Each year, she supports Beyond Bedtime, an organization that provides new pajamas and books to children in need. The mission resonates deeply with her because something as simple as a bedtime story and a new pair of pajamas can provide hope during difficult times.

Today, Kelly remains grateful for the career she has built, the clients she serves, and the opportunities she has been given.

In an industry often focused on what’s next, Kelly prefers to focus on what’s right in front of her. She takes care of people, serves her clients well, and makes her family proud. Each day, she gives her very best. For Kelly Shields, that’s success. 🍋



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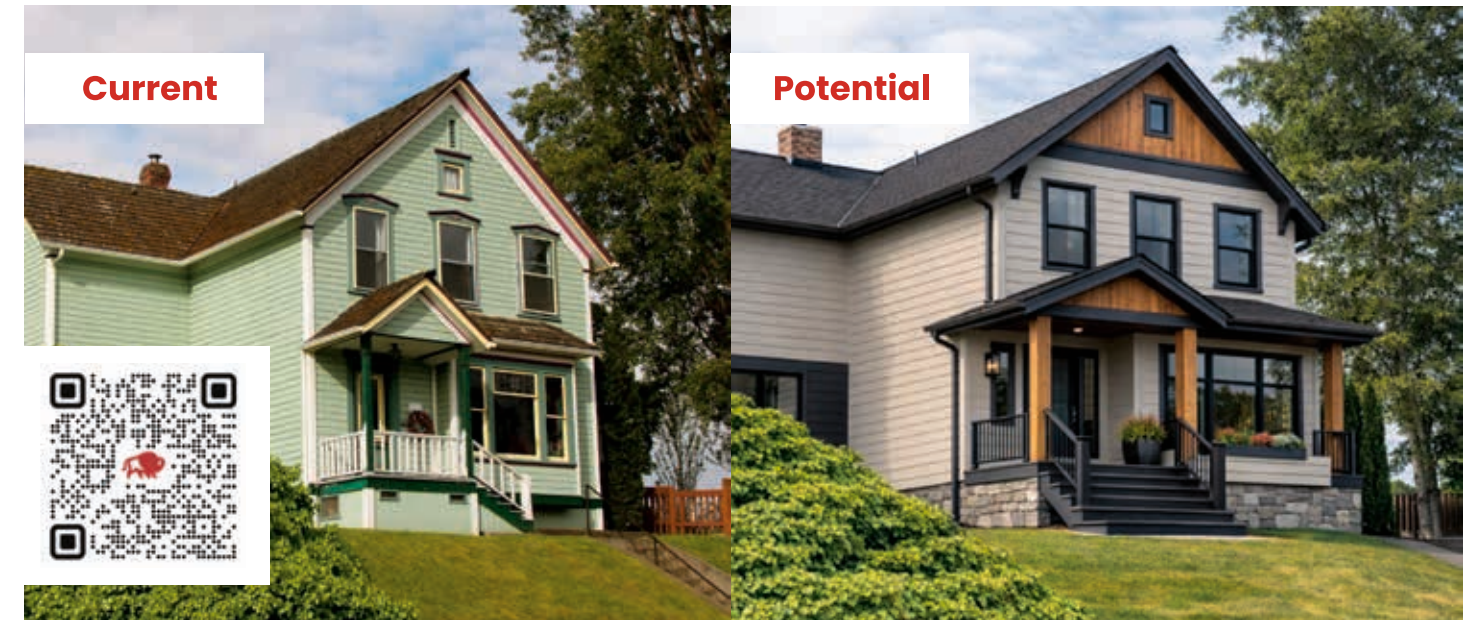


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Triangle Real Producers Magazine Celebration



On Wednesday, July 22nd, *Triangle Real Producers* brought together featured Agents and Partners for a special Magazine Celebration Lunch in Raleigh. Hosted by AR Homes at their stunning luxury model home at 6804 Brixley Circle, we celebrated the agents and partners featured in the May, June, and July issues of *Triangle Real Producers*. We presented framed copies of each honoree's feature, enjoyed a casual lunch, and celebrated the accomplishments, relationships, and hard work behind their success. It was a wonderful reminder of what our community is all about — connection, collaboration, and championing the people who continue to make a difference in Triangle real estate.

The setting itself made the afternoon especially memorable. The model home by AR Homes — known as the Dawning II — is designed for those who appreciate fine craftsmanship and thoughtful design, with a striking two-story foyer and wraparound staircase creating an inviting yet grand entrance. Expansive living spaces extend seamlessly to a generous covered porch, offering a refined setting for open-air entertaining. With five bedrooms, a bonus room, and a club room, the home offers both versatility and privacy, making The Dawning II an exceptional retreat for modern luxury living.

Events like this are why *Triangle Real Producers* exists — to celebrate the people driving our industry forward and to create meaningful opportunities for agents and partners to connect and champion one another. We want to extend a huge thank you to AR Homes for welcoming us into this beautiful home and helping make the afternoon so special. We're grateful to all of the agents, partners, and friends who continue to make the Triangle real estate community such a remarkable one!



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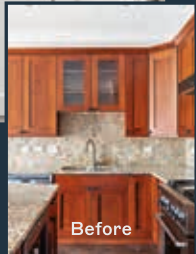


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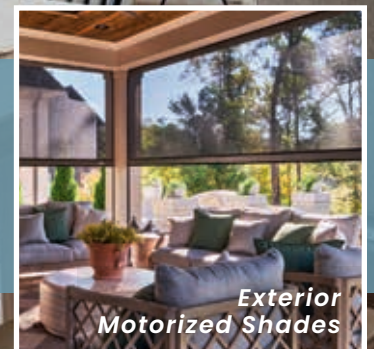
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