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SEPTEMBER 2026

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Special Broker Issue



SUSAN KAZMA
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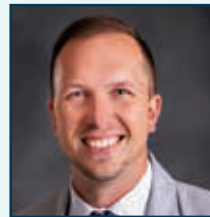
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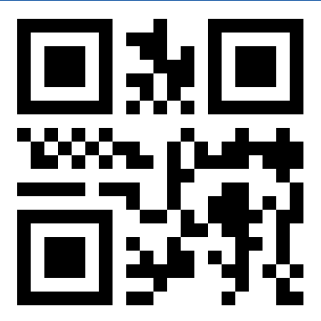
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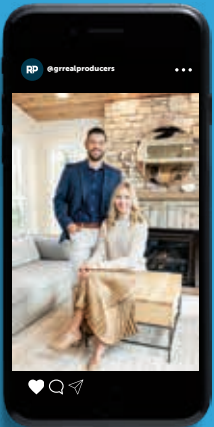
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Susan KAZMA

BUILDING A CULTURE OF BELONGING

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For Susan Kazma, real estate has always been about building community, creating opportunities, and helping people feel like they belong. “When people come into the office, it’s very open, welcoming, and warm,” she said. “We kind of have a saying here that everybody matters.”

A lifelong Michigan resident and graduate of Grand Valley College, Susan first entered the industry working for her father, who owned a small real estate brokerage. “I knew the real estate lingo. I knew a lot about how an office was run,” she said. After stepping away for about five years to raise her children, Susan returned to real estate full-time in 1979. “I’ve never not been full-time since,” she added.

Over the years, Susan gained experience at several brokerages, including CENTURY 21, RE/MAX, and independent firms. Each stop along the way taught her something valuable. “You pick up tools everywhere you go,” she explained. “I learned a lot of things at RE/MAX, I learned a lot of things at Real Estate One, and I grew from that knowledge.”

In 2001 — just 44 days before the events of 9/11 — Susan launched her own brokerage. “It

was wild,” she recalled. Susan initially operated under national and statewide franchise brands before ultimately making the move to independence in 2020. “I’m really much happier being independent,” she shared. “You can make your own rules.”

Susan used that independence to build a brokerage culture unlike any other. Today, Success Realty West Michigan is home to approximately 50 agents representing a wide variety of cultures, backgrounds, and life experiences. “We speak 10 different languages, and I have people from five different continents,” Susan said.

Even after decades in the business, Susan remains hands-on, actively listing and selling homes while leading her brokerage. “I think being actively involved in the market is huge,” she explained. “Hands-on is always a plus.”

Susan also owns Success Licensing, a pre-licensing school that provides the state-required 40 hours of education for aspiring agents. For Susan, however, the classroom experience is about much more than licensing. “Our company is really all about education,” she said. “It starts with the licensing school, but it doesn’t stop there.”

Every week, agents at Success Realty West Michigan gather for training sessions, power hours, and roundtable discussions focused on growth and development. Susan is passionate about helping newer agents avoid the mistakes she made early in her own career. “I lost a lot of sales because I didn’t have the depth of knowledge that I have over 30 or 40 years,” she said. “I’m really committed to making sure my agents have that depth of knowledge as early in their career as possible.”

Susan’s dedication to mentorship has helped create remarkable results. While many brokerages struggle with retention, Susan says approximately 70% of her new agents make it through their first year in the business. “We worked hard on building community,” she explained. “The agents know each other. They like each other. They’re from all different backgrounds, and they help each other,” she added.

Susan believes one of the keys to that supportive environment is fairness. “The rules need to be the same for everybody,” she said. “It doesn’t matter if you’re doing \$20 million a year or \$1 million a year.” According to Susan, by leveling the playing field, agents are more willing to collaborate rather than compete internally. “If people start working together, they produce more business because





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For Susan, summertime brings even more opportunities to entertain. She lives on Dean Lake, where gardening, boating, and backyard gatherings become the center of her social life. “We have huge parties in our backyard,” she said. “Our life is really all about enjoying the lake once the weather gets nice.”

Susan also believes strongly in giving back. Her brokerage supports CASA, an organization that advocates for children in Kent County's foster care system. Through pajama drives, clothing drives, and annual donations, Susan and her team work to make a difference for vulnerable children in their community. The cause resonates personally: a few members of the office team were in the foster system as children. “That makes it even more heartfelt,” Susan said.

At the core of everything Susan does is a simple philosophy based on integrity and kindness. “You need to do the right thing,” she said. “It doesn't matter what the other person does. You are whatever you do.”

Susan measures success by the people around her — the agents she mentors, the friendships she has built, and the welcoming culture she has created. “We laugh together, we party together,” she said. “That kind of atmosphere allows people to plant their roots and grow.”

they're talking and helping each other,” she explained.

Susan intentionally builds a culture of inclusion from the moment people walk through the door. “We are very open and welcoming to everyone regardless of faith, sexual preference, or race,” she said. “If they're good people, they're good people.”

The office itself reflects Susan's personality and passions. Opera music often drifts through the building thanks to her daughter, a dramatic mezzo-soprano and graduate of Berklee College of Music, who runs a music studio within the office space. “If you own the company, you can make it as quirky as you want,” Susan said, laughing.

Family has always been at the center of Susan's life. She and her husband, Matt Rockwood, have been married for more than eight years and share a lively home with Susan's 100-year-old mother. Susan also takes great pride in her two children: her daughter performs with West Michigan Opera, while her son designs computer software for the U.S. Department of Energy. “We have a nice life,” Susan said.

Outside of real estate, Susan is known among friends and family for another talent: cooking. “I am an absolutely incredible pie maker,” she shared. Half Italian and deeply family-oriented, Susan loves bringing people together around food. “There's always food,” she joked. “You always make more than you need.”

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Ryan OGLE

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S U C C E S S T H R O U G H C O N S I S T E N C Y

Ryan Ogle didn’t find real estate through a course, a career counselor, or a calculated pivot. Instead, he found it at a restaurant bar stool, eating lunch alone, when the man sitting next to him happened to own a brokerage. A single conversation changed the direction of Ryan’s life, and that willingness to follow an unexpected path has carried him through more than two decades as one of Grand Rapids’ most recognizable names in the business.

Ryan grew up in Grand Rapids and started his first company straight out of high school: a painting and odd-jobs operation that had him power washing decks, painting fences, and eventually tackling multi-color Victorian homes in Heritage Hill that took an entire summer to complete. He was around 20 years old when that lunch conversation sparked a new idea. “Why paint homes when you could sell them?” Ryan said. The logic was simple, and it stuck.

Ryan started his real estate career at Smith Diamond Realty in Caledonia, then spent about two and a half years at Keller Williams — long enough to learn the ropes and pick up what he could. He found a willing sounding board in KW broker Jason Carpenter, someone he still texts when an unusual deal crosses his desk. From there, Ryan ran a real estate wing for a downtown law firm before launching Blu House Properties in 2008. The timing was brutal — the market was collapsing — but Ryan opened the doors anyway. “Good or bad market, I’ve always been busy,” he said.

Ryan ran Blu House Properties as an independent brokerage for roughly 15 years, then in 2020, he brought it under the eXp Realty umbrella. The move gave his agents access to technology and tools that an independent brokerage would have had to purchase separately, and it freed Ryan from the liability that comes with holding the broker’s license. “Liability freedom was huge,” he said.

One of Ryan’s clearest lessons about the business is that early effort compounds over time, creating opportunities that are often impossible to predict. About

90% of his business now comes from referrals, and he has learned to let the long game play out. “I’ll get a lead this week and it could be from something I did 17 years ago,” he said. Although that patience is hard-won, Ryan admits that the first five years were grinding and disorienting, with little mentorship and even less structure. “Knowing what I know now, I could go back and do all of it in five years,” he explained. “It wouldn’t have taken me 15 years to figure it out.”

Now more than two decades into his career, Ryan has accumulated over 3,000 transactions spanning residential, commercial, and virtually everything in between. His business runs approximately 65% residential, with commercial work making up the rest — a mix that evolved naturally as clients’ needs diversified. In 2018, he served as president of the Grand Rapids Association of REALTORS® (GRAR), where he addressed new member orientations and informally became a resource for agents who needed someone to call when a deal got complicated. A dozen or so newer agents across different firms still reach



“

Knowing what I know now, I could go back and do all of it in five years. It wouldn't have taken me 15 years to figure it out.”

out to him as an unofficial “phone-a-broker.” He doesn’t mind. “Real estate has provided such a way of life for me and my family in a good way that you give back,” Ryan shared. “It’s a great thing to be part of, so it’s a great thing to help make it better.”

Ryan currently serves on the board of ICCF Community Homes, one of Grand Rapids’ largest affordable housing nonprofits. His involvement grew organically from years of supporting the organization’s work until they asked him to join more formally. Ryan deliberately limits his board commitments to one at a time, and he maintains a seat on the professional standards committee at the GRAR to stay connected to the broader industry.

Away from work, Ryan prioritizes family life with his wife and their three children, whose busy sports schedules keep everyone moving. His oldest son is playing junior hockey in the North American Hockey League in Amarillo, Texas, on a path toward Division I college hockey. His son in high school plays football and lacrosse, and his freshman daughter is active in sports as well. When the family travels together, they look for somewhere warm. On his own, however, Ryan gravitates toward more demanding adventures — he summited Mount Rainier last year and spent time in the Bitterroot Valley of Montana on a bear hunt and elk scouting trip the following fall. He also enjoys fly-fishing in the rivers of northern Michigan through the warmer months.

In the years ahead, Ryan would like more ownership. His personal goal is to acquire more commercial real

estate — to build the kind of asset base that real estate sales have made possible. He also plans to expand his reach through eXp Realty into other markets, with Florida on his radar.

At his core, Ryan operates from a conviction that there is enough

business to go around, enough success to share, and enough room for everyone willing to stay in the game long enough to find it. For more than twenty years, he has leaned on his faith to treat people well, do what is right, and enjoy the blessings that God has given him in this business. ▀



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One lesson I wish I had learned sooner: It's better
to take one small step than no step at all. Progress
begins with action, no matter how small.
Luana Nakano — Luana Nakano Photography



How to negotiate better.
Ashley Streight — Real Producers

Growing With Purpose

PHOTOS BY JACOB HARR WITH PHOTOREAL
PHOTOS TAKEN AT ADA HOTEL

SCOT KELLOGG

SCOT KELLOGG NEVER EXPECTED REAL ESTATE TO BECOME HIS CAREER PATH. IN FACT, WHEN HE MOVED BACK TO WEST MICHIGAN FROM CHICAGO, HE THOUGHT HE MIGHT OPEN A BAR INSTEAD. “I WENT AND WORKED AT A BAR, AND ENDED UP GETTING FIRED,” HE SAID WITH A LAUGH. “IT MADE THAT GOAL CHANGE A LITTLE BIT.”

Soon after, Scot’s father — a longtime home builder and real estate investor — invited him to start building houses. “I did it growing up with him,” Scot recalled. “I didn’t always love working with him, but I didn’t have a whole lot of other prospects at that point.”

While Scot enjoyed the construction side of the business, he found himself drawn to the marketing and relationship-building aspects even more. “I thought, boy, I’d much more enjoy the promoting and marketing side,” he said. “That led me to getting my real estate license.”

For almost a decade, Scot spent his career at several brokerages of varying sizes, learning something valuable everywhere he went. “I took something good from all of them,” he said. “I was at one of the largest companies, then a midsize company, then one of the smallest companies. It gave me perspective.”

During the uncertainty of the recession and with a second child on the way, Scot made the leap into brokerage

ownership in 2011. “My wife didn’t think it was great timing, but I said, ‘I’ve got to do it,’” he explained.

Scot launched 616 Realty later that year, but the company didn’t explode overnight. “It boomed very slowly,” Scot admitted. “In the first seven years, we grew from just a few agents to maybe 20.” He continued selling a high volume of real estate himself while constantly refining the brokerage behind the scenes. “We were always doing things to make the company better,” he added.

Everything began accelerating after 2018, when 616 Realty moved into its current headquarters at the corner of Leonard Street and Plainfield Avenue. At the time, the brokerage had 38 agents. Today, it has grown to 130.

“We really found our niche,” Scot said. “We connected with agents through our agent-centric model.”

Scot uses that philosophy to guide every decision he makes as a broker-owner. “Everything I do, I think of as

an agent first,” he explained. “I think about what agents want, what would help them succeed, and how I would want to be treated.”

Instead of creating unnecessary overhead at 616 Realty, Scot focused on flexibility, support, and culture. The brokerage offers a welcoming headquarters designed more like a coffee shop than a traditional office, complete with workspaces that accommodate different working styles. “We’ve got agents who come in every day and some who hardly come in unless we have food,” Scot joked.

More importantly, Scot says the culture at 616 Realty stands apart because agents genuinely support one another. “We have 130 agents with all different personalities, but they all treat each other really well,” he shared. “They’re not overly competitive with each other — they’re willing to help one another.”

Scot credits much of the company’s growth to a commitment to continuous improvement. “We

strive to get a little better every day,” he said.

Scot admits that early on, he underestimated how much personal and organizational development it would take to build a brokerage that could truly be great and provide agents with a place they wanted to call home.

“When I started, I thought I could grow the company quickly,” Scot said. “Now I look back and realize we still had a lot of growing to do. Why would agents have joined at that stage? We simply weren’t as good as we needed to be yet. The growth came as we improved our systems, support, and overall value to our agents.”

Instead of chasing trends blindly, Scot focused on adapting to the changing industry while staying grounded in relationships and service. “You have to embrace what’s coming next,” he explained. “Technology changes, marketing changes, and every generation communicates differently. You have to stay open to that.”



THE PEOPLE WHO
SUCCEED ARE THE
ONES WITH **GRIT** —
THOSE WHO **SHOW**
UP EVERY DAY
AND FIGURE OUT
HOW TO **CONNECT**
WITH PEOPLE IN
THEIR OWN WAY.”



At the same time, Scot believes success in real estate has less to do with personality and more to do with consistency. “I used to think I could tell who was going to make it, but I figured out it really didn’t matter if someone was extroverted or introverted,” he said. “The people who succeed are the ones with grit — those who show up every day and figure

out how to connect with people in their own way.”

Scot has also been encouraged by the newer generation entering the industry. “I’m blown away by the young agents right now,” he said. “Some of them are incredibly talented and way more mature than I was at that age.” At the same time, Scot continues to see professionals

in their 40s and 50s successfully transition into real estate from entirely different careers.

Outside of real estate, Scot values the time he spends with his family above all else. His wife works in public health, focusing on grant initiatives related to the opioid crisis — a mission Scot says she is deeply passionate about.

Together, the couple stay busy raising their two sons, ages 16 and 14, while juggling schedules filled with sports, school activities, and travel. Whether it’s cheering on his kids at their events, taking family trips, or enjoying a game of pickleball, Scot believes family time is an important priority.

Scot also believes strongly in supporting the local community. After participating in Leadership Grand Rapids (LGR) through the Chamber of Commerce, he became more connected to nonprofit organizations throughout the city. Today, 616 Realty runs a monthly spotlight series in which the team films local nonprofits to raise their visibility — and pairs each feature with a donation or contribution. “We try to use our platform to help people learn about organizations doing really good work,” Scot said.

For Scot, the brokerage’s growth has always been about more than increasing numbers — it has been about building a company where agents feel supported, valued, and empowered to succeed together.

“I feel very fortunate,” he said. “We have an incredible group of agents and staff. Every day, I get the opportunity to work alongside talented people who genuinely care about one another and their clients. That’s what it’s all about.”

While the company’s growth is something he is proud of, Scot believes its greatest success is the community that has been built along the way. 🏡

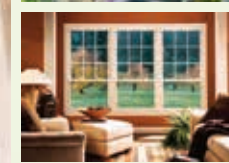
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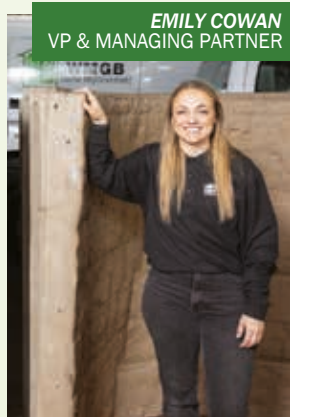


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PAUL Carlson

Not Following the Script

PHOTOS BY JACOB HARR WITH PHOTOREAL

PHOTOS TAKEN AT ADA HOTEL

Paul Carlson has never been very good at following someone else's script. If everyone is heading one direction, he's usually the person wondering if there's another way to get there. That instinct, more than any playbook, is how he has built his business.

Paul's tendency to question the norm showed up early. In high school, his classmates voted him teacher tormentor and class skipper his senior year.

"I probably earned both of those," Paul said, laughing. "Looking back, though, I don't think I was trying to cause trouble. I just always questioned why things had to be done a certain way."

"I always felt average or below average growing up," he added. "In hindsight, it's because I was never great at science or math or memorizing capitals and historical dates. My kind of intelligence just wasn't really tested in high school."

After graduating from Grand Rapids Baptist High School, Paul enrolled at North Park University in Chicago. He briefly considered culinary school and graphic design before landing in business and marketing, and for the first time, something clicked.

"It was the first time the sparks started flying," he said. "I thought, 'Maybe I actually have a thing I'm decent at.'"

Paul went from coasting through school to surprising even himself by graduating at the top of his program.

Even so, after college, Paul still wasn't sure where he fit professionally. Back home in Grand Rapids, his father's brokerage, Five Star Real Estate, was already established, but a strict no-nepotism policy meant Paul couldn't come on as an employee. Instead, he started as an independent agent, just as the housing market began collapsing in mid-2006.

"The market was brutal," Paul recalled. "At one point, almost every transaction was a short sale or foreclosure. People were losing their nest eggs every day."

For Paul, surviving those early years took creativity. He taught himself photography on the side and built a thriving wedding business, shooting 25 to 30 weddings a year across the state.

"I was actually making more money shooting weddings than selling houses," he said.

Unlike real estate, photography came with no rulebook.

"That's when I realized I'd spent my first few years in real estate trying to become the agent I thought I was supposed to be instead of just being myself," Paul said. "Ironically, that's when I started to shine."

"I didn't just become a better agent," he explained. "I became more comfortable being myself. That mindset ended up shaping everything that came next, from how I approached my business to how we built Five Star."

From that point on, Paul dropped the traditional real estate image that never suited him.

"I stopped wearing suits. I changed all my marketing. I realized that if I wasn't drawn to the polished, highly controlled salesperson image, there was a good chance a lot of other people weren't either," he said.

"Meanwhile, Zillow was becoming a juggernaut, and everyone seemed obsessed with trying to beat it," Paul added. "I realized Zillow was always going to be better than me at a lot of things, but it could never be me. I leaned into that."

The shift showed up fast. Within a year, Paul's production doubled, then tripled, eventually reaching nearly 60 homes sold a year as a solo agent.

Around that same time, Five Star Real Estate was rebuilding after the downturn, and Paul's father asked him to help with marketing and growth strategy. In 2011, after buying out the company's remaining partner, Paul stepped into a leadership role. The brokerage had about 155

agents then, down from roughly 235 before the Great Recession.

“We shook hands and basically agreed that our best days had to be ahead of us,” Paul said. “That became the entire mindset.”

“Our whole goal became simple: become the most supportive brokerage possible,” he explained. “Anyone could buy a website, a technology tool, or a new feature set. We wanted to focus on the things that couldn’t be easily copied.”

Today, Five Star Real Estate is home to 944 agents across Michigan and Florida.

Leadership, though, did not come naturally at first. When Paul became president of the company in 2015, he wrestled with imposter syndrome.

“I felt like a fraud,” he admitted. “I thought, ‘I’m not the classic CEO personality. I’m not ultra process-driven. I’m not the guy taking cold showers at 5 a.m. and drinking protein shakes.’”

A series of one-on-one conversations with agents changed how Paul saw the job.

“I spent months sitting down with agents one-on-one,” he said. “They probably thought they were coming in because I was going to help solve their problems. Looking back, I think we solved each other’s. From that moment on, it completely changed how I approached leading Five Star. I realized I wasn’t supposed to have all the answers. My job was to build a place where our staff and agents could be successful.”

This philosophy still shapes the culture at Five Star Real Estate.

“Technology changes every year. Companies buy each other’s features all the time,” Paul explained. “What



I’m proud of is that we’ve built a place where 944 agents and an incredible staff genuinely enjoy helping one another. That’s a lot harder to copy than software.”

Those same values shaped Five Star Real Estate’s expansion into Florida, which happened organically through agents already connected to the brokerage.

“It wasn’t some giant master plan,” Paul shared. “One agent led to another, then another. Most growth happens that way.”

Paul’s refusal to buy what everyone else was selling is exactly how Homebase, Five Star Real Estate’s custom platform, came to exist.

“The software wasn’t bad. It certainly wasn’t great. It just wasn’t built for the way we wanted to operate,” he said. “Eventually we realized we could stop trying to force our company into someone else’s

system and build something that actually reflected who we are.”

For Paul, that possibility came down to timing and technology.

“Years later, AI made it possible to build things that used to require a much larger investment,” he explained. “I got fascinated by what suddenly became possible. We ended up with something that costs a fraction of what we used to spend and does a better job solving the problems we actually have. Honestly, I think we’re just getting started. I’m excited to see what we’ll keep building for our agents.”

Even with the growth, Paul stays introspective about leadership and ownership.

“For a long time I wished I fit the mold better,” he said. “Eventually I realized maybe I wasn’t supposed to.”

Outside the office, Paul prioritizes time with his wife, Lindsay, and their three daughters, ages 15, 13, and 8. They spend their free time boating, skiing, traveling, and summering in northern Michigan near Portage Lake.

“We enjoy traveling, spending time up north, and just being together as a family,” Paul shared. “The kids are at a really fun age right now. They’re all developing their own personalities and interests, and it’s been fun to watch them become their own people.”

As he looks to the future, Paul remains focused on continuing to build something that both the staff and agents are proud to be part of — where people enjoy coming to work, collaborating with one another, and finding better ways to serve their clients and each other.

“I’ve made plenty of mistakes over the years,” Paul said. “Most of the things that have worked came from asking a simple question: ‘Is there a better way?’ Sometimes the answer is ‘no.’ Sometimes you stumble onto something pretty special.”

“It wasn’t some giant master plan.
One agent led to another, then another.
Most growth happens that way.”



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Throughout my career, I have learned that one relationship can change the direction of your business and sometimes even your life.

The right conversation can lead to a referral, a new opportunity, a partnership, a mentor, or an introduction to someone you may have never met otherwise. But building a powerful network is not about collecting business cards, adding contacts to a database, or asking people what they can do for you.

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The strongest networkers lead with curiosity. They ask questions, listen, and look for opportunities to help. Instead of walking into a networking event thinking, “Who can give me business?” try asking, “Who can I meet, help, or connect today?”

That simple shift can change the way people remember you.

Building the right network also requires consistency. One conversation is a starting point, but relationships grow through follow-up. Attend the events. Reach out after the closing. Celebrate other people’s successes. Make thoughtful introductions. Stay visible without making every interaction about business.

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