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Agents of change

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Jill McDowell (formerly Conway) spent nearly two decades as a TV news reporter on News 12 and Channel 11. David Heydt was a producer for the VH1 series “Before They Were Rock Stars” as well as for radio icon Howard Stern. Kathleen McCarthy worked in development for the 9/11-related charities Tuesday’s Children and the New York Says Thank You Foundation. Kay Gemelas was in the restaurant business, owning restaurants in Mineola and Port Jefferson.



Bernard Hardy



Mindy Greenberg



Jill McDowell



Jovanni Ortiz



David Heydt

What they all have in common is that they traded their former careers to work in real estate sales. And, as career changers, they are in good company.

“About 99 percent of the people in real estate sales had a prior career,” said Donna Einemann, manager of the Rockville Centre office of Daniel Gale Sotheby’s International Realty, who noted that until recently colleges did not offer a major in real estate, so many young people didn’t consider it as a viable career.

Because so many real estate salespeople did something else previously, they bring different perspectives and skill sets to the table.

Before real estate

Dana Forbes had two careers before she began selling real estate. First she worked on Wall Street, and then she founded her own business on the production end of the fashion industry.

“Obviously my background in finance helped tremendously, and having run my own business gave me skill sets that I use in real estate,” said Forbes, who is a global real estate advisor in the Manhasset and Westhampton Beach offices of Daniel Gale Sotheby’s. “Working in real estate is like running your own business. There are a lot of things that you have to do on your own: You get your own clients, you do your own marketing plan, your

own business plan. Of course we have a support staff to help us, but you're relying on yourself. You're making your own schedule, and how successful you are depends on how committed you are, and that is very much like running your own business."

Prior to joining the Great Neck office of Douglas Elliman Real Estate, Mindy Greenberg had her own interior design business, appearing on HGTV for five years and providing design services around the country.

"I was a social media junkie and had tons of followers for my design business," she said. "As a result, my self-promotion and computer skills have served me well. Also, I was used to dealing with people with disposable income in my design business, so that ability is well-honed."

Bernard Hardy sells real estate from Douglas Elliman's Franklin Square office. But previously he was a detective and intelligence officer for the New York Police Department and later owned his own private investigation company and security guard training school.

"I find that my experience as an NYPD police detective has prepared me well to cater to the diversity of people in the housing market," Hardy said. "I reasoned and negotiated with different types of people all throughout my career as a detective, and I use the same negotiating skills to obtain the best results for my clients in the real estate industry."

Heydt, who spent more than 20 years in the entertainment industry before joining Douglas Elliman's Port Washington office, said the "opportunity to put my branding and marketing experience together with my organizational and production skills gave me the confidence that those attributes would absolutely translate well to the real estate business."

People come to real estate from all walks of life, and what they did in their previous career is less important than whether they were successful at it, Einemann said. Agents' backgrounds are featured on their bio pages, where potential customers might turn if they are researching a particular agent.

"When people read the agent's bio, it might lead them to take the next step to call the agent," Einemann said. "If an agent used to be a teacher, and the buyer is a teacher, the buyer might feel this is a person they could relate to. Or if the agent is a nutritionist, and the buyers are avid gym goers, the buyers might think the agent is someone who may 'get' them."

Because sellers and buyers want to work with agents they like and trust, Einemann said she looks to hire people who are likable, trustworthy and authentic, and who are motivated by a desire to make a difference in people's lives.

The best things about real estate

"Seeing the joy and excitement on the clients' faces after receiving the keys to their new dream home, and knowing that I was a part of making their dreams come true" is what Hardy likes best about real estate.

"Most people in real estate are in it because they can make a difference," Einemann said. "You're helping people create a home for themselves, their family or their future family in a community that they will establish roots in. It's extremely satisfying to know you contributed so greatly to their lives and they will remember you for it."

Real estate also provides a flexible schedule, which appeals to many mothers of young children in particular.

Gemelas long considered a career in real estate, but she took the leap after she became a mom.

"I wanted to be able to make my own hours and work close to home," said Gemelas, who is based in the Mount Sinai office of Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage.

Gemelas said she likes the interaction with people and the fact that real estate has broadened her horizons.

"You have to learn about the economy on a local, national and global level, which is something I didn't keep up with previously," she said.

Donna M. Loring had a successful first career in print advertising that involved plenty of travel. But it got to the point where she didn't want to be on the road one to two weeks each month.

"I was looking for something that was flexible yet very much a strong business," said Loring, who now sells real estate from Coldwell Banker's Northport office. "I wanted to be able to use my skill sets in something that would intellectually stimulate me, and real estate seemed like a good fit."

People might say they want to go into real estate because they love houses, but it's not really about that, Loring said.

"Houses are the product. What you're doing is managing people's needs, wants and expectations, and a good agent needs to become immersed in the community and understand the market and market trends to be able to help clients navigate through the unknown," she said. "You have to have people skills to be able to help people through stressful times. I like helping people go through the process to reach their goals."

Forbes loves the feeling that with real estate sales, the sky is the limit.

"You can work as much as you want; you have unlimited potential – there's no salary cap," she said. "You can be as successful as you can dream about being."

Jovanni Ortiz enjoys making connections and building relationships, something he did in his past career as a political consultant working on a reelection campaign for New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg and the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton. Now selling real estate in the Garden City office of Douglas Elliman, Ortiz says his favorite part of the job is negotiating.

"It is an adrenaline rush for me," he said. "I find it exciting and I enjoy the challenge."

What's difficult about real estate

There are downsides to the business.

"What I like least is when a deal falls apart or I am unable to get an offer accepted," Ortiz said. "It has always been hard for me to accept defeat."

Clients have a lot riding on a deal going through, which creates a lot of stress.

"Most of my clients become friends and I also take on their stress and deal with difficulties in the process so they don't have to," said McDowell, who works in the Smithtown office of Douglas Elliman. "Real estate is a very tough business and I never thought it would be as competitive or stressful as it is."

Real estate salespeople have to rely on five other professions to close the deal, Gemelas said. When something goes wrong in steps involving the engineer, attorney or banker, the real estate broker often has to answer for them, she said.

"So many different pieces have to be in alignment," said McCarthy, who works in the Flushing office of Daniel Gale Sotheby's. "It's all about staying in communication and keeping things going while managing clients' expectations. It may be the biggest purchase of their lives, or they may be selling their childhood home, and sometimes their emotions get the better of them."

Even though the hours are flexible, real estate is very much a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week business, Forbes said.

"It's really hard to turn away when people need you in the evenings or on Sunday morning," she said. "You have to be available to them when they're having doubts or second thoughts or want to talk something through."

Since agents work on commission, it can be challenging to deal with an irregular income. But many agents say this pushes them to work harder.

"It drives me to make sure I always have things in the pipeline," McCarthy said.

The industry, she added, "definitely has its ups and downs."

"There are emotional roller coasters," she said. "But when you're at the closing table and you know you were able to make your client's dreams come true, it's all worth it."