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The Appraisal

Before They Sold Real Estate



Marcus Yam for The New York Times

Haviland Morris, a real estate broker, is remembered for her role in "Sixteen Candles."

By ELIZABETH A. HARRIS

The music video for Notorious B.I.G.'s song "[Big Poppa](#)" has dancing and gambling, a thumping rhythm and a young Sean "P. Diddy" Combs sitting in a hot tub surrounded by scantily clad women.



Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

Jackie Dunphy, a successful hand model, is now a broker with Corcoran.

But if you watch carefully, you can catch a glimpse of another young man, one who darts on and off the screen wearing big, gold-accented sunglasses, taking swigs from a bottle of Champagne. He was a member of B.I.G.'s rap group, Junior M.A.F.I.A., and he went by the name Klept, or Kleptomaniac.

Fast-forward 15 years. Where do you think Kleptomaniac might be now?

"Real estate," he said. "Mostly sales."

Klept, who now uses his legal name, Terrence Harding, is a vice president at the Corcoran Group and sells apartments in Manhattan and Brooklyn.

Selling real estate has long been a second or third career choice for most agents, a place to turn when the children grew up or Plan A didn't quite work out. And while in much of country moonlighting homemakers and former lawyers dominate the field, New York City is a different story. Here, the arts are a magnet and the dreamers run thick, so the first career of your real estate broker might just be a doozy.

There are acrobats and opera singers, ballerinas and models, jazz dancers, a gay-porn star and many, many actors. There is also Laurie Lewis, a classically trained pianist and flutist, a composer and a Corcoran broker, who was for a time the voice of Baxter the cat in commercials for Meow Mix.

Meow, meow, meow, meow. Meow, meow, meow, meow.

"People come to New York from far-off lands and states with a dream," said Leonard Steinberg, a managing director at Prudential Douglas Elliman and former fashion designer. "Oftentimes, those dreams don't pan out as well as you'd like them to, and then you start looking at alternative careers."

In addition to working in real estate, however, Ms. Lewis still composes. And there are plenty of other agents who have embraced their new profession without giving up their old careers entirely.

Take Jackie Dunphy. You have seen her before, but don't scour your memory for her name, or even for her face, because for 30 years, Ms. Dunphy — also known as Jackie Rivers — has been working as a hand model.

In addition to cradling pieces of Kentucky Fried Chicken and manipulating tubes of lipstick, her uniform fingers and deep nail beds have stood in for Sharon Stone, Christie Brinkley, Cindy Crawford and many others in movies and in advertisements, she said.

But it gets better.

“My claim to fame was poking the Pillsbury Doughboy,” Ms. Dunphy said.

A careful hand model can have a long career. So Ms. Dunphy lived much of her life wearing gloves (she estimates she has more than 50 pairs), learned to do a lot with her elbows and stayed away from anything that might dimple her fingers with calluses. Still, when she reached her 50s, the regular flow of work began to sputter.

“The older you get in this kind of business, the less they need you,” Ms. Dunphy said calmly. So about five years ago, she got her real estate license, and today, she works as saleswoman at Corcoran in East Hampton, on Long Island. But she still models about twice a month.

“I like to keep my hand in,” she said.

Then there is Fredrik Eklund, a top broker and managing director at Prudential Douglas Elliman. Once a gay-porn star, who also had some success as the founder of a tech company and a music label, Mr. Eklund now performs with his clothes on, on the Bravo reality show “Million Dollar Listing.”

Plenty of agents have left their old worlds behind entirely.

“In my past life, I was the marketing director for my father's company, the Hair Club for Men,” Shari Sperling, a broker at Halstead Property, wrote in an e-mail. “My father is Sy Sperling, the guy from the late-night commercials who used to say, ‘I'm not only the Hair Club president, but I'm also a client,’ as he held up his photo ‘before’ (bald) and ‘after’ (with hair).”

For several years in the 1990s, Ms. Sperling's job was to cast and direct the commercials and infomercials for the Hair Club for Men, which sold an elaborate system of extensions made of surgical adhesive and human hair.

Ms. Sperling found men to give testimonials and asked them questions to prompt them from behind the camera. When they spun their heads to show the hair from different angles, she made

sure they didn't go too fast or too slow. ("O.K., go, go, go!" she recounted steadily.) It was her innovation to have them run their fingers vigorously through their hair for the camera, she said.

Then, in 2000, her father sold the company and it was time for her to move on.

"How do you get a job after that?" Ms. Sperling said in an interview. "It was so specific. And I didn't exactly want to go into hair transplants next."

She switched to real estate.

Pamela Liebman, the president of Corcoran, said that after years of media saturation and Goliath sale prices, real estate was increasingly becoming a first career choice for young New Yorkers, but that those people were still outnumbered by those who had first tried something else. Often, she continued, the talents that draw people to careers like acting and modeling — two of the biggest real estate feeder professions — are readily transferable to being an effective agent.

"I hate to say you're acting, but sometimes real estate is a bit of a show," Ms. Liebman said. "When you're a broker, you're on stage, and you've got to make people like you."

Haviland Morris, now a saleswoman at Halstead Property, is one of many New York City actors to make the switch.

Ms. Morris made a living as an actress for 25 years, and you might remember hating her character, Caroline Mulford, the girlfriend of the character Molly Ringwald had a crush on, in the movie "Sixteen Candles." Or you might recognize her as someone who several times was falsely accused on "Law & Order" several times. But when she got into her 40s, the phone calls slowed, Ms. Morris said, so she started selling real estate, work that was flexible enough that she wouldn't have to give up acting altogether.

"If I did real estate, I wouldn't have to say, 'I'll never do another movie again,'" Ms. Morris said. "I just couldn't do that." Besides, she added with a little thrill in her voice, "this is way more dramatic than acting."