

## Common sense guards Realtors against crime

### Sizing up prospective buyers is important

Dayton Business Journal - August 25, 2000 by [Laura Williams-Tracy](#) News Contributor

For an industry that relies heavily on women dealing with strangers, real estate agents must depend on their intuition and follow basic safety tips to ensure their security.

Real estate agents have daily, one-on-one contact with virtual strangers and make themselves relatively easy targets for criminals. The National Association of Realtors reports an increase in crimes against real estate agents in recent years. Crimes range from minor thefts to assaults, rapes and even murder.

The **Charlotte, N.C.**, real estate community has been knocked on its heels by a series of crimes against agents. In 1989, 44-year-old Charlotte real estate agent Joanne Fleming was killed at a model home on Old Concord Road where she was working alone. A 19-year-old man pleaded guilty to her murder. In 1983, a Charlotte agent, Diane Gabriel, disappeared after being called to show a house. Her body was never found, but a man was convicted of her murder. Then in 1991, a Charlotte home sales agent was sexually assaulted in a model home where she was working alone.

"This is an industry where, by definition, people get into cars with strangers and drive around with them," says Gail Martin, vice president at the Charlotte Regional Realtor Association. And while no Charlotte real estate agent has been the victim of a high-profile crime lately, Martin says agents hear of such crimes happening in other communities and it raises concern and awareness.

The CRRA worked with the Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department to develop a series of tips that it gives to all new members. Martin calls them "common sense guidelines" that every real estate agent should follow.

Among those tips are:

- Never meet a stranger alone at any property. If possible, meet prospective buyers at the office.
- Inform another person of your destination and who will accompany you, all in earshot of the client.
- Always drive your own vehicle so a client can't feign car trouble.

Craig Allen, crime prevention office with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, says following these personal safety tips can keep agents out of unsafe situations.

"Selling real estate could be a dangerous profession in the fact that you are meeting people you don't know who could easily give you false information," Allen says. "The opportunity is there. What Realtors have to do is take that opportunity away from the suspects."

Jean Bridges, an agent with Allen Tate Co., has been selling homes in Charlotte for 14 years, and she says she never takes chances.

"If someone sounds iffy, I take another agent from the office with me to meet them. I just say something to the client like, "We were coming back from another showing and there wasn't time to drop her off."

Bridges says agents quickly develop a sense of how to size up candidates. They ask questions such as how long the prospective buyer has been looking and whether they've spoken to a lender. Those sorts of questions help agents determine how serious the client is about purchasing a home. "If I don't get a good feeling about them, I postpone the meeting until later."

Charlotte's female real estate agents are something of a sorority, and they pass along e-mails and notices when scams or other questionable activities are rippling through the industry.

"We've been very fortunate in the last few years," said Patty McKeel, president of the Charlotte Regional Realtors Association, a 3,600-member organization made mostly of women. "When something bad happens to a Realtor, everyone tightens up. But when things are going well, you stop worrying about it."

McKeel says the biggest unknown risk to agents lies in cold calls, where someone sees an ad in the newspaper or a sign in a yard and calls the agent to come show the house immediately.

"There've been lots of times where someone calls out of the blue and wants to meet me somewhere to show a house. More times than not, I go," McKeel says. "But you've got to be careful. And if you

lose a sale, so be it. It's not the end of the world."

McKeel adds that much of the fear has been removed from her practice due to the high volume of work she does with people relocating to Charlotte. Those homebuyers are referred by a national relocation network that prescreens homebuyers.

"I have never once worried about a relo(cation) even though they are total strangers," McKeel says.

Williams-Tracy writes for the Charlotte, N.C., Business Journal.

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