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## **REALTOR® Safety: "You may lose a sale, but if the situation is uncomfortable, then bow out."**

*1994 article*

One REALTOR® murdered ... one or more assaulted ... several receiving harassing phone calls. Unfortunately, it's often tragedy that focuses attention on the issue of everyday safety. Such is the case with the misfortunes of REALTORS® in Illinois in recent months.

### **A vulnerable profession**

It is the nature of the REALTOR® profession that individuals must oftentimes visit vacant, unfamiliar properties or neighborhoods. These visits are habitually done at night and usually solo. In addition, a REALTOR®'s name, phone number and, many times, photo appears on signs, flyers and in ads each day.

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'There's no question that REALTORS® are extremely vulnerable. It is imperative that if it can't be helped for a REALTOR® to go alone to a property, that at least they follow strict precautionary safety rules.

The recent murder of Decatur REALTOR® Sherry Lewis brings the tragedy of REALTOR® vulnerability dose to home. The 30-year-old Lewis, who had been associated with Jim Masey REALTORS® Inc. for the past year, was found murdered seven hours after she left to show a vacant house on Decatur's northeast side. The local paper reported that Lewis had fought with her killer and was apparently strangled with bare hands. Preliminary information indicated she was not sexually assaulted. All that was taken were her keys.

The murder left Illinois REALTORS® enraged, looking for answers and obviously extra cautious.

Shortly after the murder, the Decatur Association of REALTORS® invited all members to a meeting with the sheriff and other officials to review what had happened, get the facts, squelch any rumors and go over some safety precautions. You'll find many of the precautions they discussed listed on these pages.

### **Nationwide problem**

REALTOR® safety is an issue not limited to Illinois. A recent item in *The Connecticut REALTOR®* warned agents of a suspicious man who had been

targeting female real estate agents. Although no one had been hurt by the man, REALTORS® reported being frightened by him. The magazine stressed, "Remember, use caution and do not go alone to vacant properties. Don't put your safety in jeopardy for the sake of a commission."

More incidents have occurred in New York, California, Oklahoma, Missouri, and many other states. It's been reported that 70 REALTORS® have died -- most of them women -- in the past 14 years. These figures, as reported by the FBI, are thought to be considerably conservative, and some think the number of deaths could be twice that high.

### **Words of caution from the Illinois State Police**

The *Illinois REALTOR®* contacted Sergeant Erich Westphal of the Illinois State Police to help explain some safety rules and offer insight into the recent happenings.

According to Sergeant Westphal, "Assailants are always looking for opportunity. REALTORS® may become prey often for the same reason someone is assaulted late at night in a parking lot. Whether it's an assault, for money, or just because it's a sickness, perpetrators prefer one-on-one encounters and vacant places. In interviews and studies with violent offenders in assaults against women, the offenders reason that they feel they 'can handle a woman.' Traditionally, women have been seen as the weaker sex. The perpetrator has this perception."

The area doesn't seem to matter when it comes to where attacks occur. Westphal said that attacks occur in rural as well as residential areas, however, he thought that in a rural setting, neighbors sometimes take note of new cars or people more than in a more populated area. But again, if a home is for sale, it is expected that there will be an increase in the number of cars going down the street to drive by it, and it is very natural for REALTORS® to be around, showing the home to strangers.

### **Open house safety**

Safety at open houses poses difficulty as well. A REALTOR® at an open house doesn't know whether to expect one person or 50 people, so special precautionary procedures should be taken. Having people sign in or register when they enter the home and present identification is essential.

Westphal also suggested setting up a time every hour or so to call the office or home to ensure that everything is ok on your end. Also, try to have more than one person at the open house. "The old adage, 'there's safety in numbers' is very true."

### **Why take the chance?**

Taking a self-defense class may be a good idea, suggested Sergeant Westphal. Classes often build self confidence and help participants appear less scared or timid. Westphal said that the Illinois State Police presents a program that reinforces the basics. "It helps remind participants of all the things they know they should do and have been taught, but have forgotten or slacked off in doing."

For example, always try to leave with someone and look around when you

go to your car or leave a building. Why take the chance? If you think there is a potentially dangerous situation, then wait. Or simply call the police. Westphal insisted, "I'd rather have a policeman sent out 1,000 times and there not be anything wrong rather than for someone not to call and then something happens."

One common problem situation is when there are late meetings. It seems that there is always someone that volunteers to stay behind and clean up. The cleanup process will go more quickly with more people, and then you can all leave together in a safe group.

Westphal said, "If you must carry a defense weapon, I suggest carrying pepper spray. It's 100 times better than mace. Pepper mace has no physical side effects, and the symptoms are gone in 15 to 20 minutes. The only drawback is that it doesn't work on someone who is under the influence of PCP, heroine or extreme cocaine, because their nerve endings are not sensitive, their adrenaline flow is very high and this is what the pepper spray affects."

### **Do the unexpected**

Another deterrent is for a victim to do something unexpected. Assaultants are counting on their victim to be quiet and just do what they say. They basically **don't expect or want a woman** to react, because they don't want to have attention drawn to them.

Some victims have vomited on purpose or have said that they have some kind of venereal disease. This type of behavior is meant to shock the assailant into different behavior and convince him or her to alter their current course of action.

Here's an extreme case Sergeant Westphal related of the victim doing or saying something unusual that worked. 'W woman was being assaulted, and she pleaded with the assailant to not hurt or rape her because she was pregnant. The man finally gave up and let her go. It turned out that the woman was 87 years old. Westphal encouraged victims to think fast and, if they try to combat their assailant, to strike in strategic places, including the eye, under the chin or the ear. Westphal stressed that the victim must react quickly and use any tools that may be handy, for instance a pen or keys. Many women also carry heavy purses which may be used in club fashion.

### **Be on your guard**

Westphal urged REALTORS® to meet a client they've never met at the office, even though it may be an inconvenience. Be on your guard, though, if you must meet for the first time at the house.

A safety precaution is to telephone the office when you pull up in your car. Call in and tell them the make and model of the car, give a name and description of the person.

Be sure the person shows an ID. If you lose a sale because someone was offended that you asked for an ID, then the sale wasn't worth it in the first place. Something isn't right if they're reluctant. Also, be sure to mill around outside so the neighbors can see you, too. Meet the person outside, in public view.

If you don't have a cellular phone, yet, you may want to consider buying one just for the purpose of calling in when you're showing homes. Portable phones are even better, as you can have them with you at all times, in or out of the car.

If something seems awry, bow out of the showing. "Say 'I'm really sorry, but something just came up.' You can say that you just found out about it when you called the office when you drove up. You may lose a sale, but if the situation is uncomfortable, then bow out."

Another thing that may be becoming more common now is for the seller to remain in the house while you're showing it. This is something you may wish to discuss with the seller during your initial session with him. Ask them to stick around; after all, they don't want anything to happen in their house, either. They'll follow whatever rules you set up and won't interfere if you don't want them around.

Safety is an ongoing concern that should be uppermost in the minds of REALTORS®. If you have any questions, comments or concerns about REALTOR® safety, please contact the Association at 217-529-2600.

*by Deborah Herr, Assistant editor*

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