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Building a real estate business is hard — and the market doesn't care who you are

By ELAINE HESSER

IT WAS a sunny day in Santa Barbara, but not a happy one for realtor Ryan Melcher, now a top producer with Sotheby's. It was 2010, and he had just left his fifth rental that year. He said he was moving his stuff to a new spot — “the worst unit” in an apartment complex several miles away — on foot, because he didn't have a car.

“I was walking with five pieces of luggage on wheels. It was 103 degrees, I had 3 1/2 miles to go, and I was looking up at this steep hill in front of me,” he said. “I was steps away from homelessness after coming from a family with more than just about anyone on the Monterey Peninsula. This was my low point. No one was going to come and save me. I always thought somebody would. Then I realized that if I didn't fix this, this was it.”

How Melcher — Doris Day's only grandson and the son of Terry Melcher, who for many years was a high-powered songwriter and producer working with the likes of the Byrds and the Beach Boys — came to that low point in Santa Barbara is a story that's made the rounds of tabloids and celebrity gossip websites.

Briefly, he said his parents divorced when he was in eighth grade, and his father's new wife was successful in cutting him off from his family and inheritance, leaving him with nothing.

“Dad stopped talking to me, and his new wife stoked that flame. From eighth grade, the only thing I knew was court,” Melcher said. Meanwhile, because of legal battles and the rift in the family, he also lost touch with his grandmother.

Closed doors

The Palma High School graduate tried college, but dropped out after a semester. “I was too screwed up at the time. It took me until I was in my 30s to figure myself out.” He found work, but after a time, he realized he wanted more. “I didn't want a good life. I wanted an amazing life,” he recalled.



Realtor Ryan Melcher said that this charming cottage-style spec home he sold in 2019 “transformed his business.”

In 2009, as the economy tanked and people everywhere were losing jobs, Melcher went to Los Angeles, determined to leave his past behind, push his own limits, and find success. Although his father died in 2004, Melcher thought Terry's old friends might help him start a career in show business. “I would have taken a job in the mail-room,” he remembered. “I would have taken a job getting

coffee for other people for free, just to get in the door.” Instead, he found dead ends. He said that “about half” of the people he contacted told him they'd just lost their own job.

“Everyone felt the same squeeze” of the tightening

MELCHER *cont. on page 40A*

40A The Carmel Pine Cone November 10, 2023

PENINSULA BUSINESSES

MELCHER *cont. from page 33A*

economy. Since Melcher had helped his mother manage properties and plan events in Martha's Vineyard, where he and his parents had summered in better times, he decided to go into real estate, moved to Santa Barbara, and got his license.

He said that the day after that summertime cross-town trek, he made about 250 cold calls, but remained “too proud” to impose on friends or ask for help. He worked diligently over the next 18 months, making little headway, earning just enough money to pay rent and eat. “I would borrow or rent a car for showings. My credit was toast,” he said. Eventually, he decided it was time to come home.

‘Gotta work’

“By the end of 2011, I felt strong enough not to get sucked into family drama, and I had friends here. I called my good friend, Doug Steiny, and he took me on at Carmel Realty.” Steiny, a fifth-generation Carmel Valley resident, is a successful realtor who has since also moved to Sotheby's. Melcher said they've known each other since Melcher's childhood.

With Steiny mentoring him, Melcher said, “I built my business brick by brick. On Friday nights, my friends would be going to Sade's and they'd bang on my office window, saying ‘Come get a drink,’ and I'd say, ‘Nope, gotta work.’”

He said he kept “grinding away,” holding as many as five open houses every weekend — one on Friday afternoon/evening, and two each on Saturday and Sunday. By 2013 and 2014, it was paying off. He started working with more expensive listings, and his website (ryanmelcher.com) includes pages of multimillionaire-dollar sales, along with some marketing videos he's quite proud of. In 2014, he sold a house on Carmel Point for \$3.4 million and got his first big commission check. “I was swimming in debt and I said,

‘Oh, thank God!’”

“Those are hard deals to get,” he said, noting that he had met the sellers at an open house. “Clients don't want to work with someone new. It's a visibility issue — there are so many of us,” he added, estimating that there are between 1,500 and 1,600 active agents in this area. In addition to selling properties, he's worked with clients on spec homes, remodels, renovations and house flips. His energy is palpable, even over the phone.

He aspires to expand his business along the coast in Pebble Beach and the Carmel Highlands, and wouldn't mind snagging some of those big \$10 million-or-more listings along the way. Melcher also said that at some point, he'd like to build his own real estate team. He understands that will take more effort, and he's willing to put in the hours.

“People think real estate seems glamorous, easy and fun, but a lot of people do it for years with few sales. You have to be willing to be extremely uncomfortable and upset sometimes, and face one failure after another.” He added, “All the things you want in any business are found in the things you don't want to do.”

Love and friends

Melcher, 40, has also found love — he recently married his longtime girlfriend Britney Giammanco in Martha's Vineyard, posting on social media that it “was the most incredible weekend” of his life, and “I've never felt love like that.” He also said he loves her family and how welcoming they've been. The newlyweds live near Highway 1, in the homestead of an old ranch.

He said that one of the things he likes about the real estate business is meeting so many wonderful people and connecting them with each other. He genuinely enjoys having them around and entertaining at his home on the weekends. Like his grandmother, he loves animals, and eventually,

he'd like to have an animal sanctuary.

Despite the old family upheaval, he has happy memories of growing up here. After Day died, he wrote on social media, “I will forever be grateful for the time I had with

both my father and my grandmother. When I was younger, our family was so close and I was so fortunate to have such special people raise me. It's taught me to live in the moment and not leave things unsaid.”



PHOTO/COURTESY DAVID WEICH

Real estate agent Ryan Melcher, 40, recently married his longtime girlfriend, Britney Giammanco, in Martha's Vineyard.