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Joanne Nemerovski

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By Sheila Inbinder



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How often we've heard the expression: She's one in a million. Usually, it's meant figuratively, intending to bestow one of the highest compliments you can pay a person. And in that context, Joanne Nemerovski is indeed one in a million. However, in this case, it is more than figuratively speaking. Literally speaking, Joanne is actually one in 1.2 million licensed real estate agents, according to the latest statistics from the National Association of Realtors. She is consistently one of the top producers, having sold \$64 million in 2005 and a total of \$575 million in the 15 years she has been active in the industry.

Born and raised in Highland Park, but "on the outskirts of Highland Park," Joanne says, it wasn't quite as luxurious and glamorous as some of Highland Park. "People have this impression of grand houses, and it's true a lot of Highland Park is beautiful, but I grew up in a very old house, with five of us and one bathroom — two sisters, four women, one bathroom."

She now lives and works in Chicago, a city she loves. "Chicago is so much better than it used to be for raising kids. We no longer see that mass exodus to the suburbs," she says. "Being in the city is so culturally exciting. There's so much to do, and your kids get a real diverse experience growing up. It makes you realize you're just one person in a very large world. I think that's an important lesson." Her excitement about the city is contagious, a feeling that can't help but come through to her clients. "There are all different types of housing and each block in the city is architecturally unique."

Joanne graduated from DePaul Law School, where she attended night school. She started out as an attorney, having put herself through law school working in building management. She proceeded to leas-

ing, but by the time she passed the bar and became a lawyer, she was already thinking about starting a family. "I was a practicing attorney for a very short time. I did a lot of *pro bono* work, but I decided the law just wasn't for me. I did not like staying in an office all day. I was married in 1986, passed the bar in '87 and had my daughter, Rachel, in '89." For the first year after her daughter's birth, Joanne stayed home. When she opted to re-enter the work force, "I decided to go into real estate because I wanted something where I could control my own time." Now the extended mother of five — two daughters and three stepchildren — Joanne balances that fine line between being a parent and working a full-time job. Both are extremely important to her, and one does not detract from the other. She handles it so well, in fact, that professionally a lot of people are unaware of her family, and conversely, many

In the garden with Sandy Ging, a current seller in Lakeview.



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Harry and Joanne in front of her listing at 2212 N. Cleveland.

acquaintances through her children don't realize she's anything but a mom. "I do work a million hours," she concedes, "but it is all about prioritizing and being organized. When I'm driving my kids, I may be on the phone. But still, I'm the one driving them. Each day is a full day." Joanne lives and works in the same general area; her two daughters attend Francis W. Parker School, which is within three blocks of the office and home. "I can see my kids off to school at 8:15 and still be in the office by 8:30. And even if I drive my stepdaughters, Elana and Rose, to school in Evanston, I can start work by 9:00 a.m."

After getting her license, she started at an office where she worked briefly, "less than six months. Then, I started to figure out how the business runs and I wanted a more sophisticated, full-service operation." As she puts it, "Getting the real estate license isn't difficult; it's about what you do with it." Joanne left the office where she started. "I studied the business and figured out how the industry works, the advertising dollars companies spend, all the things that go into making a successful company — your support staff, the computers and everything you have to work with. I interviewed at all the top firms. One of the things that drew me to Koenig & Strey was that I really wanted to work for a company that supports the individual, and they do. I didn't want to work for a big corporation. Ironically, Koenig & Strey is huge now, bought out by GMAC, but they were so unique — a real boutique

operation. While I was deciding, they invited me to their annual awards banquet. They gave everyone a little present as a thank-you for their sales production. The Koenigs themselves did the shopping. They are such a lovely family. When I went to the banquet, I felt I really wanted to work for this company. It was so personal." Joanne acknowledges it has changed through the years, along with the industry. "Koenig & Strey has been forced to change; you can't survive as a small, family-run operation. But, I do think the changes have been good. It's still a very sophisticated, high-end company, and they try to spend their dollars where needed. They do amazing advertising and marketing, things that matter in supporting the clients and people that work there."

Yes, Koenig & Strey GMAC is indeed a big corporation today. Still, in many ways, it manages to maintain the mom-and-pop feeling. The Koenigs are very much involved and make their presence known. Ed Koenig speaks so highly of Joanne. "She is just terrific. She came to us in the early stages of the office on North Clark Street and has been a mainstay of that office. She's one of our top agents." Looking back over his long association in the business, Ed recalls, "When we started in business, we had one agent, Norma. Tom Strey and I were partners that started the business, and she was our number one, and only, sales person, so we wouldn't have had a business if it hadn't been for Norma. We were quite small for a couple of years. And then we opened another office, and the next year another office, and that's how it happened." But getting back to Joanne, "It took a lot of good people like her that helped us grow so tremendously. We moved into Chicago for the first time in 1987, and the office on North Clark Street, where Joanne has

Joanne with Hilary Eldridge after an inspection at Hilary's listing on Wayne.



been since 1990, has grown to over 200 people. We opened at 900 North Michigan and that's over 200 people. Those offices do over half our business, doing over a billion dollars each. We have some wonderful people working in those offices, and all our offices." Ed is also emphatic on another point, "You know, it's the people who make the company, not the location." He still loves the awards banquets that captivated Joanne. He knows how appreciated they are, judging from the letters he receives. "It's so heartwarming. It's just a little way for us to express our appreciation for the people who represent us, and I think that's true of Joanne. She really represents us well." Even with the merger with GMAC and size of the company, Ed still acts as sort of a goodwill ambassador. "I do go around and visit the offices. It still keeps the connection with the Koenig & Strey family, no matter how much we've grown." And that is very important to the Koenigs. Still, he feels "it's been a very healthy partnership." It is also this combination of large corporate advantages and the continued personal touch that convince Joanne she is in the right place. In addition, Joanne's sister-in-law, Julie Brown, just started selling with the Deerfield office.

Meeting Joanne in person can come as a bit of a surprise. Younger looking than her years and with an easy, laid-back type of personality, it just doesn't meet with the perception of a dynamic, high-end real estate agent. Underestimating her would be to do her a big injustice. Juggling a very hectic schedule, she produces. "My office used to have 30 people. Now, I think we have over 200." Commenting on a recent article we both read on the vast influx of real estate sales people, she notes, "A lot of people see real estate as glamorous and fun. It is a lot of work. And it is competitive. You have to be Johnny- (or Janey)-on-the-spot. If somebody wants to see something, you have to accommodate; your schedule is constantly changing. The business has changed a lot; the industry has changed a lot. Mortgage rates were low, so everybody

Joanne with developer client Giacomo Caliendo just after winning the Good Neighbor Award.



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Victoria and Larry, two of Joanne's favorite clients, currently in the process of moving.

was refinancing. All of a sudden, everybody had a cousin who was a mortgage broker. It's the same thing in real estate." Many new agents have entered the field, but, as she emphasizes, "What it boils down to is service. It requires much more work to get a sale. As the market tightens, you have to go out and find the client. You can't just put a home on the MLS and hope it's going to sell. I don't have a team, although I do have a full-time assistant who is fabulous. Christie is a big help with everything, even with the kids." No, Christie doesn't double as a sitter, but she helps with the scheduling. "She helps free some of my time so I can be a better mom and I can be a better agent." Spending time with her kids is very important to Joanne. "With Christie helping with a lot of the administrative things, it helps free some of my time. I wear many hats in one day, and I'm always running here and running there. Being organized is key."

Yet, even with all this running, Joanne does manage to keep her cool and is noted for her laid-back approach. Giacomo Caliendo, a developer with G Corp Development, is a client of Joanne's. "We are currently involved with a five-home development in Lincoln Park, and Joanne has been contracted to sell three of them, of which she has already sold two. I think she works well with potential clients. We hired her because of her reputation, and Koenig & Strey's reputation, which is very high, especially in the high-end market in the Lincoln Park area. She's very professional and very thorough, but she does have a very laid-back, casual attitude, and I think that's what people — potential buyers — really relate to. She really does a good job." Caliendo elaborates even further, "When I see her walking around one of my developments with a potential buyer, she does such a good job of putting people at ease. There's no stress there in a high-pressure environment." Interestingly enough, Caliendo had known of Joanne for about 15 years before actually contacting her. But after seeing her name everywhere, especially on high-end homes and developments, he did a lot of research and talked to a lot of people and agents, and was sold, a decision he's obviously totally pleased with. "It's really a credit to her how laid back but professional she is at the same time." Joanne just nominated the developer for Chicago's Good Neighbor Award, and he won.

With all the agents falling by the wayside, what started Joanne on the path to \$575 million in the 15 years or so she's been in the industry? "I remember the first sale I made." It wasn't considered a big one at the time. "It was at a studio at 777 North Michigan Avenue, a building my



Joanne with GMAC top executives receiving her award, Feb. 2006, for ranking ninth out of 22,000 agents nationwide.

aunt used to live in before she passed away. I thought it was a sign. I was pregnant and only three months in the business. It closed right when I had gotten home from the hospital.” She had made a couple of sales while pregnant, but didn’t work again until her daughter, Rachel, was 1 year old. “I had a little break there.” However, and that’s a big however, “The year I had my second child, Nikki, I was the number one broker in the city.” She is also quick to add, “That was 1991, and the number one broker in the city at that time was at \$18 million in sales. The prices today have continued to increase, so \$18 million doesn’t sound as high as it did then. It wasn’t that I didn’t work hard. It was very hard and I was very committed. However, today, the top sales numbers are unrealistic because the numbers now generally represent a team of 10 to 20 people. It’s hard to compete with that.” She fondly remembers the \$18 million year. “That year, they had the most wonderful awards night. Everyone knew each other. It was a close-knit group, not nearly the 17,000 licensed real estate people currently in the Chicago market. For the years that I won, they had a much more personalized awards night. One year, they had it at Café Brauer and they called me up and gave me roses and a vacation package. It was a big deal. It’s different today. Even if you sell \$30 million, which is an amazing amount of work, it doesn’t touch the top category.”

Chuck Goro, the managing broker at Koenig & Strey GMAC, says he’s never heard Joanne say a bad word about anyone. She’s also generous in her praise. Joanne makes it clear she is not knocking the team concept. “I think working with a team is fantastic. However, I don’t want to have a team. First, I like selling homes better than regulating people. And second, I think the seller is more satisfied when there is one person servicing their listing. I have gone to some of the homes listed with a team and you can end up with a person showing who has little to no experience and is not familiar with the property. The most important thing you can provide your clients with is quality service.”

Chuck Goro, of course, had more to say about Joanne. Becoming affiliated with the company in 1991, he sort of inherited her. “She was part of the office when I started.” Currently, he’s her broker and runs the office. “If she’s in need of help, I help her. Everybody is impressed with Joanne. People like to do business with someone they like, they know and they trust, and Joanne is at the top of everyone’s list when it comes to that. We have a service we call Premier Service, where we give our clients the best possible service they can get. We send surveys

out, and our national survey return is pretty high, maybe 94 percent. I would say that Joanne never, ever gets a survey back that isn’t 100 percent satisfied. She is just a special person.” As if all this isn’t praise enough, he still added, “Considering she has a family with five children and still has time to run an effective business is amazing. She’s dedicated. She’s hard working. She really cares about her clients, which comes across in the service she gives. She goes above and beyond the call of duty. She will get anything done for them that will help them out. Never have I had Joanne come in and complain about anyone in a deal. I’ve never seen her lose her temper. She’s just perfect. She’s been a top producer for the company from the very beginning.”

Joanne is a modern woman with what is still considered old-fashioned values. Never neglecting a client in even the smallest matter, her family is still her priority. With her husband, Marc Brown, for seven years and married for five, they have raised their children together. While Joanne says she doesn’t work with a team, she quickly adds she does have a “little team.” Her assorted children all pitch in one way or another. “My stepson, Max, is actually going to help improve my website. He’s really so talented in technology, and helping me with my website is something he volunteered to do. My daughter, Rachel, is into photography. Nikki is really good with marketing ideas. She helps me make flyers, fills out postcards and make calls. Sometimes, when I pick her up and she sees that I’m overwhelmed with something, she’ll ask, ‘What can I do?’ It’s really cute. I hear her on the phone, ‘This is Nikki and I’m calling for my mom.’ All of the kids have such different interests.” Her kids range in age from 12 to 17.

Another thing Joanne has working for her is her assistant, Christie Cox. “Maybe she’s a team rolled up into one person.” Christie has the same unflappable personality that Joanne has, which is probably one reason they work so well together. With just as hectic a schedule as Joanne’s, she just takes it all in stride. “I’ve been working with her for over six years, and we definitely have good chemistry,” Christie says. “She is easy to work for. She has very high expectations, but she’s also very fair and honest. I learn something new from her every day, and not just about business, but about life and people and relationships. She’s an all-around great person.” Does essentially doing the work of a team ever get to be too much? “It’s a lot sometimes, but it makes it easier to keep a handle on things.” Her respect for Joanne is very evident. “Joanne’s main interest is making things work out and making everyone satisfied,

Batter up — Christie, Joanne, Rachel and Harry at a fundraiser for Children’s Memorial, where Joanne was honored with throwing out the first pitch for the Cubs.





Joanne with her family — husband Marc and children (from left to right): Rachel, Max, Nikki, Rose and Elana.

and she applies this philosophy to every aspect of her life.”

In addition to Christie, Joanne does have one other person she works closely with. “I have to mention Harry Maisel, who works in my office. I have worked with him for the past three years, and whenever I get a listing, a referral, and I just have too much on my plate and don’t feel I can give it my full attention, Harry and I co-list it. He does an amazing job and is great to work with. He’s really a terrific guy. This referral relationship allows me to continue the level of service I want to give each and every client.”

Talking about her nonteam team approach brought us right back to the team concept, which is evidently very prevalent today. “I’m at the point of my life where I’m so thankful and feel so fortunate that I have this wonderful career, and I want to spend quality time with my family. I don’t want to be responsible for a team of people who have different schedules, then you’re on the phone so much more, figuring it all out — this person’s schedule, that person’s schedule. Plus, you don’t know how you are being represented; who’s showing up for you. It’s your name on the line, your reputation.” She still remembers walking into the showing of a big house in Lincoln Park: “And there was this young kid, super nice, but he remarked, ‘Oh, this house is so overpriced.’ If you were the seller, would you want that person representing you?”

Joanne understands the need to be careful. “I think that comes with

Joanne, Marc, Rachel and Nikki at a party.



years of experience. I had a listing recently, and when I went on the listing appointment, I noticed a bubbling in the garage. When I questioned it, the seller merely said he was going to get it fixed. But when pressed, he admitted he didn’t really know what it was. I want to know. I have to know. I don’t want to overlook it and hope nobody notices. I’m in this neighborhood. I know people. My name and reputation mean a lot. I always tell my kids, ‘All you have is your name.’ I do the best I can.”

She does acknowledge the team concept is a fantastic idea for others. “I’m not knocking it. I really think it’s great. They’re probably making a lot more money. You can easily increase your business if there are more people to spread around, but the whole structure is different. You’re running people instead of properties. My assistant does not show properties, although she’s licensed and could show them. Instead, she helps me in all the administrative things. My big thing now is not to be attached to a phone. I’ll check my voice mail and ask Christie to make many of the return calls. She handles everything that does not need my immediate, personal attention, although I stay on top of it all. Everything filters through me.” According to Joanne, some clients don’t like working with an assistant; they want the attention of the agent all the time. Of course, she meets all types. “Some people are very demanding, but most are incredibly nice. I just sold an \$8 million listing on East Lake Shore Drive. Both the sellers and buyers couldn’t have been nicer. All parties involved were terrific throughout the entire transaction.”

Whether it’s instinct or years of experience, or a combination of both, Joanne is nothing if not innovative. “I have a listing — it’s an amazing house, Frank Lloyd Wright style, on three lots with a coach house and garage — but it’s been on the market for about 10 months now, and I’ve had so many showings. So I suggested we clean it out, rent it, and after it’s rented, start again next year. The seller agreed. My idea was to call everyone who was shown but unfamiliar with the

Joanne with her kids.





Just some of Joanne's extended family and favorite cousins.

neighborhood. There were five people interested. Renting it first and living there, I think they will find they do like the neighborhood." This really sparked interest.

Not all houses are easy to sell. Having faith in your agent also inspires confidence, and Joanne Nemerovski certainly does inspire faith. "I thought she was wonderful," Nancy Cohen, a recent client, remarked. "She was so easy to work with. I had a very difficult property to sell. It was unique, one-of-a-kind. I thought it would take over a year to sell, and it took exactly a year." But she never got discouraged. "Joanne had creative ideas for selling the property. She put in a ton of time and effort marketing-wise. She did a great job and sold the property. We even ended up with a couple of offers. I'm very happy with the price we got. She and Christie made it so easy. They just took care of everything, and I did not need to be involved."

Getting into high end was never a plan of Joanne's. "It just kind of happened. Hard work had a lot to do with it. I don't only sell high end, but the high-end sales add to my numbers significantly. I do try to help everyone who calls me.

"I was recently at an awards event in Las Vegas. I don't usually attend these functions, but now that we're Koenig & Strey GMAC, a huge company, they are able to get incredible speakers and classes, which make the trip worthwhile. And the private event had Earth, Wind & Fire as entertainment. I also went because I was in the top 10 of 22,000 agents. I sold \$64 million in 2005 with over 30 transactions. The key, as any top producer will tell you, is not luck, but hard work. I just do the best I can to represent my clients." Joanne also loves representing buyers, something a lot of agents prefer not to do. "It's so exciting when you find someone the perfect place. And it's a lot less work. It is hard work, the marketing of a property. There is so much to do. If you're representing the buyer, you just go with them — support, educate and advise them. It's fun." She also believes it's hard for a small company to compete in today's market. "There are the websites and the advertising pages. But even more, your peers, other agents who are around you day in and day out, networking new listings and ideas." At her company, they go on caravan every Thursday. So as a seller, the minute you list with Koenig & Strey GMAC, there are 200 people with their eyes on your property." She also adds a more personal observation. "That's what I've loved about Koenig & Strey — the people."

Joanne's work ethic and dedication to business has already been made abundantly clear. It has also been noted she has a family to whom she's very devoted. That extended family is more than her husband and combined children. "I have a huge extended family," she relates. "I have two sisters, a niece and nephew. My husband has three brothers, all married with children. My dad was one of six and I have loads of close cousins. Mostly, they all live in the Chicago area. My aunts and uncles, parents and in-laws are all over 80. We have a very close family. I have so many people in my life who are active and over 80. It's amazing!" That may explain Joanne's zest for life. That and the fact that her dad not only survived World War II, but escaped from a German prison camp during the war. He is a real war hero. Joanne takes great pride in this.

As for that immediate family of hers, besides the pride she constantly shows in her children, she is extremely proud of her husband, Marc. They met in college and re-met in 1999. Besides being a self-employed options trader, he runs a tutoring program at the Chicago Board Options Exchange. "Every Monday, he has 50 people who volunteer and tutor kids from Drake School, a Chicago Public School. He pairs the students with their own trader for homework help. It is a really great program."

Joanne herself is no slouch when it comes to community service. For one thing, she was active with the Daniel Murphy Scholarship Foundation, which awards scholarships for inner-city students to attend private high schools. Joanne was a member of the committee that selected the scholarship recipients and was also a mentor for one of the students, Monica. "She's fabulous. I'm so proud of her. She is now getting ready to graduate from Princeton and is currently in the process of applying to medical school. In the eight years since we were introduced, we have become very close. In fact, I'm helping her brother find an apartment right now." Joanne has also been a room mother for about 12 years, since her oldest was in junior kindergarten at Francis Parker. "I have always been pretty involved."

And speaking of involved, oh yes, there's more. Joanne got very involved with hurricane relief. "My office really came through for me. I went to some meetings with a few families from New Orleans who were relocating here, and then sent an e-mail to all Koenig & Strey agents. I asked for donations. You would not believe how many people in the office were helpful. My friend, Francesca Rose, also an agent in my office, went around with me in a truck and picked up donated furniture. Jerry Siegel, my friend who owns Midway Movers, donated an entire

Joanne and Marc's wedding.





Another day on the job — Nikki, Rachel and Christie at an open house.

moving van for the day. I got beds and dressers and TVs donated; and with the additional money donated, I purchased couches. I went out to Waukegan and outfitted a couple of families who relocated there. It was so great. A lot of people, as individuals, at Koenig & Strey really helped me.” In relating the story, it is very evident how much satisfaction Joanne derived from this and how much it meant to her.

With all this activity, is it possible she finds time to do anything recreational? I don’t even know when she finds time to sleep. “Our family is busy, but we figure out life on a daily basis. We do a lot together, actually, an amazing amount. I play on a lakefront volleyball team in the summer. I love rollerblading and I love biking. My husband, kids and even parents like to ride in those charity fundraisers. If I try to do something physical, I like to play tennis or volleyball, where you can be social and physical at the same time. The best mornings are when I work out with one or two of my best friends, either at the gym or on the lakefront. I can still get to work by 9:30. We share a personal trainer and do a lot of chatting. I also do Pilates one day a week.”

Of course, Joanne keeps up with the latest technology. She just handles it her own way and makes it work for her. Christie prints up her e-mails and she goes over them at night, giving Christie the input, and she replies the next day. If there’s something that requires immediate attention, Christie notifies her via voice mail and she’s instantly on it. “I’m not sitting in the office. I’m not at the computer, I’m out somewhere — I’m selling. When I’m with clients, I want to give them my full

Joanne with friends on their annual trip to Mexico.



attention, so I don’t like to walk around with the phone or BlackBerry in my ear. I don’t answer the phone when I’m showing. But with 24-hour voice mail, which I’m neurotic about checking, you will get a call back the same day.” Joanne confesses, almost self-consciously, that the thing she would find most helpful in her job would be to have a driver. Obviously, something she considers a luxury, even though a great time saver. “It is hard to get your work done while you’re driving.”

With the influx of new agents in the business, we touched briefly on how this could affect commissions. “I think so many people see this as a quick way to make a living. Everyone seems to be going into real estate. But I don’t think it will affect commissions, because if you can really show your value as a professional, people are willing to spend the money. If it helps their bottom line, why not? An experienced agent adds knowledge, information and ancillary services to every transaction. It’s the same as hiring a doctor or lawyer; you want the best person you can get. You get what you pay for. Agents who are reducing commissions may also reduce your bottom line. I don’t talk people into selling. It’s a process. I try to educate them and then let them decide.”

Joanne Nemerovski is a well-known name in the industry and a respected one. Dwight Cleveland, a developer and client of Joanne’s, states she’s a great broker. “She’s very sharp, which sort of sets her apart from many other brokers. She has this great ability to create the need to act on the part of buyers. She usually represents me as a seller and has this unique ability to create the right atmosphere. She once told me that when she’s showing a home, every single potential buyer coming through is the person she envisions selling it to. She motivates herself that way. She gives it everything she’s got in every showing. It’s really unique, because most people might see a guy in a T-shirt and jeans and just not want to waste the time — let them go through the house on their own — but Joanne focuses on each prospect.”

When Joanne works with someone, she is totally committed. This is probably one reason most of her business is referrals and repeat customers. What about people who think they don’t need the services of a professional? “It happens. People will say, ‘Oh, I can sell it myself like my neighbor,’ and sometimes they do. But I ask you, how do they know they got the best price by selling it themselves? If you’re not paying a commission, you’re losing all the other knowledge a broker brings to the transaction. My favorite line when sellers are trying to sell on their own is: ‘I had lots of people through my house Sunday and everybody liked it.’ Do you know anybody who would go to somebody else’s house and say to the owner, ‘I don’t like it?’

“I try to constantly reinvent myself, think of new and interesting ways to market and advertise. I try to be the kind of person people will want to work with. I love what I do. I meet wonderful and interesting people every day selling high-end real estate in Chicago. I have worked with and shown homes to several celebrities, including many TV and famous sports personalities. Unfortunately, I can’t say who because professionalism requires privacy.”

Listening to Joanne is easy, but the interview had to come to a close because it was time to take one of the kids to a tennis lesson. “My kids are the major motivation of why I work.” She is totally devoted to both. As I stated at the beginning, and I think anyone who knows her will agree, Joanne Nemerovski is indeed one in a million. In every sense of the phrase.

Joanne Nemerovski of Koenig & Strey GMAC Real Estate can be reached at (312) 475-4505, or by e-mail at jnemerovski@ksqmac.com. ■