

47 years of  
real estate

*dreams*  
come true

# Michael Saunders & Co Leaps To Success One Day At A Time

by Christy Pessemier

Every morning, when Michael Saunders gets up, she starts her day with ginger and lemon tea, the newspaper in her hand, and a strong sense of purpose.

"I get up every morning thinking about how I can make this company better," she says.

But Saunders isn't talking about making the company better in a massive, earth-shattering way. She's talking about a little bit at a time.

"If you can make yourself 1% better every day by just taking little steps, at the end of the year, you've pole vaulted into a huge leap. Your company is 365% better."

That sense of purpose is what has brought Michael Saunders & Company to where it is today. With 24 branch offices, they are known as the luxury leader in Southwest Florida covering Sarasota, Manatee, Charlotte, and Lee Counties. They've also been recognized in the top 15% of real estate firms in the U.S. by RealTrends 500 rankings, and despite being a regional company, they hit #77 in sales volume nationally in 2022.

Even with this amazing amount of success for Michael Saunders & Company, as well as Southwest Florida real estate in general for the past few booming years, headlines about the current real estate market and economy have some people worried. And who better to weigh in on the current state of housing than Saunders herself? She has seen her share of crazy markets, and the good news is she remains optimistic.

"We are in a normalizing market," Saunders said. "I don't know that we'll ever see a market like 2021 again. It was drinking from a firehose."

According to Saunders, after 2021's red-hot real estate climate with multiple offers, waived inspection contingencies, and homes purchased sight unseen, it can be challenging getting used to "normal" again.

"The first half of last year was very strong," she said. "And then the third and fourth quarter fell off the cliff, as it did all around the country."

Still, Saunders says the Southwest Florida market is more insulated in comparison to other areas around the country, due to cash buyers purchasing homes in all price ranges, from \$200,000 to \$20 million. Nationally, the cash buying rate ranges from 25% to 31%, on average, while 60% of Michael Saunders & Company's current buyers are all cash.

Despite this strong protective factor, fear about the economy can spread like wildfire.

"The thing that's hardest to deal with in every market are the headlines," Saunders said. "You read the headlines and they are national headlines."

Though she feels there will be continued challenges, Saunders believes this is a healthy market overall. With the U.S. Census bureau reporting that 444,484 people moved to Florida in 2022, our state was the fastest growing state in the nation last year. And this year, the region's housing and commercial real estate market is still in full force.

Saunders describes the real estate market as sometimes being a “rollercoaster,” something she’s accustomed to navigating.

Despite her years of experience, wisdom, and immense success, she never would have imagined she would own a real estate company one day.

But she found her way to real estate through a series of events, and an incredible amount of determination.

Saunders earned a degree in history and psychology at Florida State University on a full scholarship. She didn’t want to stop there, though. Her dream was to go to law school, and that meant she’d have to get a fellowship.

“I had a lot of love and encouragement from my parents when I was growing up, but no money.”

She applied and went in person to be interviewed for a fellowship. After waiting for hours in a smoke-filled room full of men to be called back for an interview, she finally asked why they hadn’t called her back yet. Saunders was told fellowships were only given to men who were going to make a career out of law—not women.

“So, I tucked my tail between my legs, came home, and that’s when I got a job teaching. If I’d known then what I know now, my name would be on that law school,” she said.

Though the door to her law school dream had closed, it didn’t stop her from forging a different path ahead. She taught 10th, 11th, and 12th grade at Manatee High School.

She then worked as a probation officer. “I started doing dependency work and counseling after school and on weekends, and I fell in love with it.”

Saunders realized that she was unable to impact the lives of 180 kids through teaching, but she was able to make a big difference in the lives of youth as a probation and parole officer.

“I begged and borrowed things just to get a bicycle for these kids, or tennis shoes so they could play a sport or go to school,” she remembers.

When it came time to make a career change, Saunders felt real estate was a perfect choice. It was another

area where she felt she could make a difference—one in which people were making the most important decisions of their lives.

When she started Michael Saunders and Company 47 years ago, Saunders came into the real estate world accustomed to solving complex challenges.

“I got into the business in 1972, and it was the Wild West. It was buyers beware, sellers beware, no one dressed professionally, and no office looked professional,” she remembers. “I thought, I can do this, and I can take all these skills that I got from working with children, motivating them to make a difference.”

Starting out in real estate required a strong connection with the local community. She found this in the relationships she’d built while working as a probation officer with the local police, clergy, business owners, and attorneys.

She wrote notes to the people she made connections with saying: “Hello, you knew me as a probation and parole officer. I loved the time we spent together helping our children. But now, I’m in real estate. If you have any need, please give me a call.” And the referrals started pouring in.

At the time, Saunders was working as a real estate agent under a broker. She’d just been asked to list Tiffany Plaza on Longboat Key. She was thrilled. There were 42 listings in the building. It was on the water, and it was gorgeous. But her broker didn’t share her enthusiasm.

“He told me I was crazy. He asked me if I knew about a thing called red tide; then he reminded me about interest rates, and the lines for gas because fuel was scarce at the time. He said he wasn’t interested, and it wasn’t going to sell.”

That was the turning point she needed.

“I looked at him and thought, this is my reason to leave,” Saunders said. “There weren’t the values or the standards of continuing to raise the bar.”

That’s when she decided to go out on her own, and she narrowed down what her purpose and focus for the company would be.

“I’m going to start a company based on something very different. And I’m going to only sell waterfront, and I’m going to hire the right people, and they’re going to be value-based.”



MICHAEL SAUNDERS & DRAYTON SAUNDERS.  
PHOTO BY BARBARA BANKS.



"As a woman, I had to work harder," she said. "But I never felt that being a woman meant it was hard. It was challenging. I felt I'd earned a seat at the table, and I deserved to be at that table, and they respected me. So, in this community, and nationally, and internationally, I made a spot for myself as a woman and a leader."

"It's about never, ever, ever giving up. I never gave up. I have a lot of grit."

Having fond memories of being raised on Longboat Key in the quieter days before the first bridge to Anna Maria Island was built, she relishes her childhood memories of the magical place Longboat Key was for her. Saunders grew up on the water and worked in her father's marina, and she wanted to help others experience that same wonder that living on the water in Southwest Florida brings.

"We sold only the waterfront because I knew the waterfront."

As time went on, Saunders established a name and a reputation for herself and her company. People started telling her Michael Saunders & Company was the only company they trusted to list their homes. She expanded from a luxury and waterfront specialist to listing all price ranges of homes.

All along the way, as the company grew, Saunders insisted on building it by staying focused on their top values: integrity, excellence, communication, and mutual profitability.

She raised her son, Drayton Saunders, as a single mom while building the company. When Drayton was a child in the 1970s, he thought real estate was boring, and was more interested in untangling the phone cord when his mom was on the phone with clients. Today, Drayton is President of the company and has an office down the hall from Michael.

"As a child, I had no real concept of what my mom did," he said. "Paving my way, I had to go and do

## “Having a home that makes a difference in how you feel when you come home at night, when your friends come to visit, that emotional part of home ownership—how do you put a price on it?”

other things—later discovering an appreciation of what real estate really was, and how fabulous this business is.”

Among the other things Drayton did was starting and running a bagel and coffee shop in Santiago, Chile, for eight years while in his twenties.

“When I was running the bagel and coffee shop, I loved what I did on some level, but it was tough to get alignment as a team in the food service industry,” he said. “When I came back in 2003, I saw that my mom had built a reputation for being the best of the best in this market. Even though I said I would never do it when I was younger, it was the best decision I ever made.”

Though the two are close, they are very different. Each of them has unique strengths and they complement each other. Drayton says the things he’s learned the most from his mom are doing what you’re passionate about and being an engaged listener.

“Watching her, I’m often reminded that you always learn more by listening, rather than giving an answer,” he said. “She is someone I know that has mastered that skill, and that’s a big part of why she’s successful.”

Saunders has been on panels with other real estate titans like Dottie Herman and Barbara Corcoran and speaks to crowds of 2,000 and more people. But despite her many connections, and influence far and wide, she loves coming back home to her roots—Sarasota.

She continues to mentor agents, and says she loves any moment when she can be with agents in the company. As of now, there are over 600. When she overhears an agent commenting, “I work for Michael Saunders,” she says “No, no, no—you’ve got that wrong. *I work for you!*”

It’s all about listening and learning, while also showing them how to help their clients understand this market.

Saunders reminds people that, despite the doom-and-gloom housing market forecasts that often make the headlines lately, the 50-year average interest rate is 7%.

“That’s an attractive rate. And if rates go down, you can refinance. My thinking is if you’ve found something that creates the lifestyle you want, and you can afford it, you should buy it.”

After 47 years of running one of the most successful real estate companies in the country, she knows what she’s talking about.

“There is not a bad time to buy,” she says. “Having a home that makes a difference in how you feel when you come home at night, when your friends come to visit, that emotional part of home ownership—how do you put a price on it?”

Though she says she’s still working on work-life balance because she adores what she does, Saunders is having a lot of fun spending time with her grandchildren these days. Drayton’s three children Kinsley (7), Beckett (6), and the latest addition, Emerson, are her pride and joy.

A few Saturdays ago, while Saunders was helping Kinsley decide what special items to bring to school for a spotlight on her life, Kinsley’s brother, Beckett, suggested a few items. He then chimed in and asked if he could bring something that doesn’t cost money.

“Sure, you can,” Saunders assured him.

“Well, if it doesn’t have to cost money, I’d take happiness.”

Though this story explains something very special to her, it also sums up why Saunders loves the massive world she’s created of people and real estate—she also loves making people happy.

And who wouldn’t be happy buying their dream home, on the water, in Southwest Florida, in our beautiful slice of paradise. Mission accomplished, Michael!