

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

Reflecting on 20 years of leadership



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Working at the Association is an honor and a privilege. For most of the staff, it isn't a job or a career. It is our "other" home, it is our life.

The 100th anniversary of our Association has prompted me to reflect on my 20 years at the helm of this great organization. I am grateful and humbled for the roles the staff and I have played. This is no ordinary organization and certainly no ordinary job.

Among the staff, there are a substantial number of us who have tenure and longevity. The main reason is this is not a static place to work. This is not a static industry. We don't just get a new president every year, well almost every year, but the industry is constantly changing. So, no year, let alone day, are ever the same, making it a challenge at times to succinctly summarize "What exactly do you do?"

After lobbying for the Real Estate and Building Industry Coalition (best known as "REBIC") for six years — effectively serving as the government affairs director for the Realtors® and home builders — I was slightly done with politics and looking forward to a low-key job in the corner as the Association's general counsel, dealing with bylaws, rules and regs and contracts.

That did not last long (five short months) when I was hired to be the fourth CEO of the Association. 2001 President Mike Rash and the Board of Directors at the time took a chance and showed faith in me, and I have been determined ever since to not let them down.

It has been quite a ride and one that I have enjoyed tremendously. The leadership that the staff and I have served have made this organization what it is. As we celebrate the 100th anniversary, we are witnessing the culmination of years of hard work, care and dedication by both volunteers and staff.

STARTING WITH 9/11

When I step back and reflect on these past 20 years, it starts with 9/11. I was literally eight months into the position and was speaking at a firm's sales meeting that beautiful Tuesday morning. I recall waiting in the lobby and there seemed to be a lot of commotion. I heard the receptionist say that the World Trade Center had been hit by a plane. The whole world seemed to speed up and slow down all at once. I was called into the meeting and told that everyone was too shocked to continue. I left. I headed back to the office.

I thought about the role of a leader in a crisis and what my job was going to be when I got back to the Association. When I walked in, someone had moved a television into the lobby and the staff had gathered to watch the horror in dismay. We closed our doors; we all went home to be with our families. And thus began my firm message of "family first." If God and family are first, I believe, then everything else falls into place.

And so, we regrouped. Mike Rash, whom I learned years later was a Vietnam veteran who had seen firsthand the ravages of war, was determined to move us forward. He insisted we hang the largest American flag we could find off the side of our building as the membership gathered for our Fish Fry, a longtime annual event, a few weeks later. I will always be thankful for Mike's patriotism and resolve as well as his gentle spirit and fun sense of humor — all of which helped us carry on in the face of the uncertainty we all struggled with after that fateful day in 2001.

By 2003, the proposed changes of the Governance Task Force of 2001 became a reality. Our Association Board of Directors and MLS Board of Directors were separated, held together by a common Executive Committee. This achievement, way ahead of its time I now realize, was due to the belief and the commitment of the leadership that it was the right thing to do.

It was the beginning of what we benefit from today, which is a nearly complete functional and financial separation of the two companies (the nonprofit parent Association and the for-profit MLS subsidiary), which make up Canopy. This separation of Association and MLS is something many MLSs around the country are just now addressing, and NAR is contemplating making such separation an MLS "best practice." To us, it just made sense. And now we are in the process of another Governance Task Force looking at how we position ourselves for the future.

TAKING WHAT WE HEARD TO HEART

But there is more to Canopy than the Association and the MLS. 2003 President Tony Smith and I attended an NAR Leadership Conference at which the president of NAR challenged local and state associations to focus their charitable efforts on housing. This led us to take a hard look at our charitable arm — what we know today as the Canopy Housing Foundation — that had been incorporated separately as a 501(c)(3) in 1985.

Again, having even started a Foundation when we did, Canopy was ahead of its time due to the wisdom and foresight of the leaders before us. Taking what he heard to heart, Tony pushed for our Foundation to re-group, change its mission and focus strictly on housing. It was the beginning of many changes to follow. Among them, the Foundation started an endowed and nonendowed fund at the Foundation For The Carolinas in 2003 and pledged to raise \$1 million by 2013. While that goal did not happen until last December because of the Great Recession—our Canopy Housing Foundation is recognized nationally for how Realtors® can be involved and care about their community and the entire housing continuum from homelessness to homeownership.

We have been so fortunate to have the right president at the right time, time after time. Tony was the first contemporary of mine to be president. He was also the child of a Realtor®, as was I. The next two presidents, David Barnhardt and John Byers, were also close to my age and children of Realtors®. That seemed to solidify our friendships beyond just working together.

I will be forever grateful to David, who gave me the assurance that everything would be fine in 2004 when I was preoccupied with the adoption of my child and ultimately took maternity leave. He gave me the peace of mind to focus on my daughter, Kate, and not worry about work.

In 2005, John and his quirky sense of humor kept us all laughing while getting a lot done, including the start of our first member value campaign marked by those oval stickers with an old-fangled phone saying “Call a Realtor®”.

In 2006, President Gay Dillashaw, so poised and gracious, had the foresight to capture our history while so many of our past leaders were still with us. She also had the conviction that Realtors® needed to defend their value to the consumer. Most Realtors® had done all the things they do for their clients without really telling their clients what was involved, making it “look” way too easy. Talking about your value was not something that was done and that needed to change.

NAVIGATING THE GREAT RECESSION

As the Great Recession hit in 2008 and continued for several years, each president brought a slightly different way to focus as we continued to think of ways to reduce our costs. In 2009, President Donna Anderson, who chaired the first all-female Executive Committee, pushed for more education about professionalism. She was also president when the Foundation had its first Realtors® Care Day.

On a very personal note, I would be remiss to not recognize that both Dot Munson, president in 2007 and 2008, and Donna were my rocks as I went through a tough divorce and started life as a single mom. They were in so many ways fairy godmothers to Kate and me. I don’t think I would have come out as strong as I did if it were not for the support of these two women in my life and I owe them a debt of gratitude!

In 2010, President Lyn Kessie gave all the staff a boost by graciously inviting us to her alpaca farm in Waxhaw and treating us with a special picnic. It was a fun event in what was not exactly an enjoyable period of time.

By 2011, with the recession still looming, Laurie Knudsen with her wry sense of humor and calm demeanor helped us stay the course and focus inward, including a review of Mingle School (now Canopy Real Estate Institute) that solidified the school as a member benefit. It also made education a top priority through our Speaker Series (now Realtor® Hot Topics), BIC Briefings and training sessions.

As we started to crawl out of the recession in 2012, and short sales and foreclosures were at an all-time high, Jennifer Frontera could not have been more perfect for the role of president. Jennifer had spent much of her career working in the foreclosure market, and no one was better equipped to deal with the media on the topic than she was.

It was also during Jennifer’s tenure that we continued to look inward and conduct an Internal Structural Review of every committee, its purpose, what worked well, what didn’t and what would make it better. It was a huge, time-consuming effort, but it positioned us well to hit the ground running as we made our way out of the economic slowdown.

Laurie and Jennifer remain dear friends, not surprising considering the time we spent together working our way through the downturn!

By the end of 2013, things were looking up during Eric Locher’s presidency. Eric gave me two gifts. He encouraged me to go out with someone I had met on match.com, and that someone is now my husband, John. He also honored me with his President’s Award at the end of his year.

GROWING IN MANY WAYS

2014 incoming President Joe Rempson invited representatives from the North Carolina Mountains MLS to attend our Association's strategic planning meeting in the fall of 2013. It was Joe's unflappable, low-key, nonthreatening approach that set the stage for a year-long negotiation for Canopy MLS to provide wholesale services to NC Mountains MLS. The negotiation culminated in a three-year agreement to do just that starting in October 2015.

I would be terribly lax if I did not give a special shoutout to two women who graciously served two terms as president, Dot Munson in 2007 and 2008 and Maren Brisson-Kuester in 2015 and 2016. Both Dot and Maren deserve a lot of kudos for their selfless willingness to serve even in the most challenging of times. In both situations the incoming presidents could not fulfill their duties and when I turned to Dot and Maren to ask them to serve again, neither one batted an eye.

During Dot's two years, I believe she set the record for the most media calls and interviews taken by a president. She was also responsible for the start of our Diversity Council, making a commitment to make sure our future leadership was reflective of our membership.

Again, having a Diversity Council start in 2006 was way ahead of its time. Today, in 2021, NAR is now requiring local associations as part of its Core Standards to have some component of what they do address diversity, equity and inclusion. I'm glad to see that something we have been doing for years is finally taking off! Our Association will forever be in Dot's debt for her insistence and vision.

When I called Maren to say I was in a bind because the incoming president could not serve the following year, I remember her clearly saying, "Just tell me what you need me to do." It was also during Maren's tenure that the Association signed an agreement with Peter Pappas to sell the property it owned, while retaining an acre for the Association's new headquarters and parking deck. Contract negotiations took up most of 2015 and 2016, so having the continuity of Maren serving for those two years ended up being critical to the success of the project.

Maren was also incredibly energetic and, in her 30s at the time, one of the youngest presidents to serve. She was not afraid to push the boundaries and to fight for what she believed. She is another example of a selfless servant leader, and I was so proud to watch her ascend to be the president of the state association in 2020 — a year that needed strong leaders!

When Roger Parham was elected and served as our first African American president, I remember thinking it was about time. It was almost embarrassing that we had not had an African American president at that point but again, right time, right president. Roger's charismatic personality carried us over the finish line in encouraging the NC Mountains MLS to merge with Canopy MLS after just a year and a half of wholesaling to the organization.

LITERALLY MOVING INTO THE FUTURE

As we started the design and construction of the new building, we could not have picked a better president for 2018 than Jason Gentry, who had an architecture degree and had worked in the field. He also had a keen eye for design in general and paid impeccable attention to detail — which was a huge asset during construction. It was also Jason's passion that if we were "starting anew" in our new headquarters, we ought to consider a possible new "brand" for the organization. And so the re-branding process started as we built our new HQ.

So much change culminated in 2019 when Brenda Hayden was president. Change can be hard and very disruptive, but with Brenda, whom I had met in prelicensing class at Mingle 20 years ago, it was smoother than anyone could imagine. Smooth is probably an understatement when you consider that in 2019 we changed our name, held the 10th anniversary of Realtors® Care Day, moved into our new headquarters and started the Pearl Society, marked by a commissioned sculpture in our new lobby. Again, right president, right time.



At the end of Brenda's presidential year, the senior staff all came up with three words to describe her, something we had never done. But there was something special about her, and we all felt it. A few of the adjectives to describe Brenda were: steady, poised, sincere, caring, passionate, kind and humble — in short, amazing.

And just when we thought we couldn't possibly have more change, 2020 happened. We literally spent a mere half hour at the February 2020 board meetings talking about in-person attendance and how many virtual meetings would be allowed for board members. Interestingly, board members from the Western Region strongly argued in favor of in-person meetings and then before the next meeting, COVID-19 happened.

LEADING IN A PANDEMIC

What followed was a year full of challenges more so than changes, and 2020 President John Kindbom was again the right president at the right time. John's mature confidence was exactly what we needed to get us through a year of not knowing where things were headed or when they would end. John had been my unofficial coach and mentor for years, and he and I were so looking forward to working together the year he was president, but it did not exactly turn out the way either of us had anticipated.

In my almost daily morning conversations with John he remained calm, focused and positive. He led the rest of the year virtually, something we had never experienced before. It was a year of experimenting and learning. We failed some times and we won some times, but we got through it. I don't think the year could have gone better under the circumstances. I will be forever grateful to John for his leadership and friendship.

Now, in 2021, President David Kennedy — an avid, well-read history buff, quick on his feet, comfortable in front of a camera, smart as a whip and deft with the pen — is the perfect president to lead the celebration of our 100th anniversary. Our current Board of Directors is probably the most diverse we have ever seen. Diversity, equity and inclusion are clearly part of our culture.

A FEW FINAL THOUGHTS

As I finish writing this, the Nominating Committee has begun its diligent process of identifying potential interviewees to run for president, treasurer and the boards of directors for 2022. I am confident strong leadership will continue because we are seeing success from cultivating future leaders through our Leadership Academy: the number of willing members to be interviewed is at an all-time high.

When I began as CEO, the Executive Committee was dominated by white men. I have seen it swing to all women, and we even had an entire Executive Committee that was (at least raised) Catholic — which I always found ironic considering we are in the South. As time passed, Executive Committee members became younger, and the mix of age, race and gender and gender identity continued.

But the common thread in all of the successful leaders of our organization was that they served for the right reason. They served not for themselves or their ego, but because they truly cared about the organization.

I wish I could write about all the Executive Committee members, task forces and committee chairs who have served the Association with their leadership, and all the committee members and Leadership Academy grads who have given us their valuable time over the years. Suffice it to say, Canopy has been, and continues to be, blessed with leaders who embody our mission to "lead, equip and educate" members.

And the staff and I have been equally fortunate to work right along beside them. Looking at the future of this organization, long after I am gone, I am confident it will only get better. 