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Going the extra mile is par for course when Realtor seals deals with wealthy clients

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• Audio tour: See what it's like to be a Realtor to the rich

Mary Lou Lanaux, in her red-check flannel pajamas, heard the hum of the fax machine in her living room and got to work. With an offer in hand, Lanaux, one of Atlanta's most distinctive — and successful — real estate agents, threw on a coat against winter's chill and slid into her waiting Jaguar, her husband at the wheel.

Destination: the five-acre Duluth estate of hospital administrator Patricia Parker, almost a half-hour from Lanaux's home.



Photos by KIMBERLY SMITH / Staff
(ENLARGE)

Mitch Spelios (left) pilots the family boat on Alpharetta's Lake Windward as his wife, Patrisse (center), and their real estate agent Mary Lou Lanaux ride on the lake surrounded by luxury homes. Lanaux, who sold them their lakefront home in 2005, likes to stay in touch after the sale.

It was cold and late. But the prospective buyer had given Parker until 9 a.m. the next morning to respond.

When she opened the door, Parker admits being a little stunned — and delighted — to see Lanaux.

"It was 11 o'clock at night," Parker said, "and she had on her bedroom slippers."

Lanaux shrugged it off. "That's my job," Lanaux said. "Whatever it took [to sell the house], that's what I was going to do."

She paused: "I think she was a little surprised."

Lanaux, an agent for Keller Williams, is one of dozens of Realtors in metro Atlanta who specialize in high-end properties and multimillionaire clients, the so-called luxury market where \$1 million homes represent the lower end of their listing spectrum.

Clients in that market can be quite different from typical house-hunters and often require special consideration.



(ENLARGE)

Lanaux doesn't skimp when she's selling a pricey home. She spends thousands for the best in photos and brochures, and she buys ads in slick books such as Unique Homes (in her hands).

"The biggest difference in working in the high-end market is that the buyers don't have to buy and the sellers don't have to sell," said Colorado Realtor George Harvey, a member of the National Association of Realtors' luxury home council. "It's more subjective. These are things they desire. It's nothing they need."

Agents who focus on this type of real estate perform services and employ techniques that extend far beyond customary marketing. They often cater to a clientele accustomed to pampering and frequently must accommodate quirky eccentricities to earn their commissions.

But the rewards for those willing to step up to the demands are tantalizing.

Lanaux closed on 28 properties in 2005, the most expensive of which sold for \$4.7 million. She charges a flat 6 percent fee for her services, which she often splits 50-50 with a buyer's or seller's agent.

"I don't discount, ever," Lanaux said, "but I always deliver full value."

High-class marketing

Her six-figure income comfortably supports that Jaguar XJ8, and her battery-powered Suncruiser pontoon boat on Lake Windward (crass, noisy, gas-powered watercraft are banned on the serene enclave). And it also helps with the designer-landscaped, four-bedroom Windward home, where she lives with husband, Tom, two dogs and a 37-year-old parrot.



(ENLARGE)

Mary Lou Lanaux gets the call when a property such as this Country Club of the South home in

Alpharetta — featuring seven bedrooms, nine bathrooms and two half-baths, an exercise room, a pool, a wine cellar and a private theater — goes on the market.



(ENLARGE)

Lanaux emphasizes quality and uniqueness of design and materials during her showings, like this special embossed wallpaper.



(ENLARGE)

With a blue Tiffany bag in hand (which is how she carries her sales materials), Lanaux visits a home she's listing in the Lake Windward community of Alpharetta.

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Of course, she says luxury items such as the boat and the Jaguar are part of her marketing tool kit, because her clients are most comfortable — and likely to buy — in a setting that affirms their affluent lifestyle.

Potential buyers scouting north Fulton's exclusive Windward development get a tour of the property on Lanaux's boat, complete with gourmet food and wine served in Tiffany flutes on white linen tablecloths with silver candelabra.

She has hired helicopters for airborne property tours and has been the hostess of tony, invitation-only poolside luncheons for prospective buyers at her listed properties.

When selling a home, Lanaux flies in photographers from Los Angeles, contacts from her former executive career in the film industry. A one-day shoot can cost as much as \$5,000.

She usually attends the session and hand-selects the shots to be used in her brochures.

"The front elevation has to be perfect, *perfect*," Lanaux said.

Then, she will spend as much as 60 hours composing the home descriptions for her heavy, glossy, full-color brochures. Printing the brochures usually runs about \$4,000.

She buys ads in slick books such as Unique Homes and the du Pont Registry, maintains five Web sites and targets potential clientele through ads in publications such as Variety, the Hollywood Reporter and The Wall Street Journal.

In areas that allow them — and many expensive developments forbid street-side postings — Lanaux suspends heavy white wooden for-sale signs from milled newel posts. The sturdy, deceptively simple signs feature her name dead-center in copyrighted script and her phone number, just enough information for a passenger in a moving car to absorb.

Lanaux said she spends an average of \$12,000 to \$18,000 on every house she sells.

"What can I say?" said Lanaux, her hearty laugh welling up. "It's my life."

A different kind of show

Lanaux's passion for real estate evolved from her first career as a high-ranking executive in a film distribution firm affiliated with B-movie mogul Roger Corman's Concorde Pictures.

After eight years of traveling to Los Angeles for short stints and handling most of her film-distribution business from Atlanta, Lanaux was confronted in 1993 with a request from Concorde executives that she move to the West Coast permanently.

As much as she loved the movie business, she declined and submitted her resignation.

Using their life's savings, Lanaux and her husband launched her second career on business experience, a hard-won Rolodex of contacts and a truckload of optimism.

She didn't sell a single property for 14 months.

But opportunity called in 1996 in the form of an old business contact who was planning a move to Atlanta to take the helm of a Fortune 500 company headquartered here.

"He saw my name on a listing and just assumed I was successful," Lanaux said. He hired her with instructions to close on a house in five business days.

With Lanaux at his side on the patio of a \$3.8 million Buckhead home, the executive calmly inked a \$500,000 earnest check.

While the client went off to dinner with his wife, Lanaux went home to write an offer for the house to be delivered the next morning. The seller accepted the offer that day.

Her new career was launched.

Lanaux's clients and brokers alike praise her ability to match buyers' needs with just the right property and her efforts to cover every detail of a sale.

One of her clients refused to buy any property until his dog had inspected and approved it, but the owners of the

house she was trying to interest him in wouldn't allow the dog inside.

So, Lanaux walked the client and his pooch around the home's entire exterior, allowing the dog to look in every window.

"And I walked behind them with a little thermos of water in case the dog got thirsty," Lanaux said.

The client bought the house.

Special level of treatment

Harvey, of the Realtors' association, said flawless people skills and access to elite enclaves are essential to success. "The affluent have earned, either by birthright or hard work," he said, "the right to certain special treatment."

Many of Lanaux's clients, which include show business celebrities, corporate executives and private investors, require confidentiality agreements before doing business with her. And Lanaux, in turn, requires potential buyers to provide verifiable statements of their ability to afford a seven-figure purchase before she will show them any property.

Developer David Chatham, president of the Keller Williams brokerage where Lanaux works, said he always matches Lanaux with buyers who require sensitive treatment and properties that merit special attention.

"I call her and I don't have to worry about a thing," Chatham said.

This personal attention, Harvey said, is the difference between a run-of-the-mill Realtor and a luxury agent.

"There's a lot of talk about the Internet making agents unnecessary, but that's just not true," Harvey said. "It is still an eyeball-to-eyeball people business."

But all that takes a lot of time.

Lanaux, an avid collector of seashells, recently returned from a beach vacation. The getaway was her first in two years.

Brad Mitchell, who recently listed his \$1.2 million Windward house with Lanaux, knows why.

"She," he said, "works her tail off."

Tips for everyone

Even if your home is worth just \$100,000, you can sell like the millionaires. Keller Williams agent Mary Lou Lanaux recommends the following five, inexpensive techniques that can help attract a buyer at any price point:

- **Get a current**, independent appraisal that supports your asking price. "You can't simply pull a number out of your head," Lanaux said.

- **A colorful, pristine lawn** is essential to making that important first impression on a prospective buyer.

"It's imperative that you have a manicured, emerald lawn with cloistered gardens that create a palette of color," Lanaux said.

- **The front door should be an inviting portal.** "There should be a maintained front door or entryway with urns on either side planted with perennials that mirror each other and subtly whisper, 'Welcome,'" Lanaux said.

- **Refresh your visitors.** "You should have bottled water in an attractive ice bucket readily available for prospective buyers," Lanaux said.

- **Give potential buyers a clear view.** "Your sparkling clean windows should gleam in the sun," Lanaux said.

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