No matter how you look at it, 40 years is a long time. When Unique Homes began, luxury was a very thin slice of real estate overall, not every city had a Multiple Listing Service and there were very few ways to publicize homes for sale. Changes brought by the fax, cell phones, computers and the internet all lay ahead. Today, details of a property can be broadcast worldwide within seconds of being listed. So, luxury seems everywhere, making it a challenge to sift through all the hype; real estate professionals have to be as global as they are local.

In this final celebration of all things 40, we take a look at real estate professionals who have been in the business as long as we have. What does it take to thrive over four decades? Persistence is essential, of course, but the pros we profile also point to a love of the business and passion to help people as key.

We start with a centenarian who still drives herself to work every day...

By Camilla McLaughlin

"In 1945, Ebby Halliday ventured where few women dared to go — real estate. And, while selling the American dream to others, Ebby herself came to embody the American dream — a true Horatio Alger who bootstrapped herself from a Kansas farm to selling bats in a department store to being one of the most successful Realtors in the country. Ebby led her company through decades of changing economies. Today, with more than 1,600 agents, it is the No. 1 independently owned residential real estate company in Texas and eighth in the nation."

Memorable moment: ‘Early in my career, builders had just started building $100,000 homes; very high end at the time, in Preston Hollow. To build my business, I arranged to hold open one of these homes. One Sunday a shabby old model car drove up. The builder happened to be there; I could see him shaking his head as he said, “Don’t waste your time on the occupants of that car.” I met them at the door with enthusiasm and showed them every inch of the house. After conferring privately for about 10 minutes, they called me over and proceeded to pull out $50,000 in cash! I then learned that the buyer was a Maitre’d at the old Baker Hotel and he had saved his tips from wealthy oil barons who frequented the hotel.”

Success secret: “I give credit to my management team and our many sales associates for our success. As Roger Staubach says in the preface of my book, we both had something in common — we both had great teams.”

Bob Borden

LandVest Boston, Mass.

A background in the securities business was an excellent foundation for a career helping New England’s major families make wise decisions about their holdings. Under Borden’s stewardship, LandVest has blossomed into a multifaceted company equally expert at valuing special properties, determining optimal use for large parcels of land, marketing and managing timberlands, conservation gifting and planning for family lands.

Memorable event: Selling the company to Merrill Lynch Fine Homes and then having to buy it back. As a newly minted president, Borden says the negotiating was fascinating.

Pivotal moment: Being able to reinvigorate the company. “Many who had been with the company for a long time felt that the heart of the company was gone. It’s a wonderful people story because of the amazing amount of support from the people here.”

Barbara Cleary

Barbara Cleary’s Realty Guild New Canaan, Conn.

Six college tuition propelled Cleary into real estate. Independent brokerages ruled luxury then, and Cleary remains a staunch proponent. When large corporations got into real estate in the mid 1980s, she helped found an affiliation of independents in Westchester and Connecticut. When her broker merged with Merrill Lynch, she started her own company. This year, Cleary’s Realty Guild celebrated a 25th anniversary and Cleary has received numerous industry recognitions. Looking back, she says, “What started out as a need has become a really good thing.”

Game changer: Voicemail! And “how we could have lived without cell phones.”

Biggest luxury change: Yesterday’s luxury has become today’s entitlement.

Pivotal event: Starting the System One Network and her own company simultaneously.

Memorable moment: Receiving a 2010 global award from Christie’s International Real Estate.

Ebby Halliday

Ebby Halliday Realtors Dallas, Texas

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George Damianos
Damianos Sotheby’s International Realty Nassau, Bahamas

Few college grads opted for real estate in the early 1970s. “Real estate salesmen were considered one step above a used car salesman,” Damianos says. Friends who went into law and accounting “started out making good money, but over the years the tide turned and those who were good at real estate did a lot better than many professionals.” Damianos started “at the bottom, selling whatever I could” in his father’s company. Biggest change: “The National Association of Realtors evolving into a more professional organization.”

Game changing technology: “The fax.”
Pivotal event: “Learning about franchising in 1994. When Sotheby’s offered the Bahamas franchise in 1995, Damianos was already in line.”

Memorable moment: “Selling the British Colonial Hotel in downtown Nassau in the early 1990s. All in a day’s work: Walking in to show a house and discovering a burglar in progress. Fortunately, the burglar was hitting in the attic.”

Maxine Gellens
Prudential California Realty San Diego, Calif.

A sales star even before real estate, this Prudential powerhouse received Century 21’s “Rookie of the Year” for San Diego after less than a year in the business. “Back then I really had no idea of what a goal was, but I put a picture of a cruise ship on my calendar in the office and that December my husband and I went on a cruise.” Today, being No. 1 is old hat to Gellens and her daughter, whose stack of awards include Prudencia’s top spot more than once.

Game changing: “Cell phones. ‘Before then, we ran from pay phone to pay phone.’”
Pivotal event: “Joining forces with her daughter in 1994. ‘We merged offices, going to Prudential in La Jolla, and had a huge party, including search lights to celebrate.’”


Funny anecdote: Having to present an offer that included the family dog in the sale. “The seller agreed and the new owner and dog lived happily ever after.”

Celia Dunn
Celia Dunn Sotheby’s International Realty Savannah, Ga.

When Celia Dunn got her start, there was no milkman, so finding the right house was a challenge. Men still outnumbered women in the profession, but it was one career that offered “women an opportunity to be successful if they were willing to work hard and had a high level of integrity.” Synonymous with Savannah real estate long before she founded her company 29 years ago, Dunn and her husband helped to revive the historic district.

Biggest change: “When she started, ‘people took you at your word and your word was your bond. A deal was a deal. Today, you cannot count on anything until it’s closed.”

Pivotal moment: “The boost of support she got from her broker when she decided to go out on her own.”

Memorable events: “Seeing properties in the historic district she sold decades earlier for $125,000 for over $2 million.”

Getting started: “Her first showing was in a violent thunderstorm with a tornado. ‘We never lost in this business,’ she later told her husband. But when the buyers purchased the home, Dunn says she realized, ‘By golly, maybe I can sell a house.’ And that ‘just sealed my fate in real estate.’”

Jim Gillespie
CEO, Coldwell Banker Real Estate Parsippany, N.J.

With a degree in Parks and Recreation, Gillespie envisioned a life helping kids. As CEO of Coldwell Banker, he’s helped more than he ever imagined. In 1975, a tennis pal encouraged him to try real estate. One of his first customers was the YMCA, his former employer, who called to wish him well: adding there was no way she and her husband could buy a house on their minimum wages. Gillespie told them about FHA, showed them some homes and negotiated a purchase. When the sale closed, they cried. “They never thought they could own a piece of the American dream.”

Memorable moment: “When Celia Dunn became the first woman president of the Professional Women’s Council.”

With a few of the significant luxury events where Hoffman has been present. Formerly a champion rider on the national show circuit, she also an expert on equestrian properties. The secret to her success? “I don’t take a lot of listings. I am a boutique company and I take just a few listings and work hard to get them sold.”

Hoffman International Properties Dallas, Texas

“Real estate is something I always wanted to do,” Hoffman says. The Bal de la Mer in Monte Carlo, Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance, the Salon du Cheval in Paris and dozens of charity galas are only a few of the significant luxury events where Hoffman has been present. Formerly a champion rider on the national show circuit, she also an expert on equestrian properties. The secret to her success? “I don’t take a lot of listings. I am a boutique company and I take just a few listings and work hard to get them sold.”

Luxury change: “Computers and the Internet allow individuals to live virtually anywhere.”
Pivotal moment: “Selling a 2,300-acre estate on the James River. ‘Then realized that I might actually be able to make a go of it’”

Memorable moment: “Much later, I represented the sellers and purchasers of a 6,000-acre, 82.5 million property on the James River. That certainly was the most memorable transaction thus far and probably the most memorable moment.”

Frank Hardy
Frank Hardy, Inc., Realtors Charlottesville, Va.

A lifelong affinity for the outdoors prompted Frank Hardy toward real estate after graduating from the University of Richmond. When he opened his own brokerage, he focused on upscale and country property. Today, from the Tidewater region to Charlottesville and the counties surrounding Montgomery, his name is synonymous with Virginia luxury.

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When Rita Hansen plans for a small boutique detailed, real estate called instead. A move to Colorado did little to dampen her career, which includes owning two companies and national recognition as a top producer since 1978. Developers, artists and sculptors all consider her their Realtor, as do musicians such as Willie Nelson and pro-athletes.

Game changers: “Companies offering less work for lower commissions. ‘Sellers really need to find out what agents will do to publicize the homes’.”
Pivotal event: “Selling a property, the Llama Ranch, for $4,000,000 to Charles Keating—opened eyes to bigger things.”

Memorable moment: “A Japanese executive responded to an ad (in The Urbanite). The first item on his agenda after she picked him up at the Denver airport—Selling ‘Little Bear,’ a famous bear in Evergreen. Never forgo lessons: ‘A buyer presented bank statements demonstrating his ability to purchase and left a $350,000 check as a deposit. When Hansen followed up and checked with the bank, she discovered the account balance was only $5.’”

Rita Hansen
Inter Real Estate Services Evergreen, Colo.

“Always being open to learning.”

Betty Graham
President, Coldwell Banker Previews International Beverly Hills, Calif.

Hired at age 18 to be Johnny Carson’s personal assistant — and later working behind the scenes in the film industry as a photographer — created trusted relationships long before Betty Graham began her real estate career in Malibu. Early on, Johnny Carson hired her to represent his two homes. “He was very supportive of my career and that was a gift to me,” she recalls. Graham owned her own Malibu firm, Coast and Canyon, before joining Jon Douglas Company, which merged with NRT and Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in 1997. This year Graham was named president of Coldwell Banker Previews International.

Biggest change in luxury: “The most remarkable change is the shrinking of the Internet. International used to be more smoke and mirrors and it is very concrete now in terms of marketing. Sellers want to know what you are doing for them internationally.”

Memorable moment: Johnny Carson was renowned for protecting his privacy. The sales contract for his home contained an unusual item that the buyer inadvertently mentioned to the press. Graham had to get Carson’s permission to confirm the item. His response: “You know what, it’s a cute story.” The item: The buyer, John McEnroe, had to give Mr. Carson six tennis lessons.

Secret to her success: “Always being open to learning.”

Marilyn Hoffman
Hoffman International Properties Dallas, Texas

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Luxury change: “You have to do so much more than in the past. Advertise, do brochures, websites and go to events.”

Pivotal moment: “Expanding her scope worldwide, creating one-on-one connections at top luxury events.”

Memorable sale: A $32 million house in Door County, Wis., that closed in 24 days. The home had been listed with another broker for less money for a year without selling.”

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**John Brian Losh**
Chairman, CEO 
Ewing & Clark 
Publisher, LuxeRealEstate.com 
Seattle, Wash.

“Few have the same perspective as Losh, who is a luxury broker and also runs the largest luxury group in the industry. Beginning as an individual agent and then owner of Seattle’s oldest brokerage, Ewing & Clark, Losh founded Who’s Who in Luxury Real Estate in 1987 to establish a network of independent luxury brokers. LuxurealRealty.com followed in 1995.”

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President & CEO 
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Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y.

Theatrical training and PR/marketing proved a perfect background when Peterson, a stay-at-home mom with two daughters in school full time, turned to real estate. And initially, her new position evolved into management positions and then broker/owner. The Daniel Gale Agency has been a power player in real estate on Long Island’s North Shore since 1922. Under her leadership, the company has grown to become a $2.5 billion organization with 27 offices and divisions and more than 600 associates.

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**Game changer:** Transparency. “The consumer has this information; we have the knowledge to effectively interpret that data, which leads to successful transactions.”

**Biggest luxury change:** Luxury will always represent different things to different people, but what is considered luxury now is far more inclusive than in the past.

**Pivotal event:** “Being given the opportunity by Jean and Kent Gale to purchase the majority share of the company over time.”

**Memorable moment:** Being the recipient of the first award as the No. 1 Sotheby’s International Realty affiliate in the world (a title it held for over a decade).