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JEFF CLARKE

Bill Desautels has come a long way in the real estate business since he was 18 and working for his brother

Bill Desautels has been the owner and president of RE/MAX North Professionals on Roosevelt Highway in Colchester since 1992. Forty real estate agents operate out of that office. What really put Desautels on the map is his work as The Condo Guy, backed by five Realtors and four full-time assistants.

On June 10, Bill Desautels was named Realtor of the Year by the Northwestern Vermont Board of Realtors, and, for this interview, he shared the story he told on the night he accepted the honor.

According to Desautels, his father, a part-time real estate agent and full-time mailman, promised that when he landed his first sale, he'd buy his son a new 10-speed bike.

There was only one problem. "It seemed like it took forever, because he was so honest that he would tell people not to buy for one reason or another," recalls Desautels, admitting, "My dad wasn't very good at real estate."

What his father lacked in sales skills, however, he made up for by being unashamedly honest. "He's the most honorable man I know," says Desautels.

Eventually, his father made that first sale and delivered the bike as promised. The lesson was twofold, says Desautels: Real estate — even back then — offered tangible rewards; and, perhaps more important, honesty in all dealings is important, no matter what the cost.

Since 2002, Desautels has been owner and president of RE/MAX North Professionals in Colchester, which boasts 37 real estate agents. Desautels operates his own venture under that umbrella: The Condo Guy, a name under which he is well known, especially in Chittenden County.

He has, he says, tried to hold both RE/MAX and The Condo Guy to the same sense of honor he learned from his father and from previous RE/MAX owner Tom Thompson — or at least, he says, the best imitations he can muster. "I'll never be able to walk in my dad's shoes, but I can hope to walk in his footsteps. If I could ever get close to walking in his footsteps, I'll be a lucky guy."

He holds all his RE/MAX agents to the same sterling standard — no exceptions.

"If I ever feel that a real estate agent on a team here has questionable ethics or questionable professionalism, no matter how much money they're bringing in to me, I will terminate them in a heartbeat," says Desautels. "Frankly, my personal reputation and the reputation of this company matters more to me than what goes into my wallet."

Desautels wears many hats in his business, but he's probably best known for his work as The Condo Guy. A Certified Residential Specialist, not only is he a Realtor for people looking to buy and sell

condos, but he also does consulting work, lending his expertise on buyer preferences to development teams to ensure a marketable end product.

In particular, Desautels enjoys his work on affordable housing, an endeavor he says may not always fill company coffers, but is nonetheless rewarding. His consulting work with various land trusts on these projects takes him as far away as Stowe, Middlebury, and Montpelier.

Real estate developer Eric Farrell has built condominium units in the Burlington area such as Eastwood Commons I and II, and Desautels has handled all of his marketing for the last three or four years.

"He's sold about 150 units for me, and he also did some consulting work as we were developing the product to bring to the market. He's very well informed and high energy and colorful to deal with."

As head of The Condo Guy team, Desautels is backed by an ever-evolving group of agents and assistants. He started developing his team in the early '90s, two years after joining RE/MAX. It has grown to include nine members — five Realtors and four full-time assistants — to meet the growing volume of business. The Condo Guy has gone from selling 18 condos in his first year to a best year of 440 sold.

He says that one of his favorite parts

of running the business is training and motivating his employees. "I love training and teaching them and mentoring them to become better real estate agents."

An example is his recent walk with new agents along the entire length of Kennedy Drive, stopping at every condominium project along the way. "I tell them everything I can think about that project and why somebody may want to live there, and why somebody may not for a different variety of reasons," he says, with more than a hint of passion in his voice. "Whether it's real estate or anything else, you've got to know your product."

Those agents are expected, in turn, to impart that knowledge to clients. It's a win-win situation, he says. "I really believe that the more educated the buying and selling public is, the better off I am."

In real estate where the stakes are high, and lost opportunities could be counted in six figures, it's important for his employees to be on top of their game, he says. Even then, Desautels allows little down time. "We have a saying here. No matter what just happened — no matter how bad it was — you have, absolute max, 15 minutes for your pity party," he says. "Because you have other people that need you for the rest of the day."

He may ask a great deal of his team,

The Condo Guy practice has gone from selling 18 condos the first year to a best year of 400 sold. His sister, Patricia Desautels (left), works on special projects; Jess Peck, is new construction liaison; and Nate Malley and Allyson Nadeau are Realtors.



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RE/MAX North Professionals

but he goes to great lengths to boost office morale. The RE/MAX office space, which Desautels calls "a living, breathing workspace," offers agents and employees such luxuries as an office shower and a massage room.

Desautels takes members of his team on vacation when they've been working particularly long hours, offering things like a shopping spree in New York City, and plans what he calls a "day of mirth," when a member of the team can choose a group activity for all to enjoy.

Reaching this point has not been quick or easy. Desautels' history with condominiums reaches back many years. While studying to pass his real estate exam, he worked days tarring condominium foundations, and nights as a security guard in a condominium project. In 1978 at age 18, he earned his real estate license, and in his first full year barely made \$6,000.

Just about everyone tried to convince him to quit the business, but Desautels recalls his parents' encouraging him to stick with it. A neophyte in the industry, he was working for his brother, David Desautels. Back then, he says, it was all about learning scripts and dialogs and knocking on doors to deliver them.

He admits to being out of his element at the time. "I had a mouthful of braces, I didn't own a car, I didn't own a suit. I was as introverted as introverts get."

He persisted, though, and over time, all of that pavement-pounding brought him out of his shell and would serve him later, as the industry changed and technology became both a boon and a potential pitfall for real estate.

While technology has streamlined some processes, it has become a crutch for some, he laments.

"Some people are so hyper-connected to all of these Web presences. I think it's all fine and good — it's a great tool — but I think the smarter real estate agent should marry it into the old-fashioned approach, which is what we used to call the belly-to-belly." That means making a personalized call or meeting in person instead of spending the day attached to a blue-tooth and a keyboard.

Desautels continues to practice what he preaches, using more old-fashioned methods of reaching the general public, including an extensive mailing list that, he says, includes the 7,000 or so condo-

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miniums in the greater Burlington area.

The area is home to him. A fourth-generation Vermonter, Desautels was born and raised in Burlington's Old North End. He lives in a home in Colchester, though is also the owner of two condos: the RE/MAX offices — technically a condominium — and a retreat in Montreal.

Travel is his recreation. He mentions that in his youth, he took a year off to backpack around the globe with stops in China, India, and Africa. He's also an avid exerciser and reader — up to six books at a time, mostly business-related material.

The passion and drive with which he lives his personal life reflects the sort of drive Desautels says is needed to succeed in the real estate industry. "I really think that the energy you bring to that table — and it could mean the calm energy — has to be there," he says.

"You have to be right in there for that conversation and not care about what the outcome is for yourself. If you're married to the outcome, your decision and your



JEFF CLARKE

The RE/MAX office space, which Desautels calls "a living, breathing workspace," offers agents and employees luxuries such as an office shower and massage room. Susan Brown (left) is financial manager; Lee Moffitt, operations manager; and Judy Brace, closing coordinator.

guidance are going to be all about you and not about the client."

It all comes back to those lessons learned long ago. "I don't necessarily

want to be the largest agency, and I don't need to be number one in sales, but I want to be known as the most respected agency in the area." ●

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