

los angeles/san fernando valley edition

BROKER★AGENT™

magazine

Susan Blau &
Ben Di Benedetto
broker/agents of the month

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Team

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Imagine you are a homeowner sitting on quite a bit of equity. You love the area, and you've made some memories there, but the house just isn't meeting your needs. So you are vacillating between selling and remodeling your home to better fit your lifestyle.

You get a referral to a trusted real estate team, and you inform them of your dilemma. They carefully look over the house, and then, to your surprise, they tell you they don't think it's in your best interest to sell. Rather, they recommend, you should refinance, cash out some of that equity, remodel, and stay put.

Sound like a fantasy? Not when you work with the team of Susan Blau and Ben Di Benedetto of Keller Williams Realty—Studio City.

This talented duo began working together in 1999 after meeting the year prior, and helped open Studio City market center for Keller Williams Realty, along with their operating partners and seven agents, in 2004. Today this office has 130 agents and occupies over 14,000 square feet of custom office space while continuing to grow at a rapid pace.

In addition, Susan and Ben are in the top one percent of agents worldwide and their production ranked third in the region and 96th in the nation in 2005. Not bad statistics when you work with a company that ranks as the fourth largest in North America.

Through it all, they continually amaze clients with their extensive knowledge and broad skill set, which includes a host of services that go far beyond the norm, and an honesty that is both surprising and refreshing.

"In addition to the typical services you would expect from a team of real estate professionals, we also offer detailed market analysis, an extensive library of materials for seniors and baby boomers, the ability to tackle relocation needs, consultations that address real estate tax transfers and private annuity trusts, as well as the retention of current property tax bases and the transfer of that tax base to other purchases," said Susan. "We sit down with people getting divorced who don't know how to proceed and figure out how to refinance them and improve their financial outlook. That's not something we do for profit; we do it to help people get into a better situation."

Added Ben: "We have people who don't know if they should sell or



Ben & Susan A Great Team—at Work and Play

add on. We will counsel them, and introduce them to our myriad of resources, including architects and designers, when needed. In fact, we have told a number of people they shouldn't sell."

Continued Susan: "Those are our biggest advocates. They remodel their house and then refer their aunt Susie to us."

Referral business is perhaps the best indicator of respect and success in real estate, and the team of Susan and Ben is proud to be at the point where their client base feeds on itself because of the reputation they have built. And they are equally proud of the caliber of clients who are drawn to them.

"We have worked very hard to build our business to the level it is today and establish a reputation for excellence," said Susan. "It's wonderful to be able to achieve a measure of success without compromising your values, and to know that the clients you have appreciate you not just because you can get them a good deal, but because of how you go about it."



Added Ben: "The basic premise of sales is that people like people most like themselves. If we're ethical, most of the people we attract will also be ethical. They are a reflection of us. If we were not ethical people and we attracted other unethical people, it would make it very difficult to do our job or enjoy our lives."

Continued Susan: "Nice people do seem to seek us out. I actually just got off the phone with a referral who immediately told me he hated brokers. The bad part is, I can't necessarily argue with him. When the market is hot like it has been recently, everyone comes out of the woodwork to get his or her real estate license, and not everyone is so concerned with being decent. We are also fortunate that the Keller Williams ideal is predicated on having educated, well-rounded brokers who believe in achieving a win-win situation and doing business in such a way that everyone comes away feeling they were treated fairly. As corny as it sounds, that's how we run our business."

Treating clients fairly is only part of the equation; another is being knowledgeable enough to properly guide clients through the maze of homebuying and selling.

"We are problem solvers and we have a huge base of knowledge. After 30 years in this business, it would be hard not to," said Susan. "As seasoned veterans, we've seen just about everything. We take great pleasure in assisting agents in our office, and even greater pleasure providing a level of expertise to our clients."

A critical aspect of that expertise is how the team responds to changing markets.

"We know how to market property in every market," said Susan, who is also a licensed broker. "We have been through three or four drastic market changes during the last 30 years. We have no fear when it comes to changing marketplaces, and can adjust in order to better serve our clients."

One thing that is always constant regardless of prevailing conditions is how the team markets properties for sale.

"Our value proposition is our marketing and our service," said Ben. "We have a staff in the office that includes a seasoned agent, a buyer's agent, two part-time assistants, and one full-time office manager/assistant. They do a lot of the paperwork and administrative stuff, and the two things we maintain total control over are marketing and client contact. We spend quite a bit of money on advertising and marketing. We have a 48-foot billboard, a kiosk in a local mall, advertisements in three different magazines and two newspapers, we own 40 Internet domain names, and we just started publishing our own 12-page community and real estate-related newspaper that goes to our market-area clients."

With all the effort they exert on behalf of their clients, it is no wonder that those who work with them can't say enough good things.

"When you hire Ben and Susan, you've got an awesome tag team with a great supporting cast," said client Christopher Harwood. "Between them they've got more experience than almost any two agents in town, much less the country. They've seen it all and have a solution to every twist and turn that selling or buying a house will throw at you. Their resources are endless and they surround themselves with solid people with tons of integrity. During this most recent real estate boom, a lot of novices got into the game. Susan and Ben are pros. A novice will get you lost. Ben and Susan will take you by the hand and lead you through the forest like any great guide, and they'll do it with a smile and a laugh. Even if you've bought and sold many homes in your life, you know that smart homeowners always surround themselves with the best. Ben and Susan are the very best."





Of course, the old saying goes that the best never rest, and Ben and Susan's time, effort, and commitment are paramount. Fortunately, the time spent is enjoyable because they both love what they do.

"It's a fascinating business because every client and every deal is different," said Ben, whose interest in architecture and design certainly comes in handy in real estate. "No matter how much you think you know, you are always learning in this business, so it is constantly motivating. Finding the right house for each individual client is challenging, and that is one of both of our strengths."

Added Susan: "I ran a successful real estate practice before Ben joined me, so I bring extensive experience and a great deal of marketing expertise that's critical to real estate. Ben is well versed in the ins and outs of the corporate world, and is great with people. Everyone always trusts him immediately. He's like that pooch with the big brown eyes. I call him 'The Bald Guy'."

Her nickname for him is a term of endearment, of course. After all, the two are not just a successful pair at the office.

"We met each other late in life," said Susan. "I was a single mother with a son that was about to turn 11" (the "Apple of their eye" is now 20 and a student at the University of Pennsylvania). "We met, fell in love, and got married."

Their partnership soon transferred over to business, and Ben found his niche alongside Susan in real estate.

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"He was doing corporate turnaround and saw what a great time I was having in my real estate practice," she said. "He had grown tired of his profession, so he decided to go get his license and become my partner."

Added Ben: "I was at a point in my career where I didn't know what I wanted to do. I was well compensated but was bored. If I was going to work that hard, I wanted it to be for me, and something I was interested in. Not to mention the fact that with our different schedules, we hardly got to see each other."

Thankfully, those days are gone, and the pair—who are also active in community organizations and outreach including the Business Improvement District for Studio City (Ben is a Director), the Studio City Chamber (Susan is a Director), the East Valley YMCA (Susan is a Manager on the Board), and the YMCA Lakeside Golf Tournament (Ben is on the Board), as well as the Studio City Neighborhood Council (Ben was the Founding Chairman)—soon found they were just as compatible in business as they are at home.

"We both have a passion for real estate, and we are both well suited for it," said Susan. "We have similar taste but different strengths, and we complement each other well. People always say we're great together."

Added Ben: "We're a great team because we approach things from a different angle. Susan is cut and dry, and numbers and task-oriented. She is outstanding at contracts and negotiating. I'm very people oriented."

The couple has been working together for seven years, but the only itch they have is for more of the same, which is music to their clients' ears.

"My deep appreciation goes out to Ben, Susan and all of their fine staff," said client Bill Brier. "They did a magnificent job from beginning to end. They did everything they said they would do—to the max!"

That kind of client satisfaction is a driving factor for Ben and Susan. No matter what's happening in the market, no matter how many years they have been in the business, no matter how impressive their production, one thing always remains constant: it's the people that matter most. That's how they turn clients' real estate fantasies into attainable realities. ★

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