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The million-dollar babies

Seems like yesterday they were getting allowances. Now it's commission checks from megabuck sales.

BY GAYLE POLLARD-TERRY
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Acting on the recommendation of a friend, Ismael Diego made an appointment to meet a new real estate agent. When he opened his door, he got quite a surprise.

"She looked 17," said Diego, who is 57 and owns restaurants in Culver City and Santa Monica.

At 20, Crystal Carter may not be old enough to drink, but she is old enough to handle a real estate transaction. The minimum age to qualify for a real estate sales license in California is 18.

Carter is among a growing number of realty agents younger than 30. Ranging from newcomers who live with parents or survive on part-time

jobs to successful twentysomethings who bring home big commission checks, they represented 5%, or 63,000, of the 1.265 million agents and brokers who belong to the National Assn. of Realtors, when last counted in 2005, said spokesman Walter Molony. And their ranks have more than doubled from 1999.

Diego's initial response was not unusual. Young agents stand out in a profession with a median age of 52, Molony said, because most agents are on their second career.

Not Madison Hildebrand. He's not even close to getting an AARP card.

The 26-year-old "rookie" agent of Bravo TV's "Million Dollar Listing," said he was discouraged from entering a field dominated by baby boomers.



*YOUNG AGENTS: Clockwise, from top:
Max Shapiro, 23; Scott M. Price, 29;
Madison Hildebrand, 26; Crystal Carter, 20.*

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"Everyone told me I was too young to be successful in this business," he said, especially in a fiercely competitive real estate market like Malibu. "The price tags of the homes were too high, the buyers and sellers were too sophisticated, and my face was too young."

Hildebrand was licensed at 24, and his first official listing was the Malibu home his parents owned. When they decided to put their three-story Mediterranean on the market, he handled everything. Including that large, four-bedroom home, his first-year sales totaled just over \$17 million.

This year, Hildebrand, who is with Coldwell Banker's Malibu West office, expects to close \$28 million in sales.

He's certainly not the only agent who got his start with help from family members.

The family business

Agent Crystal Carter also got her first listing from her parents, in August, a month before she turned 20. Her father, record executive Terry Carter, wanted \$2 million for a five-bedroom, four-bathroom house in Encino.

"Have you ever seen that show 'Flip This House'? My dad could have invented that," said Carter, whose 26-year-old sister, Nekaya, got her broker's license in October and recently opened Carter Brokerage Inc. in Inglewood. "He used to tell me all the time ... to get into this business. 'I'm giving my money away to these agents.'"

Her youth and inexperience didn't bother her dad, but buyer Diego was another story.

"He was very uneasy. He said I didn't have any experience," Carter said of the client she still calls "Mr. Diego." But, she added, "he gave me a try."

The young agent convinced him "she knew what she was doing," Diego said, by the way she spoke and handled herself. She showed him the modern-style house in Encino, and Diego said he fell in love with it. Escrow closed a month later.

Max Shapiro's father, Stephen, never pushed him to get in the biz, although Stephen Shapiro has been working in luxury real estate for nearly three decades. A co-founder of Westside Estate Agency in Beverly Hills, the senior Shapiro has built a wealthy, celebrity-studded clientele who purchase and sell homes in the most exclusive ZIP Codes of West Los Angeles.

"He told me to do whatever I wanted to," said Max Shapiro, who just turned 23.

But when he dropped out of college after his first semester, his father gave him a deadline. In one year, he had to be out of the family home.

So at 19, he became an agent.

Like most new agents, he had a hard time getting listings since most buyers and sellers find their agents through referrals.

"I needed my father's help," he said. His father gave him an agency listing -- a four-bedroom house in need of remodeling, the younger Shapiro said, but it had a great location in the Beverly Hills post office area. He sold it for \$1.6 million in 2003. His commission worked out, he said, to \$42,000 after taxes.

But he didn't go on a spending binge. "My dad is very strict about teaching me the ways of money," he said. He deposited it straight into his bank account, saving to support himself.

Business picked up as his friends and their parents started selling and buying houses.

He handled \$48 million in sales in 2005 and has sold \$34 million this year. He also appeared in VH-1's "The Fabulous Life Presents: Really Rich Real Estate."

He now considers his age an advantage. "A younger client can relate to me more."

And there are more young clients these days, especially in celebrity-rich Los Angeles. Nationwide, the percentage of buyers younger than 25 increased from 11% in 2001 to 14% in 2005, the Realtors trade group reported.

His celebrity clients include Lindsay Lohan, Frankie Muniz, Brittany Snow and A. Jay Popoff, lead singer of the band Lit. Sports clients include NBA stars Baron Davis, Trevor Ariza and Dijon Thompson, all former UCLA players Shapiro met through connections he made when he was a high school basketball standout.

Connections, however, haven't immunized him from the housing market's slowdown.

He recently gave a private showing of a two-bedroom, three-bathroom Malibu beach house, on an acre of land, with stairs down to the ocean, a two-unit guesthouse and celebrity neighbors -- Brad Pitt in one direction and Cindy Crawford in the other. Listed for nine months, the price has dropped from \$10 million to \$7 million.

"I have shown this house over 100 times," he said. "I don't mind. It's for a friend. It's going to sell eventually, and it's a big payday." Today, that house is in

escrow.

Hugo Mendez, 26, hasn't had his real estate license long enough to show anything 100 times. He got it in late October.

He hustled on a recent Sunday, working several hours as a freelance DVD editor before heading over to Los Feliz. There, he baby-sat two open houses for new Spanish-style town homes on behalf of more experienced agents Janice Hou and Scott M. Price, who were busy working another open house. The agents are all with Prudential California Realty, John Aaroe Division, in Santa Monica.

With heavy foot traffic all day in response to a price reduction to \$725,000 on the smaller condo, Mendez fielded questions as seven prospective buyers crowded into the trilevel unit.

As he prepared to end the open houses, two USC law school students showed up. They scrutinized each condo and talked about the "Trojan network" to Mendez, also a USC grad.

He didn't rush them, although he worried about being late for his job as the host at a sushi restaurant in Venice.

Mendez is also relying on a little help from family members. "I moved back home to pursue this career," he said.

Building momentum

Hou, 27, also lived at home her first year as an agent. "I made no money," she said. "My first check was for \$8,000." That was in 2004 as she built up business. She did a good deal better in 2005, with sales of \$12 million, and this year her total is just over \$8.3 million.

Price, 29, worked as a server at a Chinese restaurant his first year as an agent. Last year, his first full year, he had \$8.18 million in sales, and he racked up more than \$14.2 million this year.

Neither launched their real estate career with a listing from their parents, however, like Carter, Hildebrand and Shapiro.

Is this a good job for someone between the ages of 18 and 29?

"If you're young and you know a lot of people that are in the market for buying, then yes it is," Max Shapiro said. "If you are graduating high school and you don't want to go to college and you can't figure out what you want to do, no it's not good. You are going to be sitting there making no money, wasting time."

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Diane Wedner contributed to this article.