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ask the EXPERTS

With the economy still in a wicked mess, reports are that the latest trend in homebuying is *not* buying. Renters are on the rise. But are they? Real estate source Inman reported in January that it is cheaper to buy in the majority of the country's larger cities. Keith Jurow reported last year on World Property Channel that a Harris Interactive survey found renting a better option. So which is it? We asked locals in the industry how the trends are swaying the Dallas housing market and the frustrations behind them.

MICHAEL LITZINGER

William Davis Realty Uptown

The trend has affected my business significantly. The firm I recently moved to seems to be more in tune with today's market. Their streamlined, online process requires less paperwork which makes it better for the client, a much quicker turn around for me and better for the environment.

Leasing does move property these days, and I am just glad the industry moves in some fashion whether it's leasing or selling.

I do think the trend has affected us locally somewhat, but not nearly as severely as in most other areas. I still feel good about the Dallas market. I know Realtors in other areas that can't say the same.

Buyers are decreasing to some degree. Even with low interest rates, I've had a lot of buyers come to me and then disappear.

DERRICK DAWSON

Texas Pride Realty

As an active and producing Realtor also working in property management, I'd say the rental trend has picked up significantly, but that doesn't mean it's been ideal for property renters/owners or for the multi-family industry. The rental market has been stable but faces some challenges based on broken leases due to financial hardship or unemployment. Many are playing it safe by downsizing or combining rental homes based on economic conditions, being fearful of keeping their jobs and saving for the future.

Today is a buyer's market and an ideal time to get out of the rent race. The downfall to the buyer's market that I have seen personally is buyers and investors taking advantage of desperate people in today's markets, possibly causing detriment to individuals or families in their time of need but also bringing down values in

those areas making it harder for others to sell.

DAN FLYNN

Dave Perry-Miller InTown

The trend of leasing over buying has changed the way I preview properties in my area. Leasing is so hot now, I've looked at rentals and try to know the different apartment communities close by. Now I am much faster to respond to leasing needs.

I process far more leases to build my future list of clients. I try to educate and prepare them for the buying process down the road. Using a Realtor to find the perfect place to lease makes a lot of sense for those wanting to buy in the future but also for those who don't really want to do the legwork.

I recently represented a seller who could not sell his property for the amount he was hoping for. Finding qualified buyers in his market and price range wasn't easy. Another

Realtor's client was interested in leasing the property so I had to have that conversation with my seller. The seller decided to go with the lease. While sales are still going strong, leasing has increased. While this really is the time to buy, I think all the media attention scares buyers. Potential buyers need to know that the market is stable here and we are one of the cities leading the nation in sales right now. Go buy a house now or pay more for it later both in price and interest rates.

KEITH M. THOMAS

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Although the economy has definitely affected us here, it is worse in other areas of the country. Dallas continues to grow and so I feel the trend's impact on Dallas has been positive.

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 EXPERTS page 14



Michael Litzinger



Keith M. Thomas



Derrick Dawson

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Cameras follow Leslie Birkland, right, and goddaughter Kalyn Braun in 'Big Rich Texas' which also features Birkland's new Dallas-area estate.

cougar's DEN

'Big Rich Texas' star Leslie Birkland found house shopping in Dallas easy — with some high-end help, of course

By Rich Lopez

Being blonde and beautiful never hurts — especially in Dallas. Blonde, beautiful and rich is even better. Leslie Birkland dealt with some hefty drama in the just-finished season of *Big Rich Texas*, but maybe the biggest drama was finding a new home in the area to partake in Dallas society, men and the pageant scene. Birkland calls Big D home, for now, and becoming a denizen wasn't so difficult.

"My house was pretty easy to find and prices are just right now," Birkland says. "I kept hearing Dallas hadn't been hit really in the [economic] crisis."

She was a bit overwhelmed upon coming to the city to join her cousin (and castmate) Connie and to oversee her goddaughter Kalyn's pageant career. Thinking the idea was to settle in Dallas proper, she found that wasn't reasonable to live a certain lifestyle and be comfortable. She found she didn't have to live in Highland Park.

"Everyone was so willing and a lot of Realtors were coming out of the woodwork quickly to help out," she says. "But it was Connie's husband John that pointed me elsewhere to look."

For anyone looking to buy another home, she says once you've done it, you know how to negotiate what you need and it goes far eas-

ier the second time. Although she won't divulge exactly where she lives, she describes it as about 45 minutes northwest of Dallas. As for the house — well let's just say she's kept up with the Joneses just fine, if not blowing them out of the water.

"It's about the same 6,000 square feet as my house in Washington with eight bedrooms and three kitchens," she says. "It's pretty grand! It's so elegant and beautiful with these big columns. That's new to me. And sometimes when you want a bit more land, you have to go out to where it's spread out. I love it."

But Birkland's celebrity going to be an issue with the neighborhood? She says no. As the cameras are rolling for *Big Rich Texas*, the Style Network has stayed out of sight of the neighbors or respected their privacy as well. In turn, Birkland says the people around her seem not to care all that much about the little piece of TV reality happening right next door.

"They see what's going on and they may ask, but it's no thing for them," she laughs.

For the average person, that amount of square feet seems like a daunting task to move in to. But rich folks do it differently. Birkland has no projects for the house per se. Updating a room with paint or doling pieces of furniture among eight rooms isn't necessary. Higher end homes with specific interiors come as an entire package. Basically, this is not a fixer-upper.

"Yeah, I'm not doing anything," she chuckles. "With homes like these, there are furnishings specifically designed for the house, so there's nothing I'm doing in that regard."

As for getting used to Dallas, Birkland is dealing with learning a new

city, navigating high society and handling some real-life drama all in front of a camera. Before she moved here, she researched maps, but found it difficult to gauge distance from the heart of the city. Initially, she leased a house just a couple of miles from her cousin in Highland Park.

"People would ask me where I lived and I didn't know," she says. "Then I'd just say Highland Park, but where I was wasn't Highland Park and that was a whole thing!"

She takes it all with a sense of humor. Especially since she's been labeled the cougar of the show. Romancing the likes of Anthony Dorset Jr. (son of the former Dallas Cowboy) and a young golf pro known only as A.J., she's definitely a connoisseur of the younger man, but for her cougar-dom, she seems to roll her eyes at her cougar-dom.

"I do like men that are younger. but I didn't realize I was a cougar," she says. "It's funny, but definitely not icky. There's a line not to cross. I never want to be old enough to be their mother. I already have three sons! But the men I date are just about 10 years younger. If it was 15 or 20 years difference, then I could see that."

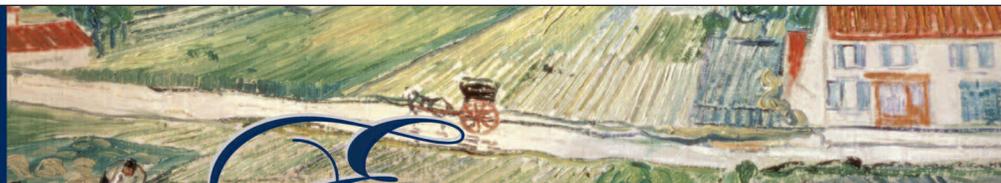
The next season hasn't started filming yet and Birkland is just fine with that right now. She has enough on her plate to keep her busy supporting her lavish lifestyle, whether it's business or fun.

"Through my property investments and CDs, I have a comfortable lifestyle," she says. "Plus, I'm very conservative with money and do some modeling on the side. As for being here, well, it's only been six months and I'm not used to the roads, but I'm learning the neighborhoods and getting familiar with them." **DH**

For more about the show, visit MyStyle.com/BigRichTexas

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PEAK pocket

An eclectic community finds solace in a tiny East Dallas 'hood'

By Rich Lopez



On the whole, East Dallas has a solid reputation as the quirky part of town. Artists and musicians find cheap properties to rent and homeowners find a sort of refuge that's not like any other. But look a little closer and the area is divided into several neighborhoods such as Munger Place and Junius Heights. As historic districts, they keep up the heritage of the area, but a street over and the denizens of Peak Suburban and Mill Creek do their own thing.

"We're all a little off-kilter here," Charlie Jenks laughs.

Jenks lives in a patch of neighborhood called Mill Creek with his partner of 25 years, Eric White. Sectioned off between Fitzhugh and Haskell avenues, the tiny area has been both a haven for Jenks and White as well as quite a find. The couple moved here from Baton Rouge and was intent on finding an older neighborhood. A friend told them to go east.

"It took a while to find this part of town," Jenks says. "We knew we wanted to an old part of town. We had gone to Oak Cliff, looked in Oak Lawn because of the community, but we finally came to look here. This house being larger, we knew this is the one."

That was 21 years ago. Beginning with what White describes as a teardown that was boarded up with no plumbing or even doorknobs, they have now renovated into exactly the home they wanted.

"When we moved in, there was lots of sketchy people around," White says. "We couldn't afford to buy this house now."

The old neighborhood that was once spotted with substance abusers, homeless drifters and prostitutes evolved into an attractive area. With yuppies jogging in the streets and same-sex couples walking their dogs, Mack Anderson now sees a small utopia, but without the invasion of big stores and McMansions.

"It hasn't really gentrified through the

years here," he says.

Anderson lives in the micro historic district of Peak Suburban within Mill Creek. A street away from friends and neighbors Jenks and White, Anderson revels in the overall feel of the magnificent trees, the different people and the big porches.

"Sometimes I just take my dinner out there and see what's going on," he says. "It's better than TV."

His Victorian home, which was also renovated, is thought to have been build in the 1880s.

Now retired, Anderson liked that his commute downtown was only five minutes. That factored big into his day-to-day living, but the texture of the area was a big selling point when he bought in the early '80s.

"You don't find that kind of diversity anywhere else, we all get along," he says. "Here you have Irish, German, Hispanic and everyone gets along fine. It's like the way the world should be."

Add to that a bustling number of gay residents. The diversity and eclecticism of the area resonates with LGBT homebuyers and owners for similar reasons Oak Cliff does.

"I think we've always been here," Anderson laughs. "I think us gay people want projects, want big houses and we're the only ones willing to get things started. That makes a statement to others who follow the risk to bring up the neighborhood."

Jenks and White feel good about being able to fit in and be proud.

"The flag goes up twice a year," Jenks says. "There are several gay people around and the neighborhood associations and straight friends are all gay friendly, we've never not felt comfortable here."

But while buying a home is not impossible in this is East Dallas pocket, Anderson makes a point about how great his spot is.

"If it has a good feel, it doesn't matter where it is," he says, "so I found that the people who move here, stay here." **DH**



Charlie Jenks, above left, and Eric White enjoy their front porch in the East Dallas neighborhood of Mill Creek. Sprawling back yards and Victorian homes such as Mack Anderson's, previous page, dot the Peak Suburban district within Mill Creek. (Photos by Rich Lopez)

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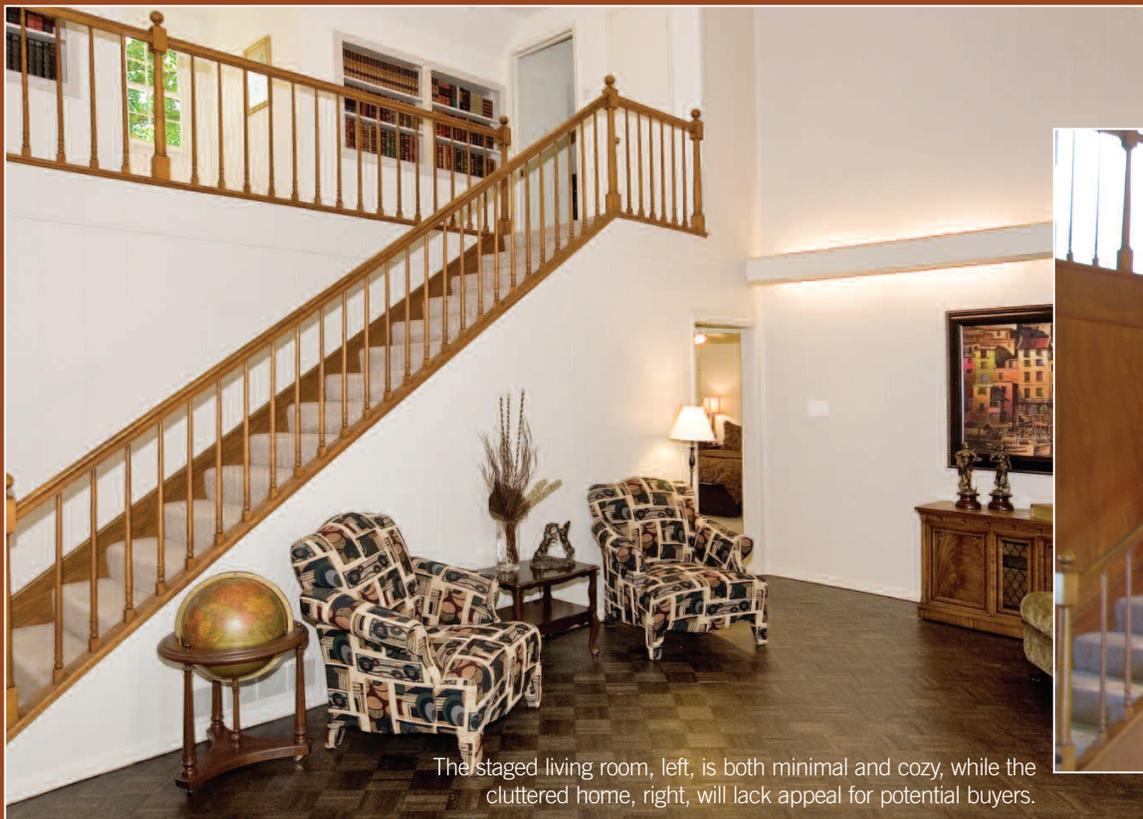
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[READY TO SELL]



The staged living room, left, is both minimal and cozy, while the cluttered home, right, will lack appeal for potential buyers.

STAGE *fright*

Robert Jory offers relief in the daunting task of getting your home ready to sell

By Jonanna Widner

Selling your house isn't just an ordeal, it's a competition. As potential buyers head to sites like Inman.com or Trulia.com for

research, those sites offer peeks inside to give an idea how the house can be used. Does yours look like a livable space or is it a click away from missing out?

Dallas Realtor and stager Robert

Jory offers tips on both preparing your home to sell and when it's time to call in an expert. Staging can sometimes be just a deep cleaning and clever furniture rearranging, but Jory points out that every so often he

needs to point people in the right direction. And with so many, getting started it can be overwhelming. "We provide basic staging services free, like arranging furniture and giving color advice," he says. "We point out to the homeowner what needs to be packed away and which furniture needs to be removed. A lot of staging is removing and arranging furniture in an appealing way." It's all a trick of the eye. Less furniture makes a room look larger. This is good, but staging should convey

Fabulous Home by Steve Hild



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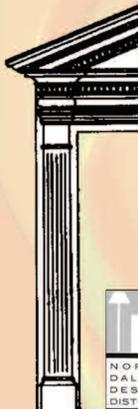


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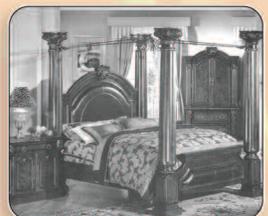


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something about the house's character and still resonate with a buyer. Buying a house is one of the biggest financial investments anyone will make and a lot of emotion goes with that.

"If you can create a good emotional feeling then you are 80 percent of the way to selling that home," Jory says. "Balance is key. You don't want potential buyers spending all their time admiring items. People feel good about homes where there is no clutter and a minimal amount of decorative items."

Clutter is a big issue and Jory stresses that point the most. If but one thing is to be done before anything else, he advises to edit down. Even if there isn't time to set up or stage everything else.

"De-clutter!" he exclaims. "It is very difficult for people to remove the items they have lived with for years. They don't realize how much stuff they have."

While you create the ideal image of both a house and home, ironically you don't want it to be too personal. Family pictures, odd souvenirs, religious and political items might steer potential buyers away.

"You don't want the buyers to be thinking of you," he says "you just want them thinking of your great home."

Of course, Jory could just do the work for you. Depending on your budget, his job can be to do the quick stuff of arranging the house, or it can extend to repainting a room and even new furniture of the temporary kind.

"After we provide a free home preparation report which outlines repairs and improvements room by room, then the homeowner can choose what they want to do depending on their budget," he says. "After improvements are made, we come out and stage the home with either the homeowner's furniture or sometimes we'll use rental furniture or provide our own if available."

For this market, such lengths are worthwhile. The goal is to sell and a nicely wrapped package can do just that.

"Ultimately, if [a buyer] falls in love with the home, it's sold," he says. **DH**

For more information, visit RobertJory.com.



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[REMODEL]



Super (RE)model

Remodeler Chris Sandlin says slow your roll before that redux

By Jonanna Widner

As a third-generation home-builder and remodeler, it's no surprise that Chris Sandlin opted out of a journalism career and instead chose the family business. He made the change in 2005 and with such a history of the industry in his blood already, Sandlin brings a fairly unique perspective to the market.

"I'm 30 years old, which is relatively young compared to others in my position," he says. "But I put a lot of time and energy into the right team of workers and sub-contractors to customers' homes so the end result lives up to what the homeowners deserve. As a gay business owner, I'm happy in providing stellar home services to the community."

Before moving forward with that remodel, Sandlin says to think before demolishing.

KNOW WHEN TO REMODEL:

"I commonly work with homeowners to determine whether it makes more sense to remodel or move. I approach each situation openly and honestly, and try my best to suggest what I think would be best, even if that means I don't win the job."

REMODEL BEFORE SELLING:

"This is usually the case with older homes that have not been remodeled recently. Homeowners accept my guidance for what sells. I have a good combination of experience in the homebuilding and real estate industry.

"There is a catch-22 here. If the house sells quickly, homeowners in won't have time to experience the finished remodel project which tends to be the kitchen or master bath."

OVERKILL:

"This can happen very easily. Most \$250,000 homes

do not need a \$50,000 bathroom redo, nor does a \$300,000 home need a \$100,000 commercial grade kitchen. A wide variety of factors need to be considered, including how long they plan to stay in the home, what's the budget, how it adds to the home's value."

BUDGET HELP:

"When in the budgeting/planning phase with homeowners, research the values of nearby homes, especially with remodels. This has been helpful in concrete figures regarding their remodel, as well as experienced conjectures about how the remodel will affect the home's future value."

DON'T RUSH THE DETAILS:

"Too many homeowners want to rush into their project without a clear vision. Step back, assess the project and come up with a plan. With that, the end result will be every-

thing the homeowner wants. Rushing into it without a plan will only result in more time, money and headaches."

GOING GREEN:

"This is an area I take pride in. As a certified green professional through the National Association of Homebuilders, I integrate green philosophies and I want to minimize waste factor and landfill component as much as possible."

"I started making many green features as my standard a long time ago because I feel it's the right way to build and remodel. I'm happy to see more homeowners interested in these options."

DIY:

"I'm happy to help prepare homeowners for what they would encounter if doing it on their own. Sometimes it works out just fine, with small jobs that don't require licensed tradesmen or city permits. When it comes to larger jobs, people need to know if they honestly have the time to do this in addition to the day job." **DH**

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[HOMEBUYING]

Timing is EVERYTHING

All signs point to now as the right time to buy

The ironic bit of this troubled economy is that this is an advantageous time to buy a home. A huge purchase doesn't seem wise in the air of unemployment, higher prices and an unstable stock market. But by all appearances, housing prices are going down while everything else goes up.

"It's like our parents used to spend 10 to 18 percent and now, rates are now at 4 percent and lower," Realtor Sandy Maltese says.

Last month, the Primary Mortgage Market Survey set a record low with a 4 percent rate for a 30-year mortgage and 3.28 percent for 15-year fixed-rate mortgages. Maltese urges contemplative buyers to act now.

"Payments can be so much lower right now and rents are rising," she says.

Maltese and her group, DFW Urban Realty, work with many properties in the Oak

Lawn/Uptown area. With many rental properties throughout, renting has been cheaper than buying.

Where sellers unintentionally become landlords, rents rise so owners can afford to keep paying on the property.

"People can either downsize to fit into a rental space or can afford to buy," she says.

Realtor Derrick Dawson agrees.

"Most people don't realize they qualify to own their own home," the Texas Pride Realty agent says. "I'd encourage anyone interested in owning a home to seek a lender today and find out if they qualify. It is free to do."

In the Sept. 29 article "Good Time to Lock in a 30-Year Fixed Home Mortgage Rate?", the International Business Times advised to evaluate the probability of a rising fixed mortgage rate to its decline probability.



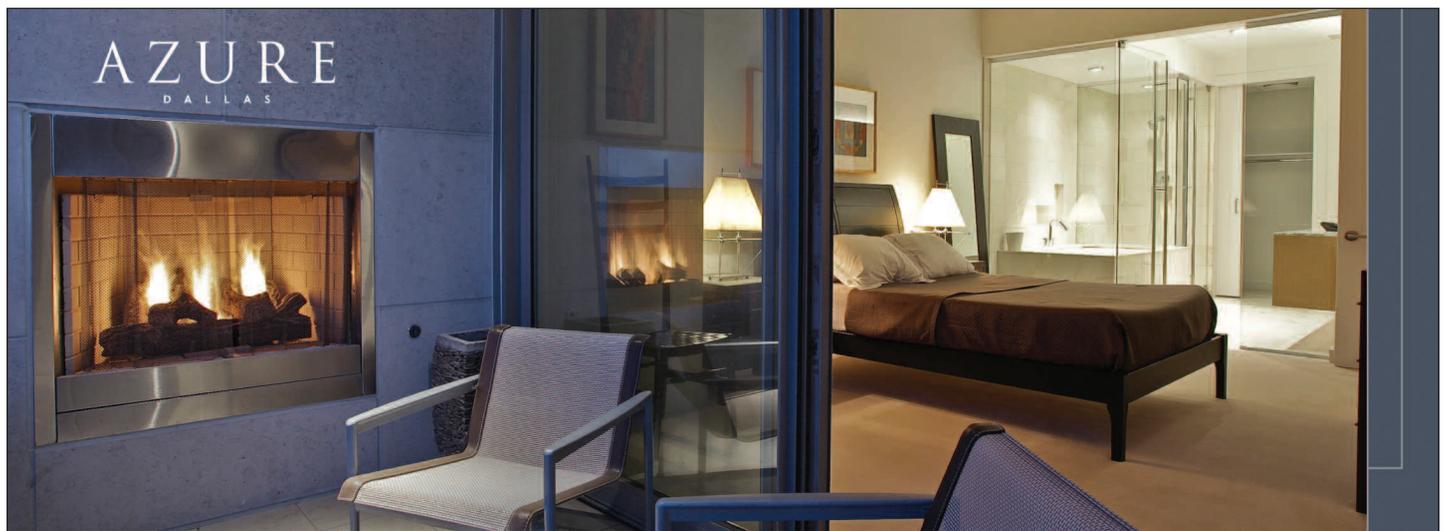
The piece points out that historically, upside risk is higher than downside gain which should encourage buyers for nailing a fixed rate now.

Maltese points out that initiative is what's needed. Qualifying for financing is crucial, but after that, then comes the nerve to plunge in now to lock in a low rate and have a home sweet home.

"Here in Dallas, I say give it a shot," she asserts. "If a property, especially a foreclosure, is marked low, there will be offers for it quick. If you're paying cash, you jump to the front of the line, but that's not always the case. At the very least, show up and try." **DH**

Visit DallasPropertyLocator.com and TexasPrideRealty.com for more information.

— Rich Lopez



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EXPERTS From page 4

we handle all residential and commercial real estate transactions yet, our primary business is apartment locating. We want to maintain focus on renters, but we've created strategic partnerships with other real estate companies and have a referral program with them. We work closely with our clients to help with all of their real estate needs.

For homes that have reasonable mortgages there is good news. In Dallas, the rental market has significantly gone up, especially from 2010 to present to a 94-97 percent occupancy rate.

Buyers become renters for two reasons: First, they are able to get a nicer home for a lower monthly payment. And second, it doesn't make sense to buy unless you're planning to stay. However, buyers are increasing, oddly enough. MetroTex Association of Realtors reported that last August 2010 there were 1,223 properties sold and this August 2011 there were 1,485.

It's a landlords' market. Rents are at a premium and good ones go fast. When I show my clients rentals, they want to think about it, I encourage them to act quickly, because the unit is gone within a day or two. Why should homeowners take a loss on waiting for a qualified buyer, when they can rent quickly and hold out for the market to improve? **DH**



Dan Flynn



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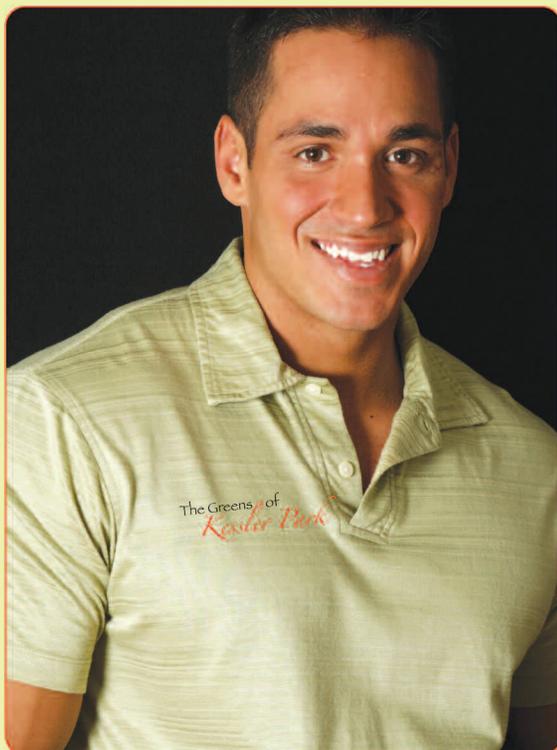


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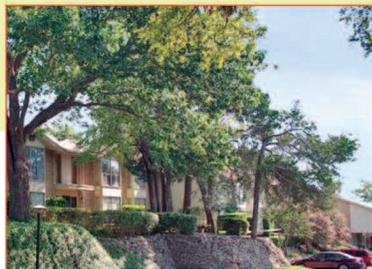


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