

Association Members “Think Globally, Sell Locally”

Summary

Immigration is the largest factor in the changing demographics of middle Tennessee, which includes greater Nashville. While small, the Williamson County Association of REALTORS®, which serves this area, has made a big commitment to diversity and now provides language and cultural education for its 1,200-plus members.

Background

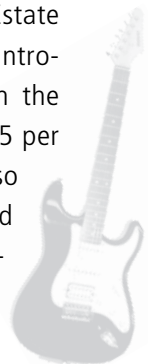
Middle Tennessee is home to residents from more than 80 different nationalities. A construction boom, a burgeoning biotechnology industry, and the presence of three universities fuel immigration to the area. There is a significant Ukrainian population and the largest concentration of Kurdish nationals outside their homeland. The Hispanic population is among the fastest growing, increasing by 400 percent between 1990 and 2000. Keeping in mind that a third of first-time homebuyers are immigrants, the Williamson County Association of REALTORS® (WCAR) is looking at ways to help members serve their current and anticipated markets more successfully.

What the Association Did

“We are attempting not only to diversify our membership,” says Helen Carter, former executive director of WCAR, “but to help our current members understand that by diversifying their client base they create more opportunities and that these opportunities multiply.” The Association undertook a variety of projects to bring REALTORS® up to speed.

Language skills: Many members will need to acquire new language skills, Carter believes. She strongly encourages members to refrain from “using the client’s 12-year-old as interpreter” and, instead, to sign up for “Spanish for Real Estate Professionals,” offered since 2003. The 15-hour course, similar to college-level introductory Spanish, includes basic language instruction as well as information on the Hispanic culture. Association members pay \$250, and the instructor receives \$245 per student. The instructor approached the Association with a ready-made course, so out-of-pocket costs to date have been zero. Once enough members have mastered basic Spanish, the Association plans to offer an 8-hour follow-up course emphasizing real estate terminology.

New REALTORS® signing up with WCAR are asked what languages they speak, and there are plans to survey the entire membership on language skills. WCAR intends to add this information to its member database.



REALTOR® education: In 2005, WCAR began using its Lunch and Learn program (a brown bag get-together) to educate members on cultural diversity issues. “Our members have to get continuing education credits for renewal of license,” explains Carter, “so we’ll be using these sessions as opportunities to impart an understanding of other cultures—what works and what doesn’t.” Instructors will be unpaid WCAR members who are from other cultures. “We have members from Iran, Iraq, Turkey, all over. And they know the problems that newcomers experience.”

International Council: Association leadership decided to form the International Council of Middle Tennessee “to help immigrants and businesses assimilate into our communities by educating our citizens about their different cultural backgrounds and the methods by which they prefer to achieve home ownership.” Membership is open to anyone in the greater Nashville area, including REALTORS®, mortgage bankers, chambers of commerce, colleges, and universities.

The International Council fosters opportunities for education, networking, and partnering with other community organizations to achieve its goals. One of the first programs offered was “The Influence of Foreign Scholars on Middle Tennessee,” which highlighted the numbers, housing needs, and economic impact of foreign faculty and students attending the area’s colleges and universities.

WCAR provided \$3,000 in seed money to launch the council and donated staff time to establish its bylaws, articles of incorporation, and separate tax identity. Annual membership dues are \$50.

More than staff and money, the key to success, according to Carter, is “passion.” She credits 2004 WCAR president Emil Mongeon with leading the charge in an effort that is now “snowballing.” As Carter puts it, “Immigrants came here to achieve the American dream. Shouldn’t we learn how to help them achieve that dream?”

Outcomes

WCAR’s efforts have borne fruit in a number of different areas. Nearly 100 WCAR members have taken the Spanish language course offered by the Association. Members also traveled to Romania in fall 2004 to meet colleagues through the NAR Ambassador program, and WCAR later hosted delegations from Romania and Latvia. The forum on international scholars hosted by the International Council drew 80 participants, including representatives of the local immigration council.

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