

REALTORS® Help Bridge a Cultural Divide

Summary

The Arcadia Association of REALTORS® helped its community in California go from an atmosphere of reticence and mistrust to one of participation and friendship, by encouraging real estate agents of different ethnic backgrounds to become active REALTORS®.

Background

During the 1980s, the San Gabriel Valley came to include the largest suburban Chinese American population in the country, as residents of traditional enclaves in Los Angeles moved to the suburbs. By 2000, cities like Arcadia, once largely white, had a population that was nearly 40 percent Chinese American.

While these wealthy, educated new arrivals brought their businesses and new economic activity to the region, they also brought new preferences in housing. For example, the newly arrived Chinese residents, with a tradition of multigenerational living, saw a need for larger homes, while more established residents of Arcadia saw tree-lined lots being stripped and homes that clashed in design and color with theirs being built. Zoning disputes split the real estate market along ethnic lines. Furthermore, many of the area's REALTORS® felt excluded from this new real estate market, as Chinese Americans looking for housing were more comfortable dealing with minority-owned agencies, such as the rapidly expanding Long Dragon Realty.

What the Association Did

During this time of transition, the Arcadia Association of REALTORS® (AAR) was fortunate to count William (Bill) Van Buskirk among its politically active members. Van Buskirk (Monrovia Board of REALTORS® president, 1987–1988; AAR president, 2000; AAR Political Action Committee chairman, 1995–1998 and 2001) saw AAR as the organization to reach out to all of the residents of Arcadia. Van Buskirk went to work to encourage Chinese American real estate agents, who were unfamiliar with AAR and reluctant to become REALTORS®, to join the Association. He instilled a level of trust and understanding among the new arrivals to Arcadia that would lead to wider acceptance of all cultures within the community. This helped pave the way for political compromise and the passage of a zoning regulation that was acceptable to all parties in the housing market.



As these new agents joined AAR, Van Buskirk encouraged them to take up leadership positions in the organization. Helen Cao, for instance, says Van Buskirk inspired her to join AAR. Born in Shanghai, and a holder of an MBA degree, Cao was a young, respected real estate agent in Long Dragon Realty. But she says she had “zero involvement” with AAR until she met Van Buskirk, who was then chairman of the AAR Political Action Committee. Van Buskirk persuaded her to join the Budget and Finance Committee of AAR and then encouraged her to take on a leadership role.

“He was like a mentor to these new agents from Long Dragon,” says Pat Vercelli, membership director of AAR. “And he was a real catalyst to welcoming the diversity into our Association over the last few years.”

Today Cao is president of AAR. In fact, two of AAR’s last three presidents—Cao and Kelvin Wong—have been Chinese Americans, and other REALTORS® from the Chinese American community have taken up positions on AAR’s Board of Directors. Chinese American–owned real estate agencies are also heavily represented in AAR.

Outcomes

Bill Van Buskirk died in 2002, but the organization has continued to take a lead in pushing for cooperative solutions to cultural and linguistic differences. In November 2004, AAR offered a bilingual seminar—taught in English and Mandarin Chinese—which focused on the details of the California Association of REALTORS® (C.A.R.) Residential Purchase Agreement. The free seminar was sponsored by AAA, C.A.R., and Security Pacific Loans, and attracted 400 real estate professionals from across Southern California.

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