

Women in Business
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By Barry Ellsworth
THE INTELLIGENCER

Debra Tosh doesn't mince words. Does she think being female make a difference in the real estate business?

You bet she does — and it's a difference that works both ways.

"It's very difficult for women to work in the commercial field because it is an old boy's network and a lot of people don't give you the respect they should, because you are a woman," said Tosh, an agent with Re/Max Quinte Ltd. "It's always men that do commercial."

Bruce Cooke, Jamie Troke and Joe Shunock dominate the local commercial scene. They are all friends of hers, she said, adding she doesn't blame them for the situation — men buy commercial real estate, the most valuable real estate of all, from men. It is that simple, Tosh said.

But when it comes to residential real estate, women surpass men, asserted Tosh.

"I think women, in many respects, are better realtors because they know what a woman wants," Tosh said during an interview. "We listen better as a rule and understand what is important in a house — large kitchen, built in features, natural light."

She is asked what men look for in a residential property.

"They usually just want a garage," Tosh replied, accompanying the words with her trademark booming laugh and big smile.

Such candor is refreshing. Many women, afraid of the 'rabid feminist' label, pooh-poo the idea there's any hint of sexism in the business world. A bracing sense of humour and ebullient demeanour have contributed to her successful real estate career. One year, Tosh exceeded the annual million dollar sales mark, she frequently outperformed real estate colleagues, and on a number of occasions Tosh has been recognized as Top Producer at Re/Max Quinte Ltd.

On top of sales, Tosh is a textbook example of how to be a good citizen through volunteer work. Carol Feeney, executive director of the Quinte Arts Council, nominated Tosh for the award.

"Life as a real estate agent is very demanding, often requiring Debra to work most weekends, holidays and

evenings," Feeney wrote to the judging panel. "...time literally means money and her source of income, but, despite her hectic schedule, she dedicates a great deal of time supporting non-profit groups...."

"She is on the front line each month

TOSH, DEBRA

answering calls to the Sexual Assault Crisis Centre ...Debra organizes fashion shows and other events to support charitable causes such as Habitat for Humanity.

"She is on the executive for the Belleville Theatre Guild as well as... act-

ing and directing... (and) she has recently taken on the role as Food Chair for the annual Festival of Trees, the annual fundraiser for the Quinte Arts Council and the Lung Association, as well as being the emcee for the festival kickoff, Quinte Cabaret."

A nominee for the award last year, Tosh said answering calls on the crisis telephone lines has given her a better understanding of how women are used and abused.

"Some of these poor women, what they have been through," she said.

Violence against women is something those in real estate are conscious of, too. Working late in the evening, meeting a person or people to close deals, there's a kernel of fear in the back of a woman's mind.

"You never know where you are going to go and who you are going to be with," Tosh said. "You never know."

"I had a guy when I went to his home (who) was smoking crack, so I left."

Attacks on women agents do occur and Tosh said she makes sure the office and/or her husband, Dave, know where she is, particularly at night.

Belleville-born and raised, Tosh remembers comments her mother made while she was growing up.

"My mother used to say, 'It's a man's world,'" she said, adding that over the years, the situation has improved.

"Things sure have changed since I was a little girl," Tosh, 49, commented.

It's been a long road back to Belleville. Tosh left the Friendly City in 1975, moving to Peterborough where she worked for CHEX Television. "Then I went to Toronto for City-TV."

She left there, too, and became a waitress and bartender at an exclusive Toronto restaurant and bar, then opened a vintage and new clothing store called Tom Foolery.

Tosh moved into real estate in Toronto in 1986, married her husband who teaches computer software at Loyalist College and resettled in Belleville in 1990.

She was with J.E. McKinney Real Estate, and moved to Re/Max when Sean McKinney bought the local franchise.

Tosh said she is very happy here in Belleville, but she harbours one regret.

"My biggest regret in life (is) that I left City-TV," Tosh said. "I always thought I could be Jeannie Becker."

There's that booming laugh again.