

Loyal clients keep area Realtor's name among best

By [Lynda Zimmer](#)

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CHAMPAIGN – Kay Bird is not a Pop Tart.

She is a Realtor with 31 years experience.

"A Pop Tart real estate agent is one who gets a call from someone who saw a 'For Sale' sign, says, 'I can be there in half an hour;' and jumps in the car to go," Bird says.

When you become successful, you don't need to be on call on 30 minutes' notice.

Plus, as Bird points out, "It can be very dangerous. Ever since that Realtor was killed in Decatur, we've learned you must know the person you're going to meet."

A female real estate agent was strangled when she went to meet a stranger at a vacant upscale home in Decatur. Her death and that of other agents have led to a real estate safety code that advises agents to meet clients for the first time in their offices.

"Also, you don't know if the caller is qualified to buy the home or working with another Realtor," Bird said.

Ethics of the business – plus complicated formulas dealing with each agent's commission – call for knowing agent/client relationships upfront.

Bird got into real estate almost by accident.

She had been a secretary in the University of Illinois Forestry Department for seven years, but was staying home with her younger of two sons.

"A friend called me and said, 'I think we should go to Parkland (College) and take the real estate class,'" Bird said.

It was 1977.

"I went because she didn't want to go alone," Bird said. "I kept saying 'I'm not going to go into real estate; I'm going to be a stay-at-home mommy,' but I took the state test and passed."

Next, her friend took her to lunch with the owners of Miller & Miller Realty.

Bird then started saying that she was going to work only part time.

During an eight-week training session that included measuring houses, "I started to really like it," Bird admitted. "I knew I could make more money and I knew it was a way to get out of an unhappy marriage."

In one year's time, she saved \$10,000 and by 1979, she had a more than \$2.5 million volume to her credit. In real estate, the volume refers to the final sale prices of closed listings. Agents who list and/or sell properties earn commissions. Each agent, in turn, earns a different percentage commission – based on his contract with his broker and agency.

This year, as a measure of success, her Team Kay – that includes Bird; Kyle Harrison, her younger son; and their office manager, a Realtor named Kelly Smith – had a \$13.5 million volume on 60 closed sales through mid-September.

Bird stayed with Miller & Miller for 16 years, went to Re/Max for seven years, then Coldwell Banker for five years. She remarried along the way.

Three years ago, she and six other agents started the Keller Williams agency in Champaign.

"Everywhere I've been, my clients follow me," says the 60-year-old Bird. "But Keller Williams is my final resting place."

With 52 agents, "It is agent-run and not run by a group of managing brokers," she said. "There is a 50 to 90 percent commission spread. When agents have contributed a certain amount of money to the company, they keep 100 percent of their commissions."

"We operate lean and mean," Bird said. "We have cut back on everything. We spend more on the Internet than anything else. After checking the Internet, people call us and say, 'These are houses we want to see.'"

Bird said she learned from her partner/son that today, "91 percent of buyers are searching the Net instead of print ads."

She laughs about the irony of that development.

"I started in real estate back before computers and FAX machines," Bird said. "I was always running. Computers were such a howl; nobody wanted to use them, they were foreign to us."

She admits that, because of the economy, this is not the greatest year to sell a house.

"You have to educate your sellers ... a house may be assessed as being worth \$250,000, but you have to tell the owners that their toughest competition just sold for \$230,000," she said.

"Some sellers have to get out. They are selling for less than they owe on mortgages and bringing checks to the closing," Bird said.

That is called a short sale and her partner/son, Harrison, is specializing in them these days.

"At a conference of 1,200 Realtors in Denver, we heard that some 80 percent of sales these days are short sales," Bird said.

"It is hard going through these hardships with people," she said. "But I feel good that I've contributed to a part of their life they'll never see again. We should never see this kind of market again."

Another difficult real estate market was the early 1980s.

"I nearly dropped out of the business six times between 1980 and 1985," Bird said. "Mortgage loans went up to 18 percent and real estate tanked.

"I worked part time at Casual Corner and for radio stations. And I mowed lawns with my (two) sons. I had no other income and with kids, a house payment and car payments, I spent a lot of nights not sleeping."

One big challenge in the real estate business is self-motivation.

"You are an individual contractor, your own boss," Bird said, "but you just have to keep going."

One frustrating task is reading people.

"I try to figure out whether a potential client is high maintenance, analytical, totally anal or happy-go-lucky, then adjust to that," she said. "When you're new to the business, you take whatever."

"Now, it's very rare, but now I can say 'No' to a buyer or seller I feel I cannot work with."

Pluses of the business for Bird include friends and flexibility.

"I have made incredible friends," she said. "There is an excitement of being with different kinds of people. I still have lunch with people I would have never known if I hadn't been in this business. It's a people business."

"You also have some flexibility," she said. "I can go to my (10) grandkids' games. And now I've made it a rule not to talk to clients after 8 at night."

She lives with her husband, Chris, and four cats on almost three acres in northeast Urbana, where she loves to garden.

Bird attributes her success to working "really, really hard" and a "personality that is able to talk to people."

"Going into business with my son Kyle four years ago has been the best and working with Kelly (Smith) since 1 1/2 years ago has been great," she said. "I feel complete in the business world. I am totally myself. I can say 'No' and have fun."

Bird's friend, who talked her into taking real estate classes 32 years ago, ended up moving to Springfield and retiring from a telephone company.

"She still laughs at me staying in the business," Bird said.

Sage advice

Kay Bird, who has been a real estate agent for 31 years, has earned certified residential specialist, graduate realtor institute and accredited buyers' representative designations.

Here is her advice for those new to the business:

— "Education is critical, but you've got to jump in and get both feet wet."

— "Have at least six months worth of money (to live on) saved. You're lucky if your first sale closes within three months."

— "Look at joining a company and a team. You'll get emotional support, education and hands-on training."

Bird still goes to school in her field, spending between \$3,000 and \$5,000 a year on education and seminars.

"Everything's changed in real estate in the last 10 years," she said. "You have to keep changing with the times."