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PHOTOS BY CARL JUSTE cjuste@miamiherald.com

Daniela Alexandre takes in the view as she tours one of her listings at the Five Park luxury residential tower on Aug. 20 in Miami Beach. Alexandre became a real estate agent a year and a half ago.

HARDER THAN IT LOOKS

Despite what's seen on TV, new real estate agents struggle in Miami area's market

BY MAX KLAVER
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The dun sectional was soft and seemed to swallow Jill Eber as she leaned back into it, appraising the view of Brickell from across an incandescent Biscayne Bay.

The vista and the condo that framed it, a Fisher Island unit that she has been trying to sell, could be had for a hair under $12 million. To Eber, a titan of the Miami area's luxury real estate market, that price tag is perhaps a notch or two above peanuts.

Properties that she has sold have dwarfed the condo in price by an order of magnitude, a compound in Miami Beach fetched $122 million last year, a Miami-Dade County record.

Jill Eber, inside one of her listings on Fisher Island on Oct. 10, is a titan in the Miami area's luxury real estate market.

Visions of agents like Eber — dressed in white lace, cruising around America's most expensive zip code in a teal Ferrari, showing some mansion worth many times the median Miamian's total lifetime earnings — have drawn thousands of new agents into the industry.

The prospect of high-dollar sales and fat commission checks, of working flexible — and perhaps fewer — hours and of escaping the 9-to-5 rat race, all with relatively little training, has drawn nearly a half-million Floridians into the industry, according to data from the state's Department of

SEE REAL ESTATE, 6A

This bedroom view spans across Biscayne Bay as Daniela Alexandre toured one of her current listings valued at $21 million at the Five Park luxury residential tower on Aug. 20 in Miami Beach.

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REAL ESTATE

CARL JUSTE cjuste@miamiherald.com

Daniela Alexandre tours a closet in a listing at the Five Park tower on Aug. 20 in Miami Beach. A year and a half ago, Alexandre, 29, left her gigs as a model and bottle girl.

Business and Professional Regulation.

And the gangbuster COVID-19 years, when high-income earners poured into South Florida and paid big bucks for their pieces of paradise, did little to dispel the notion that working in real estate was all "Selling Sunset," a quick and easy trip to personal and financial freedom.

The reality for many new entrants is less glitz and more grind. And without a Rolodex of property-hungry contacts, a financial cushion to survive what will statistically be a financially tight first year or two, and some serious hustle, the path to anything resembling Eber-hood is far narrower than the Netflix show might have one believe.

'PLAYING "SELLING SUNSET" '

Cruising down Miami Beach's Alton Road in a new Audi, Daniela Alexandre savored the fruits of having all three: the contacts, the cushion, the hustle.

A year and a half earlier, Alexandre, 29, left her gigs as a model and bottle girl and pivoted to real estate.

She saw a booming industry that seemed to define the city that Alexandre, who grew up in Atlanta, now called home. In a way, it did.

Of the total $534 billion in economic activity that greater Miami generated in 2023, $104 billion — almost 20%, the most by any sector, and it's not close — came from real estate, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis' most recently published data.

And the skills needed to be a successful agent weren't unlike those needed to make good money in bottle service, Alexandre recalled reasoning as she navigated the Audi into the valet drop-off at Five Park, a towering glass ellipse in South Beach. Both require being people-focused and sales-driven and delivering an "experience."

Plus, she knew a lot of people — rich people — from her nightlife past. Alexandre's "sphere of influence," industry argot for who you know, is replete with those who casually drop five figures on a night out, she says.

In her estimation, success in real estate comes largely from "the connections you make. It's all about the people you meet."

A newly minted agent, Alexandre took her license to industry powerhouse Douglas Elliman, where her boyfriend knew someone, and dove into her new career. She made two sales in short order, selling her boyfriend's condo for nearly $900,000, then purchasing their shared townhouse.

She has since made a few more sales on top of the slew of rentals that she has facilitated and that keep the money flowing. Alexandre estimates she has "transacted" $3 million in the last year, from which she earned close to $100,000.

Next year, she hopes to double that.

And if she can help ink a deal for Five Park's $20 million penthouse — she posted the listing on her social-media channels and got some nibbles — she'll blow that goal out of the water. The buyer's and seller's agents often walk away with commissions of 2% to 3% — though some of that goes to their brokerages.

If the sale closes, Alexandre could make enough to potentially take a month or two off.

Up 500 feet above street level, Alexandre leaned over the condo's balcony, taking in the view of the mainland to the west. Beyond this or that sale, her goal, she said, is to be "one of the most sought-after real estate agents out here."

Another agent on her team pointed across the water to Star Island. From the penthouse, they could make out rapper Rick Ross' mansion.

"It's honestly like playing 'Selling Sunset' in real life," Alexandre mused.

EASY TO GET IN, HARD TO MOVE UP

Drawn to the state's lax COVID-19 restrictions, warm climate and favorable tax policies, wealthy transplants poured into Florida — South Florida, in particular — during and after the pandemic.

More than 16,000 people came to Miami-Dade County from New York City alone in the four years leading up to 2022. Their combined incomes totaled $6.1 billion — upward of $380,000 per person.

And between 2014 and 2024, greater Miami's population of millionaires doubled to nearly 39,000 people.

The real estate market felt their arrival.

Between the middle of 2020 and 2021, the average sale price of a single-family home in Miami-Dade almost doubled, according to the Miami Association of Realtors. The number of closings paid in cash spiked 174%, and the market's total dollar volume nearly tripled from $1.6 billion to $4.6 billion.

During that time, "every agent was selling," said Zach Joslin, co-founder of the Brissi Group, a Miami-based brokerage that's part of the BHHS EWM Realty firm. "They were making money because the market was flying."

Cue the hopefuls.

"When the market is going up, everybody who is maybe unhappy in whatever job they're doing thinks, 'Let me get a real estate license,' " Joslin quipped.

And they did.

Between 2019 and 2024, the state's Department of Business and Professional Regulation issued nearly 72,000 real estate licenses, an almost 20% increase.

Part of the reason, Joslin said, is that it's not particularly difficult to get a sales-associate license. Any legally able-to-work person with a Social Security number, 63 hours and a few hundred bucks can complete the mandatory training course and, theoretically, pass the test.

Once you're licensed, you can work — and, Alexandre said, "in real estate, it's like, if you're *working*, you're going to make money."

That might've been the case in the early 2020s. But "when the market is tough, like it is now, a lot of agents fall away," Joslin said.

"It's easy to become a Realtor," he observed. "It's hard to be a successful Realtor."

According to the National Association of Realtors — a trade association that represents more than 200,000 real estate professionals nationwide — 71% of its members with less than two years of experience in the residential real estate market made fewer than five transactions last year.

Nationwide, the median pre-tax income of members, known as Realtors, with less than two years of experience was $8,100.

Within that early career bunch, 87% grossed less than $50,000 last year, the Association reported. Only 2% of

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Real estate agent Angie Zavala — at a condo unit for sale in Miami Beach on Nov. 13 — says of her new career: 'It's intense. In the beginning, it was quite tough.'

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>
> ***Zach Joslin, co-founder of the Brissi Group, a Miami-based brokerage that's part of the BHHS EWM Realty firm***

Realtors with less than two years of experience earned more than $150,000. Discounting the brokers — who run the firms for which sales agents work — less than half of all agents, no matter their level of experience, made more than $50,000.

The Miami Association of Realtors, the national organization's local chapter, reports having roughly 60,000 members, the most of any regional affiliate, according to the Miami Realtors. But, citing "member privacy," the Miami Association of Realtors, declined to provide local transaction data.

'THAT'S WHERE THE REAL MONEY IS'

Angie Zavala knew what category she was shooting for.

It was during the pandemic, while working as a property manager in an apartment building and seeing expensively dressed real estate agents cycling in and out, that she decided to make her move.

"That's where the real money is," she recalled thinking, "and that's where I want to be."

Zavala, like Alexandre, quit her job a year and a half ago and jumped in headfirst. Also like Alexandre, she has trained her sights on the top. "I want to be *that* person, that if someone thinks about real estate, they think of Angie."

But unlike her penthouse-peddling peer, Zavala, 26, entered the business with a relatively slim "sphere of influence" in the world of big spenders and little financial cushion.

"It's intense," Zavala said of her new career. "In the beginning, it was quite tough."

It was two months into the job before she landed her first lease and, with it, her first commission check. The savings that she had come in with ran dry by month four. Among the job's heaviest burdens, Zavala said, is the adjustment to not having many of a full-time salaried job's stable trappings, like health insurance. Zavala — along with a reported 96% of her National Association of Realtors colleagues, most of whom are independent contractors — doesn't get health insurance through her work. She purchases her own, for $279 a month.

Nor does she receive a biweekly paycheck. Instead, money comes in spurts.

"You don't know when your next sale is going to be," she said. So far, she has had one.

It's the rentals, where she earns maybe 5% of a yearly lease's value, that keep the lights on.

And for those, she grinds. While it's not a normal 9-to-5, the hours aren't exactly enviable. "My time off is usually when [my clients] are sleeping or when they're at work," she said.

That means working evenings, weekends or whenever anyone who needs to tour a home has the time.

"I devote so much time to real estate that I don't have a personal life," Zavala said. "I don't really have a social life."

She sighed. Rays of a late-afternoon sun shone through the balcony door and into the listing, a two-bedroom, second-floor condo whose drab gray walls soaked up whatever light made it past the building opposite it in North Beach.

Zavala's financial situation is still more precarious than she would like, but she's "getting a grip of it," she assured. More than anything, she's optimistic about the future. "This real estate life that I'm doing is like a dream," she said.

With enough hard work, it could come true, though it might look different than she originally imagined.

"I think a lot of these shows, especially on, like, Netflix," said Zavala, "show that [real estate] is so glamorous, and you'll just find anybody that will want to buy. But it's not necessarily like that."

"I thought I'd be driving a Lamborghini by now," she laughed.

"But I'm not."

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