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After the Breakup, They Help Sell the House

Lucky are the few who move out of their houses simply because they have tired of the view or suddenly possess the means to trade up. More often, it is a change in life circumstances that pushes people out into the housing market, something like a new job, a new husband or a new baby.

And lurking with quiet devastation behind many “for sale” signs is the big, sad shift that almost always requires that somebody move out: divorce.

For real estate agents and brokers, deals that spring from divorce are an inevitable slice of the business, and over the years, many find themselves gathering answers to questions they hoped never to ask.

How does one represent two people who won't speak to each other? How does an agent show an apartment that has been divided by awkwardly placed locks or temporary walls? And what if your client's highest priority is making sure their former partner does not come out ahead?

For most agents, this is an accidental expertise. For others, it is a niche.

“We specialize in it,” said Vicki Stout, an agent at Keller Williams Suburban Realty in Livingston, N.J., who proclaims herself to be a “divorce specialist.”

“But it is hard to advertise,” added Bob Bailey-Lemansky, her business partner. “No one is going to go to our Facebook page and ‘like’ divorce.”

It was about three years ago that Ms. Stout, a widow and single mother, and Mr. Bailey-Lemansky, who is divorced, created New Jersey Real Estate Divorce Specialists. Today deals stemming from breakups tend to make up about half of their business. They have a few useful tips for their clients (how both halves of a divorcing couple can maximize tax breaks on capital gains when selling a home, for example) but most of what they offer is more basic.

They have found that having one man and one woman on the sales team can make acrimonious couples more comfortable, they say. They have grown accustomed to having every conversation at least twice. And perhaps most crucially, they said, they are inured to the difficulties that can arise when clients' claws are out.

“We're familiar with how to handle clients that have restraining orders,” Ms. Stout offered matter-of-factly.

Just a few months into their partnership, however, they discovered that business cards loudly proclaiming “Divorce!” were not always a banner their customers were eager to fly. The pair changed the name of their partnership to Family Focus Realty.

In fact, keeping the word quiet is often a priority, many brokers



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Bob Bailey-Lemansky and Vicki Stout specialize in the sale of New Jersey homes of clients going through divorce. Deals stemming from breakups tend to make up about half of their business.

say. Most often, when buyers hear “divorce,” their first thought is “fire sale.”

“I don't discuss it because it opens up the seller to getting killed,” said Frances Katzen, a managing director at Douglas Elliman. “Buyers think they must be desperate.”

Optics are important, Ms. Katzen continued, and if a closet looks bare on one side, she will gently rearrange what's available to make the absence less apparent. But Michael Shapot, a senior vice president at Keller Williams Realty in New York City, whose biography calls him a “certified real estate divorce specialist,” likes to go a step further.

“If there are no men's clothes in there, go buy some,” Mr. Shapot said. “Ask a friend, or find some off-season clothing you can store there. There are things you can do.”

Mr. Shapot's divorce certification comes from a company in Colorado called the Financial Divorce Association, which offers roughly four hours of tax and legal seminars on DVDs for about \$600. Ms. Stout and Mr. Bailey-Lemansky have taken the course as well.

Sometimes an agent's most dif-

ficult task is not keeping the divorce under wraps, but navigating between the two clients who are in the middle of it.

Mr. Shapot recalled situations where apartments were left covered in laundry and dirty dishes because the partner still living there was not eager to sell. Ms. Katzen said a client of hers in similar circumstances left the bathroom filthy and the apartment reeking of smoke for its first showing.

Elayne Reimer, an executive vice president at Halstead Property and a former marriage and family therapist, said she had clients a few years ago whose impending divorce required jumping through extra hoops not just for her but for buyers, too.

“I had to meet the husband in the lobby and then he escorted me to his section of the apartment,” Ms. Reimer explained in an e-mail. “I had to then meet his wife elsewhere and wait for her to escort me to her section, which was locked from him.”

A similar dance was performed each time she took buyers to see the apartment, first one section, then, at a later date, the other.

All this, of course, raises the

question: Doesn't it get depressing?

“I mean, it's not inspiring, I will say that,” said Victoria Vinokur, an executive vice president at Halstead Property.

“I think it's very important to remember that these people are not trying to be difficult on purpose,” Ms. Vinokur continued. “This is just one aspect of a big picture they're dealing with. They may have other money, maybe other properties. What if they have children?”

Even in difficult circumstances, however, homes do eventually sell, at which point the parting couple gathers up the pieces to look for separate places to live, and real estate agents are called in again.

Ms. Katzen of Douglas Elliman has a pair of divorcing clients right now who are buying two apartments on different sides of the same building, she said, because they hope it will make the separation easier on their child.

“It's quite selfless, really,” Ms. Katzen said. “Some people would say, ‘Forget you! If I'm going out on a date, I do not want to run into you in the lobby.’ Talk about putting the child first.”