

Village Associates Celebrates Ten Years in Lamorinda

By Lou Fancher



Top Row: Jeff Snell, Dan Weil, Clark Thompson, Steve Smith, Charles Levine
 2nd Row: Kurt Piper, Marianne Greene, Dexter Honens II, Hal Kaufman, Patty Battersby, Ignacio Vega
 3rd Row: Joan Evans, Karen Murphy, Margot Kaufman, Ashley Battersby, Margaret Zucker, Terri Bates Walker
 4th Row: Sue Layng, Linda Ehrich, Carol Stevenson (Office Manager), Pamela Halloran
 5th Row: Ann Ward, Joan Eggers, Joan Cleveland, Tara Rochlin
 Bottom Row: Ben Olsen, Sue Olsen, I. Bruce Maxon
 Not pictured: Linda Friedman, Debbie Johnston, Art Lehman, April Matthews, Judy Schoenrock, Ann Sharf, Lynda Snell
 Photo Andy Scheck

Village Associates is celebrating its 10th anniversary, but for founder Ignacio Vega, there's no looking back.

"The reason we came about is that a group of agents didn't want to become a part of a larger conglomerate," Vega said, reluctantly describing the real estate company's origins. "It really started off as casually as this: the core group decided to form their own agency. But really, I don't want to talk about how we started. The fact that we are still here ten years later is the real story."

Properly redirected, the interview turned to an exploration of why, according to Vega, the agency retains a 33% market share and has the number one highest dollar volume in Contra Costa County.

"In real estate it's all about relationships and knowledge," he said. "The core group of agents has had their lives, their families, right here, since the beginning."

Kurt Piper, a Village agent with 18 years in real estate, pointed to experience: "On average, our associates have 20 years of experience, which is a pretty impressive statistic. There's something to be said for that."

And Vega has a lot to say about his co-workers. "People seek us out as the local experts. Buying a house is not a commodity. It's not something you do on e-Bay. It's a life, a lifestyle. You add value if you are viewed as a local expert."

Both men believe the knowledge-bar has been raised by the internet.

"Today, a client profile is someone who is way more educated and aware about the [real estate] environment. They're so far down the stream and knowledgeable that as an agent, you had better be equally informed," Vega said.

Piper agreed, adding that in today's hi-tech world, "most buyers have already seen the property online before they set foot in the house. Because of this, the photos, descriptive text and virtual tour accessed online should be properly displayed so the buyer is excited about visiting the property."

With the internet offering easy communication between sellers and buyers, might some people forego using an agent? Vega and Piper jumped on this subject immediately.

"Buyers and sellers will hire a friend or a friend of a friend who is a newer agent or a part-timer and in some cases, when a transaction is at a critical stage, this agent can't draw on past experiences to give their client timely advice. I feel the experience of our Village Associates can save our clients money and lead to a less stressful or smoother transaction," Piper explained.

"For sale by owners, discount brokers, and companies trying to generate sales on a website, aren't that effective. Inevitably you have to be on the ground. You have to know the community," Vega said.

"And there's nothing like being in the car with someone, pointing things out, answering every question."

Village Associates hasn't simply sold to the community; they've invested in it. Each year the company supports local events: Lafayette's Art and Wine Festival, Orinda's Classic Car Show and Parade of Trees, and Moraga's Treeline Triathlon.

"We don't advertise it, but every year we deliver 75 food baskets—literally laundry baskets

stuffed with everything you need for a Thanksgiving dinner—to Children's Hospital in Oakland," Vega said. Social workers distribute the food to families temporarily staying in Oakland because their children are in the hospital.

Vega is perhaps most proud of the company's durability. "It's important to notice: we've gone through a couple of economic cycles and we've survived the extremes," he said, noting the unprecedented economic environment from 2003 to 2007. "The boom mentality created impressive wealth for an extended period of time. Since then, the whole upsetting of the economy has affected us, no doubt, but much less so than other areas."

As for the future, Vega is certain of one thing, saying, "I have no growth plans. I have one office and that's as far as it's going to go. You can dilute your image by spreading yourself out. Your mission changes when you try to expand. Suddenly you're doing things other than focusing on your core, which is serving this community."

On September 18, 2020, when the company celebrates a second decade in business, Vega and Piper expect they'll be doing the same job they do today: delivering in-your-hand, instantaneous information and working in real time, all the time.

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