California agent launches first of its kind — an institute for divorce-related real estate matters

As any real estate agent who has helped a divorcing couple knows, dealing with a marital property can be a road dotted with landmines.

How do you sell the house when one party doesn't want to cooperate? How do you deal with dual representation? Who pays for what?

In January, Laurel Starks, a divorce-property specialist and Keller Williams' team leader, launched the Divorce Real Estate Institute (DREI), a series of online and brick-in-mortar courses taught by an experienced faculty of family law attorneys, mediators, lenders and family court judges.

In March, Starks held the first of four, annual five-day Master Courses in Southern California for agents who want to specialize in divorce-property sales. The online videos ring in at $995 and the Master Courses cost $5,000, Sparks told Inman.

Laurel Starks

"Family law attorneys and courts routinely rely on experts: psychologists for custody, forensic accountants, business evaluators," said Starks, who has closed more than $150 million in divorce-related sales across California in her 13 years as head of the Starks Realty Group. "The house is the largest and most emotionally fraught asset in the case, yet there isn't a proper expert for that, someone who is skilled and formally trained in the family law process."

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For Master Course graduates serious about the business model, a separate series of weekly learning labs are available at a cost of $1,500 a month. Included in the cost, new students are granted access to certified divorce real estate experts and hands-on training to become expert witnesses in divorce proceedings, said Starks, author of *The House Matters in Divorce*.

The mission of the Institute is to fundamentally “transform the collaboration of real estate and family law professionals,” so every divorcing couple is given the best possible outcome.

“We have not shown up as the professionally skilled experts we are, and until we do, there will always be a barrier because lawyers don’t need sales people,” said Starks, who has advised and testified in hundreds of divorce cases. “They need credible colleagues who get their world and can serve the needs they don’t even know they have. That’s what we teach at DREI.”

Harold Deblander

Harold Deblander, a Sotheby's agent in San Francisco and a Master Course graduate, invested in the classes with an eye toward securing his role in a rapidly changing industry.

"With more and more discounter brokers popping up and robot Realtors being developed in a garage in Palo Alto as we speak, Laurel Starks' training and expertise in divorce real estate is placing real estate agents in a position where their expertise and value-add proposition to a very complex and delicate situation is going to make it very hard for 1 percent commission agents or robots to compete in any efficient manner," Deblander told Inman in an email.

Kris Lastition

Kris Lastition, a Re/Max agent in Los Angeles and a Masters Course graduate, said her favorite part of the course was the course visit to divorce court. In one case, she observed a wife who had received a home in the settlement but was then unable to pay the mortgage on it — something an agent could have flagged.

Until she began attending the courses, about half of Lastition's cases involved divorce-related properties. Had she been educated on the delicate nature of the specialty, she may have been able to generate far more business, she told Inman.

"You are walking into a conflict no matter how you look at it," Lastition said of the delicate nature of the specialty. "It's like a whole other level of real estate."

Email Gill South.

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