

Eco-Sales Pitch

For Some Home Buyers, Less is More



BY ELIZABETH MCGOWAN

A childhood fascination with Ranger Rick magazine. Hours exploring bugs and buds of the Pennsylvania countryside. Then, a bachelor's degree in ethnobotany and a stint with the Peace Corps in the Ukraine.

With that background, it's somewhat surprising to find Michael Kiefer in an urban setting at all. But the Woodridge resident is combining his business savvy with his people sense to shape a career as a "green" Realtor in DC. It's a pursuit that allows him to mesh his appreciation of the natural world with his understanding of environmental technology.

"My theory with everything I've ever done is that if I'm not on the edge, I'm taking up too much space," says the soft-spoken 34-year-old with the looks of an Eagle Scout. "I want to make sure I innovate."

Hmmm. A cynic might dismiss such spoutings from any Realtor as a temporary gimmick for an industry eager to glom on to the sustainability tsunami enveloping the nation. But wait. There's indeed grass-fed, free-range, sustainably harvested meat on this green realty bone. And it's becoming something of a Holy Grail for twenty- and thirty-somethings.

Kiefer enrolls in online seminars and training via EcoBrokers, an organization in Colorado. Its database lists him as one of eight DC-based Realtors certified in green practices. And in May, the University of Maryland graduated its first class of master's degree students from its cutting-green-edge real estate development program.

Green Realtors, aware that buildings suck up about 40 percent of the nation's ever-more-expensive energy, speak passionately about connecting buyers with efficient, healthy homes. Though they're not builders or inspectors, they aim to serve as their clients' conduits to specialists such as energy auditors, green kitchen designers, solar panel installers and green roof experts.

"Many young Realtors and homeowners are pining for a holistic approach to real estate," says EcoBroker Courtney Poulos, 30, a Realtor since 2005 who now walks to her job after recently switching from Weichert Realtors to Coldwell Banker Dupont. "The principles of green real estate are sound, and the benefits are indisputable."

One of her first assignments is marketing The Hillingdale condominiums on Sixth Street NW in the Mount Vernon neighborhood. Much of the revamped residence is constructed with recycled wood, plastic and composites. Other features include Energy Star appliances, compact florescent light bulbs, solid core interior doors and insulated windows.

Kiefer and Poulos educate themselves about the environmental and economic advantages of investments in insulation, renewable energy, countertops made from recyclables such as glass or compressed paper, paints without harmful volatile organic compounds, passive solar heat and flooring crafted from bamboo, cork or reclaimed hardwood.

But buying green isn't just about tankless water heaters, southern exposure and pervious driveway pavers.

On Saturdays, Kiefer becomes an eco-Pied Piper of sorts while guiding potential clients on house tours in DC neighborhoods near Metro stations. He urges buyers tempted to purchase in the suburbs because they've written off DC homes as too expensive to reconsider their arithmetic.

Walking, bicycling and riding trains and buses aren't wallet-busters and reduce a person's carbon footprint, says Kiefer, who drives a Toyota Prius hybrid vehicle.

Living close to work and near public transportation saves money spent on auto upkeep. To emphasize his point, Kiefer offers his clients memberships in the car-sharing enterprise Zipcar, which offers affordable wheels on a short-term basis. He also urges them to carefully study the utility bill history of any house they are eyeing.

The University of Maryland's Colvin Institute of Real Estate Development,



part of the School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, isn't specifically training residential Realtors. But most of its graduates will be interacting with agents on some level as they pursue careers developing property and reinventing urban landscapes.

Students delve into energy efficiency, adaptive reuse of historic buildings, planning and permitting that supports smart growth and public-private partnerships that support mixed-use, transit-oriented development and affordable housing.

"We're going well beyond the traditional finance and business approach to real estate education," explains program director Margaret McFarland. Baltimore developer John Colvin donated \$3 million this year to establish the institute. "We tout what we call a quadruple bottom line: economic viability, environmental and social responsibility, and beautiful, sustainable design. Think Google and Apple."

How to care for and feed a green home can be perplexing for clients. Kiefer and Poulos try to demystify the experience by offering printed and electronic tip sheets.

"When you buy your first place, you're never given an owner's manual," Kiefer says about plans to produce video podcasts offering tutorials on maintenance as simple as changing a furnace filter to topics as complex as understanding an energy-efficient heating and ventilating system. "Green building technologies need to get into the market. Eventually, it will be commonplace."

Nobody in the real estate business sees green fading away. This city is further greening its building codes, and the DC-based US Green Building Council released its Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standards for homes earlier this year.

"This isn't just a blip like the 1970s were," McFarland says, adding that she expects the ecological approach on the residential front to catch up with the commercial sector. "Now this type of thinking is being institutionalized."

And Kiefer doesn't anticipate seeking employment as a biologist anytime soon.

"I've discovered something that completely interests me, and I know it's needed," he says. "I don't think this is a short-term trend. Our goal is to take this to the next level."

Read more about green realty at Poulos's website, www.greenlignanddesign.com and Kiefer's Web site, www.greencrealty.com. ■

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