

Former secretary starts real estate business

Gallatin developer Haynes was role model

BY SARAH KINGSBURY • GALLATIN NEWS EXAMINER • OCTOBER 14, 2010

It was a job as a secretary that inspired Sarina Brownlee to start her own business 23 years ago.



Sarina Brownlee started Action Property Management 23 years ago after being introduced to the field of real estate while working as Charles Haynes' secretary. (SARAH KINGSBURY/Gallatin News Examiner)

JUST THE FACTS

Name: Action Property Management

Location: 130 W. Eastland St., Gallatin

Contact: 452-7117

Website: actionpropertymanagementtn.com

How long in business: 23 years

Business type: Property management

Startup capital: \$2,000

Inspiration: "The diversity of people I meet each day."

Role model: Charles Haynes

Best lesson learned: "Don't take people for face value; you have to check them out."

Rookie advice: "You've got to love people but you've got to have tough love too, because Christmas comes the same time every year."

She was working for the late Charles Haynes, who was in real estate and auction at the time, at his office on Eastland Street when he encouraged her to go to school to become a licensed broker. She knew she didn't want to be a realtor, so she borrowed \$2,000 from her parents and opened a property management company.

When Brownlee started her business, she managed 40 properties in an office on Witherspoon Avenue. Action Property Management didn't generate much income at first, but then word-of-mouth advertising picked up and Brownlee's reputation as a Gallatin native helped clients trust her.

"You have to have a lot of faith in a property manager, because there's a lot of money that goes through," she said. "It's like you're taking care of their child, because it is an income or a retirement for most people."

Since then, she has moved into the building where she once worked as Haynes' secretary, and her business has grown to include 300 properties with owners from California to New York.

When she walked through those same doors to interview for a position as Haynes' secretary in the 1980s, she never envisioned that the job would lead her to become an entrepreneur. The three years she spent with Haynes introduced her to the field of real estate, while she learned some other valuable lessons that she has

carried to the present day.

"He taught me to treat everyone on the same level — nobody's too rich, nobody's too poor," she said.

That philosophy poses its own challenges, though. As a mediator of sorts, Brownlee has to balance grace for the tenant with responsibility to the property owner, while still supporting her own business.

"There are times when a tenant gets into a situation and they need a little leniency on rent," she said. "But not too much, because if you don't collect rent, you don't make any money, and the owner doesn't make any money."

She remembers, though, what it was like to need a little help. An apartment complex she now manages was where she once called home — as a single mother on welfare with two children.

Bad Economy Means More Renters

Tough financial positions increased for homeowners as the economy plummeted into a recession. While Brownlee's business actually improved, she had to keep in mind that it usually meant others were worse off.

"Right now rental property is good, but you have to also consider that a lot of people have gotten in situations where they've lost their homes," she said. "Also, a lot of people can't sell their homes right now, so renting is an option for them."

For a property manager, an increase in the unemployment rate can also mean more tenants are late paying rent, or can't pay at all. As a one-woman business operation, Brownlee handles it all on her own, including the unfortunate court appearances that occur when a tenant is evicted.

"I try to get good tenants so I don't have to deal with that, because I don't make any money if I don't collect rent," she said. "It's kind of like, 'Don't run from me, just call me and let me know what's wrong and we can deal with it together.'"