

Snapshots of Non-Traditional Paths to Careers in Commercial Real Estate

An interview with

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Please provide a brief description of your academic history. What was your graduating major in Undergraduate school and in Graduate School (if attended)?

I received a Bachelor of Arts in Music Performance from Miami University (Oxford, Ohio) and a Master of Music in Piano Performance and Pedagogy from the University of Colorado (Boulder, Colorado). Several years later, I also received a Post Baccalaureate Certificate in Paralegal Technology from the University of Cincinnati (Cincinnati, Ohio).

Did you practice professionally in the degree that you first majored in? If yes, how many years of experience did you gain before your move to a career in RE?

Yes, I spent four years working as a musician, which included a teaching position with a school for the arts, owning and operating a private piano lesson studio, and working as Choir Pianist for a local church.

What prompted your move into Real Estate development?

After four years in music, I began to realize opportunities for career growth were limited unless I opted for a Doctorate in Music and a career in academia. Not wanting to take on further student debt and disheartened by the competitive nature of the field, this did not appeal to me. I was ready for a career that offered room for growth, not to mention stability in terms of hours, income and benefits. I moved from Boulder, Colorado to my hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio to explore options and ended up enrolling in a Paralegal Certificate program at a local university. My older sister practices as an attorney and encouraged me to give the program a try, knowing it would offer the stability and growth opportunity I sought. I signed up for a full course load as a trial run, and was fully committed after the first week. The critical thinking, attention to detail and subject analysis required in legal work were skills I had honed as a classical musician, and I loved the opportunity to learn and move towards a new career. After two semesters of classes and a summer internship with a local law firm, I received my certificate and began applying for jobs. I was

introduced to the Counsel for Affordable Living at Episcopal Retirement Services and began working for her as a temp a few weeks after finishing my internship. Episcopal Retirement Services (“ERS”) offers a full menu of services for older adults, and the Affordable Living department develops, owns and manages housing communities for older adults with limited to low incomes. After several months working as a paralegal temp for their in-house legal counsel, I was hired full time as a Project Coordinator to support the development team. Eventually I was promoted into my current role, Development Project Manager.

Did you have to take any additional courses of study specializing in RE to enhance your knowledge in this field?

Yes, in addition to the Paralegal Certificate program referenced above, I was fortunate to attend the National Development Council’s Housing Development Finance Professional training program over the course of my second year at ERS. The program highlights real estate development finance for both single- and multi-family housing development. I also attend annual housing development training sponsored by the Ohio Housing Finance Agency and Ohio Capital Corporation for Housing.

What was your very first position/ role when you began your career in RE? Could you describe your day-to-day responsibilities and tasks at that time?

My first position in RE was as a paralegal supporting the legal counsel for an affordable housing developer. In this role, I drafted documents required for real estate acquisitions, assisted with locating and preparing due diligence items for lenders and investors, reviewed property management documents, maintained legal files for real estate projects, and assisted in funding disbursement requests.

Early in your RE career, what were the best opportunities or projects to get up the learning curve?

I was fortunate to begin my RE career at a non-profit whose values include developing from within

and offering career development opportunities for staff. Several months into my first role, I asked if I could attend a housing development conference that many others on staff planned to attend. At the conference, I eagerly soaked in sessions on low-income housing tax credits, HUD finance, multi-family housing management, and strategies for ending homelessness. Back in the office, I tried to view every assignment as a learning opportunity. Part of my role included organized our legal counsel's real estate closing binders, so I read partnership agreements, notes, mortgages, deeds, and loan agreements as I compiled the binders. I said yes to projects I wasn't yet ready for, such as responding to the local housing authority's Request for Proposals for project-based vouchers, and asked for help where needed. Fortunately my teammates were very willing to listen and answer questions!

to perform complex pieces of music from memory in front of judges and audiences developed a sense of personal responsibility and drive to succeed. These skills have all served me well as a Development Project Coordinator. Much of our funding is only received through very competitive application procedures, and the attention to detail I honed as a pianist are well-suited to analyzing the complex funding requirements. My sense of responsibility allows me to stay committed to finding solutions for projects that desperately need renovation funding. The passion and empathy that served me well as a performer are now translated to a passion for affordable housing and doing what I can to help create and maintain housing solutions.

How has your role or area of focus in RE evolved over the years? In what ways did your experience and knowledge in your previous professional degree bring value to your role in RE?

Over the course of several years at my current company, my role evolved from paralegal to project coordinator to Development Project Manager. My primary responsibilities now include leading real estate projects from site control through construction completion, including applications for federal, state and local funding, supporting debt and equity closings, and ensuring compliance with funding requirements. While a Master of Music in Piano Performance and Pedagogy does not at first glance sound like the most relevant degree for a career in RE, I find that my education and work experience as a musician translate very well to my current career.

Music was my passion and ambition since I was eight years old, and taught me a great deal of discipline, attention to detail, and analytical thinking. Preparing

How many years have you been in the CRE space? What are the most rewarding aspects of your work?

I've worked in RE, specifically affordable housing development, for five years. The most rewarding aspect of my job is interacting with our residents, whether that is volunteering at a holiday party or attending a grand opening after we've constructed or renovated a new affordable living community. Hearing the residents express their satisfaction with their new, or newly renovated, apartments makes the years of work securing financing, closing loans, and moving through construction well worth the effort.

What is the one piece of advice you would give college students today?

Do not feel obligated to choose one career path that will have to serve you for the next 40 years. You can always make a change! Take some time to reflect on your goals and make sure your field of study offers career paths in line with those goals.

Thank You!