

Michael Saunders

(Real estate executive, Sarasota; age 74)

▶ **I can throw a cast net** better than I can dance.

▶ **When I first started in real estate** and I would travel the country and the world and would talk about Sarasota, people would say, ‘Oh, Saratoga. You must be into horses.’ And I’d go, ‘no, no, no, no, no, Sarasota — the west coast of Florida.’ I really worked hard trying to put Sarasota on the radar screen as a magical place to be.

▶ **I love to cook.** Many of my friends today don’t cook, so I’m in much demand when I have time to cook. I like comfort foods, whether it’s a stew, a meatloaf, spaghetti sauce. You tell me what you like, and I’ll try to cook it.

▶ **The lack of civility today** is frightening to me. Civility is critical in problem-solving. If you can’t have a civil conversation about major issues impacting us today and into the future, you’re not going to find solutions. It trickles down in terms of politics, but also the workplace and in schools.

▶ **I don’t watch television.** I’ve never wanted a television in the house. There are books to read and art to see.

▶ **My parents’ expectations** of me were I could be anything I wanted to be, but I better be the best I could be. Dream the impossible dream, but be prepared to pay the price to make it come true.

▶ **Fun for me is business.**

▶ **I think the cultural assets** of the Sarasota community are what set it apart from other sun-kissed, beachfront, golfing areas in Florida and elsewhere. The arts make

A long time ago, I learned that I don’t make the market. I deal with the market I have.

Sarasota different.

▶ **In this business,** you have to be a good storyteller. You have to be able to paint a picture of what the lifestyle is like, what living in a particular house will be like.

▶ **When I started working,** my mother told me to always buy the most expensive jacket I could afford. And she said to find an accessory that changes the look, so the accessory that changes the look for me became scarves. I could dress something up or I could dress it down. That’s what began my lifelong collection and love affair with the scarf.

▶ **In 1957,** my parents moved full time from Tampa to the north end of Longboat Key. We had a little cottage. Daddy exercised his spirit of entrepreneurship and opened a marina. My earliest, fondest memories are of Longboat Key.

▶ **My name** (Saunders was named for an ancestor, 16th-century English poet Michael Drayton) helped me in the early days because when Michael Saunders called and they thought it was a man on the phone, I’d get my foot in the door — and I wouldn’t take it out.

▶ **Selby Gardens,** I never tire of going there. I never tire of Ringling. I never tire of the beach.

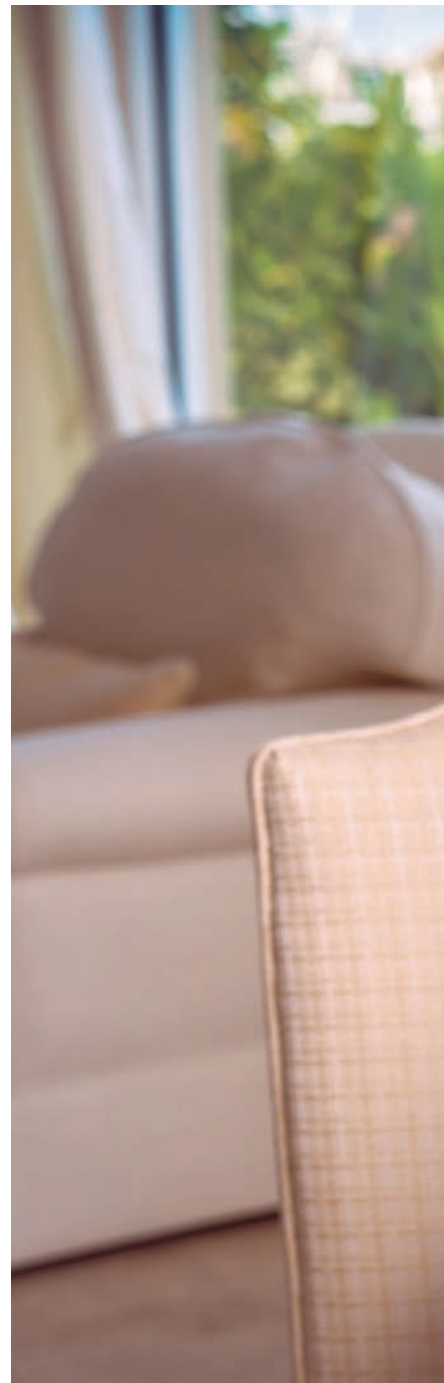
▶ **I needed \$5,000** to start the business in 1976, but, as a woman, I couldn’t get a loan. A client said he’d co-sign, and I gave him my word that, no matter how long it takes, I will pay back every dime.

▶ **I’m a great, great believer** in public education. Without a strong educational system throughout the state of Florida, we’re not going to

attract people who have children to raise.

▶ **I got a full scholarship** to the University of Florida’s law school, but I needed a fellowship to attend. When I went to be interviewed for the fellowship, I was very politely told that they didn’t give fellowships to women. I said OK. If those are the rules of the game, I need to come home and I need to work. Fortunately, they needed a history teacher at Manatee High School, so I taught for a year.

▶ **When I started my business,**





real estate companies then were a conglomeration of mismatched desks and chairs and, if there were photographs of properties, they were taped to the window and would curl and turn yellow in the sun. And people were not dressed professionally. Agents would come in wearing shorts and sandals. You're helping people make really important decisions, so why shouldn't you reflect that degree of professionalism? It was my goal to establish a real estate company where the offices looked professional and the

people dressed professionally.

► **Probably one of the things** that I think is most important is the lack of affordable housing in our market area — and I think that's true across the country — but I think it's particularly true here, and I think that's something that as a community we have to face.

► **More than 20 years ago**, when the Ringling estate's Ca' d'Zan mansion was falling apart, and the balustrades were crumbling and the roof was leaking and the paintings on the ceiling were water-stained, I headed the

capital campaign to restore it. That was 1995 maybe. It makes me feel full of joy to walk through Ca' d'Zan today.

► **The Cortez fishermen** loved to stop and chat with my father. He was quite the storyteller. We'd wake up in the morning, and one of the Cortez fishermen had left two or three trout on our doorstep or a couple of redfish for breakfast.

► **In the real estate business**, you need solid core values and the right people, but marketing was always the underpinning of everything. 