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## Palisadian-Post's Real Estate Q&A with Betty-Jo Tilley

*The following interview by Managing Editor Bill Bruns with real estate agent Betty-Jo Tilley continues our series of monthly question-and-answer columns with leading realtors in Pacific Palisades.*

**BRUNS: I understand that you have family roots in the real estate business?**

**TILLEY:** I'm the third generation in my family to broker real estate. My father founded Jacmar Home Builders, Inc. in 1938 in Alhambra, built most of the residential neighborhoods in Alhambra and Montebello, and owned motels and later restaurants. His dad owned a walnut ranch and real estate brokerage in what is now Montebello, lost it in the Depression, and my dad bought it back in '38.

**BRUNS: Where did you grow up?**

**TILLEY:** I grew up in Sierra Madre, where the velvety mountains loom over this magical little town. We spent weekends and summers on Lido Isle in Newport Beach, which at that time was a friendly, unpretentious little beach town. Not surprising I would end up in Pacific Palisades, where we have both ocean and mountains!

**BRUNS: What were your main activities in high school?**

**TILLEY:** The counter-culture of the '60's permeated my high school experience at Pasadena High. Oddly combined with my high school years as a Candy Striper at our Sierra Madre Community Hospital, it was a time focused on helping others and, of course, dreams of changing the world.

**BRUNS: Were you an entrepreneurial type of teenager, somebody who was destined to end up running her own business?**

**TILLEY:** I can't say my teen experience foretold my future, except that I've always been energized by work. My first "job" began at age 10, when my older sisters (age 19 and 21) and I lived and worked every summer at my dad's Silver Moon Motel in Anaheim, near Disneyland. My dad would give the resident staff a vacation and install his three girls to replace them for two weeks. We did everything: taking reservations using the old-fashioned switchboard, checking guests in and out, bookkeeping, cleaning rooms and maintaining the swimming pool.

**BRUNS: How did you decide on your college?**

**TILLEY:** My dad, who had been forced to drop out of USC to support his family in 1929 after the stock market crash, encouraged me to become a Trojan and I quickly learned how right he was. I loved many of my classes, in a variety of subjects, but eventually earned my degree in broadcast journalism.

**BRUNS: After graduating, what was your first job?**

**TILLEY:** I first worked at KTLA News re-writing AP/UPJ news wires for the on-air talent, but eventually ended up in public relations—at Ruder, Finn and then Kip Morrison & Associates, specializing in local and national luxury product promotion. I switched to real estate, laughably, because I thought it would be more relaxing to have flexible

hours. It didn't occur to me that I'd be working evenings and every day of the week!

**BRUNS: Who were your mentors when you began your real estate career in 1987?**

**TILLEY:** Larry Ackerd and Ellen Bergeron—my manager and co-manager at the Jon Douglas Company in Santa Monica—and the Jon Douglas training team. Twenty-five years ago, new agents underwent a month of fulltime training, followed by a year of intense mentoring, as opposed to today's practice of solely being mentored on only the first few transactions. Later mentors in the business were Alan Long, who recruited me to his DBL Realtors to continue selling real estate and help him in creating a charitable foundation. It was a wonderful time working closely with Alan, who sold his company to Sotheby's a year later and donated \$1.6 million to Chrysalis. My current mentor is my branch manager at Prudential, John Closson. We are in a very complex "people business" and the variables are often unpredictable, so even after all these years, I enjoy a collaborative relationship with my management to ensure that my client advice is always of the highest caliber.

**BRUNS: Early in your career, you had notable success during the recession years of 1990 to 1994. What do you recall about that era and how you made it work?**

**TILLEY:** My business grew to success during the '90-'93 recession, but overall it was a terrible time and I'm glad it's over. It was completely unlike our recent recession. Professionals, especially attorneys, were being laid off in droves and losing homes they'd purchased conservatively with their salaries, but could not afford with no or greatly reduced income. People were extremely emotional, and rightfully so, during that time, and I went on many listing appointments where the husband was angry and the wife was crying. For over a year, the market was characterized as being "in free fall" and there were clients I counseled who said, "I'll burn it before I'll sell it at that," but months later it wasn't worth what they owed the lender. I accomplished close to 75 short sales during that time. Interest rates were very high, so I also did a great number of transactions with creative financing terms and sellers carrying loans. Marketing was just as important as pricing, so I focused on drawing attention to my properties through unusual ways, such as Fiestas with mariachis and margaritas! It definitely took the edge off for sellers, and my listings sold quickly when others languished.

**BRUNS: After all these years, what are the sustaining factors that keep you motivated and in love with your work? What do you take pride in that you feel you do particularly well as a realtor?**

**TILLEY:** My work never stops being engaging, because it's always changing. People go through a process to arrive at what's best for them, and a person's home is so personal. The most adept business-people benefit from adept counsel. I enjoy working with attorneys, even real estate



*Betty-Jo Tilley*

attorneys, and other professionals, because they appreciate professionalism and expertise and I love brainstorming through their transactions with them. I feel most in a service business when I work with older people, when I can guide clients through a stressful time, or when clients look to me for help in prepping their property for the market. They work with me when their lives are changing, and whether the transition is for a good reason or not, it can be stressful simple because it's change. People are generally very busy and adding real estate to the mix is a lot to handle. They don't need it to be another point of stress, so I take a lot of pride in doing my job well and enabling the process to go more smoothly and ultimately well for my clients. Even when I'm friends with clients or know them very well, it's important for them that I distance myself and limit our relationship to a professional one during the time of the transaction. Clients are constantly surprised at the extent of what "full service" means, from overseeing the prepping, to doing just about anything to accomplish their goals and help along the way and after. I love exploring options, especially in situations that call for problem solving and more complex orchestration. It's important for clients to be fully informed and aware of all options, so they can make sound decisions, and I love finding solutions that might not be readily apparent because the client is so involved, or so busy with other things, like the jobs they do. When clients are fully aware of all their options, making the actual decisions are easy and result in feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment.

**BRUNS: So how and when did you meet your husband, Richard?**

**TILLEY:** I met him in 1985 when he owned the Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery, which represented contemporary artists. I was representing Coitreau Liqueur, Domaine Chandon and Petrossian Caviar at the time, which took the pressure off having to rely on my brains or beauty for a date with good taste. With Richard dealing art in Europe so much, we had quite the exciting early years, until we had kids and finally realized the meaning of phrases we formerly considered ridiculous, like "life can't be fun all

the time." We moved from Santa Monica to the Palisades in 1994 and raised our kids in the church at St. Matthew's, Methodist Preschool, Pali Elementary, St. Matthew's and Harvard-Westlake for Jack and Marymount for Grace. Jack is a junior at Vanderbilt, where he has a sportswriting scholarship, and Grace has math/science interests that include cognitive behavior and neuroscience. She's headed for Skidmore College this fall.

**BRUNS: The real estate market has been strong the past three years, in terms of actual sales, but currently there are barely 50 homes on the market. How does one acquire listings in such a tough situation?**

**TILLEY:** This market and my business have survived fires, floods, earthquakes, riots, stock market crashes and recessions. During this time I have developed many loyal clients who are always sending me business. If my personal inventory is low at any time, I can trust that business is right around the corner and my reputation and client referrals will always sustain me.

**BRUNS: What is your philosophy about giving back to the community? You have a long list of schools and nonprofit organizations that you support with generous checks every year.**

**TILLEY:** There are many individuals and organizations in our community, particularly the churches and temples, that do huge amounts of good charitable work, so I'm certainly not unusual and most of what I do is part of a larger effort or group. I don't think in terms of having a philosophy, but I do have a helpful nature, and like so many Americans, I was raised by Depression-era parents who taught to us to help and share with others less fortunate, in whatever way we can. I aligned myself with Prudential because we have a charitable foundation that gives greater amounts than I could ever give personally, and I can quickly and easily submit grant requests for organizations my clients believe in.

**BRUNS: What are the enduring strengths of Pacific Palisades? Do you see any discouraging trends in our community?**

**TILLEY:** While the Palisades will continue to change, I can't imagine it will ever lose its friendly, small-town flavor. The schools, churches and temples and all of our local organizations ensure the sense of community and giving spirit that makes the Palisades a very special town to live in. There are amazing towns and cities all across our country, where people care about each other and their quality of life, but they don't all have our weather, our ocean and our mountains! Of course, the most discouraging trend but certainly not just the Palisades, is decreased affordability. As the Palisades continues its growth, real estate appreciation and popularity, I believe we all have an obligation to ensure the warmth and sincerity of our community endures.

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