

# MEREDITH KATZ

## Building Relationships and Connections in Commercial Real Estate

by Elizabeth Davies

When Meredith L. Katz looks out the window of her corner office at Chicago's Greenberg Traurig LLP, she can't help but think of her grandmother.

Faye Miller was among the few women in her graduating class at DePaul University College of Law. She was smart, tough and no-nonsense. She also was a woman in an era where there was no place for one in the law. Unable to land the job she had trained for, she worked as a legal assistant then eventually stayed home to raise her family.

Katz was only 10 when her grandmother died, but that story resonated so deeply that it prompted her to develop a successful law practice of her own.

"I looked up to my grandma as a role model and wanted to fulfill something she couldn't," she says. "I feel like I'm carrying on the legacy my grandmother started."

And what a legacy that is. Today, Katz is a shareholder at Greenberg Traurig, where her real estate practice has her working on some of the most prominent buildings in Chicago's skyline. She focuses particularly in acquisitions, dispositions, financing and joint venture agreements for uses that include office, retail, hotel and multi-family residential units.

"Meredith is very good at cutting through noise, and she doesn't bring a big ego to the table," says Erin Ankin, general counsel at Waterton Residential. "That's helpful in the real estate space because she can deal with real issues and reach reasonable conclusions. She is a tremendous outside resource for all of us."

And while she brings intelligence and hard work to the table, Katz has a secret weapon as well: a particular ability to connect with those around her.

"I have an intuition about people, and it's served me well my whole life," Katz says. "Hard work is a given, but connecting with people is intangible."

### LIVING IN THE HEART OF HER WORK

Heading out of her apartment, Katz loads her daughter into a stroller, offers a kind word to the doorman and steps out onto the city street. She walks along, baby Beatrice happily



waving at strangers on the street, and looks up at the buildings around her.

There's the apartment building she worked on. The Starbucks in a building where she managed the sale. The idyllic John Hancock Center, towering over Michigan Avenue in part because Katz was on the team of lawyers who handled its contracts.

"I love that I worked on that," she says. "Every time I walk by, I think how lucky I am to have a job where I know a little more about the businesses right in my neighborhood."

A bit further away, Katz worked on the acquisition of the Sullivan Center, a combination retail/office space anchored by a Target store. It's yet another example of the multi-use spaces Katz has helped to provide to her community.

"I see the Chicago landscape and feel lucky that I've been able to learn the nitty gritty about these buildings through my work," she says. "I have a profession that allows me to see the fruits of my labor and watch them affect so many people."

That's why she landed at DLA Piper for her first job. She was drawn to the firm's strong real estate department and quickly threw

herself into the work.

"I had many dinners at the office and sacrificed my personal life," she says. "But I wouldn't have changed it for the world."

Her move to Greenberg Traurig came after working opposite the firm on a deal. A partner from the firm invited her to interview there. Although she enjoyed her job, she suspected it might be time for a change.

"If you're looking for a workhorse, I'm not sure I'm your person," she told them. "I believe in excellence in my work product, and reputation is everything. But I'm ready for a little more balance."

Greenberg Traurig's response—and what she particularly loved about the young, entrepreneurial firm—was to support her in working the way that was best for her. So, she joined the firm and found mentors who helped her build a successful career.

"I've had champions who have given me guidance, both personally and professionally, and helped me navigate my way to success with bringing in business and becoming a shareholder a few years ago," she says.

That's why she's quick to come alongside younger lawyers.

“I try to impart on associates that you can’t look at the people next to you and think they’re working more or getting better assignments,” Katz says. “Everyone’s circumstances and capabilities are different. You have to allow people to find their own way along slightly different paths.”

#### DRIVEN FOR SUCCESS

Growing up in suburban Glencoe, Katz was one of two children born to an accountant and a stay-at-home mother.

She was fascinated with stories about her grandmother, though. Katz knew she lived in a time with far more opportunities than women ever had before her.

“I wasn’t treated differently because I was a woman,” she says. “My parents made it clear that if I worked hard, I could achieve anything.”

Wanting to do justice to the women of her past, while laying a foundation for women in her future, Katz studied English at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor before attending Loyola University Chicago School of Law.

“I always knew I wanted to be a success,” she says. “There was always an expectation of excellence. When I graduated law school, I knew I wanted a big firm job. That meant graduating at the top of my class and working really hard.”

Her education and work ethic have been instrumental in helping Katz fulfill her goals: having a corner office while being a mom. Today, she is the only female real estate partner in Greenberg’s Chicago office but still makes a point of tucking baby Beatrice into bed each night.

“I’m making both things a priority,” Katz says. “I can still be an excellent lawyer and keep up a book of business, but also be as close to a mom, as I had, as possible. I think being a mom makes you better at work because you think of things from different perspectives.”

Katz is married to a fellow lawyer, making their lives with a baby hectic but rewarding.

“Part of the reason our life works with two lawyers and a 1-year-old is we have a real partnership,” she says. “He’s the biggest champion when it comes to my success. There is a sacrifice with a working wife and mother. Sometimes the husband has to leave work or pick up household responsibilities. We couldn’t do it if we weren’t a team.”

#### MORE THAN WORDS

Katz shares many characteristics with other successful lawyers. She’s smart, hard-working and detail-oriented.

What separates her from the pack are her communicative abilities.

“She has an excellent ability to quickly form relationships with counsel on the other side of the transaction,” says David Rosenbaum, managing principal at WHI Real Estate Partners LLC.

In fact, Rosenbaum hired Katz to do more of his business after working on just one deal with her.

“She’s the kind of lawyer looking for solutions to problems,” he says. “For us, she’s become as much of a counselor as a lawyer.”

Katz purposefully reaches out to colleagues and clients in hopes of finding a place where they can connect. She makes a point of remaining calm, even when others are not. And she treats others with the respect she wants to instill in her daughter. If nothing else, she figures, she is modeling kindness to those around her.

Most of the time, however, it turns out to be quite good for business.

“My goal is for the other side to say, ‘You and your team were a pleasure to work with, and I look forward to working with you again,’” she says. “It makes things go more smoothly. We are all trying to accomplish the same goal. We just have to try to find the fairest result. If I can build a relationship with the other side and have them trust me, it makes our work much more enjoyable.”

Client Andrew Hananel, managing partner of Acre Valley Real Estate Capital LLC, appreciates her efforts to build consensus on real estate deals.

“She’s not afraid to tell us what she thinks is right, and she gives practical advice,” he says. “She has an uncanny ability to put people at ease. So rarely do you find lawyers who are able to tone down the aggression.”

Hananel continues to use Katz as his out-of-house counsel because of the depth of her knowledge on a wide range of subjects.

“We rely on her to guide us to reasonable positions across the full gambit of real estate practice,” he says. “Some firms are very pigeonholed, but Meredith does it all and does it all very well.”

Those are words Katz knows her grandmother never would have heard—if only because she was a woman. And she knows full well that she has the chance to demonstrate the possibilities for the generations of women yet to come.

So, she’s choosing to do that by striving high and exceeding her mark. She wants to be known as a professional who is smart, capable and kind.

“Real estate is a small community, and that makes it even more important to build good relationships,” Katz says. “I’m lucky that many clients have become friends and vice versa. It’s a special way to build a book of business.” ■