

People



W. MARC BERNSAU | BUSINESS JOURNAL

| OUTSIDE THE BOX |

Marianne Sullivan Going once, going twice ...

Marianne Sullivan's timing could not have been better when she took a big leap three years ago and launched her own firm, Sullivan & Sullivan Auctioneers of Boston, specializing in real estate auctions.

Needless to say, business is booming. And there's no sign of a let up in the months ahead.

That's bittersweet news for a self-made entrepreneur such as Sullivan, who never graduated from college but still managed to design her company — using contracted auctioneers and support staff — to expand and contract in lockstep with the needs of her clients, mostly bankruptcy attorneys and banks working through loads of bad property loans.

Sullivan recently spoke with BBJ real estate editor Craig M. Douglas about her role as an auctioneer and her all-too-personal understanding of foreclosures.

What makes for a good property auctioneer?

You need a knowledge of real estate and you have to be quick on your feet. You need to be able to adapt and be sensitive to any and every situation.

How are you compensated?

We work on a fee basis.

Where do you conduct business?

Our auctions happen right on the property. If the property is occupied, we may be on the corner.

Compare business today to, say, five years ago.

I started my company three years ago. When we start-

ed, I'd say we had maybe 20 to 30 auctions a month. Today we're exceeding 125 auctions per month.

Do you see more problems ahead?

With no end in sight, our business could essentially double within the next two months, based on what I'm being told.

Who's losing their properties?

Mom and pop operations. Small-business owners. Homeowners. We're seeing more secured parties fail as well.

Did you foresee today's problems when you launched your business?

I really wasn't taking into consideration the economy. I was just ready to make my own giant step into business.

Is it a difficult business, emotionally?

It's difficult seeing someone lose their business, whether it's the owner or an investor. In a lot of cases, the properties are empty. But I have many experiences where I spent time talking with a debtor making sure they've exhausted all of the possibilities of trying to keep a property as opposed to it being foreclosed.

That sounds like it's above and beyond the call of duty.

I just feel for the situation. I was in a foreclosure situation myself about 15 years ago. It was an income property and I had a partner and we just kept losing money and losing money and losing money. ... This was back in the other boom, and so of course the debt exceeded the value. In those days, there weren't any short sales. So I had to go to the bank and take out a loan for \$10,000 to show up at the closing to pay the deficiency. When does that ever happen today?

Are you surprised often?

Always. We were working with an income property and we were getting ready to do the auction and this little kid came out of the house, walked right down the stairs, and had this little piece of paper all wrapped up and he didn't have any shoes on and he was crying and just said, "Open this." We had all kinds of bidders there and so I open this paper and there was a flower inside and the paper read: "Please help me save my house." So what did I do? I just turned and started bawling.