

TIMING

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Brad Larson said. "So many people have gotten out of it. I want to be in when it comes back. We knew things were down and people were getting out of the business."

Rick Larson is retired from teaching courses in Minnesota and elsewhere, where he developed curriculum, training programs and textbooks used by more than 500,000 students at Kaplan real estate schools over his 29-year career.

"It was my idea to retire in Fort Myers," Mr. Larson said. "But they started this business."

Now he will teach classes at the new school.

One of the first students, Carol DeBonis, said she dabbled in real estate in Massachusetts and Connecticut, but never got her license. She moved to Fort Myers with her fiancée last month after retiring from a job at Aetna insurance company.

Ms. DeBonis, 60, said a broker recommended Larson as a thorough program. The sales associate program costs \$299, including textbooks.

"They had the most services and they were close by," Ms. DeBonis said. "Once I get through this course and the state exam, I'll be a real estate associate. I believe there will always be a market for it."

The 63-hour course makes the students official sales associates, and also primes their interest in an industry that took its share of blame for the foreclosure mess. In Lee County, 144 people got licensed in October 2005, but only 45 this October, according to the Florida Division of Business and Professional Regulation.

"It will be a building process," Rick Larson said. "We want to be part of the solution to get this market back on track."

"The entry-level people are really valuable. The key to the business long-term is new blood."

If Ms. DeBonis stays in the industry, she'll need to renew her license every two years, and Larson hopes to be her choice for continuing education throughout her career.

"We're a cradle to grave organization," Rick Larson said. "These people sitting here, we want to make sure they come back year after year."

The Larson school prides itself on a professional image: clean, state-of-the-art classrooms, comfortable chairs, instructors dressed in suits and ties, even free coffee. The curriculum aims to be interactive, where students give presentations and instructors teach students best industry practices, instead of just preparing them for an exam.

"The license doesn't come with operating instructions," said Brad Larson. "You'll learn things you'll need to be a better professional in the market. We think the consumer is part of our customer base. How is the consumer served by a mandated license that requires no education?"

Unlike at some real estate schools, the instructors aren't allowed to recruit students. The school aims to work cooperatively with brokers who send them people looking for a license.

"This is a safe haven," Rick Larson said.

The school doesn't guarantee students a passing grade on their exams, but will offer their money back if they aren't happy with the course. Besides the sales associate license course, there is a license exam preparation course for \$129, which is only for help passing the exam; a 45-hour post-license education course for \$199; and a 72-hour real-estate broker license course for \$399.

The Larsons also hired their aunt Wanda as a secretary and the classrooms are decorated by Rick Larson's wife, Rose, with black and white photos of historical Southwest Florida people and buildings, like the Sydney & Berne Davis Art Center in downtown Fort Myers.

"We wanted to be totally integrated into the community," Brad Larson said. ■

ARTFEST

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ability to excel in math and science," she said. "It provides that foundation for them. We should not think of art education as a frill or luxury. It's core to what they learn."

And having a strong arts program ultimately benefits local businesses, Ms. McAllister says.

Students who are exposed to the arts make better employees and bring a unique, rounded approach to their jobs and communities. They develop a life-long love of the arts and patronize theaters, symphonies, and galleries. This, in turn, supports community businesses.

A three-year study led by the National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies reported that a strong arts community provides a significant economic impact on an area. In addition to the millions of dollars pumped into to the local economy by nonprofit arts agencies, the study concludes, "Arts districts attract business investment, reverse urban decay, revitalize struggling neighborhoods, and draw tourists. Attendance at arts events generates related commerce for hotels, restaurants, parking garages, galleries,

and more."

Ms. McAllister encourages local businesses to support the arts in the Fort Myers community through ArtFest's Art Dollar Challenge. A donation of \$25 will purchase art supplies for an elementary classroom, \$200 will send an artist to a middle school for the day, and \$750 will send a high school student to the Ringling School of Art Summer Teen Workshop. The Corporate Art Buyers Program, for a \$600 minimum donation, allows businesses to purchase original artwork for home, office, clients, or employees.

Oswald Trippe and Company, an independent insurance agency based in Fort Myers, supports the ArtFest program by sponsoring the Art Under 20 high school art show and competition.

"The arts have a significant role in education both for their intrinsic value and for the ways which they can enhance general academic achievement and improve students' social and emotional development," says Stacey Mercado, spokeswoman for the Oswald Trippe agency. "A strong arts community is essential to providing a cultural platform that offers the opportunity to grow, learn and succeed. When a community succeeds, the business community is able to succeed." ■



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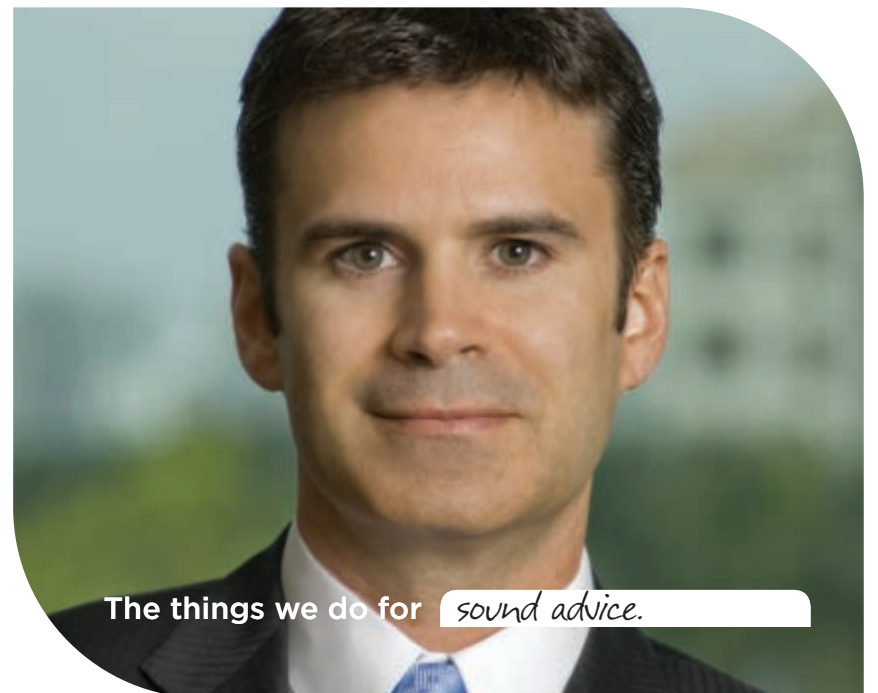
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