

of sense. It makes civic dues-type of sense. It makes tax sense."

Laughlin, who has master's degrees in education and French and works for UW-Madison, and Nitzel, a lawyer, developed their business plans with no knowledge of each other - or anyone else who had such a commission pledging system.

Laughlin works for the UW Information Technology Academy, a program that aims to prepare students of color and low-income students to succeed in college. She also serves on the city Community Services Commission and says she has a strong belief in helping people.

Put that together with a love of houses, architecture and the field of real estate and Foundation Realty was a natural result.

"When I was looking for my own house I enjoyed the process, but it also seemed very overwhelming to me," Laughlin said. "So I felt like if I could help other people with that process it would be great. I wanted to bring that human services side into what I was interested in, which is real estate."

So, while Laughlin will work with any client, her special interest is under-represented groups such as first-time, low-income, minority, and female home buyers.

With referrals being a key in real estate, Laughlin said she benefits from all the people she has met in her community work. And there also is a trust factor in being a person of color.

"It's the element that you relate to people you look like and feel comfortable with," she said. "It's such a huge purchase. And you don't know who's out for what. I'm really an advocate for buyer representation."

And she came up with the 15 percent donations.

"I want to see Madison's booming real estate industry do some good in the community," said Laughlin, whose mother joined her firm earlier this year.

Nitzel, who works part time for the nonprofit Alliance for Animals, said she got into real estate partly for the extra income and partly because she loves houses, but also was driven by the home-buying experiences of friends.

"I kind of watched them go to some of the bigger companies not knowing who to use and not feeling totally taken care of by some of the bigger companies," she said. "And I thought, 'I can help my friends out. I can do this just as well as anybody else.' "

While Laughlin is a traditional real estate agent, Nitzel also does flat fee listing real estate for \$395 and legal work for FSBO (for sale by owner) clients.

"People need options," said Nitzel, who works alone. "If you can sell your own house, why not?"

As a matter of principal, Nitzel also avoids high value homes; any such client she would refer to Laughlin.

The pledging was a natural idea for Nitzel.

"I usually work for nonprofits and the idea of making money and not giving some away ... " she said. "I always thought if I had a business I would give money back somehow."

While both give 15 percent of their commissions, they use different methods for choosing recipients.

Laughlin pools her pledge money and takes grant applications from community organizations, then chooses recipients on a biannual basis. Her first cycle just ended June 16.

"I had thought about having the client choose where it goes but then I discarded that because it takes that sense of purpose away because I don't know where they're going to send the money," she said. "I want to stay focused on the goal of community and human service organizations. And I don't want it linked in any way to the actual revenue coming in."

Nitzel lets clients choose the recipients - within a certain framework. If a client demands a recipient she can't stomach she turns down the business.

"I have ethics that I stand by 100 percent," she said. "I make it clear to people when they come to me what types of nonprofits I donate to."

Nitzel's recipients so far include the Community Action Coalition, East Isthmus Neighborhoods Planning Council, the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence and the Tenant Resource Center.

Laughlin and Nitzel each say they have raised about \$1,500 so far.

Nitzel knew of Laughlin first, but Laughlin made the first contact after someone told her of Nitzel.

"I told her we should get to know each other because we have similar goals, and I'd like to talk about ways we could collaborate," Laughlin said.

"I really kind of cried" when learning of Laughlin's similar effort, a laughing Nitzel recalled. "I thought I had the idea and it was unique."

The two have become friends and collaborators, but established no formal business relationship.

They say they have encountered no resistance from other real estate agents - beyond what Nitzel runs into that any non-traditional real estate agent faces.

"We're not big enough yet," Laughlin said. "From my experience the realtors in this area are pretty open - once you collect the commission it doesn't matter what you're doing with it."

They also say they aren't troubled by critics who might say their pledging is nothing more than a marketing ploy.

"If I get more clients I help more people," Laughlin said. "So I hope I get more clients because of this because it's all going to a good place. I would be happy if some of the big guys took our model. Because ultimately who's benefiting? The bottom line is it's going back to somebody."

Byrne agreed, noting that the national Realtor Magazine promotes Realtors who do charitable work in their communities.

"Who bloody cares?" she said. "The bottom line is the good work is getting done."

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