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"A tribute to a multifamily pioneer"

December 13, 2012 - Front Section

I am often asked where I get my passion for real estate, and the answer is simple, it comes from my late mother, Beverly Gannaway.

My earliest memories are of riding in the back seat of our car while my mother either collected rent or posted notices to pay rent or quit on the first of every month. I vividly remember people not being too happy with the notice and chasing our car down the street, yelling at my mother. She calmly said, "Joann, this is a business. We provide a nice place to live, and they in turn pay us. When they don't pay, they're not keeping up their end of the deal."

Then there was the time that one of her long-term residents was injured on the job and unable to pay rent while he was recovering in the hospital. She covered his rent for four or five months until he was able to get back on his feet. She told me later that he had caught up on all of his back rent by the end of the year, and when I asked her why she had decided to take that kind of risk, she said it was simple, "he's an honest, hardworking man and I knew he would pay me." He had earned her loyalty by years of being trustworthy.

My mother was a property management pioneer. She was creating value in real estate in ways that would later become common practice. At one property, she replaced all of the grass with low water vegetation. I preferred the grass and commented, but she said, "Joann, do you like it enough to lose 25% of your profit to mow and water it? Besides, it's much better for the environment and eventually people will have to care about where our water is coming from."

At another property, she converted a large bathroom into two smaller bathrooms to create a two-bedroom, two-bathroom unit, thus achieving a higher rental value. She also networked with other property owners and their communities believing that neighbors helping neighbors would create better communities for people to live. Back when apartments were called apartments, she called them communities and created a sense of "home" for her residents. She enjoyed knowing her residents and they enjoyed living in her communities. One woman lived in one of her apartment communities for over 30 years!

She was a stickler for details and I often took the time to walk with her while she inspected construction or maintenance work. I had the opportunity to watch her as she inspected the new paint on her wrought iron fencing with a mirror to make certain the painter didn't miss the underside. I learned the importance of having a watchful eye and knowing what to look for, and my mother never backed down when she knew she was right.

During December of 2009 my mother was diagnosed with stage-four breast cancer. She passed away on October 6, 2011, at just 65 years old, but almost two years after the doctors said she had just weeks. Early detection would likely have saved her life and there's a lesson in the need to be as diligent with our own health as we are with our families and businesses.

My mother was not formally educated or trained. She simply had a great head for business, an

unrivaled work ethic and fierce determination. She was a beautiful redhead with a huge smile, and once you met her you would never forget her. I attribute my passion for real estate and eagerness to uncover a property's true potential to the many valuable lessons taught to me by my mother. Joann Gannaway-Breuer is managing principal at HG Cornerstone, LLC, Boston.

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