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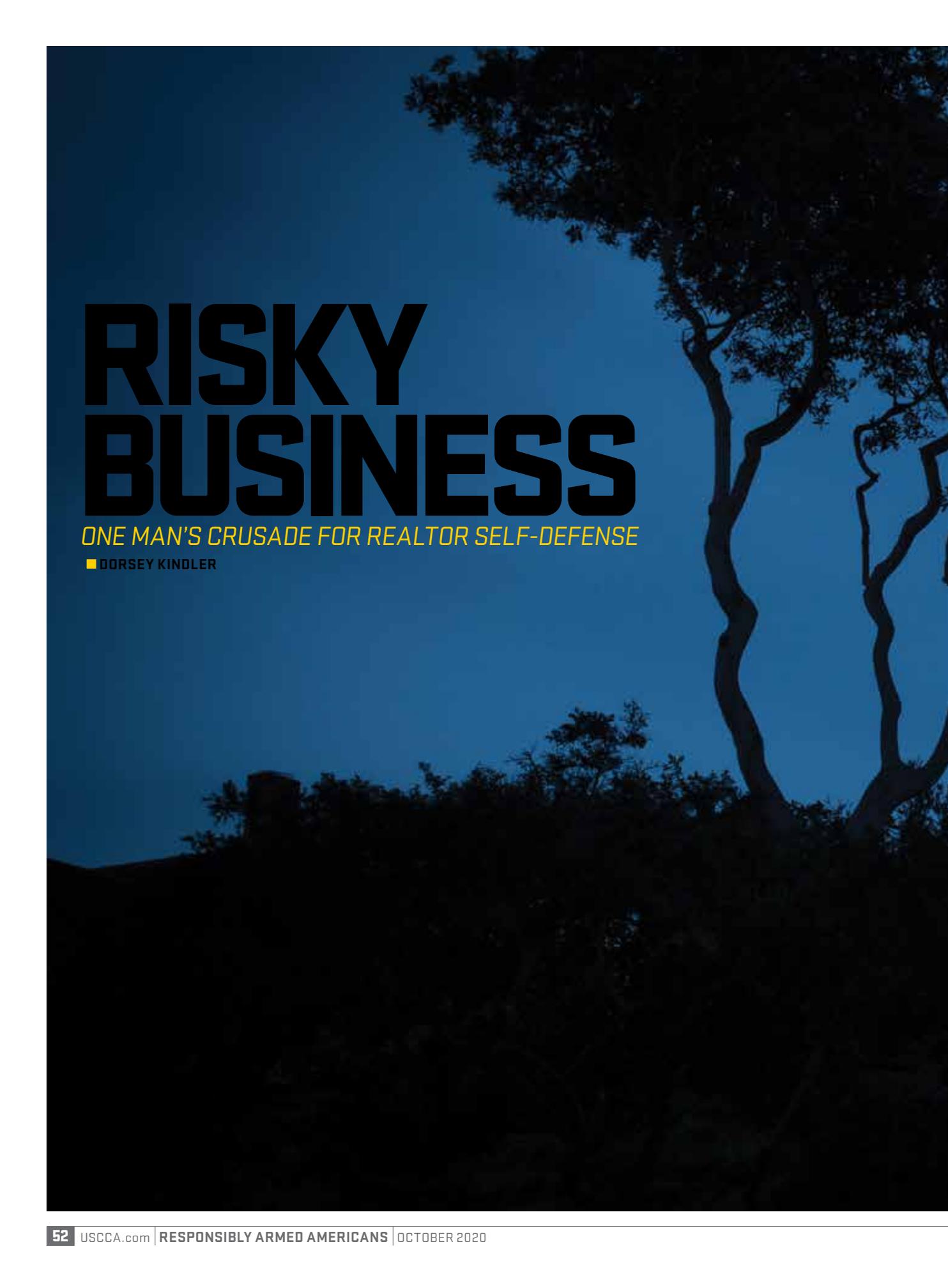
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RISKY BUSINESS

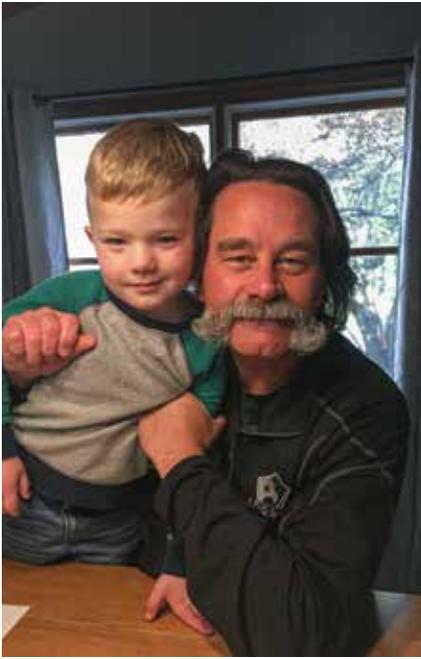
ONE MAN'S CRUSADE FOR REALTOR SELF-DEFENSE

■ DORSEY KINDLER



GOING SOLO

Real estate agents face a unique risk in their profession: Part of what they do is meet strangers in empty buildings, and this can easily turn dangerous.



“We don’t know where it’s ever going to strike, do we?” The conference room full of Montana realtors looked up from their phones and laptops to consider Will Parker’s first PowerPoint slide: a bolt of lightning.

“Criminals pick the time, and they pick the place to strike you,” he declared. “If you think you’re always prepared for it, the reality check is you are not.”

Parker sported a luxuriant Wyatt Earp-style mustache, long hair and a polo shirt emblazoned with “Glacier Speaks IT,” the name of his Kalispell-based instructional training business. He’s not the typical figure you would picture standing in front of an audience of realtors. But for the past several years, the retired naval officer has been on a mission to spread awareness of the dangers realtors face every day. He hopes to accomplish this by sharing his realtor safety program throughout his adopted home state and eventually across the country.

“Realtors are a targeted market for victimization,” said the 52-year-old instructor during an interview that followed. “A lot of times they work alone. They go to unoccupied homes. And they appear to be well-to-do.”

The majority of realtors are women, he said. (According to the National Association of Realtors, women make up more than 60 percent of the profession.) And

to complicate matters further, they often put photographs on their business cards that make them look 20 years younger.

“Next thing you know, ‘Sociopath John’ decides that’s the look he likes,” Parker said in his characteristically bluff manner. “And he travels across the country and abducts them and rapes them and murders them.”

EASY PREY

Arkansas-based realtor Carl Carter knows all too well the dangers of his profession. His mother, Beverly Carter, also a realtor, was kidnapped and murdered on the job in 2014. Today he runs the Beverly Carter Foundation out of North Little Rock, Arkansas.

“We’re all about crime prevention for lone workers,” he said. “I talk to different groups. And we’re working to build educational materials to raise awareness about how to prevent crime instead of having to react to it.”

One of the difficulties Carter faces is the relative dearth of published information on the topic. Most real estate agents are independent contractors, he said, so agencies aren’t required to report to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

That said, every year the National Association of Realtors, at 1.3 million mem-

TALKING SHOP
Parker, shown at his home (left) and presenting (right), teaches his realtor safety program and is also a USCCA Certified Instructor and Training Counselor.

bers strong, conducts a member-safety survey followed by a report. According to the 2019 results, a full 33 percent of respondents experienced a “situation that made

them fear for their personal safety.”¹ And while 95 percent of respondents reported not being a victim of crime in the previous year, 2 percent said they were victims of identity theft, 2 percent said they were victims of robbery, and 1 percent said they were victims of assault.

Not captured by the numbers is the psychological aspect of why realtors put themselves into risky situations, Carter said. Meeting someone at the last second, perhaps without having conducted a background check, is common.

“People get into [selling real estate] with this excitement that they’re going to be so rich,” he said. “And so they kind of throw all caution to the wind whenever they have these opportunities. Because it’d be super sweet to get this \$10,000 commission.”

Some people take advantage of a realtor’s hunger for the sale with deception and fantastic tales, according to Tierra Hodge, of Parkway Real Estate in Chico, California.

“Yeah, I got a call from a gentleman posing as Dwight Yoakam,” she said. “And, of course, I was delighted! I would

■ DORSEY KINDLER

STAY ON TOP

Will Parker rather bluntly reminds his course attendees that the lessons they're about to learn are written in the blood of realtors that came before them. Unsettling, yes. But there is truth to it. Here are some safety tips he suggests when showing houses:

- The office is where you meet new clients. If you can't meet them at the office, you need to meet them at another branch of your agency. And if not there, then with another association. Just call them up and ask, "Can I use your conference room to meet with a client?"
- Many agents don't share with family, friends or their agencies where they are, who they're meeting with or when they're going to be back. Don't go out with complete strangers in the middle of nowhere with no expected time of return. Always tell someone where you're going.
- Don't go alone. Team up with a colleague or friend when showing properties and holding open houses. Reciprocate whenever possible.
- When showing properties, carry a bright flashlight that has enough heft to be used as a weapon if necessary.
- If you're alone, avoid no-exit areas (such as basements) when showing houses to prospective buyers. [**Editor's Note:** This is, admittedly, the most difficult-to-follow piece of advice he offers. Prospective buyers want to see features such as basements.]
- Know where you do and don't have cell coverage at your various listings.
- Keep a logbook during open houses. Ask for photo ID and take notes on any physical features that could help you make a police identification. Periodically snap a photo of the log and text it to a friend or colleague.
- Have an emergency escape plan for every listing. Use Google Earth and Google Maps to figure out how to best escape the property. Scout out obstacles, such as fences, in advance.
- Realtors have a tendency to wear impractical shoes. Make sure your footwear can stand up to running over rough ground or broken glass.
- Ensure there's enough fuel in your vehicle when you're out showing properties and that you park in a way that facilitates a quick escape. Consider backing into spots.



love to sell Dwight Yoakam a cabin in the woods off the grid."

But the man's unusual requests for showings sent up several red flags. He only wanted Hodge at one listing, well out of cellphone range. He rebuffed her request to bring a showing assistant and refused to first meet at a public location.

"The whole celebrity ruse is really believable," she said. "When a celebrity calls and says, 'Hey, I want total privacy. And I want to buy this neat little place. And I don't want anyone knowing where my hideaway cabin is.'"

While there isn't a lot of safety training in the industry, Hodge said, she ended up following her personal-safety protocol and sent the fabulist on his way.

"I'd rather be rude and end up being

safe than being overly polite and get in trouble," she said.

THE MAN BEHIND THE 'STACHE

Meanwhile, back in Bozeman, Parker was getting to the "meat" of his three-hour presentation. He explained that violent confrontations come at a physical, moral and legal cost and are best avoided.

"Why am I going to get engaged with someone?" he asked rhetorically. "Because they called my wife a name? Sticks and stones may break my bones, but hollow-points expand on impact, right?"

This elicited an appreciative chuckle from the audience, which remained remarkably engaged with Parker despite the inherently dry nature of much of the

material.

Originally hailing from Michigan, Parker rose to the rank of lieutenant in the U.S. Navy, where he taught sailors how to operate the Aegis Combat System. It was during a posting with the U.S. Marine Corps as a naval gunfire liaison officer that he picked up the nickname "Freddie Mercury" for his facial hair.

"I was the only person in a Marine Corps infantry battalion that had a mustache," he said.

Parker developed a love for competitive shooting after coming back from the Middle East to his home in Jacksonville, Florida, in late 2006. An internet search for "combat handgun" led him to his first match, and he was instantly hooked. Now he primarily competes in



the Single-Stack Division (1911s) of the United States Practical Shooting Association (USPSA).

Upon retirement from the military, Parker fulfilled a lifelong dream of moving to Montana. Today he runs Freddie Merc's Gun Werks out of a 2,000-square-foot shop on his property outside Kalispell, complete with a fully furnished in-

HARD TRUTHS
Parker's presentation includes topics that are not necessarily comfortable to discuss but which represent the realities agents face.

structor's quarters on the second floor. He offers concealed carry training and defensive shooting classes, and while he sells a variety of firearms and accessories, he considers himself an educator first and foremost. Creating a realtor safety training curriculum was a natural outgrowth of his original business.

FINE-TUNING THE PROGRAM

Parker reached out to his local association — the Northwest Montana Association of Realtors — but was “stiff-armed” for two years. Finally, in 2016, he was given a chance.

“I got it down to what I consider the three most important lessons,” he said, “which are developing a personal-protection plan, the legal use of force, and deadly encounters and their aftermaths.” He asked for feedback after his initial class. And the critique that mattered most was, “What does this have to do with realtors?”

He went back to the drawing board and spent another 20 to 40 hours reworking the curriculum. He also sought the advice of Great Falls Association of Realtors CEO Terry Thompson, her association still reeling from a 2011 sexual assault on a member by an airman from nearby Malmstrom Air Force Base.

“I taught him the basics of how to communicate with realtor associations,” Thompson said. “And after I saw [his presentation], I gave him some advice on how to improve his teaching in our style.”

She also connected Parker with Carl Carter, of the Beverly Carter Foundation, and put him in touch with a woman in Nebraska who runs a business of booking instructors for associations around the country.

“I just continued to [book] him because of the caliber of instructor that I saw that he was,” Thompson said. “How he covered the topic. He’d done his research on things that were important to realtors.”

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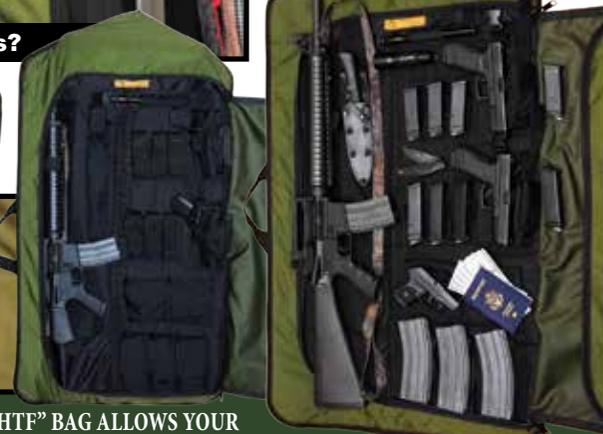
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THE WINNING FORMULA

As of 2020, Parker has presented to most Montana real estate associations. And his state-approved curriculum consists of seven different modules that count toward 16 hours of continuing education. A four-hour class is \$1,500, while an eight-hour class is \$2,500. He can be booked through his website at GlacierSpeaksIT.life.

"It can be an association," he said. "It can be a brokerage. It could just be a bunch of realtors who go on and get together to learn this lifesaving information."

During the course in Bozeman, Parker covered a remarkable amount of ground — creating a plan to avoid violent encounters, mental preparation for likely scenarios, considerations specific to vacant properties, how to stay safe during a showing, items to keep in a vehicle "go bag" and various use-of-force options. Throughout the talk, he drove home the fact that anyone can be a victim of violent crime.

"Sometimes I think he scares people

with how real of examples that he can give," Thompson said.

The information pertaining to firearms and firearms training was cursory, however, and this is by design.

"I recommend that they come to my concealed carry class that is written by the USCCA," Parker said. "So I don't want to talk about firearms too much because I don't want to make it a firearms class. I want it to be about realtor safety."

It's a winning formula, according to attendee Jana Weaver, of Dahlquist Realtors in Great Falls, Montana. The 52-year-old was spurred to take Parker's class because she describes herself as "too trusting." She was so impressed that she thinks it should be required by the state.

"I just keep repeating to myself that it can happen to me," she said. "I'm much more cautious. I let people know where I'm at. I text the address. I check in with them. Like I said, just not so trusting."

Weaver and several realtor friends have gotten together in order to hire someone to teach an evening self-defense class to augment Parker's instruction.

ONLY THE BEGINNING

Parker has ambitions of writing a book, creating a video series and taking his instruction nationwide. He wants to develop relationships with the National Association of Realtors, the Beverly Carter Foundation and possibly the Real Estate Educators Association to bring safety training to the forefront of the real estate industry.

"It's a business," Parker stated. "I've put an enormous amount of resources into what I do. And it costs me a lot of money to be a really good educator. But first and foremost, I want to help the agents not fall victim to violence."

ENDNOTES

(1) According to the NAR, the survey was sent to 46,177 members. There were 2,652 respondents for a response rate of 5.7 percent. At the 95 percent confidence level, the margin of error is plus or minus 1.9 percent.



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