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David Chases Goliath

BY AURRICE DUKE

About two years ago Judi Desiderio founded her flagship real estate company in East Hampton. The seasoned veteran had been in the business for more than 25 years, the last stint working for the Corcoran Group.

Then Ms. Desiderio acquired the Village Realty storefronts and leases. "The stars were aligned for me to do this," she said last week.

At the time, the small boutique agency had offices in East Hampton, Southampton, and Westhampton Beach, as well as Mattituck on the North Fork.

After the purchase Ms. Desiderio spent the better part of three months inputting real estate listings into a computer by hand. "It was a labor of love," she said. By March of last year, the doors to what was now called Town and Country Real Estate opened for business in all but Southampton.

To borrow her metaphor, it appears the stars are in alignment again: A fourth office is slated to open in Bridgehampton in the coming weeks. The 1,200-square-foot Bridgehampton space will house nine workstations and eight desks. A second North Fork location is under renovation in Southold, and plans for a Southampton office are in the works.

Staffing the Bridgehampton shop, at the site of the now-defunct Scott J. Aveda Salon on Main Street, is Janet Hummel, the managing partner. The two women have known each other for years. Ms. Hummel and her ex-husband, a builder, used to buy property from Ms. Desiderio when she was with Cook Pony Farm Real Estate in East Hampton.

Ten years ago, Ms. Desiderio suggested that the pair work together. Ms. Hummel went from the building side to the "inside" of real estate. She held a position at Cook Pony Farm for several years, weathering the agency's acquisition by the Corcoran Group, and playing various professional roles along the way.

The Corcoran Group acquired Cook Pony Farm Real Estate in East Hampton in the fall of 2003, and in March of 2004 it added Dayton-Halstead, in East Hampton, Bridgehampton, and Sag Harbor, to its corporate mix.

"The merging of the firms got too big, and I got away from the nuts and bolts of real estate," Ms. Hummel said. "I became a professional meeting-goer."

"She would attend five-hour meetings and come out looking like she was run over by something on the track," Ms. Desiderio said.

"I lost track of inventory, what was happening in the market. Being back with Judi is like coming home again. It's like we've pushed the clock back in time," Ms. Hummel said.

Home is a reoccurring theme with the two women; they associate it with the firm's very reason for being. Both have called the South Fork home for nearly 30 years, and the agency's brokers and management have strong ties to the community, as well.

Like its competitors, Town and Country boasts "the finest software program money could buy," according to Ms. Desiderio. The company recently re-launched its Web site. A defining feature is the mini-commercial that pops up when the site is engaged.

"Being as organic as we are, we wanted to tell you a little about us," Ms. Desiderio said.

The Web site is a reflection of the business, the women say. In addition to a listings-search feature on the home page, there is a Web log (blog) on the site, which provides a view of real estate machinations from the ground up.

"I'm A.D.D.," when it comes to surfing the Net, Ms. Desiderio said. "It's important for me to get to the information quickly."

Word is trickling out about developments at Town and Country. "We are bringing in agents from Sotheby's, Prudential, Coldwell Banker, Corcoran, and Devlin-McNiff who are at the top of their game," Ms. Hummel said.

"It's important to get people who play well with others," added Ms. Desiderio ruefully.

Homeowners have also heard about the company's expansion and have voiced their desire to list their property with the "local" agency, according to Ms. Desiderio.

While some might question whether the company's expansion is a wise move in today's changing market, the women remain confident. "We're willing to put ourselves out there," Ms. Desiderio said. "There's a comfort level from knowing the business."

"And being a controlled independent, we can tick and check," she added. "The Titanic



Judi Desiderio, left, the president of Town and Country Real Estate will open a fourth office in Bridgehampton. Janet Hummel, a managing partner, will run it. *Morgan McGivern*

may not have the same flexibility. We don't have to pay corporate overhead. Of our five offices, we own two of the buildings."

In Ms. Hummel's view, the foundation of Town and Country — and a point of differentiation from the big conglomerates — is their ability to provide timely responses. "You can check with a manager. There's the answer."

The partners claim to offer clients a more hands-on experience, whether the property lists for \$800,000 or \$80 million. It is an approach they have compared to the personal touch of shopping at Tiffany versus Kmart.

"I knew that my contemporaries were not going to enjoy working for corporate America," Ms. Desiderio said. "I set out to be a multi-office establishment that was agent-friendly."

But success, so far, is outpacing the planned timetable.

"When Allan M. Schneider folded into Corcoran, that catapulted my mission," Ms. Desiderio said.

With all the acquisitions, "there are too many agents operating under one name," she said. "The agents are cannibalizing each other for business."