

Talking shop takes broker on a rags to riches journey

By LIANA GREY

Last year, Aliza Avital, a broker at Eastern Consolidated, sold an apartment complex in Murray Hill that seemed like a lost cause: the 18-unit building, on 32nd Street between Second and Third avenues, had been on the market for two and a half years, and the landlord wasn't doing much to speed up the sales process.

"The seller was rude," Avital said. "He always used to hang up the phone."

Still, she persisted — much like she did a decade ago during her first assignment, when she waited for hours in the lobby of an apartment building on the Upper West Side to meet with a reluctant seller.

Finally, a client and good friend purchased the building in Murray Hill for \$3.1 million.

"I'm very close to my clientele," said Avital. "I make parties, I entertain them." For her birthday in February, she threw a bash for 50 friends and clients at Abe and Arthur's, an upscale American eatery in the Meatpacking District. "We danced until 3 a.m.,"



she said. "I got phone calls from clients the next day." Long before she began selling build-

ings, Avital had her heart set on dancing in a Broadway show. After completing her National Service in Israel, where she was raised in a low-income community, she made her way to Manhattan. "I came here all alone with two suitcases and \$1,000," said Avital, who said she began working at the age of 12 to finance shopping expeditions.

As with many Broadway hopefuls before her, reality quickly sank in. "I had to work, so I started doing jewelry sales," she explained.

With her bubbly personality and eye-catching wardrobe — she now rewards herself with a new pair of shoes, purse, or even a car after a successful transaction, all of which are conversation starters with clients — sales suited her.

At the end of 2001, she met Deborah Charatan, a prominent commercial broker and the second wife of real estate scion Robert Durst. "She took me as a protégé," Avital said.

Under Charatan's tutelage, Avital learned that selling a \$30 million building takes far more patience and effort than convincing a customer to walk away with a new pair of earrings — particularly during the kind of market slump that hit after 9/11. "I worked really hard," she said. "I grew up poor and I wanted to be someone."

By the time Aliza joined Eastern Consolidated in 2003, she discovered that cold-calling is the bread and butter of an industry in which transactions can sometimes take a year or more. "My goal is to make 50 to 100 calls while working on a deal," she said. "If you get a 'maybe,' you walk in."

That's what Avital repeatedly reminds her own protégé, a former attorney with an MBA that recently transitioned into a real estate career. "The number one rule," she said, "is canvassing, canvassing, canvassing," and then making sure to follow up. Late nights at Abe and Arthur's, where Avital finally found an outlet for her dance training, have paid off:

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last year, she sold \$121.8 million worth of residential and commercial properties totaling nearly 400,000 s/f, ranging from a \$7.35 million co-op tower on Queens Boulevard to a \$51.5 million note sale at 5 Hanover Square in the Financial District.

"I don't specialize," she said. "I deal with big companies and people that are first-time sellers." Last year, she and a fellow Eastern Consolidated broker, Alan Miller, sold a \$41.1 million note for a residential complex on Park Avenue South to Savannah Partners, "one of the hottest buyers around," she said.

What sealed the deal, Avital explained, was a meal with seven Savannah employees at — you guessed it — Abe and Arthur's. "We had a big dinner," she said. "There were lots of bottles of wine."

The market has come a long way since the low point of the recession, when no amount of liquor could console buyers that had lost their deposits.

"2009 was really the worst year of my career," Avital said. With seven contracts in shambles, and extravagant bashes no longer appropriate, it was a far cry from the boom years. In 2007, for instance, she sold an \$18.5 million office building on West 14th Street, owned by an investor with a portfolio in the Meatpacking District, to two young men. Six months later, the buyers flipped it for over \$20 million.

"2010 turned around a little," she said. Now, Avital's juggling a handful of assignments, and plans on investing in her own portfolio soon.

In April, she worked with the seller of 10 Fifth Avenue, a brownstone in Greenwich Village with 14 rental units and ground-floor retail space.

"I was on the phone 24/7," she said. "It was a very intense deal." Thousands of emails later, the building sold to Benchmark Real Estate Group for \$9.5 million. "I bought myself a brand new bag," she said. "This year, I think, will be my best year ever."