

THE JOURNAL NEWS

Real life HGTV stars

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Walter and Luba Sydor stand May 23, 2014 in front of a townhouse they are renovating as they prepare to flip the property.(Photo: Joe Larese/The Journal News)Buy Photo

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A lot of us are more than a little addicted to HGTV. When late-night channel surfing ultimately leads to binge viewing of "Love It Or List It," or "House Hunters International," you know you're hooked. The cable television channel has inspired more than one enterprising homeowner to [tackle jobs themselves](#), just like their celebrity counterparts. They range from a couple learning how to flip homes to a handsome contractor who has already done a little time in front of a TV camera.

HOUSE FLIPPERS Luba & Walter Sydor

Luba and Walter Sydor are standing outside a neatly landscaped, three-story townhouse in Patterson on a beautiful, sunny day. Luba (pronounced "Yuba") is a tall blonde with a dazzling smile; Walter is an attractive, polished guy with graying temples. As they open the door, a visitor sees that the townhouse is undergoing a serious renovation.

HGTV stars? A new version of "Flip or Flop"? Not quite. But they are real-life flippers, or soon will be.

The couple took the leap after watching countless hours of their favorite TV network and aspiring to be their own version of Tarek and Christina — hosts and stars of the popular HGTV show "Flip or Flop."

Now, with their first flip, they are no longer wannabes. They are the real deal, and their story is just as compelling as any TV drama.

After 20 years in the corporate world (she was in human resources and recruiting, and he was a software consultant), they were both laid off in 2008-09. With two school-age boys and a house in Ardsley, the couple was forced to scramble, so Luba started her own recruiting firm and got her real estate license, and Walter found a consulting role with a bank. But real estate was their true calling.

"Call me a looky-loo if you want, but I have always loved real estate," says Luba. And, of course, timing is everything. When Walter's father (who was a builder) passed away, the couple decided to renovate the apartments of the nine-family home that he had owned. "Walter is meticulous at renovation, and our tenants loved the apartments. Turnover on the units was less than 2 percent," Luba says.



Walter and Luba Sydor stand May 23, 2014 in the townhouse they are renovating as they prepare to flip the property. In the back is general contractor Adrian Wowk.(Photo: Joe Larese/The Journal News)

Their appetite was whetted, and, with the economy slowly turning for the better, "We kept dreaming of flipping houses and living vicariously through HGTV."

In December, Luba was poking around online looking for opportunities and came across hubzu.com, a site similar to eBay — but for online real estate auctions. She and Walter, working side by side at home, were drawn to the Patterson property, and decided to follow the steps online to see what it would entail.

There were four hours left on the bidding process for it. Without realizing what would happen, they clicked on the "Buy it now" prompt, and instead of being directed to another step, found they were now flippers when the screen said, "Congratulations! The bidding is over, and you are the winners."

"I was stunned," said Walter. "At first, we panicked, but then realized we had made a potentially really good deal. So we drove up, saw the property, and here we are."

With Walter doing the renovations, the couple hopes to make at least a 30 percent return on the investment. (They purchased the home on the foreclosure auction for about \$125,000 below market value.) The completely remodeled two-bedroom, two-and-a-half bath townhouse is less than a mile away from the Patterson Metro-North stop and is now for sale.

"Turn the key, come in, uncork the wine and enjoy the lifestyle," says Luba.



Architect Carol Cioppa stands June 16, 2014 on the deck of a home in Croton that has spectacular views of the Hudson River. She specializes in transforming old houses into modern marvels.(Photo: Joe Larese/The Journal News)

REHAB ADDICT Carol Cioppa

Unlike Nicole Curtis, who you will see swinging hammers and tearing down walls on HGTV's "Rehab Addict," architect and designer Cioppa leaves the heavy lifting to others.

Curtis takes historic houses that are ready for the wrecking ball and restores them to their former glory. Cioppa has projects that are equally or more dramatic, including a project tagged, "Raising the Ranch," the complete transformation of a plain 1960s ranch into "a charming, spacious house with dormers. It fits into the landscape and solved the client's space issues on a very low budget," says Cioppa.

The project received a design award from the American Institute of Architects. (She has won this award twice.)



Architect Carol Cioppa talks about the challenges of renovation design at a client's home in Croton. She turns old homes into modern marvels.

What's important is listening to the client, Cioppa says. "My clients are my collaborators. Almost everyone gives me that feedback. I try to make their dreams come true, not my dreams."

Cioppa studied at Pratt Institute to be a designer, then moved on to getting her architectural degree. "I am a detail-oriented designer who sees things from the inside and out; that's why I'm good at renovations. I see the whole space."

That skill helped her with the ranch, as well as "an ugly duckling" she saved in Croton. "The view of the Hudson was to die for, but the property was overgrown and the house was so cramped, you could hardly see the windows. The ramshackle house was topsy-turvy with weird additions, but the client who bought the house saw the potential. He said, "You can remake the house, but you can't make that view'."

"I never get the easy jobs," says Cioppa, of Pound Ridge. "When other architects don't want the job (because it is too challenging), they often give the client my name because they know my reputation. The client doesn't have to spend a million dollars to get a good project and have it recognized as such."



From left, brothers Frank and Michael Rao pose at one of their properties at 155 Irving Avenue in Port Chester. They run New York Commercial Realty Group, a small real estate brokerage and their specialty is industrial real estate.(Photo: Joe Larese/The Journal News)

PROPERTY BROTHERS Frank & Mike Rao

Westchester's own "Property Brothers" are Michael and Frank Rao, who own the New York Commercial Realty Group, a small boutique company in Harrison. While they are not quite the show stealers that Jonathan and Drew Scott are and are not involved in renovations, they are a force to be reckoned with.

The brothers have been in business for more than nine years, and neither of them is yet 35. "We are very hands-on," says Mike. "We're on 24-7. People are surprised when they see we are two and not 20 brokers."

"We love working. We always found a way to make money. I've been working since I was 12," says Mike, who is 32. He was in Florida College in Boca when he learned that he could attend the Gold Coast School of Real Estate, and, after 40 hours, get a license and go to work. "That was for me; I wanted to work."

Frank, 34, pursued a business degree at the University of Rhode Island, and soon, he jumped on board with Mike. "That was it; we never looked back. Now, we make deals happen," says Frank.

Together, this duo that grew up in a middle class family in Yonkers knows how to bring the right properties to the right clients. "We put A and B together." Their talent lies in seeing a space and having a vision. "We can see past the sore spots of a property and guide a buyer to see its full potential."

Like Drew and Jonathan, they each play a role in the business. Mike is the better opener, and Frank is the better closer. "I go out and get the listings, and then Frank takes over and finalizes the deal," said Mike. They love what they do, they like having an impact, and work is always on their minds.

"The deals we put together create construction jobs; we create work."



Kenyatta Jones-Arietta has started her own real estate business in Tappan. She will house hunt for anyone looking for a new home.(Photo: Carucha L. Meuse / The Journal News)

HOUSE HUNTER Kenyatta Jones-Arietta

Rockland homebuyers who are looking for the perfect perch have an ally in Kenyatta Jones-Arietta. "For me, it is not about the commission; but making people happy, helping them find the space where they will raise their families," says Jones-Arietta, who opened her own firm R2M Realty Inc. in Tappan earlier this year.

Better still, she has an amazing backstory, ready for a pilot. The mother of three, Jones-Arietta has worked in the Manhattan apartment rental business, did interior design and furniture sales for contemporary high-end furniture retailers Maurice Villency and Roche-Bobois. And she is a competitive bodybuilder.

She was a figure pro winner in the International Bodybuilding and Fitness Federation championships several years running. While she still trains and works out daily, she is focused on developing her real estate business, she explains.

"The one thing you learn through training and competing on that level is how strong you are mentally," she said. "It takes a lot of dedication, focus, determination and confidence to get to the top. And I wasn't stopping until I achieved my goal."

Jones-Arietta was honored with a Rockland Economic Development Corp.'s Forty Under 40 award in 2011, along with her husband, Rudy Arietta, assistant principal of Ardsley High School.

"I love helping people," she says. "This is a big decision — one of the biggest purchases that people make."
Barbara Livingston-Nackman



Charlie Frattini poses at his home in Croton June 10, 2014. Frattini is on A&E's *Sell This House* (Photo: Joe Larese/The Journal News)

FIXER-UPPER Charles Frattini

Not only is Charles Frattini the real thing — a 28-year local construction veteran — but he's also done some time on camera already. "I am a real builder who happens to work on TV," says Frattini, who takes on jobs for regular customers and has starred on A&E's "Construction Intervention" and "Sell This House Extreme."

"And I am the only builder on TV," and he puts the emphasis on "only." Having worked on runways in both Kennedy and LaGuardia; viaducts in the Bronx; underground utilities throughout Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan; and new buildings, including high rises, in all the boroughs except Staten Island, he is comfortable with his credentials.

"I have been instrumental in changing the NYC skyline," says the former marine, who looks fit at 5'9" and 188 pounds, and still wears his hair in the Marine high and tight.

Frattini studied engineering in college, and his building credentials include the management of the reconstruction of the Enid A. Haupt conservatory in the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, for which he had direct responsibility. Anyone who has been to the NYC landmark will remember this Victorian-style glasshouse and the "ecotour" it offers through 11 habitats, including rain forests and deserts, as well as the Holiday Train Show.

"That's what I consider my greatest achievement," Frattini says. "It was a building landmark restoration that was the first of its kind in the United States." He was honored by the engineering industry as Newsmaker of the Year for his role on that project.

On screen, he is no less impressive, whether he is fixing a failing business that was poorly constructed or helping homeowners re-do their home so it can be sold. Under that tough shell is a guy who just wants to help real-life, everyday folks.

"I thought there was joy in seeing a developer make money and have a nice project to be proud of. That's nothing compared to a homeowner or business owner who is about to lose everything, and I come in and help them," he says. "I make way less money doing TV, but the rewards are way greater than any amount of money doing commercial/residential construction. So who has it better than me? No one."

Frattoni is at work developing some new TV projects playing the familiar role of good guy who straightens bad things out, so look for him in the fall on HLN and Discovery.