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Bethesda

Fame!

Local celebrities
and their
roller-coaster
rides to success

Gaithersburg
screenwriter
Dominique Paul
isn't famous yet—
but she's headed
that way.



Love sells:

Melinda Estridge and Bob O'Toole

Of the many couples who work together in real estate, Melinda Estridge and Bob O'Toole are "the highest sales producers in the Bethesda area," Melinda says.

Chevy Chase residents, Melinda and Bob met 30 years ago through mutual friends but didn't start dating until 14 years later, after Bob called on Melinda's office as a mortgage broker. The couple married in 1995, and about five years later Bob joined her firm, The Estridge Group, a part of Long & Foster. He figured it was the only way they'd ever see each other, given their hectic schedules. "Now we work together every day and even sit in the same office," Bob says.

Melinda is the rainmaker and handles the listings, while Bob works with their buyer agents and sells to the Estridge

group's personal clients. Real estate "tends to be a family business because it can be a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week job," Melinda says. "So one of the best things about working together is that we understand each other's hours. We can take our days off together and travel together. We share the same goals, problem-solve together and have a lot of understanding about pressures and stressful days."

Melinda and Bob have taught a course for couples in real estate at Star Power, an annual real estate conference. "Couples should sit down before going into business together and ask lots of questions," Melinda says, "like the number of hours they each are thinking of working, the time off they would like to take, when they would like to retire, and how they would like to grow [the] business. Not taking the time first to consider income goals, how each of you wants to

spend and invest money, can be a pitfall for couples, too."

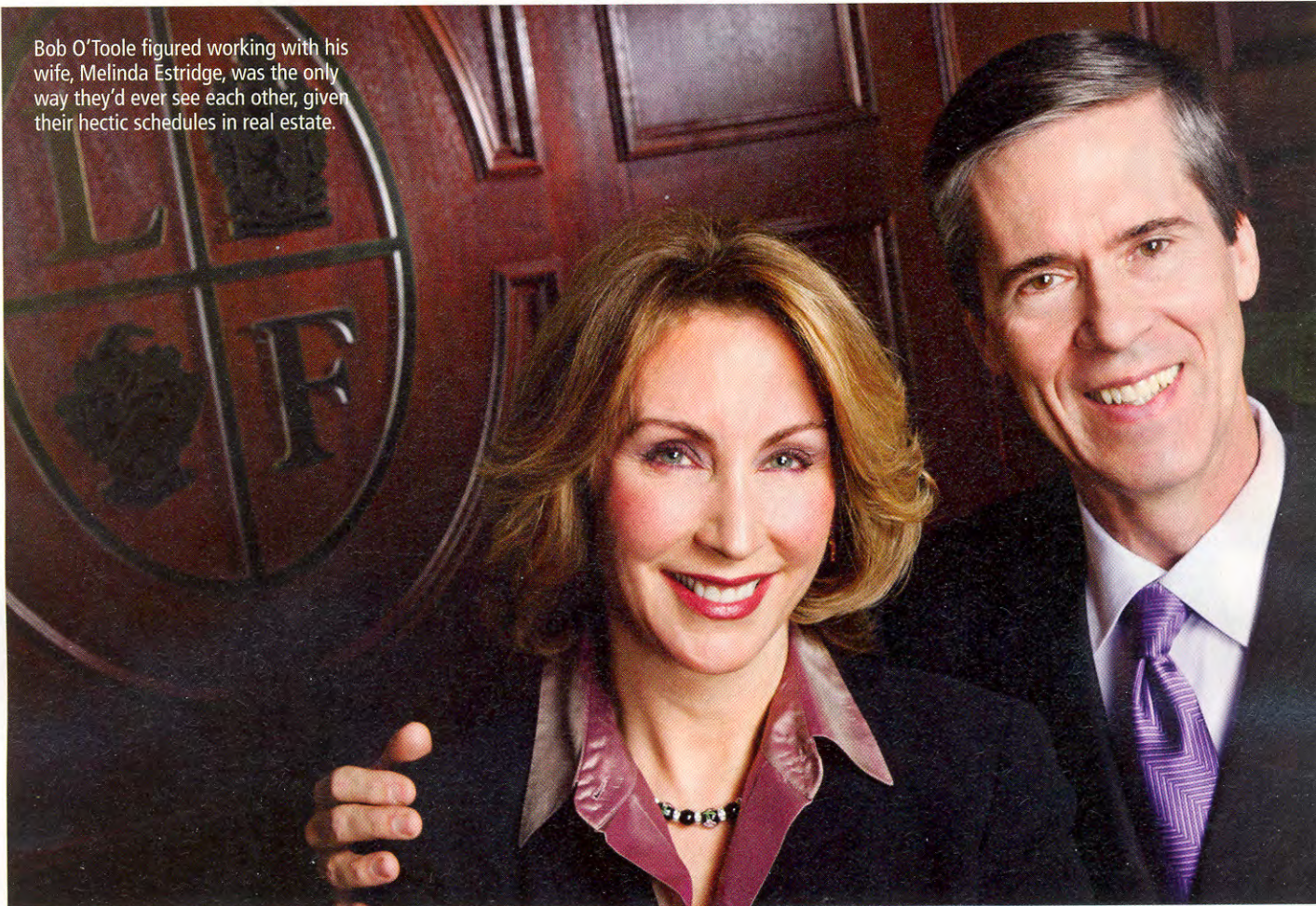
Bob says working and living together can be challenging "because we both have pretty strong-willed personalities. But we try to keep business separate from our personal relationship and have a sacrosanct date night every week. After 15 minutes of debriefing, we try not to talk about business."

He says they also have designated one area in their home as the only place where they can talk about business. "This makes us think first about whether to talk business in the evening," he says, "and requires [us] to physically move to that area."

Otherwise, Melinda says, "if we weren't careful, we could be talking about business all the time.

"Almost everyone we meet says, 'I do not know how you live and work togeth-

Bob O'Toole figured working with his wife, Melinda Estridge, was the only way they'd ever see each other, given their hectic schedules in real estate.



er. I would end up killing my spouse,'” she adds. “But I think it has brought us closer together.”

**Gotta have art:
Erin Johnson and
Owen Lentz**

In 2003, Erin Johnson was living with her parents in Bethesda, teaching private art classes and trying to save money to start a business. One day she went to Avenel to see a friend play in a rugby game and wound up meeting a professional rugby player from South Africa named Owen Lentz, who did pastels in his spare time.

They began dating that day, and soon after, Owen helped Erin launch Artworks Fine Arts Studio, now located in a 1920s house they renovated together on Old Georgetown Road in Bethesda. Married in 2005, the Silver Spring residents teach children and adults the fundamentals of fine art.

“I had been teaching in people’s homes, but I got so many students that I decided

it was time to open my own art studio,” says Erin, a graduate of Brown University in Providence, R.I., who studied at the Rhode Island School of Design.

“In the beginning we fought a lot about who would be in charge of what,” she says, “but as we learned each other’s strengths, everything ran very smoothly. Owen does a lot of the construction and maintenance. I set the curriculum and do the billing. We both teach.

“The hardest thing about working together is also the best thing: sharing everything, talking about the same things and being with your best friend almost all the time,” she says. But “we have to make sure we maintain our own identities. I do my own ceramics and sculpture, and he plays for the U.S. national rugby team, which means he has to travel.”

Owen says, “We talk a lot and have lots of discussions. Erin is more of the brains of Artworks. Even though art was in my background, I was pursuing something much different. So Erin gives me the plan, and I get it done. It helps

that we are both laid-back people.”

Erin says the one time they fight is when they have to decide who gets to pick up 3-year-old Raegan from day care and spend the evening with her, something that’s not an issue at the moment since Erin is on maternity leave with their baby, Piper. “When Owen gets to spend time with our daughter, I feel envious,” she says. “This also comes up when there is an event at her day care center and only one of us can attend because the other has to stay at work. We alternate going, but it also creates stress.”

At the same time, “after teaching other people’s children together for the past seven years,” Owen says, “we are completely on the same page with how we want to raise our daughter.”

**A family affair:
Tanya and Nick Vaccaro**

Nick Vaccaro’s great-grandfather came here from Sicily in 1906 with a recipe for a fine pastry cannoli that he sold at Fourth and H streets NW in the District until April 1981.



Erin Johnson launched Artworks Fine Arts Studio with the help of Owen Lentz, who is now her husband.