

Champion of affordable housing

Realtor of the Year has done much to foster what she calls 'workforce housing' in Orange County.

By Nancy E. Oates,
Correspondent

CHAPEL HILL -- Mariana Fiorentino had forgotten about the crowning of a Realtor of the Year at the Chapel Hill Board of Realtors' 50th anniversary fete until she saw it in the program as she settled into her seat at the Carolina Inn.

She made a mental note of who she thought it would be, but when emcee Tom Heffner began lauding the accomplishments of this year's winner, the description sounded awfully familiar. Fiorentino's name was called, and the hall erupted in applause.

"It was like a Cinderella night," Fiorentino said. "They had roses for me. Afterward, all the people I've known for years said such nice things."

As well they should. Fiorentino has done more than most to create and encourage affordable housing -- she prefers the term "workforce housing" -- in Chapel Hill and Carrboro. Starting her third year as chair of the Board of Realtors' Affordable Housing Committee, she has drummed up enthusiasm for a cause that some seasoned real estate agents have deemed futile. At some meetings early on, she could count the number of committee members on her thumbs, quite a contrast to the enthusiastic agents who came to the first meeting of the committee this year.

"In fairness, people have been discouraged," she said. "What's the sense in meeting if there are no affordable homes?"

Fiorentino has been attacking the problem on a number of fronts since she began Terra Nova Global Properties in 1996. For years she has served on the Carrboro Downtown Development Commission and the board of Habitat for Humanity. She co-chairs the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Chamber of Commerce Council on Affordable Housing and serves on the social concerns committee at the Unitarian church she attends. With a voice in so many organizations, she can be the thread that brings them together, "so we aren't reinventing the wheel in each committee," she said.

Jeff Rupkalvis, president of the Chapel Hill Board of Realtors, considers Fiorentino "the adhesive in the affordable housing committee year after year."

"She keeps them thinking progressively," Rupkalvis said. "She presents to us what the issues are and what she sees as solutions. That's unusual. A lot of people just like to complain."

The committee has published a resource brochure for agents and consumers and organized a symposium on workforce housing.

"There are a lot of things we can do," Fiorentino said, "and we need to focus on that as a community, because it changes the whole fabric of a community if we don't have a diversity of people who live here."

Diversity was part of the attraction when she moved here from Pennsylvania in 1990 with her sons Matthew, now 23 and a UNC grad who works with her at Terra Nova, and Noah, now 21, soon to move back to the area after graduating from a guitar-making school in Arizona. The boys were young then, and she wanted a good place to raise them. As the creator of the law-access loan, she had traveled to many college communities around the country, including UNC and Duke, to market it.

"I knew what was here versus Ann Arbor or Saratoga Springs," she said. The strong real estate market helped sway her decision. She got her real estate license because she needed flexible hours to raise her boys, and signed on with what was then Better Homes and Gardens Howard Perry and Walston. Rupkalvis, then a rookie Realtor, shadowed her to learn the business. When she moved to Franklin Street Realty several years later, he went with her, remaining there after she left to start Terra Nova.

Fiorentino ran Terra Nova out of her garage for several months until Bill Bracy of Arbor Realty offered her the use of extra space in his office. At the time, UNC was making a push to recruit associate professors, and she was unable to offer those prospective homebuyers much in the \$150,000 to \$200,000 range.

"We were losing people who would enrich our community," she said. "If people reject us because they can get better housing in Austin or Ithaca, it hurts the quality of the university, too."

When a 20-acre parcel of land on the edge of downtown Carrboro became available, she worked with the sellers and architect John Felton, who was then with Lucy Carol Davis' firm, to design Roberson Place, a walkable community of townhouses and detached houses in a variety of price points. Roberson Place, where she has her home and office, opened in 1998.

Over the years Fiorentino continued to find land and match it up with a developer who would agree with her concept of what would work well in the



Photo by Streeter Lecka

Realtor of the year Mariana Fiorentino stands in front of her next project, Twin Magnolias, in Carrboro.

space. Now developers contact her to work with them on creative projects.

"We are rapidly growing into a population of haves and have nots," Rupkalvis said. "Mariana wants to close that gap and make housing opportunities available to everyone."

Terra Nova, having grown to nine real estate agents, has three projects in the works that increase housing diversity in downtown Carrboro. Twin Magnolias, just west of the Thrift Shop, has 22 condo cottages, two per building so that each unit is an end unit. Two of the cottages are designated as affordable. Mulberry Street Condos, off Pleasant Street, consists of four buildings with three floor-through condos in each. The offices and residences at 605 West Main make up Carrboro's first mixed-use project.

Rick Williams of Williams Construction is the builder of Twin Magnolias and has worked with Fiorentino on several other projects. He said he has watched Carrboro move in a direction similar to Chapel Hill in that it is becoming too expensive for the people who work there to live there.

"Mariana is the champion of the underdog," Williams said. "She has always wanted to see what I call the working stiffs have the opportunity to live in the community where they work."

Through her work with the Downtown Development Commission, Fiorentino is pushing to change ordinances, such as the town's lengthy approval process.

"That discourages creative people who don't have deep pockets from coming forth with wonderful projects," she said. Increasing the efficiency of the approval process may trim housing costs because

developers won't have to carry nonrevenue-producing land for as long.

On the lending front, she is promoting a federal program called Smart Commute that boosts the monthly income figures on loan applications of those buying a home close to public transportation, making it that much easier to get loan approval.

As co-chairs of the Chamber of Commerce's Council on Affordable Housing, Fiorentino and Bob Knight, UNC's assistant vice chancellor for finance and administration, are developing a resource Web site and, as an education tool, are producing profiles of people who need workforce housing.

"She puts her money where her mouth is," Knight said. "I've seen her reach into her own pocket and help someone who fell through the cracks. She is very dedicated to this."

And she is picking the brains of the New York State Association of Realtors to organize a continuing education class to educate real estate agents about workforce housing. Fiorentino met the New York members on a trade mission to Italy to study how Americans can buy property overseas. She has her international real estate license and serves on the international advisory council for the National Association of Realtors. She is in the final phases of applying for Italian citizenship. Acquiring dual citizenship will honor her family roots. Though she talks of setting up a bed-and-breakfast in Italy, she can't see retiring from real estate.

"Real estate is a service industry, not a sales industry," Fiorentino said. "It is a real privilege to find people a place where they will live and raise families."