



Antonio Piazza & Voula Gekas

Sales Representatives:
Open Concept Team, Century 21 Atria Inc. Brokerage

INTERVIEW : Kara Kurylłowicz PORTRAIT : Wilson Huynh Studio

Antonio and Voula understand the residential and commercial real estate markets, but as importantly, they understand people. Whether you're a first-time buyer or selling the family home to upsize or downsize and return to the downtown core, it's an incredibly exciting time. At this stage of their lives, these business partners have gone through most of the same journeys as their clients. They know what it's like to start out as a single first time home buyer to a young couple looking to the future, to growing a family and face the life, career and real estate changes that come with new relationships.

This duo firmly believes that two heads will always be better than one because each individual contributes a unique set of skills and experiences to the partnership and its clients. As importantly, there is always an extra set of

eyes available with a fresh perspective. As a male/female real estate duo that shares core values, Voula and Antonio recognize that clients are happy to have the opportunity to work with whichever partner they feel suits them best because it benefits everyone involved.

Antonio and Voula are all about educating, preparing and informing clients and have the research to back up their facts, but they also know how to deal with the intangibles. People tend to fall for a home, or not, the first time they see it. The Open Concept team will help you get beyond the emotion to the practical considerations that ultimately determine whether that home will be yours. Together, they bring their respective experience and perspective to bear the benefit to every client and each transaction.

coupled with what we can deliver while being realistic and honest versus what we think they need is one of the main reasons they want to work with us.

Antonio: We ask what's driving the sale or purchase and set realistic expectations which are vital in a market with little supply and high demand. Whether you're buying or selling, we have to be honest about what your budget will

get you and the true market versus your perceived value of any improvements you've made to your home. Also, we identify ourselves as strong marketers and understand the importance of utilizing tools to help build exposure through progressive marketing initiatives. As a basis, we produce professional videos and photography for each home, market through social media, offering up a unique ability to stage and provide improvement ideas that will maximize the dollars received from your home. Focusing on the details that appeal to all senses, understanding that marketing starts from the initial visit up to final closing.

What are your key differentiators?

Voula: Real Estate can be a highly stressful and emotional process; however, it can be just as exciting and fun as well. We pride ourselves in making the real estate process a good experience for our clients, and we do this by making sure that we have done our research, are prepared and have a sound strategy. Being in the customer service industry from a young age, and working in the financial services for a number of years, I understand how important it is to make sure clients are kept up to date, responded to in a timely manner and make sure their best interests are kept in mind during the entire process and negotiations. I have also sold condos on a development site, so I have a good understanding of resale and pre-construction real estate.

Antonio: I've been in sales for as far as I can remember, I also built my own home which allows me to look at the construction and weigh in on the building inspectors' findings. My sales executive career in marketing and advertising helps me leverage our online presence and social media to ensure Voula and I tap into our respective networks and beyond. The more eyes we get on each listing the better for everyone.

What are the biggest challenges in today's real estate market?

Voula: There are so many agents vying for customers that we're competing with discount brokers. Consumers need to know that as a result of that lower commission rate, the broker is likely focused on the quickest possible sale, which benefits the broker far more than the seller. You will get what you pay for.

Antonio: Given the competitive landscape surrounding the number of agents in the GTA, we are finding that there is more of an emphasis on a "quick deal" vs the "right deal." We've been told that agents aren't always completing their due diligence and it's exposed the clients. We believe in earning our client's trust and working to ensure the overall experience is positive, talking with other professionals that we work with in order to protect our clients.

Voula: There's an abundance of information out there, which has empowered Buyers and Sellers in helping to identify their needs and wants, which is great, however, given the current Real Estate Environment, the difference between winning and losing is being prepared.

Antonio: Being prepared means you have the financing in place and your legal team standing by. It may also require dropping and waiving certain conditions such as a home inspection or flexibility around closing dates. These are things we would discuss long before getting into negotiations in order to ensure a better chance of winning and also to give our clients the confidence they need to take the next steps.

Do you work mainly in Etobicoke?

Antonio: That is certainly our focus but we've found that clients based in Etobicoke may have an interest in towns such as Milton, where I grew up, and in Oakville, Mississauga, East York, and Durham. The bulk of our transactions are residential, however our residential clients also want investment and commercial properties and may be interested in developing a piece of land outside the city. We're here to help and we both recognize the value of deep research.

Voula: That is one of our key advantages—we never make assumptions and we do what it takes to stay current. Towns, regions and markets are constantly evolving as are the rules and regulations and we often find we're more up to date on what's happening than the local administrators and realtors.

What's your perspective on foreign investment in Toronto real estate?

Antonio: It brings cash into Canada, drives economic growth and it's a vote of confidence in our city and our country.

Voula: Canada is seen as a safe haven for professionals, who initially rent, but often with a view to eventually immigrating and living in Toronto themselves.

As experienced real estate professionals—what's next for Toronto and specifically Etobicoke?

Voula: Given the current economy and interest rates, prices will continue to climb in Toronto and demand will further increase as downsizers and millennials move into the city to take advantage of the arts and culture as well as the proximity to jobs since not everyone is willing to sit on the highway and battle commuter congestion.

Antonio: In South Etobicoke, Long Branch and Mimico are the real jewels with a terrific mix of old and newer homes, all of which are currently a little undervalued compared to other areas. There are town homes and condos under construction as well as some truly creative development; for example, a decommissioned school is being converted into a beautiful modern home. I have friends in the hospitality and entertainment business and they're really focused on the untapped opportunities for new bars and restaurants in this pocket. In Mimico and Long Branch, you can raise a family in a home you own and walk a few blocks to a great local restaurant.