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Real Estate's Youngest High Flying Act

By Maria Eberle



Maria Eberle (left) and Lindsey Barrows Photo Andy Scheck

Think you know what characterizes a 10-year old girl these days? Thinking braces and braids, the complete Jonas Brothers collection, Judy Blume books, and all the candy in Powell's?

Meet Lindsey Barrows, a full-fledged 10-year old circus performer and real estate tycoon-to-be, a not-so-typical young lady who alternates acrobatics, contortions and aerial leaps with touring homes for sale in Orinda.

"When my mom asked me what I wanted for my birthday, I looked at the calendar - December 15 falls on a Sunday - and I shouted 'Open Houses!'"

Mom Cathie confirms it's true. "She loves to go to homes for sale on Sundays. I drive her around and I've actually gotten to like it too!" Not only does she drive her to open houses, but Cathie often makes the round-trip 30 minute trek from Orinda to Emeryville five days a week so daughter Lindsey can train with the famed Bay Area theater troupe Splash Circus. Their theme? "Try Circus...it only seems impossible."

Like a lot of fifth graders at Sleepy Hollow Elementary in Orinda, Lindsey juggles an impossibly busy schedule. But while most kids play computer or video games for hours, Lindsey's likely to be monitoring her favorite website, ePlans.com, a high-tech haven for home builders. With custom designs, a variety of architectural styles, and step-by-step planning guides, it's a gold mine for a budding builder in search of the perfect floor plan.

Lindsey sat down with me on a recent Sunday at my own open house on Westwood Court to talk about the business, and her devotion to it:

"I want to be a residential architect some day. I have mountains of floor plans at home." It all started several years ago when Lindsey and her family, father Doug Barrows, a project director with McCarthy Building Company, mom Cathie and 12 -year old sister Shauna visited the Pope Estate in South Lake Tahoe. Fascinated by the floor plan posted at the front entrance to the historic site, Lindsey was hooked. Since then she has committed to learning every phase of structural design from the planning stages to the finished product. Discovering she has a flare for residential architecture, she has been honing her skills for three years.

Indulging her favorite pastime, Lindsey visits up to four or five Orinda homes on any given Sunday. She has met some of the most successful and prominent agents in the tightly knit real estate community of Lamorinda. With a confident air she strolls into a house and if the opportunity presents itself, offers her completely biased and remarkably astute gift for home appraisal. In fact, she told one real estate agent in a house she toured last week that he would be lucky to get half of his asking price!

"If the agent will talk to me, I like to give them my guess at where the house should be priced, and what I think it will sell for. I look at square footage, and at recent sales in a neighborhood, but what I really look at are the finishes." The value is in the details, she likes to think, and offers this pearl of wisdom, "Hardwood is good."

Exhibiting insight beyond her years, she struggles with an environmental dilemma: "I watch the Discovery Channel and I learned that some Brazilian cherry wood is gotten through stripping the forests of Brazil. I love granite, but it's sad to see the way they strip the mountains with dynamite in China and Italy."

The pragmatist in her knows it's not all glamour in the up and down world of real estate. She's closely monitoring signs of the economy on her beloved Orinda. "The real estate market has slowed down because the economy is falling. I think electing a new president will have a good effect on things."

Lindsey's favorite home? An English Tudor style on the market earlier this year. "It had great curb appeal!" She thinks Orinda is a very special place. If she didn't someday buy a home here, her next choice would be in a mountain region for the climate. "Of course my house would have to be "green," with solar panels, a gas fireplace, and an outdoor kitchen with a breakfast bar would be nice. Oh, and a house should have at least as many bathrooms as it has bedrooms!"

What do Lindsey's friends think of her "open house" hobby? "Only 30- or 40- or even 50-year olds like to do that stuff!" chided a close girlfriend. Undeterred, Lindsey says, "I keep all the business cards of the agents I meet, and I remember every house I've ever toured." The next time you're in an open house, look for the little lady with the engaging grin. It may seem impossible, but you just might learn a thing or two!

Maria Eberle is a Prudential Realtor, and resides with her husband Peter and four children in Orinda.

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