In Their Own Words
Annie Williams

This fearless, Manhattan-hardened marketing pro's career has run the gamut from corporate publishing to the high-tech bubble and bust. Her highly-honed entrepreneurial instincts have served her well, most rewardingly in San Francisco real estate where she wears the #1 top producer mantle at Hill & Co. From rite-of-passage back-packing in Asia, to managing the tempestuous egos of New York's publishing poohbahs, Annie Williams has never lost that sense of preternatural calm that emanates from a body at peace with the demands of career, family and closing the sale.

On her roots

I was raised in Denver, schooled at UC Santa Barbara and worked as a paralegal thinking I might enter the law like my successful attorney father. As a paralegal, I would work overtime, get vouchers for a cab ride home and a free dinner, and then eat free pizza at work and walk home. That gave me the money to go backpacking around Asia. I was always entrepreneurial. When I was young, I mowed lawns, took care of pets and ran a house-sitting business. I helped finance my trip around Asia by buying jewelry in Nepal and selling it on the beaches in Thailand. I learned early on that satisfying feeling of putting your own money in your own pocket.

I was broke when I returned from Asia, so I worked as a cocktail waitress at the Balboa Café. After that I headed to New York where I got a job with Cooks magazine which, at the time, was a new publication. I started selling ad space even though I knew absolutely nothing about the business. Cooks then moved me to San Francisco to open their West Coast sales office.

Even though I was doing really well in San Francisco, in magazine ad sales in those days, all roads led to New York. So I moved back to take a sales position with Vanity Fair magazine. That was a tough gig. We had a new boss, Mr. Tough Guy, who fired almost everybody. But I thrived, and he fired so many people that I ended up being promoted to ad sales manager at age 28. After that I was recruited to Newsweek, got promoted to Marketing Director, was sent to Harvard Business School for Executive training and ultimately got recruited by the legendary Tina Brown to head up marketing at the New Yorker.

I knew that magazines were shrinking with this "internet" thing, and I also wanted to come back to San Francisco, so I took the head marketing job at CNET. When they merged with ZDNET, I joined a new incubator which was being formed by Bain, Kleiner Perkins and Texas Pacific Group (TPG) as the head of marketing. After the crash of 2000, they pulled the plug and I found a job at Venture strategy Partners, a VC firm, advising companies that they financed.

On getting into real estate

I gravitated to real estate because there is little or no overhead and my skills were in sales, marketing, negotiating, reading people--the very attributes that define a successful agent. And I wanted to control my own destiny. So I started selling real estate in 2002 here at Hill & Co. My early mentors were Jay Costello and Eileen

Mougeot, same as now. I was lucky enough to be successful from the get-go and made Top 10 my first year because I had high-end contacts and successful friends from my previous careers. .

On matters of philosophy and style

I don't have any full-time employees because I don't want the overhead and I've never found one person who possesses all of the skill sets I need. I prefer to pay right people by the hour and by the deal. If I have too many listings, I'll bring in a trusted, experienced agent on a percentage basis. I pay a marketing guy on an hourly basis. I pay a transaction coordinator on a deal basis. I'm essentially a sole proprietor who keeps her overhead low.

I love managing people. It's fun figuring them out. Some people need a goal. Some need encouragement. Some need a kick in the rear. For instance, at Newsweek, I was managing 60-year-old men who hated me. There was this guy named Jim who they had been trying to force into retirement for years. He wouldn't leave, so they thought having him report to me would be the final straw. But he was stubborn, so I tried a different tack. I said, "All of us can learn a lot from Jim. Jim, how did you get that sale?" I just tried to be nice to him and ask his advice. He would never come in my office. He would never look at me. But he finally started responding. He came into my office one day, sat down and said, "I want you to know I'm going to ask for my retirement package, but I'm only able to do it because you gave me my dignity back, and that's the way I want to go out." To this day, that makes me want to cry.

Success for me is more than money—it's balance in my life. Every year there are clients I turn down or buyers I fire because they're unrealistic, disrespectful or abusive. I don't need to earn the most money, but I do feel that if I'm going to survive this business, I can't afford to burn out. I would honestly rather be #2 and be sane, than be #1 and be strung out and sleep deprived. I don't do a high deal volume relative to a lot of top producers because I've always been able to work at a high price point. I'm lucky that way.

Carelessness and laziness drive me crazy. I have a motto: "Don't be lazy!" I say it to myself every day. When I'm out on brokers tour, and I'm tired, and I don't want to see those last two houses because I don't have a buyer for them, I have to remind myself that next week my phone might ring and I might get a buyer for those houses.

I try to be collaborative and I'm very efficient. I don't waste somebody's time. I cut to the chase. And I'm a straight shooter-very direct. For example, I set appropriate expectations for my clients. If, after six months, they still think they're going to get the $4 million house for $3 million, that's a waste of time. I've never ever had a deal fall apart because I don't get into bad deals. When I'm advising a client, I might tell them, "Your highest offer is not always your best offer. I don't think that person is going to close." I don't push buyers to buy things that they seem unsure about.

On the realities of the marketplace

25% of my business is off MLS, so finding inventory has always been a challenge in San Francisco. It always will be.

Right now, condos sales are tougher at almost any price point and any style. That's a supply and demand issue. People want deals, and they can get them. With houses, $10 million plus is tough. A single family home under $2,000,000 is still a hot commodity and anything under $1,800,000 flies off the market. I recently wrote an offer in the Outer Richmond listed at $800,000. We got it for $1,200,000 cash. No conditions. Seven-day close. I would say it's a balanced market for the $3,000,000--

$8,000,000 range. While multiple offers are becoming scarce, there is a buyer, but there is also some negotiation.

I've dealt with a lot of under-40 buyers and I like them. I work well with that group. They're not so emotional. They're factual, and rational, and they make decisions quickly and easily. They're interesting to talk to. You just present the facts, and they listen to you. It's straightforward. It's business. They want quick answers. I give quick answers. They want straight talk. I give them straight talk. They're also great about referring their friends.

On facing challenges

The costliest mistake I ever made was not taking a job at Google in 1999. It cost me millions. I was just getting married and I wanted to have kids. But I don't regret the decision. It's history. I love my kids and I wouldn't trade them for all the Google money in the world.

I remember when I was right out of college, working as a paralegal, and I didn't think I wanted to be a lawyer. My dad only had one job-ever, so, at age 21, I struggled with what my one job would be. My aunt, who was selling real estate, said, "Annie, don't worry about it. All of my friends — we're all in our third career." She had started out as a professor at Stanford, then she had written screen plays, and then she was selling real estate. "You're going to have three or four careers. Stop worrying about it. Just start doing something." That gave me a lot of freedom.