

People in Business: UP CLOSE / GIGI GIANNONI, president of Evolv: Building a niche

Marketing exec's firm handles creative, logistical details for builders, financiers

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Published on: 01/07/07

Evolv President Gigi Giannoni has overseen her company's 2006 transition from a marketing arm of a real estate development firm, Lane Co., to a free-standing real estate services company.

With condominium construction and sales exploding in Atlanta and other U.S. cities, Giannoni said the market seemed right for an experienced firm to provide creative and logistical support for builders and financiers.

"They have an opportunity to outsource a company like ours for real estate services and solutions so that they would not have to build a large company," Giannoni said. "They could focus on the niche of what they want to do and then outsource the rest of the services."

Giannoni, 43, brings an international perspective to her job, having grown up in El Salvador and Nicaragua. She is bilingual and began her career in resort management, bringing knowledge about what sophisticated urban buyers expect from a multifamily community.

"From the inception to the fruition of a project, we can work with the developer on their pre-development activity all the way to the delivery of the product," said Giannoni. "We specifically focus on condominiums, lofts, townhomes, resorts, apartments and vacation ownership."

Giannoni is a graduate of Rollins College in Winter Park, Fla., and holds a master's degree in business from the Florida Institute of Technology.

Q: You were previously in the resort business. How does that inform what you do now?

A: It brings a completely new perspective to the for-sale product.

We seem very much in the past to have been in a time of churn-and-sell. Now the consumer is much more selective with what they want to buy.

Everybody wants to feel like they're being spoiled. We all want to feel special, no matter what the price range is.

Coming from the resort industry gives me and my team a better perspective to understand that overall lifestyle that people are looking for.

People want conveniences. Time is precious. We want to feel good about where we live, and we want it to be convenient because we just don't have a lot of time anymore.

Q: What sort of services, amenities are popular now?

A: Day-to-day services, the convenience and security of a concierge. Or a secure parking garage or a secured building. Of knowing that you have a dry cleaning pickup and delivery. Of knowing that if you've been traveling and you're coming back, you might be able to call for grocery delivery service.

Having the ease of being able to go and get a workout if you don't want to have exercise equipment yourself.

Atlanta is very pet-friendly. So, the convenience of a place to walk your pet within your own your own community is a wonderful thing.

People like to socialize in a nice club room that has the bells and whistles with the flat-screen [TV] and maybe a nice bar area or wine cellars or a yoga room.

For single parents, having a place where your children can have a place of their own is also nice. If it can be supervised, even better. But just a room where you can offer kids different toys or different ways to get physically active can be a wonderful thing for a parent to have.

Things that used to be considered upgrades or very special are becoming standards and the norm. And I think the consumer is going to continue to expect more and more because their lifestyle demands it.

Q: Is there some way to characterize your typical buyer?

A: Several of our communities have different target markets.

You have a buyer that's 55-plus, in some cases maybe 50-plus, an empty nester. They don't want to worry about maintenance. Those folks might want to be in a place that offers them transportation service. 'I don't want to drive. I don't want to deal with traffic.'

Those folks are looking for conveniences such as elevators and services at their fingertips. They want to know they're living in a secure community.

Then you have the young married couple that might have a young child or a young married couple that might not have children. They're concerned about getting their small child to day care or one or two of them to the office, so location is extremely key.

And then you have the younger generation that is looking for the new, the hip, the chic, the whole Wi-Fi thing and things that pop out of the ceiling, that come out of the walls and all the fancy things in the kitchen.

The younger generation, too, is more open to taking public transportation like you see in the Northeast and other parts of the country.

So, the target markets are driven to different aspects.

Q: We're starting to see the urbanism trend in Atlanta, the return to the central city. How do you gauge that market? There's some concern now that Atlanta may be getting close to overbuilt with condominiums.

A: The move to urbanism has already happened in much larger cities. So the fact that it is happening in Atlanta is just Atlanta becoming truly a well-recognized major metropolitan city 'in the South,' still retaining some of that Southern charm.

I don't know if our city is ever going to be or wants to be like a New York City or a downtown D.C. or a Boston.

The wonderful thing about Atlanta is that it offers options to people coming to the area. So you can either live 'out' and have a lot of property and privacy. You can live midway where you can still have land and privacy but the wonderful, fulfilling aspects of a neighborhood. Or you can live in the city, still have the advantage of neighborhoods, but merge more into condominium living, townhome living, where it does lend that urban feel.

Has the market slowed down? Yes. Slowed down [from an unsustainable level]? [That,] I think, is the question we need to ask.

We went through such a real estate boom in the last two to three years, not only with individuals looking for a place to live but maybe buying second or third homes. Also, the investor market went crazy, which was wonderful for real estate and development in general.

But now things have gotten back to a pace that is more realistic with job growth and new companies.

So is it overbuilt? I would say we are building in advance of people moving to the area, companies continuing to relocate their headquarters here.

Atlanta is truly a highly desirable area. It has perfect weather. It has wonderful culture. It offers the best of all worlds relative to location within the United States and the airport. It is truly a place people want to come to.

So, is there a lot on the market today? Yes.

Is it going to be sold over time? Yes.

Are we going to build more? Without a doubt.

THE GIGI GIANNONI FILE

- > Residence: Sandy Springs
- > Family: Husband, Tim; two Persian cats
- > Hobbies: Travel, motorcycle touring, tennis, aerobics (certified aerobics instructor).
- > Favorite adventures: Motorcycle tour through the Pyrenees Mountains between France and Spain; Norway; and a high Alpine tour through Europe.
- > Favorite movie (recent): "You, Me and Dupree"
- > Favorite movie (all-time): "The Sound of Music." "I watch it religiously every year at least once. It is about the importance of family, values, love and happiness."
- > Expensive toy: BMW 650 GS Motorcycle.