

# HOUSE MOTHER

IN GOOD  
TIMES  
AND BAD,  
CAROLYN  
KLEMM IS THE  
QUEEN OF THE  
HIGH-END  
REAL ESTATE  
MARKET IN  
LITCHFIELD  
COUNTY.  
AUTHORS,  
ACTORS,  
STATESMEN—  
SHE'S GIVEN  
THEM ALL KEYS  
TO THE  
COUNTRY  
LIFE.



BY TOM CONNOR  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIE BIDWELL



Carolyn Klemm's real estate office is 2.1 miles from The Mayflower Inn & Spa in Washington Depot. But if she invites you there to lunch, and she's driving, you might want to pack a few snacks. Because between the office and the inn's five-star restaurant, you'll be taken on a winding, looping, freewheeling tour of properties she has listed or sold—or listed *and* sold, then *relisted* and *resold*—over the years. And that can take many hours.

Klemm is the doyenne of high-end real estate in Litchfield County, the pastoral 945-square-mile realm of 26 small towns and big acreage that makes up the northwest corner of the state. The woods here are full of real estate agents, but no other broker in the county appears to have become so inseparable from what she does.

"She's 24/7," says Ted Weiner, a broker with Sotheby's International in Washington Depot, and one of Klemm's main competitors. "She's very, *very* devoted to real estate. She's immersed in it completely."

No other real estate agent has so seamlessly and successfully integrated his or her family, social and business worlds—nor mixed friendship and deals to the degree Klemm has. But for all her talk—and she can talk—of celebrity clients and fabulous homes, she is down-to-earth and always discreet. In fact, her style seems to match more or less perfectly the countryside she has been listing and selling for 25 years.

Carolyn Klemm grew up in London during World War II, the daughter of Peter Viccari, a landscape portrait painter, and a mother, Eunice, who loved to entertain. Relocated to Scarsdale, N.Y., with her family when she was 9, she became a U.S. citizen at 16 and attended Garland Junior College (now Simmons) in Boston before becoming a buyer at Lord & Taylor at 21 and later working for Bergdorf Goodman in midtown Manhattan.

In 1977, she moved from New York to Washington Depot with her husband, David, a radio executive, and two young sons. Once settled in the family's 1930s brick Georgian, she quickly established herself as a formidable hostess. "I started meeting people on the weekends," she says, "and before you knew it, I was having Theodore White at my house, and this one and that one, and many well-known people whose names you would know. Those were our first friends here."

Growing restless in the quiet town, Klemm took real estate courses and in 1984 opened Klemm Real Estate Inc. in Washington Depot. Today there are four other branches, staffed by 30 associates, in Woodbury, Litchfield, Sharon and Salisbury. David is president and managing broker of the company. Their sons—Peter, 37, and Graham, 35—are brokers.

"We were spoon-fed real estate over the breakfast table," says Peter, who shares a partner's desk with his mother. "She doesn't really sit here," he is quick to point out. "She's generally out there—she does lunches, dinners, she's constantly on the move. She develops relationships every day of the week, and it's those relationships that lead to more business."

The only ambiguity appears to be what matters more to her: the wide-ranging web of friendships she has created, or the deals they have helped generate.

She is blonde and small-framed, and stylish in a casual, wind-blown way, as if she had just flown in from some exotic place—which, on this particular day, she has. The night before, she had gotten back from Palm Beach, where she has a home and where she spends half the year. "I do more business in Palm Beach in the winter and early spring than I would if I were here," she says. "I don't have an office there—I don't want one—but we have a huge social life there, in a low-key way, and I have found that people in Palm Beach need a place to go in the summer."



Klemm Real Estate's Woodbury location.

Her manner is disarming: sunny and chatty, full of talk of people and travel and parties and transactions. She frequently ends stories with a small, light laugh—*ahaha*—as if delighted by the realization that she is part of this wacky, wonderful world of fabulous people and houses. Yet when conversation turns to business—which, invariably, it does—and particularly when talking about competition, she turns sharply focused.

"Someone said once they should give out real estate licenses with birth certificates because that's how many realtors there are here," she says. "Many people go into real estate as a hobby almost, or as a way to earn extra money. For me, it's a job but it's also fun to do. Certainly there are other very top brokers, but I think as far as real competition, I've been here 32 years and I don't think any other realtor around here can say that. One of our competitors claims that they do such a great international business. That's not true.

I've sold more Europeans houses in this area than anybody!"

Which is probably true. Thanks to a black address book the size of the Old Testament, she has clients and friends—or client/friends—around the world. In 1999, for example, the Klemms, their sons, and Peter's fiancée and Graham's partner were flown to Paris for the wedding of a scion of the Hermès scarf family, followed by a six-day holiday in Morocco. "I sold them all houses," Carolyn says of the Hermès family. "And in June I'm going to an amazing six-day wedding in Napa at the vineyard of a very, very well-known family—a name you would know."

So now Klemm is piloting her black Range Rover through town on the way to lunch. Passing the Washington Depot green, she points to one house after another in a way that demonstrates her intense knowledge of the scene. "This house is a New York doctor and his wife and son. Sold that. Sold the one next door. This is a family who are very, very well-known. And one of the world's three greatest architects lives here." *Ahaha*.

On the right, set well back from the road, is a pale stucco mansion. "We just sold this, privately, for a little over \$2 million," she confides, meaning to a client her office had matched with the house before it went on the market. "This was a situation where we had to be discreet—the owner was dying. It's a famous house designed by Ehrick Rossiter, a notable architect." Passing a rambling stone-and-wood farmhouse, she says, "We've sold this house about six times. The last time was for over \$5 million. A very serious house. He's in the film business." she adds. "No names. He's very discreet."

This is classic Klemm. While most of her clients are apparently rich or famous, you won't always be able to pry their names from her. When pressed she says, "People here want discretion. It's all about trust."

Actually, some names do escape her lips: Henry and Nancy Kissinger, Michael J. Fox, Hollywood producer Scott Rudin, Walter and Carol Matthau, Tom Brokaw, George Soros, Ivan Lendl, James Taylor and his ex-wife Kathryn Walker. All have been clients. It's a little unclear who can be named and who can't, but one dividing line, not always reliable, could involve those who are still in town and those who've departed, in one sense or another.

Across the road from The Gunnery School, Klemm pulls into the driveway leading to "The Rocks," a stone fortress of a mansion she sold in 1995 to best-selling novelist Stuart Woods. The author and his wife at the time had been visiting friends in nearby Bridgewater when they met Klemm and agreed to spend a snowy afternoon looking at small, modestly priced houses. She showed them The Rocks.

Woods recalls the conversation, in her car in

the driveway, as if reading a scene from one of his novels:

"Carolyn, what are we doing here?"

"This is a wonderful house."

'Carolyn, this is way out of our price range.'

'I just happen to have the key in my pocket!'

Woods eventually bought the place for \$2.3 million, a deal at the time. He left Washington Depot in 2000. "I think she's a brilliant real estate broker," he says from his current home in Key West. "The best I've ever known. She's a genius at putting together the right people with the right house. She has a heart of gold and I would trust her with my life."

He has also trusted her as a character in several of his Stone Barrington novels, in which she appears as a real estate agent named . . . Carolyn Klemm!

On a high curve of Roxbury Road, the horse fences on both sides diminishing into the distance, a barnlike estate appears on the horizon as an island in a sea of pasture and woods. "I've sold this house," Klemm says. "It was four-point-something million. I've actually sold it quite a few times in my life. That's the fun thing about being in real estate for a long time—you get to sell some of the same things over and over again. I've sold some houses five and six times. It's funny, isn't it?" *Ahaha*.

Now, somewhere between the office and the Mayflower, she changes course. "I think what I'll do is show you Bridgewater," she says, referring to the tiny nearby town (population 1,400) and its cluster of charming, restored stores. "I actually sold the *town*—well, I sold the commercial buildings—to Peter May [vice chairman of Wendy's/Arby's Group and a benefactor to the area]." Inside the Bridgewater Village Store—a gourmet country store with tables and prepared foods—she is greeted by clerks and fellow patrons alike, and insists on buying her guest a selection of handmade Bridgewater Chocolates, a local company founded by chef Erik Landegren. Klemm, needless to say, sold Landegren and his wife their home.

Of course not everyone in Litchfield County is a fan of Carolyn Klemm. One broker, who spoke on condition of anonymity, complains about her preemptive ways of finding new clients: "She's not above doing anything to get the deal done. The high-end brokers of a certain age do things a certain way, and that's been successful—it still works with the very rich people she has contacts with."

Klemm probably wouldn't disagree. Indeed, being aggressive is an obvious path to success, even in laid-back Litchfield County. "Anybody who knows me knows I'm very driven," she says. "I think one of my secrets is that I'm a businesswoman first. But you also have to be creative, and one way is by putting ▶ 96

## KLEMM CLASSICS



### PRIVATE ESTATE, WASHINGTON

Classic Connecticut Colonial, with guesthouse, caretaker's house, pool, tennis court, large pond, privacy, western views, 130+ acres. \$9.995 million.



### COUNTRY ESTATE, NEW MILFORD

Stone-and-clapboard country house, with incredible kitchen, swimming pool, pool house, pond, views, extreme privacy, 80+ acres. Price upon request.



### LARSON FARM, NEW PRESTON

One-of-a-kind Lake Waramaug estate—including a 1925 main residence with guesthouse, barns, meadows, views and boathouse. 21.79 acres. Price upon request.

## House Mother

65 ◀ people together with houses. I have somebody coming today to look at a house that we've just listed, privately. I know her tastes and her needs—we're very good friends—and she trusts me.

"That's thinking outside the MLS box," she adds. "I don't think many people do that."

In 2008, Klemm Real Estate had a hand in more than half of the 63 million-dollar-plus properties sold in Litchfield County. This year so far, the story is the same but the numbers are indisputably down. "Anybody who tells you things are fine right now is lying, okay?" she says. "And that's why I'm successful—because I tell the truth."

How much is business off from last year? "That's a good question and I really can't answer it," she says. "It's off, but, I mean, we're selling real estate. We just sold a house for just under \$3 million. I think we'll do probably less business than we did in the past, but I think people will buy houses. People are waiting and watching, they're renting before buying. I rented a house to Anthony Minghella for many years. He wrote *The English Patient*. He became a great friend. He and his wife Carolyn rented every Christmas, and they would have bought something—I was actually looking for him—but he died."

Have house prices finally hit bottom? "Don't know," she says. "Some properties, maybe. But I think most sellers right now really have gotten the picture and are willing to reduce their prices—if they're real sellers, and if they've been watching the economy for a while, and if the house has been on the market for a while.

"One seller raised his price last year. I said, 'This is not a smart thing to do.' He didn't want to know about it. Today he called me and said, 'You were right, but we still don't know what we're going to do.' I said, 'My advice is to take it off the market and sit with it for a year because you're not in the real world yet.'"

Somehow, the Range Rover has arrived back in Washington Depot and the Mayflower is finally in sight, though not quite yet in reach. "That home I sold to George Soros once," she says, pointing out a place as we drive up a high winding drive next door to the inn. The estate is—of course—her listing. "It's for somebody who's wealthy and wants to live the life. They can go next door to the inn for lunch or dinner—or for the spa."

As it turns out, the Mayflower is an inspired choice and well worth the wait. The staff greets Carolyn by name—well, she was here for dinner the night before—and after lunch she gives a tour of the building, as if it's as familiar as back of her hand. It should be. "I've sold it four times!" she exclaims. *Ahaha!* ■