

## Wilma Caplan Interview

By Kathy Querin, PMAR CEO

Wilma Caplan retired in June, 2016, after 43 years as an Oregon broker. I asked her to sit down with me to discuss her experiences and memories, and the specific challenges – and opportunities – of being a pioneer in a male-dominated industry. According to statistics from the National Association of Realtors®, in 1973 women accounted for roughly 17% of the overall membership.

### A Partnership is Born

She was an office manager for a husband and wife who owned several hair salons. Wilma knew she wanted something different. Her interest in real estate began when she took her children to visit open houses on Sundays as a pleasant afternoon diversion. But, with her three children quickly growing into mature teenagers, they didn't need her much anymore. Her husband was a successful CPA. Real estate seemed like it would be a perfect fit. Off she went to real estate school.



Wilma was licensed in 1973, and immediately went to work at the Stan Wiley Company, Tigard office, (now Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices). After earning her way to the Raleigh Hills office, she fortuitously met another new agent, an energetic, dark-haired woman named Molly Cronin. Wilma and Molly quickly came to respect each other's work ethic. Both traveled regularly, so they worked out an arrangement to cover each other's files when one went out of



town. Their relationship blossomed, and they excitedly made plans to open their own real estate firm. The company would be called Cronin & Caplan Real Estate, and they would be equal partners. They nervously approached real estate patriarch Stan Wiley – always referred to as “Mr. Wiley” – to break the news that they planned to branch out and open their own firm. Ever the gracious businessman, he gave them his blessing with one caveat: no recruiting of Wiley real estate agents for their first six months. The agreement was sealed: Cronin & Caplan Real Estate opened

for business in 1977; Wilma and Molly boldly tread onto the 1970's male dominated turf of the real estate brokerage industry.

### A Woman's Touch

Mid 1970's real estate in Portland was still something of a “Mad Men's” world; the men were in charge, and the women worked for them. An overwhelmingly male dominated industry, many of the women licensees were part-timers in conjunction with their “house wife duties.” Wilma and Molly soon learned that some men – that is, the man of the house, and other male brokers

– did not want to work with a woman broker. But Wilma knew that it was often the woman of the household that influenced the decision in the home selling and buying process, and she instinctively brought the woman’s touch into the transaction. According to Molly, “Women know homes, that’s where they spend most of their time.” They started with fresh flowers - lots of flowers. Wilma somehow wrangled access to the Portland floral market; she arranged beautiful fresh flower bouquets in her office lobby and gifted them to clients. Not many men would think of doing that. They knew they could distinguish themselves through advertising, creating a distinctive, upscale logo, using black, red and cream script. Professional *and* beautiful. They became the first Portland brokerage to publish a home magazine. It was a leap of faith and a significant financial investment, but Wilma and Molly believed that the exclusivity of having their listings featured in a publication, albeit in black and white at the time, would appeal to high-end sellers – and their high-end egos. They were right. The publication created a lot of buzz, and brought them business. Other brokerages quickly followed their lead.



They worked hard, with many a long evening in the office going over paperwork, but they vowed to have fun: they often hosted parties for their agents and their clients. Their mutual love of “the Desert” drew them to the Palm Springs area for family vacations. Ever the business women, they purchased a home there in the company’s name, using it also as a gift for their agents to enjoy and relax. Their tactics paid off; they quickly became respected within the industry as brokers with class and authority – who also happened to be women.



## Tech Heads

Wilma laughingly recalls being an early adopter of new-fangled equipment. She bought a fax machine before most knew what it did. Back in those days it churned out peel-apart thermal paper that printed slowly, line by laborious line. Some thought it was a crazy waste of money. But, certain that it would streamline communications, she boldly forged forward. She plugged it in, watched, and waited. Nothing. She realized she needed to find someone – *anyone!* – with a fax machine to send her something so that she knew it worked. Back then it was like being “friended” on Facebook. Next came “mobile” telephones. Never mind that it was the size of a brick, attached by a cord to her car, and



required a transmitter the size of a suitcase in her trunk. In order to use it, she had to go her car and make a call through an operator. But for an active owner of a busy brokerage, everyone knew the car is where they could find Wilma. The cost of this “mobile” technology? A mere \$1,500.

### **A Boutique Firm before its Time**

Cronin & Caplan became the go-to company for high-end property owners on Portland’s west side. It was a specialty firm, that is, a “Boutique” office, before such a thing was in the vernacular. The first Cronin & Caplan Real Estate office was in a tidy two-story home at SW Vista & Burnside, two-doors up from what is now Zupan’s Market. Over time they branched out to other prestigious locations – Raleigh Hills, Portland Heights, Lake Oswego, and Gearhart. Wilma recalls in 1981, when she and Molly purchased a stately home for a new office at NW



*Wilma pictured with Jim Homolka (left) and another unidentified broker.*

21<sup>st</sup> & Irving, none of their agents wanted that address because they deemed it to be in the middle of nowhere! During the 80’s recession, for the first time, the ladies felt they needed to borrow \$50,000 to help with their expansion plans. But, they couldn’t find a lender willing to give two women a loan. Molly’s husband, a successful San Francisco industrialist, advised them to instead ask for a million dollars, so that the lender would know they were serious and truly committed. But Wilma and Molly did not want a million dollars, they only wanted fifty-thousand! Ultimately, a lender

took them seriously and they received the funds – it was their first loan after thirty years of business.

### **Kids & Community First**

When asked what she is most proud of over her real estate career, Wilma’s answer is instantaneous: children’s charities. Over the years she dedicated time and leadership to Legacy Emanuel Hospital, the Girls & Boys Club, the Dougy Center, the Perry Center, and the Providence Christmas Tree Project for Kids. She beams when remembering one particular Providence Christmas tree event, where she donated a shiny red child-size car with the license plate

“Cronin & Caplan Real Estate.” Some lucky kid was undoubtedly overjoyed to receive such an extravagant



*Wilma surrounded by brokers at a tribute celebrating the career of Mr. Stan Wiley.*

Christmas gift from Santa! And, an unintended consequence of her service: she met many influential members of the community who would become loyal clients.

### **It's a Family Affair**

Son #1, Richard Caplan, caught the real estate bug early. He spent time as a teenager hanging around the office on SW Vista & Burnside, serving as the official janitor. He helped with mailings and publications, and any other odd jobs that needed to be done. He was soon promoted to Wilma and Molly's chauffeur, with them sitting in the backseat leafing through an MLS book the size of the Portland phone directory. This pre-Uber gig served Richard well; not



only did he learn to navigate Portland neighborhoods without Google Street Earth, but, through subtle eavesdropping, picked up many sales techniques and tips as he drove. He was the first of the offspring of the Caplan and Cronin families to become a Realtor®.

Richard obtained his real estate license in 1984, and went to work for his Mother. Mother and son had an agreement – at work, Mother was Wilma. And, they agreed it would be Molly, not Wilma, who would oversee him as broker with his first transactions. But, things don't always happen as planned. A sign call came in for Wilma when neither she nor Molly were available; the call went to Richard. He was thrilled to be facing his first transaction – meeting the potential buyers in Alameda and writing their offer. But, he needed help, and Molly was not available. So, Richard went to meet the buyers in their home, and introduced his broker, Wilma. The homeowners took one look at her and asked, "Is this your mother, Wilma Caplan?" The gig was up, but Richard didn't miss a beat, responding, "Not at this table; here she is my broker." He wrote his first successful deal, with his broker's proud assistance. Son #2, Michael Caplan, joined the family tradition, and also earned his real estate license in 1986, as did Molly's daughter, Liz, in 1990. Clearly, real estate is a family affair.

### **Home Sweet Home**

Over Wilma career, there have been many milestones and accolades: 1992 President of the Portland Board of Realtors®, the second woman in its then-86 year history (Doris Anderson was the first woman to hold that title in Portland); 1993 Portland Board Realtor® of the Year; 2011 Portland Metropolitan Association Realtor® of the Year; Recipient of the White Rose Women of Achievement

Award from the March of Dimes; the David Abrahams Award; and others. But, her fierce determination as owner



*Wilma with her longtime partner,  
Molly Cronin (left).*

of a wildly successful real estate firm in the male dominated real estate world of Portland, circa 1973 and beyond, is what also sets her apart. In her well-earned retirement in her home with a view of Portland's west hills with husband Jerome, she says that what she misses most is the people – decades of friends, clients who have become friends, and making a difference in peoples lives. And, of course, the art of the deal.

Today, according to a 2016 study by the National Association of Realtors, the “typical” Realtor® is a 53-year old female. Wilma was truly a trailblazer, helping pave the path for so many women who looked to real estate not as a hobby, but as a viable career.

### **Authors Note**

*This article is the result of a lively interview with Wilma, along with independent research, plus my own historical recollections (having been CEO of PMAR for 26 years). I've attempted to portray everything accurately and honestly, and hope that you do not take exception to any of the details. My only goal is to honor a woman that I have self-prescribed to be a woman pioneer of Portland real estate. Truly, an icon in the industry.*