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Her own 'Halliday': Ebby celebrates 100th birthday

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A black-and-white photo that sits on Ebby Halliday's desk captures her joy in a single instant. It shows Ebby beaming as she embraces her now-late husband, Maurice Acers, at the 25th anniversary celebration of their company, Ebby Halliday Realtors. A simple phrase etched into the silver frame says it all: "live fully."

Ebby, easily the most well-known real estate mogul in the Metroplex, is celebrating her 100th birthday on March 9 and with that, a life lived to its fullest.

Retirement isn't on the agenda, and she doesn't hesitate a moment when asked what Maurice would say to her if he were alive today.

"He would tell me to slow down," she said, and added, "Why would I retire when there's nothing I would rather do?"

Her work ethic is beyond impressive. Ebby, whose biographical book names her "The First Lady of Real Estate," has 30 sales offices and continues to lead her business and work closely with a number of philanthropies. She is asked

frequently what keeps her so motivated.

"Well, I like to eat," she said, chuckling. "When you are raised in the worst depression the world has ever known, you learn to work."

An Education

Ebby got her first lesson in sales at age 8 in Kansas. She would ride her pony from her 640-acre wheat farm to neighboring farms to sell tins of Cloverine Salve, which was recommended for chapped skin, at 5 cents' profit per can.

"The overhead was small because my pony ate the grass on our farm, drank the water from the stock tanks and slept in the barn," said Ebby, who still keeps a tin of the salve in an office cabinet. "The profit I made on the salve went to buy more salve."

She helped support her family during the Great Depression and walked a mile and a half each way to a one-room schoolhouse that held eight grades.

“That’s where I got a lot of my education – from four rows of good books back by the big stove in the wintertime,” she said. “When I was making \$75 a month at one of my first jobs, I spent \$10 a month buying, gradually, the 48 Great Books of the Western World. They were a real treasure.”

During high school, she worked selling women’s hats in a fine department store that would be comparable to a Neiman Marcus today.

“That’s where I really learned to sell,” she said. “I learned that the customer was always right, whether they were or not.”

She was transferred to Dallas to look after the W.A. Green Department Store in 1938.

“I thought I’d died and gone to heaven,” she said. “The mayor had declared an end to the Depression of the ’30s, and it was only two years after the centennial, which brought the world to Texas. Big-name bands were still playing at the old Adolphus and Baker Hotel.”

Hats to Houses

After opening her own hat boutique, Ebby was challenged by the husband of a client to help him get rid of his unsold concrete houses.

“The next time you visit your friend who sells the crazy hats, ask her if she has any ideas how to sell my crazy houses,” the husband asked his wife, who complied.

Before “home staging” became a catchphrase in real estate, Ebby did just that – spruced up the places with carpet and decorations and successfully unloaded them. It was just the beginning of her long career.

The first large property she sold was to the chairman of the board for Dresser Industries, Neil Mallon. She said his requirements were daunting: private quarters for himself, room for his newly widowed sister and her four children, and “the real zinger” – space for tennis courts. She found the perfect home in Farmers Branch.

“It had 22 acres so I said, ‘Mr. Mallon, you can build all the tennis courts that you want to,’” Ebby remembered.

It was at that property that Ebby met the George H.W. Bush family and played tennis at 6 a.m. with a ladies tennis group. She also gained numerous clients and connections from her time at the Mallon property.

Team Effort

Although Ebby thinks Dallas is wonderful and she never misses a Mavericks game, her influence is not contained to just one city. Her company is celebrating 66 years in the region, and Ebby remembers the temporary office that was put up in Plano.

“We had to wait for our first Plano office to be built on Independence – a proper state-of-the-art office in those days,” Ebby said. “We had a little temporary office with a porta [potty] and a coffee pot, and it was a big attraction.”

Outside of Texas, Ebby and Maurice traveled around for meetings with national and international real estate committees and boards. Their travels took them to Japan, Denmark, London, Paris and Rome, among other places. When the National Association of Realtors turned 100 years old, Ebby was invited as a special guest to Washington, D.C.

“They sent a nine-passenger jet to carry me in style to serve as national chairman for our association’s centennial,” she said.

Ebby did not forget her close friends and coworkers, and even brought her longtime assistant Anne

Anderson with her when she was invited to the White House for Christmas dinner.

"It was like being in a different world," Anderson said. "She's very charitable and spirited. She's very aware of what people need."

Hall of Fame former Cowboys quarterback and businessman Roger Staubach said in the preface of Ebby's book that he and Halliday both had great teams.

"I couldn't agree more as far as my company is concerned," Ebby said. "I would never have been able to do the things I've done without the team."

In September, her assistant Betty Turner will have been working for Ebby for 50 years.

"It's a high every day," Turner said. "She's very focused – more than most. On the other hand, she can change and be very lighthearted."

Birthday Celebration

For Ebby's 100th birthday celebration, the Meyerson Symphony Center is a grand and appropriate venue. On March 9, Ebby and her guests will be entertained by tenor Mario Frangoulis and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra after a gala dinner to raise scholarship funds in association with the Horatio Alger Association.

In 2005, Ebby received the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans Award, which is reserved for community leaders who have persevered over adversity.

For her birthday, Ebby said she has been receiving numerous boxes of See's chocolate, her favorite brand, but that she really does not want any cards or gifts.

"Think of all those thank-you notes I would have to write," she said, laughing.

She does, however, have a wish for when she blows out all the candles at her birthday dessert party.

"I would wish that this company would last more than 65 years and that the people who have helped build it would have a hand in seeing that the company does survive," she said. "I want everyone to know of my gratitude for having made my life an unbelievable long one."