

Full speed ahead *For Steve Maestas, recession is no reason to hang back*

BY STEVE GINSBERG SPECIAL TO NMBW

Steve Maestas never went to college. Instead, as a rebellious young man, he worked in the silver mines. He rode a Harley and considered himself bulletproof.

Today, at 45, Maestas is still brazenly blazing his own path, and shaking up the local commercial real estate brokerage business in the process. His company, Maestas & Ward, is challenging the state's commercial real estate giants — Grubb & Ellis New Mexico and CB Richard Ellis — for market share and talent.

It's David vs. Goliath, but Maestas' boutique agency is landing punches against the national heavyweights.

And while many brokerages are retrenching in the recession, Maestas has chosen not to participate in the downturn. Instead, he is aggressively expanding, with the conviction that market share shifts and wealth transfer occurs when the economy sours. By raiding competitors for personnel, and investing in real estate for his separate company, Prime Properties, Maestas is trying to gain that share and wealth.

He has two of the largest retail centers in the Albuquerque metro — Las Estancias and Venada Plaza (Bernalillo) — under development. In September, Maestas opened the firm's new headquarters at 6801 Jefferson St. NE, a \$6.5 million investment.

To fill the new space, Maestas has been picking off talented personnel from his larger competitors. In November, he lured away Elizabeth Liming, former head of property management at Grubb & Ellis. There are hints of more additions, through a possible merger, in the near future.

Maestas & Ward opened in 1996 with three employees. It now has 30 and is looking to expand to 45. Maestas says he doesn't want to be the biggest, just the best.

Revenues in 2008 will likely be down, he admits, but the brokerage's victories this



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Steve Maestas, owner of the commercial real estate brokerage Maestas & Ward, is bucking the current economic downturn by expanding his business.

year position it well for the future. Maestas & Ward captured the two biggest redevelopment leasing assignments in town — the Winrock Town Center and the Philips semiconductor plant. To win Winrock, Maestas maximized his long-standing relationship with developer Gary Goodman. The Philips redevelopment was won largely on the strength of Maestas & Ward's office team, which is led by Karen Hudson.

As ambitious as he is, Maestas knows he can't do it all. He considered expanding into residential real estate, but eventually shelved the thought. He's focusing on building the firm's culture, doing development and brokering projects like Winrock, where he is assisting the lead, Kino James.

"Our culture is team-oriented, with plenty of peer accountability," Maestas says. "We're young in energy and spirit and very hungry. We will run through a burning building for our client."

That's the kind of chase Maestas enjoys.

"I love doing deals — from the hunt, to the process of interacting with people, [to] overcoming all the challenges ... It's special when you can create it and deliver."

Retail and real estate are in Maestas' DNA; as early as age 10, he got hooked. His father ran a tuxedo rental shop called Mr. Tux. After his father invested in an apartment building, the wide-eyed boy often accompanied him to collect rents.

"I saw the tenants give my dad \$220 in rent," he recalls, "and this started my infatuation with real estate. I was amazed people would give my Dad this money. I knew this was something I wanted to do."

But Maestas didn't take a direct path.

"I was headstrong, unbridled and had no taste for authority or the norm," he admits. "I floated from job to job. Thank the Lord, I was able to channel that energy into productive areas."

At 17, Maestas hit the road. At 19, he worked in the silver mines in the tiny hamlet of Winston, N.M.; at 22, he came back to Albuquerque and a friend got him a job at Albuquerque Federal Bank. It didn't take long before he became a branch manager.

In the late 1980s, he joined with a developer to make his first deal. However, the deal never transpired after the market softened and his boss went belly-up.

After joining Coldwell Banker (today's CBRE) in 1988 — a month after Jim Chynoweth — Maestas quickly became a star. Chynoweth later worked at Maestas & Ward before taking over at CBRE.

"He always struck me as the most driven person I have ever known," Chynoweth says of Maestas. "He was exceedingly focused and goal-oriented — the first in the office and the last to leave."

While doing retail deals at Coldwell, Maestas found his two mentors — Jim Peterson of Peterson Properties and Goodman. Both were Coldwell clients who were buying centers and needed leasing help.

"They gave me technical knowledge about how to structure a deal, how to negotiate, and I loved sitting across from them listening to their war stories," he says. "They were gracious with their time and I aspired to be in their shoes."

In 1996, Phil Ward, Coldwell's senior rainmaker in land transactions, invited Maestas to lunch.

"He put a cocktail napkin on the table and started writing down numbers for rent, equipment and a secretary and divided it in two," Maestas remembers. "The total came to \$7,000 and he said, 'Your share is \$3,500, you got it?' ... That's how we started."

With a host of big-name retail clients (Home Depot, K-Mart, Sears) who came with him to the fledgling agency, Maestas & Ward was launched. The agency was profitable in its first year and remains so today. When Hudson joined in 2003, she brought three other agents with her.

Five years later, Maestas is still pushing hard to go higher. Though he makes time for fly fishing on the rivers of New Mexico and Colorado and an occasional trip to Chicago, his favorite city, with his wife, he is devoted to his enterprise.

"I don't consider myself a workaholic but a peak performer," he says. "A peak performer chooses to excel, whereas a workaholic is addicted to work."

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