



## INTRODUCTION

---

I was at the 35<sup>th</sup> annual RE/MAX of Texas Statewide Convention in Galveston on January 28, 2012 to deliver a speech forecasting housing-industry trends. It was supposed to be a quick stop before heading to Boca Raton for a regional owners meeting the next day. My wife Gail was in Orlando buying golf wear and other merchandise for the pro shop at Sanctuary, the private golf club we own in Colorado. She and I had planned to meet up in Florida as soon as I was done in Galveston.

Margaret Kelly, the CEO of RE/MAX, who has been with the company more than twenty-five years, was traveling with me. She was there to speak at the same event.

Gail and I founded RE/MAX in 1973 with the simple notion of giving the very best real estate agents a full slate of support services and one hundred percent of the commission they earned instead of the fifty-fifty split they usually retained at the time. The idea was to build a company where great people could pull together to do great things. At the time, every leader in the industry told me my business platform would never work—that the financial model defied how things were done. They warned me I'd be driven out of the business before I could ever get it off the ground—that the company would *never* survive.

Fortunately, I wasn't the kind of man who was afraid to roll up my sleeves and do whatever it took to create my own success.

Hard work didn't scare me any more than my critics did. No job was beneath me, especially in the early years. I spent plenty of long nights stuffing envelopes, polishing presentations and hand-folding thousands of flyers. I look back at those grass-roots beginnings and smile at the memory of my fearlessness to face any challenge that came my way. It wasn't easy, as there were lots of challenges over the years. You see, when you've worked in real estate as long as I have, you know that the business is full of cycles. Some years are up, others down. The good and the great among us are separated by how we navigate the lean years—and believe me, there were many times along the way when I didn't know how we'd make payroll, let alone how I'd put food on the table for my own family.

Forty years later though, RE/MAX is the world's most productive real estate sales force, with roughly 90,000 agents and 6,300 offices in over 85 countries. At our peak, we had more than 100,000 agents. Our agent count dropped to roughly 85,000 during the economic downturn, but it's once again on the upswing. I look forward to having a big party when we reach the 100,000-agent milestone for the second time, as I know we will. Nothing makes me happier than having fun with my friends and colleagues—just like the many good times I've already enjoyed with them throughout our careers.

Although the real estate market took a heavy hit when the housing crisis occurred back in 2007, we persevered and found a way to navigate our way through those murky and tumultuous times. I saw the writing on the wall early enough to become instrumental in advising key players in the U.S. Treasury Department and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, recommending procedures that helped streamline

---

the “short sale” process for distressed properties, a broadly recognized drag on the housing industry and national economy as a whole. Doing this firmly established RE/MAX as the “go to” company for those in need, keeping our business flowing and inventory moving. I don’t worry about making ends meet as much as I used to, but I still spend many days and nights wondering about and calculating each careful next step, because you never know where life will lead you.

Just before leaving for Texas on that winter day, I felt as if my back was on the verge of giving out again. I’d been having terrible back problems since April 2010. My doctors had told me that some of my pain was due to being a little heavy for my frame and some of it was due to how I had treated my body over the years. Although I love to play golf, the reality is I’m not very good at it. Twisting my body to swing a club hadn’t helped my back issues any more than all of the daredevil stunts I’d participated in for years. I’ve always considered myself to be a really tough son of a bitch and admittedly went out of my way to prove it to the world. In 1998, I trained with a team of NASA experts in the hope of sailing a specially designed and highly technologically advanced helium balloon around the world. Although we didn’t make it, we sure had fun trying! As an auto-racing enthusiast, I had also completed the twenty-four hour sports car endurance race at Daytona, subjecting my body to as many as four G’s around every turn along the way. I’d parachuted out of planes and faced down near-certain death on my more than 35 big game hunts in Africa and other exotic locations around the world. Some might call that need for adventure crazy—I simply called it fun.

But when my back problems became unbearable, I went to see Dr. Chad J. Prusmack, a local neurosurgeon in Denver, the

city I’ve called home for most of my life. I knew of him because two of my officers at RE/MAX had seen him for their ailments, and because he had a terrific reputation.

When I first met Dr. Prusmack, I was surprised by how young, handsome and physically fit he is. I wanted to hate him for his good looks, but instead I admired how smart he was and took comfort in knowing that I would be in good hands if I ever needed his services. When we met in 2010, he showed me that my L5, L6 and S1 vertebra, located at the bottom of the tailbone, had become arthritic and worn out. Dr. Prusmack explained that I had pounded the hell out of them during the years with all of the crazy and daring things I’d done to abuse my back.

“At some point Dave, we will have to go in and work on those,” he said.

Because I didn’t get a sense of urgency from him, I dismissed the suggestion thinking privately, *these doctors usually get paid to cut*. I surely wasn’t ready to go under the knife anytime soon and it was so refreshing to meet a doctor who didn’t want to put me through a surgery until it was absolutely necessary. That really earned my respect.

“Dave, I don’t want to operate if we don’t have to,” he assured me. “We might be able to put it off for another year or two by giving you steroid shots in your spine to control the pain.”

That was just fine with me.

Dr. Prusmack set me up with his hospital’s pain center right away. The procedure was quick and easy. I was given a sedative, hooked up to an IV to repress the pain and was then given multiple shots to my spine. While the first round helped me feel about eighty percent better, there were still times when I was really suffering. This routine continued every couple of months

during the next two years as a way of reducing and managing the distress I was feeling and to help me keep moving at my usual lightning-speed pace without missing a step. The last time I went into the pain center to have the shots I was feeling especially tough. I stupidly told the doctor that I didn't want the sedatives he usually administered. He looked at me like I was nuts.

"I have a high threshold for pain," I said with tremendous bravado, insisting that he just give me the shot to my spine.

I was wrong about that. *Very* wrong.

I was in agony for at least five minutes. It felt as if an electric shock was shooting straight down from my back to my left leg. It was as if I had touched a live spark plug. Not fun at all, and certainly not recommended!

"C'mon tough guy..." the doctor coaxed until the excruciating stinging in my back finally subsided to a tolerable, but still uncomfortable, level. Once the throbbing stopped, I was completely pain free—not only had the burn from the shot eased, but my constant back pain had gone away too. The funny thing about back pain is that most people learn to live with it. Only after it's gone do you realize how much pain you were actually in. For the first time in two years, I felt great.

From that day on, I went about my life as usual. At my doctor's suggestion, I started to do some back-stretches in the morning to help keep my body limber and even lifted weights to sustain my physique and strength. As a precaution, I carried my medical records in my briefcase everywhere I went just in case anything happened while I was on the road. All I'd have to do in that event is hand the file to the attending physicians in the emergency room and they'd immediately know what we were dealing with. I remained well prepared, did all of the things I

was supposed to do, and never looked back—that is, until my trip to Galveston.

I'd gotten pretty good at knowing when I was on the brink of a setback by then, and I just couldn't shake the feeling that something was about to give on the day I left Denver. The last thing I said to my secretary before boarding my plane was, "Call Dr. Prusmack and make an appointment for when I return. I think the pain meds are wearing off." I popped a couple of Aleve on board the flight and tried not to give it another thought.

We touched down in Galveston in the early afternoon of January 27th. The event was taking place at the Moody Gardens Hotel, Spa and Convention Center, which also housed an environmental museum, so I took a tour to kill some time. I've always had an interest in the environment—so much so that I helped to build The Wildlife Experience Museum in Denver, an educational, entertaining and unique blend of interactive exhibits, large format films, fine art, natural history and community outreach programs connecting visitors with many kinds of wildlife and habitats

Later that night, Margaret and I had dinner with Richard Filip and his wife Jeanne. Richard and Jeanne are good friends of mine who at the time owned the RE/MAX of Texas region. They are very nice people, and I enjoy spending time with them whenever I'm in their area. Sometime toward the end of dinner, Jeanne and I got into a conversation about how much we hate hospitals. We both agreed that we'd rather die of an instant heart attack than spend any significant time in a hospital.

After a terrific evening, we all said goodnight and headed back to our respective hotel rooms. On the way to my suite, I turned to Margaret and said, "You know, I'm really feeling like my back is going to go out tonight. I'm going to leave my door unlocked

just in case—at least you can get in to help me if I need anything.” I actually placed one of my shoes on the floor between the door and the jamb to play it safe.

I’m the kind of man who rarely, if ever, asks for help. In my mind, real men don’t need a hand from anyone—ever. In fact, I rather despised the thought of being dependent on someone else, so for me to suggest that I might be in need was actually a very big deal. I just had a gut feeling that something bad was about to happen.

Before I went to bed that night I also thought about the safety latch on the door that led from my room to the hotel hallway. I began to wonder, *If someone had to get in through that entry, even with a room key, would leaving it in the locked position bar them from doing so?* Just for peace of mind, I got up, unlocked it and went to sleep sometime close to ten o’clock.

Around two in the morning I awoke to find that I couldn’t move my feet. I pulled the sheets off my body and stared at my legs, willing them to move, but they wouldn’t budge even an inch. I physically lifted one with my hands and immediately thought, “This can’t be good.”

In the mid-1970s I’d had a spinal injection prior to knee surgery that left me temporarily paralyzed from the waist down during the procedure, so I was familiar with the feeling I was having and wasn’t the least bit panicked about it. While I suspected it was a fluke, I did think that I should probably get myself to the local hospital.

Not wanting to disturb anyone in the middle of the night, I took my phone from the nightstand and sent text messages to Richard, Margaret and Charles El-Moussa—a RE/MAX of Texas senior officer—saying, “My back has gone out and I have to go

to the hospital. When you get up in the morning would you call or come to my room?”

I spent the next several hours watching the clock tick one minute at a time. I grabbed the television remote and began flipping channels as a distraction. I don’t remember watching anything in particular—just incessantly clicking from one show to the next.

Around five o’clock, I sent a text to my eldest son Dave Jr., who we all call *Junior*, to see how his night was going. Even though it was an hour earlier in Denver where he lives, I knew he’d answer.

“My night was good—how are you?” he responded.

“My back really hurts and I can’t move my legs.”

“Can you reach the phone in your room to dial 911?”

“No. But I’ve sent messages to Margaret, Richard and Charles to come get me when they wake up.”

Since I’d had chronic back problems for such a long time, it wasn’t unusual for me to say I was in pain. I certainly hadn’t lost feeling in my legs before, but I assumed it had to be a nerve and therefore a temporary condition. I wasn’t alarmed yet and the last thing I wanted to do was worry anyone else, so I stayed cool. At exactly two minutes after seven that morning, the exterior door to my room swung open. It was the hotel manager along with Charles and Richard. They didn’t even knock. Just then, Margaret came through the door too.

Before anyone could say a word I looked at the gathered group and calmly said, “I’m paralyzed and cannot move my legs at all. Let’s get an ambulance and get me to the nearest hospital. Back door only—no lights, no sirens. Got it?”

Even though I was in a lot of pain, I was able to think clearly

and be precise about my plan. I didn't want anyone from RE/MAX who wasn't already in my room to see me going out on a stretcher. There were 1800 agents gathered at a continental breakfast that morning and I didn't need them to see me in this condition or spread the word that something was wrong. I especially didn't want a blown-out back to appear as something much worse.

I convinced Margaret to take over for me and give the speech I had prepared for the group. As they say, "The show must go on." And so it did. She stayed back and handled the event while the ambulance whisked me away.

By the time I arrived at the hospital that morning, I was in excruciating pain. Still, I pulled my medical records from my briefcase and handed them to the attending physician in the ER.

"This is probably what's happening," I said to the doctor. If I needed to have back surgery, I wanted to get home to Denver so my personal physicians could assess my situation and make the best decisions for my care. I was willing to stay in Galveston overnight if I had to, but I wanted to go home to get a better handle on my situation.

Once I was in a room and settled in at the hospital, I called my wife to tell her what was happening. I didn't want to unnecessarily worry Gail without knowing more details. To be fair, the hospital had given me large doses of painkillers, so I'm not even sure I was making a lot of sense when we spoke. I was coherent enough to ask her to leave the conference she was attending in Orlando early and to come get me with the corporate jet. I didn't want to take a medical airplane—I wanted one I was familiar with and comfortable in.

Since I was on such heavy medication, the exact events of the day remain blurry. I still didn't have a clue about what was happening to my body, but I was absolutely certain about one thing: The pain had become unbearable. Several hours later, the doctors in Galveston agreed to release me from their hospital so I could return home to be examined by my own physicians. I was unable to walk on my own. It took several people to carry me from the wheelchair to the car and then onto the waiting plane. I don't remember much except for the pain. Although I initially thought I'd find comfort on one of the aircrafts I was used to traveling on, there was no comfort to be had. I tried lying down on the floor, reclining in a chair and even leaning over the top of one of the seats. There was no relief—just unrelenting anguish.



---

# CHAPTER 1

## Unforeseen Horizons

---

When we landed in Denver, Junior was at the airport to meet us. He's the eldest of my four children: Dave, Mary, Chuck and John. Chuck lives in St. Augustine, Florida, so we don't get to see him as often as we see the others, who live near Gail and me in Denver.

I think Junior knew I was in a lot of pain because I usually refuse to get into one of his cars. There's no good reason for that insolence other than we are both car enthusiasts and I like my vehicles more than his. But on this particular day I wasn't picky about how I was getting home as long as I was getting there quickly. Despite my fast deteriorating condition, I told my son I didn't want to go straight to the hospital—I preferred being in the comfort of my own bed.

"We'll go tomorrow," I said, agreeing to let him take me first thing in the morning after breakfast...*if* I was still in pain. Somehow I was still hoping that this would pass—or at the very least, subside to a somewhat more manageable level of pain.

Everyone was pleading with me to go to Sky Ridge Medical Center, because it's such a great facility and very close to home, but I didn't want to be there overnight. Besides, the hospital in Galveston had already given me large doses of pain medication. *Maybe I would just sleep this off, I reasoned.* My reluctance was nothing more than sheer stubbornness and, looking back, stupidity.

---

Junior accompanied me to the house to make sure I was safe before heading back to his own home.

Sleep that night was completely out of the question. I couldn't move, turn over or lift my legs half an inch off the ground without assistance. The only way I could make myself comfortable was to lay flat or to pull my knees straight to my chest and prop three or four pillows underneath my calves. When I was in that position, the pain went away but the paralysis persisted. I tried not to think too much about what that meant in the long term. I was simply focused on finding a comfortable position.

---

### JUNIOR

---

*The first inclination I had that something was off with my dad was during a boy's golf trip to Phoenix that we'd taken a week before he fell ill. Dad likes to be warm all of the time so even though it was a pleasant sixty degrees outside, he was wearing a sweater. By the second hole though, he was complaining that he was hot. I'd never heard him say he was hot—ever. When we finished our round of golf, I took a photo of him to commemorate our day. When I saw the picture, I could tell that he didn't look right. He was struggling to stand up straight and his body was crooked. The signs of something going wrong are usually present, but they don't mean much until you reflect back on them.*

---

*When Dad texted me from Texas that night, I didn't think he was in real trouble. I knew that most of his back problems were triggered from being on a plane or even from twisting his body while playing golf. Still, I texted Margaret as soon as I heard the news because I wanted to make sure he was really ok. About an hour later, she texted back saying Dad was heading to the hospital.*

*When they arrived back in Denver, I could see that Dad was in terrible shape. I begged him to go to the hospital that night, but he wouldn't do it. I was relieved when he agreed to go the following morning. I really thought he'd put up a fight because my dad could usually tough out whatever pain he had. This time was different, though. Of course, looking back, I couldn't possibly know that he'd be up against the biggest battle of his life*

out of bed—which he had. When he arrived, I was sitting in a chair in our family room, wincing and groaning. He sat down next to me and said, “You’re hurting bad, aren’t you, Dad?”

“Yes.” Frankly, there was no point in hiding the suffering. I finally admitted how bad I felt.

“You know Dad, you’ve got health insurance you’ve been paying for years and you’ve hardly ever use it. Let’s go down to the emergency room to let them check you out. They’ll probably just give you a shot for the pain and send you home.” Junior was doing his best to convince me to do the right thing—and it worked. “It’s time. Let’s go.” There was zero reluctance in my voice.

When we got to the emergency room, I was put in a staging area where I told the attending physicians that I was having severe back pain and needed medication for it. The team there was very attentive and kind. The first doctor I saw noticed that the color of my skin was a little off and that I was having trouble breathing. He gave me the same sedatives I’d been given in Galveston to take the edge off. The doctor felt it would be better for me to be transported from the ER to a regular hospital room that morning so they could run some additional tests.

Knowing I’d likely put up a fight, Junior took my doctor aside and asked whether it would be better for me to spend the night there or go home to rest. The doctor felt it would be much better for me to stay there until they were certain about what we were dealing with.

Although I wanted to keep my condition under the radar, several friends, colleagues and family members had gathered at the hospital within hours of my arrival to keep Gail, Junior and me company while the doctors ran a battery of tests. Chuck, Mary and John were told I was going to the hospital for back pain, which

By four o’clock that Sunday morning, less than forty-eight very long hours after I first discovered my paralysis, I finally caved in to the agony. I sent Ted, our house manager who lives with us, a text to come get me out of bed. It was apparent that I needed help, but I wasn’t ready to acknowledge that it was time to go to the emergency room.

Ted immediately contacted Junior to let him know what was happening, with the hope that he could talk some sense into his old man.

Junior showed up in record time looking like he’d just rolled

wasn't anything to be alarmed about. Junior remained in constant touch with his brothers and sister, providing updates throughout the day.

They had me in a very nice room on the sixth floor—one that resembled a suite at the Four Seasons more than a hospital room. Those rooms are a little more expensive than the other rooms in the hospital, but for me, they're worth the extra price. Sky Ridge is a first-class modern facility with every comfort and amenity a patient could wish for to make a stay pleasant—even enjoyable, as strange as that may sound. The section of the hospital I was in gives new meaning to “hospital food,” offering filet mignon instead of the usual I'm-not-sure-this-is-really-steak surprise you find at many places, and other fine meals cooked to order. If you want someone to stay the night with you, they will fold out a bed from the sofa in your room and make it up for your guest. It's first class all the way. If you're going to be sick, this is the place to be.

When I first got to Sky Ridge, the doctors weren't totally convinced that my paralysis and pain was exclusive to my pre-existing back problems. The doctors and nurses on duty came in and out of my room, drawing blood and running a battery of tests. I remember being told they wanted to do an MRI, but I have no recollection of it taking place because they had administered heavy-duty sedatives to keep me comfortable and still. There were several times when I felt as if I was falling into the rabbit hole as I slipped in and out of consciousness.

The last thing I strongly remember from that first day is the love and support I felt as everyone gathered in my room, keeping me company while we anxiously awaited the results of my tests. The group included RE/MAX friends like Margaret; Adam Contos, a former police officer who's now a Vice President; Vinnie Tracey,

our President, who's been with us for thirty five years; and Bruce Benham, one of my senior officers, who's been with us for twenty years. They're just some of the people who were there from the very start, and they remained by my family's side throughout this ordeal. Many of my good friends from outside of RE/MAX were there too, including Dan Predovich, Chris Mauter, Dave Fisher, John Metcalf, and Bob Fisher, who was with RE/MAX from the very start but retired in the 1990s. Everyone's care and concern overwhelmed me and brought great comfort to my family.

Day turned into night. Eventually, everyone except Junior went home. He stayed by my side that night so I wouldn't be alone. He began sending updates to my other kids as well as emails to close family friends to let each of them know I was in the hospital for my back and would likely be there until Dr. Prusmack could see me the next day.

This is the part of my story where others have filled in the details for me. Many of the events that took place over the course of the next seventy-five days are reflected through their eyes and experiences. I have very little personal recollection of all that transpired, but I've been given enough information by them to piece together and share my story with you.