



**ANCHOR:** This apartment complex in Ridgely, N.J., where Oppler spent most of his youth, remains special.

# Big Heart, Big Dreams

NAR 2021 President Charlie Oppler's love for community started when he was a kid. Now he's serving the 1.4 million-member REALTOR® family with an ambitious, compassionate agenda.

BY JANELLE BREVARD

On a brisk, pre-pandemic day last February, Charlie Oppler, AHWD, C2EX, ventured back to his hometown of Ridgefield, N.J. Although it's been more than 40 years since he lived in the working-class suburb in the shadow of New York, Oppler, 62, still returns periodically to sit on his old front stoop or reflect in a nearby parking lot. These visits help to center Oppler, the 2021 president of the National Association of REALTORS®, who has stepped into the top leadership post in these particularly unforgiving times.

Showing his sentimental side as he walks a narrow dirt path between aging red-brick apartment buildings, Oppler lights up when a blacktop basketball court comes into view. "On Saturday mornings, this was the place to be by 8:30 a.m.," Oppler recalls, peering back at the two-bedroom garden apartment he used to share with his parents, Ralph and Ruth Oppler, along with his brother, Stephen, and sister, Robin.

A lot has changed for Oppler since those early years. Although he and his wife, Geri, live just a 20-minute drive away, home is now the decidedly more upscale town of Franklin Lakes. Oppler is the co-broker-owner and CEO of Prominent Properties Sotheby's International Realty, which has 15 offices in New Jersey, more than 700 real estate professionals, and annual sales of more than \$2 billion. Yet the borough of Ridgefield, with

a population of 11,248 packed into 2.6 square miles—Oppler's home until he left for college at 17—is still very much his anchor.

"I grew up in a two-bedroom apartment. It never dawned on me that we didn't have a house," Oppler says. As his sister grew older, he and his brother created a partition out of a bedsheet to afford her some privacy while sharing a room with them. "It taught me the value of family. It taught me the value of being happy with what life is."

Charles Simon Oppler was born in 1958 in the small upstate

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New York town of Sidney and moved, when still a baby with his mother, to join his father, serving as a Marine at the Camp Lejeune base in Jacksonville, N.C. When his father retired from military service, the family, including Charlie's younger sister and brother, moved to Ridgefield when Oppler was 4, partly because his mother's brother was already living there. They settled in, with his father taking a job at a local office of B'nai B'rith, a Jewish service organization, while his mother worked in



the office of a nearby Fabergé perfume plant. “I had everything I needed,” Oppler says.

Years later, in 1980, after graduating with a communications degree from Trenton State, now the College of New Jersey, Oppler had a life-changing meeting while working at his first job with the March of Dimes. “One of my first projects was organizing a sports awards dinner,” he says. “I recruited [New Jersey] brokers Joe Murphy and Dick Schlott to co-chair the dinner, which raised \$50,000 and was successful enough to become a regular annual event.”

The two became lifelong mentors and advisers to Oppler, and they recruited him into real estate in 1981. He first went to work for Murphy Realty Better Homes and Gardens, attracted initially by the prospect of making \$25,000 a year, as his mentors suggested, which would have doubled his earnings at the time. “They didn’t tell me it was all commission,” he says. He ended up making \$26,000 his first year. “I had no perspective, and I still think I got lucky.” Oppler went on to work as a branch manager for Schlott from 1984 to 1989.

Assisting people on their path to property ownership quickly

became a passion, and soon the path turned personal. In 1983, at age 24, Oppler bought his first home, for \$90,000. “It was surreal,” he says. “I had never lived in a house before. Something as simple as coming home to a private place was a new experience.”

For Oppler, the moment clarified the important role that REALTORS® play in people’s lives. “I’m proud to be a REALTOR®,” he says. “We make a tangible difference in communities and people’s lives.”

As his presidency begins, Oppler seeks to reinforce the importance of maintaining perspective in a year in which business is strong for many real estate practitioners, but still fraught with uncertainties and losses for a lot of members and consumers. “Each of us has struggled with something. Each of us has lost something—in some cases, the people closest to us. But we’ve persevered,” he said during his inaugural address at the virtual REALTORS® Conference & Expo in November. “We will work collaboratively and cooperatively to advance the issues that benefit all members and consumers.”

## COMMUNITY BUILDER

Among Oppler’s presidential priorities is a focus on developing and aiding communities and on providing support for commercial members, who have been especially hard-hit by the economic fallout from the pandemic. His empathy-driven agenda is fueled by personal experience, including repercussions from the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Randy Kative, Oppler’s business partner since 1992, was with him on that horrific day when the Twin Towers collapsed, 20 years ago this September. “Charlie and I met at 8 a.m. that morning at our office in Fort Lee, which had a view of the Hudson River,” Kative says. “We could almost see it happening from our window. We had several days of just being numb. There’s no other way to describe it when you lived in the bowels of what happened.”

Oppler went to several memorial services in the coming weeks. “And I had a friend who went to 15 funerals in 30 days. You’re just kind of frozen in time,” he says, adding that his daughter Jacky babysat for a family in which the children lost their father in the attacks. “It was his first day of work in the World Trade Center.” The man’s wife was Oppler’s high school classmate.

This fall also marks the 20th anniversary of the REALTORS® Relief



**ON HIS GAME:** Shooting hoops by his childhood home is a favorite way for Oppler to unwind.

Foundation, which was created as a housing relief fund following the attacks. The fund raised more than \$8 million to help the families of 9/11 victims stay in their homes. In September, Oppler will oversee a telethon to bolster the relief foundation's ability to address the growing need for emergency relief. Over 20 years, the foundation has raised a total of \$34 million for victims of disasters, including floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and wildfires. The planned telethon will ensure that REALTORS®' philanthropic efforts remain prepared and funded, he says.

Another Oppler initiative similarly draws on the generous, giving spirit of the REALTOR® family. As part of the new REALTORS® Are Good Neighbors initiative, Oppler is asking members to track their volunteer activities, with a goal of logging 5 million member volunteer hours through November 2021. The idea came to him while driving with his daughter Karli after they listened to a song called "10,000 Hours" by country musicians Dan + Shay and pop singer Justin Bieber. "REALTORS® leave a large, altruistic footprint, but it hasn't been well-documented," he says. "We want to demonstrate the immense impact that REALTORS® are having on communities and, hopefully, inspire others."

In the first quarter of 2021, NAR will also launch a mentorship program, pairing members with high school and college students of diverse backgrounds who are interested in a career in real estate. It's an initiative Oppler says "will expand our REALTOR® family by bringing in new talent and diverse voices."

To reinvigorate commercial real estate and support commercial practitioners, Oppler is looking forward to the launch

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of a new event—the C5 Summit—scheduled for September as an in-person networking and educational gathering in New York City. The five C's are commercial, connection, commerce, capital, and community. "We'll invite top commercial brokers, economic development teams, REIT representatives, developers, and state and local associations to work together to secure business opportunities for their clients that are critical to keeping our economy moving," he says.

These initiatives are part of a slate of strategic priorities

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**SAFETY FIRST:** Reducing risks during the health crisis is a top priority at Oppler's 15 offices, including this one in Edgewater, N.J.

that will receive a lot of association attention in the year ahead. Those

include expanding housing equality and affordability, championing REALTORS® as consumers' best source of information on the real estate transaction, enhancing member engagement and the member experience, and driving community development. On the advocacy side, pandemic relief legislation and a federal tax code that supports real estate investment and ownership will be focal points.

## **'ONE TOGETHER'**

REALTORS® and the nation continue to manage the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, continuing economic uncertainty, and social unrest around racial inequities.

"[Oppler's] slogan 'One Together' was [a result of] us sitting in a room trying to figure out how we encapsulate who he is. This was back in 2017 when he decided to run," says Jarrod Grasso, CEO of the New Jersey Association of REALTORS®. And its message is just as relevant today. "It's never been about Charlie Oppler; it's about what's for the greater good for the organization," says Grasso. "It really encapsulates what he believes in, that it's not the one individual.

It's not just the leadership team. It's all of us working together. I think that's who he is."

Oppler was elected president of the Eastern Bergen Board of REALTORS® in 1996. Eight years later, in 2004, he became president of the New Jersey Association of REALTORS®. The 2009 NAR President Charles McMillan gave Oppler his first national committee chairmanship on the RPAC Trustees Committee; then 2011 President Ron Phipps named him as a committee liaison, setting the trajectory for the first NAR president from New Jersey in 60 years.

Grasso says Oppler's extensive leadership experience, coupled with his continued work as a managing broker, gives him "a true understanding of the effect COVID has had on our society and industry."

For NAR's two appointed leadership positions, Oppler handpicked leaders who he says are well qualified to help him navigate REALTORS® through these tumultuous times.



**BIG BROTHER:** Oppler, right, had a tight relationship growing up with his younger siblings Robin and Stephen.

Broker-owner and coach Leigh Brown, CIPS, CRS, of Concord, N.C., is vice president of advocacy, while Tommy Choi, a broker with three offices in Chicago, is vice president of association affairs. "I wanted a team that reflected diversity and the future of the organization. They are two of the most respected, talented people I've met," he says. In addition, he eagerly seeks input from the team of NAR liaisons and committee chairs who themselves are very active in real estate.

Oppler gained an appreciation of the power of teamwork through sports; he still plays in two local softball leagues on weekends. Kative, his partner, envisions that his love of team sports will infuse his leadership. "When you're in sports, your drive is to win," she says, pointing out how Charlie's motivating spirit helped their company grow from a single office with eight desks to the large brokerage it is today.

In 2009, the brokerage leaders transitioned their independent company and joined the Sotheby's franchise. "I look at him and I admire what he did at such a young age when we became partners," Kative says.

## FAMILY FIRST

Apart from sports and real estate, the passion that ignites Oppler's spirit is his commitment to family. He and Geri, whom he met in the late 1980s when she worked as a loan officer for a local bank, have two sons and two daughters. Today, Geri helps Charlie as needed with the business. His older son, Michael, is the company's chief operating officer. Daughter Jacky is a social worker and lives in Rhode Island, while Karli works in human

resources in New York and is her father's frequent companion at his beloved country music concerts. Oppler's youngest, Jason, is a college student at James Madison University in Virginia.

"Family is everything to me," Oppler says. He admits he initially hesitated to seek the role of first vice president for NAR several years ago, concerned by how much it would take him away from his family. "I wrestled with it, mainly because of Jason," who was in high school during the campaign, he says.

Oppler was attending the REALTORS® Political Action Committee President's Circle Conference in the Bahamas in 2018 just as Jason's basketball team was scheduled to play in the state semifinals. "We had a nor'easter with over a foot of snow" in New Jersey, Geri recalls. "Charlie got out on the last flight from the Bahamas." The next morning, he made the trek back

to the Bahamas on a 6:30 a.m. flight to resume his President's Circle duties. Few knew Oppler had even left, but the decision to join his family was a no-brainer. As hectic as it was to juggle competing commitments, he says, "There was nothing that would ever get in the way of that." All told, Oppler made it to 125 of Jason's 128 games.

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## COMING HOME

During his February visit to his hometown, Oppler spotted a former neighbor, Patsy Shilinsky, and walked over to talk outside her apartment. Shilinsky says she has lived in the Ridgfield complex for nearly 50 years. "Everything was like one big backyard for the children," she says. "When they played sports, we were there. When they had pancake breakfasts, we were there. It was like a Mayberry," she adds, likening the sense of community to that of the vintage TV series "The Andy Griffith Show."

It's not uncommon for her to see Charlie come back and perch on his old apartment stoop. "He's come a long way," Shilinsky says. "But when you're brought up with compassion, it never leaves you." Oppler acknowledges that the old neighborhood still tugs at his heart. Big decisions and pensive moments lead him back to the gritty borough. "When I have a bad day, I get a slice of pizza and go sit in a parking lot and think about where I came from," he says.





**FAMILY CHAMPION:** While his association and business responsibilities can be consuming, Oppler savors every opportunity to gather with his clan, which includes (back row from left) daughters Jacky and Karli, wife Geri, and sons Michael and Jason. Front row: grandson Zach, Oppler, granddaughter Gabrielle, and daughter-in-law Lindsay.