



REAL ESTATE

Foreclosure law firm cuts 236 jobs

■ Last week Fannie Mae dumped Ben-Ezra & Katz as a client. On Monday the Fort Lauderdale law firm cut its staff by 41 percent.

BY KIMBERLY MILLER
Palm Beach Post

Fort Lauderdale law firm Ben-Ezra & Katz is laying off 41 percent of its staff following the sudden dismissal of

the firm last week by federal mortgage backer Fannie Mae.

Employees of the firm, which handles at least 18,000 foreclosure cases statewide, were told of the layoffs Monday.

"Ben-Ezra & Katz today laid off 236 of our 568 employees from our offices in South Florida. We were forced to take this action af-

ter Fannie Mae surprisingly terminated its relationship with the firm last week," the memo said.

"We sincerely regret to have taken this action, particularly since we've worked hard to create a culture of community and family. This is a very difficult, sad and emotional day for everyone at the firm.

"Ben-Ezra & Katz will

continue with a reduced staff, handling non-Fannie Mae cases and other types of real estate matters, as we have for nearly 20 years."

On Friday, founding partner Marc Ben-Ezra was in hot water with a Miami-Dade judge who criticized his firm for filing "sham" documents and "wasting the court's time."

Ben-Ezra & Katz is the

second South Florida foreclosure firm to lay off employees after being fired by Fannie Mae. The Law Offices of David J. Stern let go hundreds of employees in the fall.

Ben-Ezra & Katz said they made Fannie Mae aware of possible document problems after an internal audit in the fall.

"We are extremely disap-

pointed at Fannie Mae's decision to stop using the firm's services," the firm wrote in a statement last week.

"We are also surprised by the action, since the issues leading to their action are things we discovered internally, then proactively informed Fannie Mae and created a plan to correct the problems."

PROFILE



DAMON HIGGINS/PALM BEACH POST

A NICHE: Darren Weiner of Antigen Realty, shown at AmericanAirlines Arena, home of the Miami Heat, has created a network of brokers and agents familiar with the needs of sports and entertainment figures.

RICH, FAMOUS AND HOMELESS? HERE'S YOUR GUY



CHARLES TRAINOR JR./MIAMI HERALD STAFF

NBA LINK: Darren Weiner has helped many athletes, including the Heat's Erick Dampier, shown dunking the ball against the Pacers Feb. 8 in Miami.

Darren Weiner found a niche after overcoming a battle with leukemia.

BY ETHAN J. SKOLNICK
Palm Beach Post

Darren Weiner had already been through one life-changing experience — unexpected, traumatic and entirely beyond his control. So when a friend suggested a gentle course correction in his career, a natural extension of his endeavors as a sports agent, it was worth pulling out a pen.

The friend, a Miami Beach real estate broker, told him to jot down all the real estate referrals that he'd given to his contacts over the past six months, during the pre-construction boom.

By the third one, Weiner got the point.

"When I was representing these guys, and when they moved from one city to another or even overseas, I was the one dealing with the mother, the wife, the player, the team, the Realtor," said Weiner, a Boca Raton resident for 12 years before moving to Miami in 2005. "But I'm seeing how everyone is capitalizing off my relationships. I was like, 'Why aren't I doing this?' So I got my license."

So a unique business was born, one built on the part of sports that fans think little about as they're proposing trades for their favorite teams on the Internet — the real-life consequences of relocation for the players involved, whose lives can be altered

• TURN TO WEINER, 6B

COMMERCIAL FISHING

Shrimp make a big run in bay — at last

■ For Biscayne Bay's commercial shrimpers, the run is finally on. But no one knows how long it will last.

BY SUSAN COCKING
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Pink shrimp — conspicuously absent from Biscayne Bay since the opening of the commercial harvest season last November — suddenly popped up by the thousands Sunday night. And commercial fishers expect the late-season shrimp run to continue through the end of this week.

"The shrimp blew up. They were everywhere," Jorge Fundora, an exhausted Opa-locka shrimp dealer, said Monday afternoon. "I'm beat. I'm dead. I haven't been home since last night. I've probably bought 50,000 pounds."

Fundora, president of Miami Shrimp and owner of eight commercial wing-net boats, said the average catch among the fleet of 150 to 200 boats was between 1,500 and 2,000 pounds. He said he paid fishermen \$1.25 a pound, but expects the price to drop because the crustaceans are now plentiful from here to Louisiana.

"That makes the demand less and makes the price less," Fundora said.

For commercial shrimpers like captain Jeff Hald of Fort Lauderdale, the run couldn't come soon enough.

"I got 1,200 pounds between 8 and 11 p.m.," Hald said Monday. "I ran out of ice at 11. They'll probably go all week. You'll be seeing 200,000 to 300,000 pounds by the end of the week."

But Hald said the late-season run doesn't mean shrimpers' troubles are

over. "Don't say it's the best thing we ever saw, because it ain't," he said. "I'm still \$10,000 to \$15,000 behind last year, and I'm going to have to hustle to make it up."

In a typical Biscayne Bay commercial food shrimp season Nov. 1 through May 31, harvesters encounter nightly shrimp runs that range from trickles to pulses to outright mother lodes. The runs occur when mature shrimp make their way from the bay out the passes and inlets to open water to spawn. Shrimpers harvest them in wing nets — large, tapering socks deployed from both sides of the boat that scoop up the shellfish as they drift midway between the bottom and the surface.

No one knows the exact combination of factors that cause shrimp to rise en masse in the bay.

Typically, runs occur during cool evenings around the full moon amid northerly winds and murky waters — conditions that have occurred repeatedly since the season opened. But until Sunday night, the season was a bust — a few pulses, but no big hauls. It's anyone's guess why the animals waited till now to show up. But they're expected to be around at least until Friday's full moon.

"Everything kinda fell into place," Fundora said.

He expected to be weighing and packing shrimp into Tuesday morning, employing as many as 50 laborers in three shifts over 24 hours.

"With us, it's all or nothing," he said. "When it comes, it comes all at one time."



CAMMY CLARK/MIAMI HERALD FILE, 2010

LONG CAREER: Shep Owens has been trawling the ocean bottom for 35 years to harvest Key West pink shrimp.

THE BUSINESS REPORT | BUSINESS STARTS ON 8B

PROFILE

Realtor helps athletes, others

• WEINER, FROM 8B

with little to no warning. (For instance, there's been much talk about the Denver Nuggets trading Carmelo Anthony; that deal could include as many as 14 other players.)

Those players and their families must rent or sell their homes in a rough real estate market while quickly finding a suitable place to live in a new city, all while adjusting to new teammates, coaches and roles on the floor, court, ice or field.

Through Antigen Realty, Weiner attempts to take some stress out of that for athletes and their advocates: "If you don't know who you're dealing with, it's not until after the deal goes through that you find out whether the guy represented you properly or not."

He has created a network of 350 brokers and agents in North America, chosen because they're familiar with the needs of sports and entertainment figures. He says that the network's clients have come from all 122 National Basketball Association, National Hockey League, Major League Baseball and National Football League teams, as well as boxing, golf, tennis, auto racing, mixed martial arts, Hollywood and the music industry.

Not a bad second career for a guy who needed a second chance at life.

'AN EARLY START'

Growing up in Boston, Weiner had a defined goal: become a sports agent. As a teenager, he got press credentials, made contacts, and even bonded with the Celtics in pickup games.

After interning for NBA Commissioner David Stern at the 1988 NBA Draft, he



JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES

CLIENT: Ex-Heat player Shawn Marion sought Darren Weiner's help selling a Gables townhouse.

wrote separate letters to the basketball coaches at his preferred colleges, asking for work as a student assistant. The University of Arizona gave him that shot, and

he got certified by the NBA Players Association while still in school. By 1999, at age 30, he was an established presence — especially in the NBA, where he worked with

he got certified by the NBA Players Association while still in school. By 1999, at age 30, he was an established presence — especially in the NBA, where he worked with

Hakeem Olajuwon, Rick Mahorn, Rick Fox, Nick Anderson and Sam Vincent, among others.

That year, he was attending a University of Miami football game, watching his friend Kenny Kelly quarterback the Hurricanes.

"I carry that stub with me," Weiner says.

Weiner started burning up. At first, he thought he had mono, or heatstroke, and just needed some fluid.

The diagnosis was leukemia.

"I felt everything hit the floor immediately," Weiner says. "But it was funny because, probably within five seconds, it was like an out-of-body experience, where I was like, 'Don't ask why. Why not you?'"

He got a bone marrow transplant in 2000, continuing to work from the hospital. After he could fly again, he returned full time to his agent business, while also helping the NBA run nationwide drives designed to get more minority representation on the bone marrow register.

Then came the conversation with his friend, at a time when he had tired of traveling around the world (14 countries in 12 months) to work with overseas clients. After one of his stateside clients, the soon-to-be-retiring NBA guard Damon Stoudemire, turned to him to help find a buyer and several other athletes followed suit, he thought, "Maybe I have something here."

'CONSTANT FLOW'

And he does. He's still hustling, just in different ways, and not in just a couple of sports.

"What I'm dealing are nonstop around-the-calendar seasons," Weiner says. "It's just a constant flow."

That's especially true around trading deadlines — when sports transaction activity spikes — or when seasons start. Athletes, especially local athletes, ring him up after they've been uprooted or are looking to upgrade their accommodations after a new contract.

Weiner, who is also the in-house Realtor for the Panthers, is working with several Marlins on housing for the new season, while finding spring training rentals for others, helping a prominent NFL strength and conditioning coach sell a home, and reviewing a community in the Bahamas that's being designed by top PGA golfers.

He's also still involved with NBA players, including members of the Heat, recently helping Jamaal Magloire's mother extend a lease and running over the keys to Erick Dampier's new rental property so the Heat center had them when he got off the plane early last Sunday.

His highest-profile recent deal, however, came with a former Heat player. Shawn Marion bought a pre-construction townhouse in Coral Gables in 2008, but then was traded to Toronto before he could live in it. He wanted to sell it, but 10 of the other 39 homes in the community were already on the market. After renting to the mother of then-Heat forward Michael Beasley last season, Marion met with Weiner. They decided they needed to make the property stand out for its \$2 million list price, and not just offer signed merchandise, as other athletes have done.

So they included an experience. If you bought the house by Dec. 31, you also got round-trip private jet service to Marion's new NBA city, Dallas, and four club level tickets to the Feb. 6 Super Bowl there. No one did, but Weiner credits the promotion — and the widespread exposure — for getting the property in the eyes of more people.

"We got an offer after the deadline," Weiner says.

If not yet one that gets him, or his famous client, to pull out a pen.

FLORIDA BRIEFS

• ECONOMY

Miami economy looking better than Broward

Miami-Dade's economy benefited from some scattered good reviews in an otherwise dour report on Florida by Wells Fargo.

Released Monday, the analysis predicts recovery won't gain steam in Florida until 2012 as the Sunshine State grapples with unprecedented economic problems. It noted both housing prices and unemployment appear to be getting worse, dashing past hopes of hitting bottom. "Most troubling of all," the bank's report says, "Florida is still struggling to regain its status as a premier location for new and emerging businesses."

But the report touts Miami-Dade as a place bucking some of the trends hammering Florida. "Miami's economy held up relatively well in 2010, particularly in light of the low expectations for the region," the report said, using the catch-all term "Miami" for Miami-Dade County. It noted that while employment barely grew, "there is a bit more activity beneath the surface," as continued losses in construction mask gains in sectors with ties to tourism and trade. And while Miami-Dade still suffers from housing's "mythic" growth during the boom, Miami-Dade real estate is "probably more misunderstood than any other market" as cash-wielding Latin Americans scoop up condos and homes.

The report credits Broward for enjoying a boost from international tourism, too, but mostly has glum words for Miami-Dade's northern neighbor.

"The Fort Lauderdale area is still struggling to generate even modest positive momentum," the report states.

DOUGLAS HANKS

• **Perry Ellis increases guidance:** Perry Ellis International said Monday it sees continued momentum in sales, prompting an update on earnings guidance for 2011 and initial guidance for 2012.

The Miami apparel company said it expects to report fiscal 2011 earnings for the year ending Jan. 29, 2011, of between \$1.82 and \$1.85 per fully diluted share. That represents a 78 percent increase over the same period last year when the company earned \$1.02 per share. The adjusted earnings for fiscal 2011 do not include costs associated with the recent acquisition of assets belonging to Rafaella Apparel Group.

Perry Ellis said revenue for 2011 is expected to be about \$790 million, representing a 5 percent increase over the \$754 million in revenues from last year.

For the fourth quarter of fiscal 2011, Perry Ellis said it expects earnings per share of between 66 cents and 69 cents, compared with 65 cents during the same period last year.

Perry Ellis said that for the fiscal year 2012 the company anticipates earnings in the range of between \$2.50 and \$2.65 per share, as well as revenues reaching \$1 billion.

ELAINE WALKER

• **Royal Caribbean places order:** Royal Caribbean Cruise Line has signed an agreement with German shipyard Meyer Werft to build the first in a new generation of 4,000-passenger cruise ships. The new series, dubbed "Project Sunshine," calls for a new 158,000-ton ship carrying 4,100 guests at double occupancy — about the same size as its Freedom class ships, and significantly smaller than the 5,400-passenger Oasis-class ships that sail from Fort Lauderdale. The deal — announced in Euros at a current worth of \$940 million per ship — includes an option for a second ship to be delivered in spring 2015.

MIAMI HERALD STAFF REPORT

• **Winn-Dixie loss is better than expected:** Winn-Dixie Stores reported improving sales trends in the latest quarter, but the Jacksonville-based supermarket chain still recorded a net loss from continuing operations of \$22.3 million, or 40 cents per share.

After reporting a decline in sales in the first quarter of the fiscal year, Winn-Dixie's sales in the second quarter ended Jan. 12 were \$2.098 billion, nearly the same as the previous year. Sales at stores open at least a year fell by 0.3 percent in the quarter.

FLORIDA TIMES-UNION

• **Small business forum:** The Miami Herald's annual Small Business Forum, slated for Feb. 24, includes panels on financing a business, international business and product innovation. Headlining this year's conference is Dennis Ratner, founder and CEO of Hair Cuttery.

The half-day seminar is designed to help would-be entrepreneurs get started and help small business people sharpen their game. Panelists include finance experts, successful small business people and Miami Herald editors. Tickets cost \$25 for the half-day seminar and include continental breakfast and a light lunch. Details are available at www.miamiherald.com/business.

MIAMI HERALD STAFF REPORT

NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL

OIL SHARES HELPS LIFT STOCKS

U.S. stocks closed near session highs after a rally in energy stocks, supported by a deal in the oil-services sector and a jump in Brent crude and gasoline futures, offset a retreat in Wal-Mart Stores and other consumer stocks.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average closed down 5.07 points, or 0.04 percent at 12,268.19, after earlier falling as far as 12,235.91.

The Nasdaq Composite added 7.74, or 0.28 percent, to 2817.18. The Standard & Poor's 500-stock index gained 3.17, or 0.24 percent to 1,332.32, led by its energy and materials sectors.

DIVIDENDS

	Pe- riod	Stk rate	of record	pay- able		Pe- riod	Stk rate	of record	pay- able
IRREGULAR					REGULAR				
LM Ericsson Tel	A	.3477	4-18	y	Amer Software	Q	.09	5-13	5-31
xz					First WV Bancorp	Q	.19	3-1	3-15
x- Subject to approval.					Forward Air	Q	.07	3-13	3-28
Nordic Amer	Q	.25	2-24	3-4	Halliburton	Q	.09	3-2	3-23
Tanker					Littlefuse Inc	Q	.15	2-21	3-7
OchZiff Cap	Q	.71	2-18	2-25	Mesa Labs	Q	.12	2-25	3-15
Mgmt					New England	Q	.03	2-28	3-14
y- Pay date unannounced.					Bncshs				
z- Approx. amount per ADR or ADS.					Primerica	Q	.01	2-25	3-10
STOCK					PrivateBancorp	Q	.01	3-17	3-31
Sunesis Pharma	x	*	*	*	Safe Bulkers	Q	.15	2-18	2-25
x- 1 for 6 reverse split, effective 2-15.					g- Payable in Canadian funds.				
INCREASED									
Compass Miner-	Q	.45	3-1	3-15					
als									
Thomson Reuters	Q	.31	2-22	3-15					
CORRECTION									
RF Industries	x	*	2-24	3-10					
x- Company corrects dates for 2 for 1 split announced 2-11.									

The Miami Herald

BUSINESS PLAN

CHALLENGE

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Pino Global
Entrepreneurship Center

FIU | Business

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Are you up for
the Challenge?

Monday, February 7

- Business Plan Challenge - Call for Entries Announcement
The Miami Herald/Business Monday section and MiamiHerald.com

Friday, March 25

- Deadline for entries by email

Monday, April 18

- Top Story on finalists in The Miami Herald/Business Monday section and on MiamiHerald.com

Monday, May 2

- Weeklong voting for People's Picks begins on MiamiHerald.com

Monday, May 9

- Voting for People's Picks ends at midnight (11:59pm)

Monday, May 16

- Winners announced in The Miami Herald/Business Monday

Thursday, May 19

- 2011 FIU Entrepreneurship Hall of Fame Introduction Reception
6pm-9pm, Westin Colonnade Hotel, 180 Aragon Avenue, Coral Gables
For tickets, visit <http://business.fiu.edu/alumni/ehof.cfm>

For additional info, visit MiamiHerald.com/ChallengeThe Miami Herald
MiamiHerald.com