



By **Lisa A. Tyler**
National Escrow Administrator

Absentee owners of real property continue to be the target of criminals engaging in Seller Impersonation Fraud. These criminals pose as owners, sell the property and abscond with the sale proceeds. The real property owner has no idea their property is the subject of a real estate transaction. Read all the red flag warnings found by an extraordinary escrow officer in the story titled "PLAYA del rey."

A property worth \$757,320 was sold as a For Sale by Owner (FSBO) for \$9,000 and then for \$230,000. The title officer assigned to prepare the report for the \$230,000 sale uncovered multiple forgeries in the chain of title and immediately alerted her team.

Together, the team was able to drive the bad guys away by demanding new deeds be executed in the presence of an approved signing agent. Read about it in the article titled "DISPARATE values."

All-Star was the theme for the 2023 FNF annual escrow training events. National Escrow Administration chose this theme because of our deep belief that our colleagues are the All-Stars in the industry. Our colleagues are what differentiate our Company from the competition.

Our settlement agents nationwide provide a top-notch customer experience, which is proven by our market share. They are the best in the industry. Read about a few of the recipients of the All-Star Award in the article titled "ALL-stars."

IN THIS ISSUE



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PLAYA del rey

Vickie Everly, escrow officer and branch manager for Chicago Title's Rancho Bernardo, California office, recently opened a for sale by owner (FSBO) transaction for a commercial retail space in Playa del Rey, California. The commercial building was being sold for \$399,000.

Vickie immediately noticed some red flags — there was no broker involved in the transaction and the office opening the transaction was in San Diego County, but the property was located in Los Angeles County.

Vickie began reviewing the eight-page, hand-typed purchase agreement and discovered the earnest money deposit in the amount of \$135,000 was supposed to be released to the seller prior to closing. The purchase agreement called for a closing date of June 8, 2024, which was a Saturday.

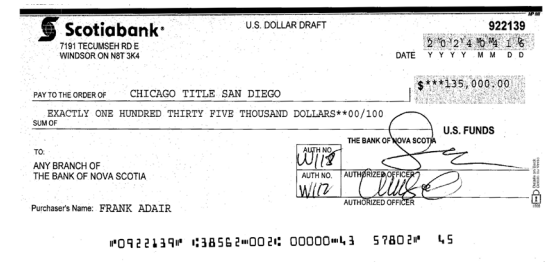
Vickie thought the sale price was significantly low for a commercial property located in Playa del Rey. She decided to look up the market value of the property using ValueCheck, which reflected the property's worth as \$2,295,400. That was a huge discrepancy between the sales price and the value of the property. This was yet another red flag.

Next, Vickie looked at the signature line on the purchase agreement. The property was owned by a Limited Liability Company (LLC), but the purchase agreement was signed using the entity name and no managing member. This was another red flag because all organizations need an authorized signer.

Vickie sent a Notice of Pending Real Estate Transaction to the address where the property tax bills were being sent. She had a feeling she was dealing with an imposter. While she waited for the true owner to respond to the notice, she requested organizational documents from the imposter via email. The imposter did not respond to her request.

The earnest money deposit arrived in the form of a U.S. dollar draft in the amount of \$135,000 drawn on a foreign bank in Canada — Scotiabank. The use of a foreign bank is another red flag. She informed the buyer and seller she could not accept the deposit, and demanded a wire transfer instead.

Just as Vickie sent out the demand for a wire, the true owner called and confirmed her suspicions. The property was not for sale and the person Vickie had been dealing with was indeed an imposter.



Vickie immediately resigned from the transaction and notified her title officer and management team of the failed attempt at the Seller Impersonation Fraud. In spreading the word throughout the family of Companies it was discovered **the fraudster opened a total of nine (9) transactions for the same property at different branded offices** throughout Southern California.

Vickie could have ignored all the red flag warnings she uncovered while processing the sale transaction, but she did not. She took each warning to mean she needed to dig deeper to discover if this sale was a Seller Impersonation Fraud. She followed each lead to the end and as a result, thwarted the crime. For her efforts, the Company is rewarding her with \$1,500 and a letter of recognition.



STOP

TELL US HOW YOU
**STOPPED
FRAUD**

settlement@fnf.com or
949.622.4425

DISPARATE values

On May 8, 2024, a resale title order was placed with Allison Jackson, a commercial title examiner for the Portland, Oregon Central Processing Facility (CPF). The sale price was \$230,000. The property was a non-owner-occupied single-family residence.

The seller on the purchase agreement was reflected as Anita Mann. The buyer was Bottom Feeder, LLC and/or assigns. No real estate agents were involved in the transaction.

Allison began her examination and discovered a quitclaim deed dated September 29, 2023, from someone other than the seller reflected on the purchase agreement. The deed indicated the grantor was Debby Wagu, who supposedly sold the property to Archie Bishop. The deed read in part:

“...Seller agrees to sell to purchaser and purchaser agrees to purchase from seller for the price of \$9,000 and on the terms and conditions...”

Allison also discovered a second quitclaim deed dated November 1, 2023, from Archie Bishop to Anita Mann, the seller named on the purchase agreement. The second deed did not reflect any consideration given by the purchaser to the seller.

The recent uninsured deeds in the chain of title gave rise for concern. Allison did more digging and discovered the taxable value of the subject property was \$757,320, but the first quitclaim deed reflected a purchase price of \$9,000. The purchase agreement received for this order reflected a sale price of \$230,000.

Next, Allison noticed the tax collector had not updated the tax records to reflect Anita Mann as the owner. She researched the “WHEN RECORDED MAIL TO” addresses on both quitclaim deeds, which were the same. She discovered the address reflected on both was for a property the Company had opened sale transactions on and cancelled twice before. One of the deeds to

transfer that property also reflected the following language:

“...Seller agrees to sell to purchaser and purchaser agrees to purchase from seller for the price of \$9,000 and on the terms and conditions...”

Allison raised the below concerns with her underwriter and shared the information with the escrow officer.

1. Taxes have not been changed. She was not sure if the assessor refused to accept the two quitclaim deeds in question or why they had not changed ownership.
2. The signature for Debby Wagu did not match her signature from her 2013 trust deed.
3. The signature on the deed from Archie Bishop to Anita Mann did not match the previous deed.
4. The notarial certificate read “this affidavit” but it is a deed they are signing. The notary signatures did not match, yet the same notary notarized both deeds.

Allison told the escrow officer she would be back vesting to Debby Wagu (as did the county) and calling for deeds to replace the two quitclaim deeds in the preliminary report.

Once the escrow officer called for new deeds to be executed in the presence of an approved signing agent, the parties to the transaction stopped responding to her requests. The escrow officer ultimately resigned from the transaction, stating in a message to the title officer, “Not a soul on the transaction will respond to me in any regard.”

For ferreting out the forgeries and alerting her entire team, Allison has received a reward in the amount of \$1,500 and a letter of recognition from the Company.



ALL-stars

All-Stars are highly effective and productive individuals. They are often self-starters, who are trustworthy, compassionate and demonstrate a high standard of conduct. They are tenacious and possess the ability to work with different personality traits.

This month we are featuring four individuals who were recipients of the FNF All-Star award in 2023.



Daniel Merry
Escrow Assistant
The Woodlands, TX



Fidelity National Title Agency recognized Daniel Merry as an All-Star. He started at the front desk during the pandemic and has since been promoted to escrow assistant. Early on, it was obvious Daniel was skilled at multi-tasking and taking care of customer's needs — important for the operation's success.

Customers regularly compliment Daniel's service and attention to detail. As a result, he is being mentored and is learning the escrow process from the ground up. He continues to show promise working for two different escrow units and covering the front desk. He is a rock star in the industry!



DeeDee Del Toro
CPF Manager
Houston, TX



DeeDee Del Toro is the Houston CPF manager. She has been with the Company for 25 years. During this time DeeDee has honed her skills by working her way up. She began with basic title plant tasks, such as opening orders and imaging documents from microfilm. She realized she enjoyed researching the history of property.

Now, DeeDee manages more than 200 orders per day. She is always responsive to requests which come her way and possesses a can-do attitude. She consistently works to develop her management skills, earning her the All-Star award.



Beata Lewis
Senior Escrow Manager
Chicago, IL



Chicago Title nominated Beata Lewis. Beata always has a positive can-do attitude, which carries through to her tireless commitment to successfully close deals. She has a loyal customer base because she promptly and proactively responds to their requests by solving their issues.

In addition, Beata supports other employees by approving wires, sending out checks and closing packages. She always avails herself when others need to collaborate, by mentoring and training others.



Karla Parker
Compliance Specialist
Denver, CO



Karla Parker is an amazing team member. Karla has extensive industry knowledge, having worked in all facets of the industry for the past 40+ years. She maintains a can-do attitude and is always supportive when anyone has questions or needs additional help. She usually finds a solution to a challenge rather than having to say no; all while remaining calm for her colleagues and customers.

Karla is instrumental in the success of our Company and has one of the toughest positions in our operation. She makes a difference every single day. She is an amazing asset and is loved by all.

Article provided by contributing author: Diana Hoffman, Corporate Escrow Administrator • Fidelity National Title Group • National Escrow Administration

