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Ebby Halliday: The Woman Who (Still) Sells Dallas

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She goes to work every weekday. She parties, lobbies, donates, campaigns, and composes songs for the ukulele. She wears 3-inch heels and still sells homes. A few years back she started a correspondence

with Warren Buffett. In fact, about the only thing she won't do is retire, even though she's 96 years old. The Dallas real estate icon allowed us to shadow her on an ordinary Wednesday in the life of Ebby Halliday.

5:30 AM. Ebby Halliday Acers is kneeling in her bedroom. She and her late husband, Maurice Acers, turned the second story of their Preston Hollow home into a giant master bedroom with abundant closets and a dressing area. First thing every morning, wearing her blue bathrobe, Halliday prays near a photograph of the man she married at age 54 and still worships. She reads Scripture and her daily affirmation.



Soon the sun rises on a glorious May morning in the town Halliday might as well own, by whose bricks and dirt she has made a fortune and built one of the nation's largest independent real estate brokerages. She reads the newspaper—the Business section first, unless the Mavericks played the night before, in which case it's SportsDay. Before she eats her breakfast, she takes her regimen of pills: one for blood pressure, one for cholesterol, a blood thinner, a vitamin. Then she finishes her meal, chooses her outfit, and waits for her makeup person to arrive.

Halliday spent her early career selling clothes. In high school, as the Depression started, she worked in a department store in Abilene, Kansas. "I always had something in the layaway," she says. A saleswoman in a Kansas City store actually invented the name "Ebby Halliday" for her. She came to Dallas in 1938 to take charge of the millinery department of the W.A. Green Department Store.

"St. John's suits are a Realtor's best friend," she says. She owns several. "You just shake them out, hang them, and wear 'em again."

Twice yearly her personal shoppers at Neiman Marcus bring her a vanload of new arrivals, along with shoes, handbags, and accessories. Halliday eliminates any that "make me look like an old lady."

Not long ago, Halliday would have headed to the Preston Center office, Ebby's Little White House on the corner of Preston and Northwest Highway, where she would pick up trash on the grounds with her manicured hands. Today, she heads to the corporate office on Sigma Road. She likes to arrive at 8:30 and drives herself in her silver STS Cadillac with license plate EBBY 1A.

"I have to drive fairly friendly," she says. "My name is on the tag."

8:30 AM. Halliday arrives at her corporate office. She grabs her "Palm Pilot," a stack of index cards wrapped in rubber bands. On each card is a list of the day's activities prepared by her

two assistants. Top of the list: "Day with *D Magazine*." Her calendar has events through October. Halliday does use e-mail, which an assistant prints for her to read. But when she was given an iPod in an elaborate invitation for the opening of Avignon at Windhaven, she gave it to an associate. "I have no idea what those things are," she says.

9:00 AM. Baker drives her to the Preston Keller office because she's running late. Ebby tries to meet every associate in her company. There are about 1,600. At the office, she rushes in to face about 45 agents.

"I'm Ebby," she says, to standing applause. She goes on to outline her three points of service, including community. She walks the talk: in 2005, Halliday received the Horatio Alger Award. "The first event was in the chamber of the Supreme Court. Can you imagine that? I was with Roger Staubach and Howard Schultz, the founder and president of Starbucks. Someone said to Roger, 'Oh, Mr. Starbucks, I just love your coffee.'"

Halliday congratulates the office on its 2006 production. "Preston Keller is taking over Preston Road," she says. "There's more Ebby signage than the mayors." The agents seem to sit a little taller as she speaks.

9:45 AM. Back to corporate headquarters to greet new sales associates. Forty recruits sit with thick workbooks, pens poised to record what she says. She makes a point of speaking to each new group. She tells them about her background and the history of the company. Then she hands each one the mike as they stand up and talk about themselves. She listens.

Then out comes another uplifting speech, this one remarkably different from the one she delivered just minutes ago. "We are headed for another wonderful year," she tells them. "And 2006 was a barn burner." She goes through Ebby's 10 Commandments, like "Thou Shalt Not Reveal Thy Cleavage," then bursts into song with her ukulele: happy days are here again, interest rates are low again. Another standing ovation. The students, 12 of whom jumped ship from other agencies, snap photos of Halliday.

10:15 AM. Ebby is back in her office, at her desk, only she doesn't sit. She and her two assistants, Betty Turner and Anne Anderson, sort through e-mail, letters, and hundreds of requests for her time and money. Staunchly Republican, she eyes an envelope labeled "Women Against Hillary." "I think Hillary's got it locked up," she says. "For the nomination."

More stacks, requests. Dallas Heritage Village. Boys & Girls Clubs of America. Equest. The Texas Senior American Pageant. Dare To Dream Children's Foundation. Collin County Advocacy Center. "We cannot support them all, unfortunately," she says.

"Here's a letter from a happy client," she says and begins to read: "I am a customer for life of Ebby Halliday."

Some letters come from out of state and have nothing to do with the company. She comes to one from an Arizona rancher who wrote to her about what illegal immigrants are doing to his property. She tells Turner to make two copies of the letter, one for Senator John Cornyn and one for Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison. She will give Senator Cornyn the letter personally.

11:30 AM. "Time to go," Halliday says. She hasn't sat since she got out of the car. The Oak Cliff Lions Club is having a luncheon to honor Wright Lassiter Jr. with its Oak Cliff Lions Club Humanitarian Award. Riding in the front seat, Halliday does not wear a seat belt. She explains that someone usually has to remind her to put it on. After all, when she started driving, you didn't even need to have a driver's license. She says she used to play tennis, but now the only exercise she gets is going up the stairs at her home and to all the Ebby offices.

We pass the Azure, where agent Joseph Gullotto is selling units "like hotcakes." "Ninety percent of that building is sold," she says. The developer is her neighbor, Gabrielle Barbier-Mueller. He's developing another area in Sunnyvale. There's the W Hotel, where Ebby has been to Ghostbar once.

At the luncheon, more adoration. She has honed her gift for meeting and greeting people. Everyone in the room, it seems, wants a hug. When luncheon introductions are made and her name is not mentioned, someone in the crowd of judges, businessmen, and politicians yells out: "Ebby's here!"

During the speaker-rich program, Halliday closes her eyes awhile to listen.

1:30 PM. Back in the car, headed to corporate headquarters, Halliday describes the location of the family home of her late husband, Maurice Acers. His mother had a choice of two locations to build it: Lindenwood in Highland Park or Zang Boulevard. She chose Zang. Still, it's a beautiful area and Halliday is bullish about Oak Cliff's future, especially when the Trinity River plan comes to fruition. She thinks Oak Cliff is a sleeper that's just about to wake up.

Back at her desk, she continues to attack her stacks of mail. She answers her own phone.

3:30 PM. Ellen Terry has a new listing at 6400 Northaven for \$5.2 million. (Ebby Halliday acquired Ellen Terry Realtors in 1995.) Halliday still meets with clients when a deal needs finessing. For a major listing like this, she will appear to showcase the listing to other firms, and she knows every agent. She walks the home and catches up with Lynda Adleta, Betty Crawford, Mark Cain, Trey Bounds, and Kay Weeks. She gives young Travis Mathews a high five.

4:45 PM. She returns to the office to wrap up the mail and freshen up for a retirement party honoring Ernst Gruch, head chef at the Dallas Country Club and a close friend of her husband's for 29 years. "Maurice loved to cook," she says of the former FBI agent. "He always told me if he could have a second life he'd come back as a chef."

After the party, she meets Ebby Realtor Joe Kobell for dinner at the club. Kobell, who owns a 1979 Cadillac Seville limousine that once belonged to Maurice Acers, has a Realtor in town from Northern California that specializes in luxury rental homes. Halliday has business to discuss with them.

8:30 PM. Ebby finally comes home. Her Mavericks have already lost their series to the Golden State Warriors, so she settles in to watch San Antonio play Phoenix. She has a very detailed cheat sheet of which channel number corresponds to which network, but she called Cody Baker several times during the Mavericks series to "fix" the satellite.

12:30 AM. After a 19-hour day, Ebby Halliday Acers, the grand dame of Dallas real estate, turns in for the night. In five hours, her hectic life resumes.