

The agent behind the Trump penthouse deal

By Shia Kapos January 16, 2015

Chezi Rafaeli was a New York real estate agent who counted celebrities and CEOs as clients. Then, 14 years ago, he and his wife moved to Chicago to be near her family. He didn't know a soul.

"My wife told me to walk up Rush Street and make some friends," he recalls.

Rafaeli, who already had earned his real estate license, put on a suit and walked into a Starbucks. One introduction led to another, and soon he met [Stuart Goldberg](#), a criminal defense attorney and author. They hit it off, and a day later, Rafaeli was showing Goldberg four condos in the just-built Park Tower.

"I'm not trying to be show-offy," Rafaeli says, but "he decided on the spot to buy one for \$2 million."

Rafaeli, who is affiliated with Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage, has gone on to sell some of the most expensive homes in town. He was the agent on the [recent \\$17 million sale](#) of the Trump Tower penthouse to Vistex CEO [Sanjay Shah](#). He also handled Citadel CEO Ken Griffin's \$15 million purchase of a [Park Tower condo](#) from hedge-fund executive Richard Cooper in 2012. Rafaeli represented the buyers and sellers in both deals. He won't reveal the amount of his commissions, though the Shah deal likely netted the largest commission ever paid to a Chicago real estate agent.

That sale was more than two years in the making, Rafaeli says. It started when Shah called him and asked to see some properties for a second home.

"I showed him at least 30 units over three years. He really wanted a trophy property so he could make a statement," Rafaeli says.

The two met so often they developed a rapport. "He was a good guy to hang out with," Rafaeli says.

Shah says Rafaeli is "easygoing, measured and persistent. He knew what buttons he needed to push to get the deal through." The tech executive called Rafaeli because of his work with Griffin. "He was a known entity. He also was a listing agent for the Trump penthouse, so I reached out to start a dialogue."

Rafaeli, 50, grew up in Tel Aviv in a family that ran grocery stores before taking a hit in the financial crisis of the early 1980s. He served in the Israeli army before moving to New York with \$6 in his pocket. Nights, he drove a gypsy cab that he secured from a dump.

CHASING BUSES

"I would chase buses in the morning and pick up passengers who couldn't get a seat," he says. During the day, he worked at a security company installing alarms.

It was a hard life, but Rafaeli says he relished getting to know Americans. Once, he tagged along with a friend to a Jewish singles party at Tavern on the Green, where he met Susan Kurtz, a Chicago native who worked in advertising. He proposed marriage two months later but was rejected. Undaunted, he kept in touch with her for two years before she came around.

"I have great patience," he says.

The two married and Rafaeli became a real estate agent on New York's Upper West Side. Working for real estate brokerage Douglas Elliman, his clients included WebMD founder Jeff Arnold, movie star Michael Douglas and celebrity stylist Frederic Fekkai.

When the Rafaelis had twins, they wanted to be nearer to family. His was in Israel and hers in Chicago, so they headed to the Windy City. Rafaeli purchased their first home by telephone—a three-bedroom at the Bristol Condominiums on East Delaware Place for \$540,000. "I overnighted a check. How could you lose?"

The family has moved three times since and now lives in Trump Tower, where Rafaeli also has his office.

He has found it easier to operate in Chicago's residential real estate community compared with New York's, where most brokers don't belong to a multiple-listing service.

"Here, you always have an indication about where the market should be and what the market value is. It's so helpful."

When he's not working, Rafaeli and his wife and their teenagers like to travel. He also has a passion for cars. He races Porsches—he owns one—at [Autobahn Country Club](#) in Joliet.

"It takes a lot of the anxieties of the job away," he says.
