



IREM® From the Front Lines Podcast

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Starting a Real Estate Management Company

Todd:

Welcome to another edition of From the Front Lines, where we discuss both the day-to-day, and one-of-a-kind issues facing real estate managers. In this episode, IREM Manager of Member Engagement, Brett Voeltz, CPM®, talks to 2024 IREM Excellence REME Award winner, Joseph Rubay, CPM®, ARM®, and his partner, Winnie Tran, CPM®, about starting his own real estate management company. Over to you, Brett.

Brett:

Thank you so much, Todd. I am very excited to have Joseph with us today. You know, I don't remember which event it was, but probably now, about two years ago, I remember sitting at an IREM event and meeting Joseph. And Joseph, maybe you don't remember this, but I just remember thinking to myself, wow, this guy is really excited about this industry. And it was really at that time that I knew you were going to keep pushing yourself to be the best that, not only you could be, but also, really, to be a change-maker in the real estate management world. So, you know, flash forward now, not only were you just recently awarded the 2024 IREM REME Excellence Award, but also you're the owner and operator of your own real estate management and brokerage company. So we'll definitely get more into that story later in the podcast. But first, you know, I just want to start with some introductions. So I know you're here today with Winnie Tran who is a partner at your company as well. So if we can just start with some brief introductions where you're both from what brought you to the real estate management industry, and then maybe a memorable IREM moment so far from your career. So Joseph, over to you.

Joseph:

Thank you. I appreciate your time and having us here, me and Winnie, we are excited to share our journey. My name is Joseph Rubay and I started in real estate management by accident. I came as an immigrant to Canada in 2018. I remember that very cold day that was -35 and I was, basically, I came from an engineering background, and I was like, hoping to get into the engineering field. And while I was looking for rent, the property manager asked me the question, "What do you do for living?" And I said, I'm an immigrant, I used to be an engineer, and I don't have a job now. So he said, "Well, you know, in Canada, we have to ask for your job to make sure that you're going to pay your rent on time. But, do you want a job?" I said, "For sure, I'm looking for a job." He said, "Would you mind being a building manager for this?" And that's the first time I heard about this profession. And I said, "What does that mean?" He said, "Well, you're going to work with me on filling the vacancies, taking care of the tenants, filling applications, dealing with contractors." And I said, "Well, seems like something I can handle." I'm a newcomer. I would not turn around this like you know opportunity. I'll go for it. So from that time, I started as a building manager, and I found myself like I am evolving in it. And even the property manager was, like, very impressed, and they

gave me another building and another building, and from one building, I saw myself managing five, and I've seen my property manager's signature, which has CPM®, ARM®, Commercial Property Management Firm, all these titles. So one day I asked him, I said—oh and President partner—I said, "Oh, my God, I'm impressed by your signature. Like, what are all these?" He said, "Yeah, I need now to introduce you to IREM. Now you are ready to start education. That's where you will really evolve, and you're going to be great, and you're going to differentiate yourself from others." By the way, his name is Paul Jones, and he's the vice president of Ayre & Oxford Property Management here in Edmonton, Alberta, all the thanks to him. He was the one that who helped me to be the person who I am. I learned from him a lot. And beside my drive and the, I would say the drive and also the love for the industry and finding the right people around me, like Winnie, my partner now she's my partner in business and she's my partner in life. We were so excited to start and evolve. And make some difference and I just love it. I love every moment in it. I'll let Winnie elaborate. A little bit more about this.

Brett:

Awesome. Thank you, Joseph. Yeah Winnie, how about you?

Winnie:

Yeah. My name is Winnie Tran. I started in property management over 12 years ago, I work for the Provincial Government of Alberta. I just started handling contracts and doing a wide variety of things for in-house properties, third party property management portfolios, along with P3s, that's a public private sector for the schools here in Alberta. So it's been, it's been a long time coming, but I'm very thankful that I landed there. And I think you'll hear the same story from a lot of real estate management folks, is that it isn't something that was readily available as like a core subject in your university degree, right? And you kind of landed in it. My studies is business and psychology. That's what I studied. I also have experience in project management, but Property Management came along, and it was something that really tickled my fancy, if I may. You know, it was a wide range of things that you can deal with through the day. Like there's a lot of technical aspects of the job that I love learning about the different systems and machineries and, you know, architectural builds and such, alongside just having the relationships, anywhere from talking to the consultants or contractors to my boots on the ground, like you know, my team, who's actually my subject matter experts in the buildings. It's definitely been a growing experience for me. I am young female of minority status, and in my position in the government, you know, it's very seldom that you would see somebody take on a position like that, and I think that that's also broken down a lot of barriers for myself and people who work in the industry. I'm really proud of it. I got my CPM® designation even after 12 years of working in the industry. So that was a fairly recent thing that I decided to do. You know, it's not that I felt that I need, you know, we can always grow. I had the experience and the education, but I wanted something that I could walk around internationally and be represented by, something a symbol that everybody would recognize. As we all know, there's different certifications out there, between BOMA, IREM, or IFMA even, and those were all part of my considerations when I decided to go for further studies. And I'm very thankful that I chose IREM. That, in turn, also got me involved with the Canadian Association, which is REIC, the Real Estate Institute of Canada. And the, you know, the memorable experiences through these two organizations is really very much so the networking that you're able to develop, and the contacts of support, and sometimes you just need to ask a quick question, if somebody in the industry, or, like, bounce an idea off of somebody. And you know, the industry is quite tight knit, so it's been amazing to meet a lot of people who have a little bit more seniority in the industry. And also, I'm very passionate about leading and mentoring young, the youth in the industry. I don't want to say youth, because sometimes, sometimes you have older folks who are doing it as well, but just mentoring

folks through their journey of property management and real estate management really is something that I'm passionate about. So I love the opportunity that I've been given, just meeting people in the field and working with our industry partners and even some of the universities here in the city. And I'm very thankful for those opportunities.

Brett:

Awesome and, you know, great stories from both of you, right? Winnie, what you said, a lot of people just kind of fall into it. They don't expect to be into property management, but then to take that passion to the industry is really what's going to set us up for success later down the line. So thank you both for sharing that. I want to talk a little bit about kind of now, you know, moving into Joseph, you started a company. You're under 40 years old. You started your own property management brokerage company. What motivated you, really, to take that step from the day-to-day operations as a property manager, to start your own company? Can you talk a little bit about that experience?

Joseph:

Sure. You know, I've been in the industry almost six years, after working into this in day-to-day operations as a property manager, I gained deep understanding of the challenges and the opportunities in the property management industry. I worked closely with the property owners, with tenants and vendors, which gave me a well-rounded perspective on what makes a management company truly effective. The transition from being a property manager to starting our own company came from a desire for a greater autonomy and the vision to offer more personalized and efficient service. So right, like I saw that there were gaps in how certain property management services were being delivered, particularly when it came to communication and tenant satisfaction, so I felt I could offer more, I could offer more streamlined and customer-focused approach. So I took the leap into the entrepreneurship. The process was a mix of careful planning, you know, risk taking, even gaining industry knowledge, because, like, I do have the knowledge of, the day-to-day operation, but just taking over, like starting a business, I had to put together procedures, policies, how I can make sure this work environment suits everybody around me, so that we can all succeed. This process was really to build a strong network and to support my vision into the property management. And I thought it's important to take the risk. And I went for it, and I am grateful. I started April 1st, and now here we are, November 12th, I have 13 buildings under management, over 400 doors, and we are improving. I'm bidding, I'm working with other investors of acquiring. I am representing now, like I wouldn't believe it, representing investors to buy \$8 million building, \$10 million buildings, which something I wouldn't think about if I wasn't courageous and I took the risk. I remember in the last Global Summit with IREM, I had a discussion with leaders like Don Levy, and they all business owners, and I had the discussion with them before I took the decision to start the business, and I asked them, How can I start? What do you think is worth the risk? And I got support and help to do that. So that was amazing.

Brett:

Yeah, and, I mean, 13 buildings, that's awesome, right? Like, that's such an accomplishment to then be able to say, I started from basically nothing, right? You had to start from scratch to build it up to 13 properties. That's great. And your sights for yourself are obviously you want to grow even more from there. And so what were some of the challenges of growth, right? Like, as you're building that portfolio size, eventually, Winnie came on to help support in the team. But what were some of those challenges early on in the process, and how did you overcome them? You talked a little bit about the support of local industry leaders. What else kind of helped propel you to where you are today?

Joseph:

Well, to be honest with you, when I started solo to build this business, I came with myself and some like you know, advises, procedures, policy, but we all know one hand will never club. So I felt the need for having a partner with me to support me so we can share these responsibilities and even like you know, duties together. At that time, Winnie offered the help. She volunteered to offer the help without even joining as an employee or a partner or anything. And I was hesitant to have her in because I thought it's not fair. I said, "Well, I'm just starting, I'm taking the risk. I cannot, you know, provide you with anything in return." And she stood up there for me. She helped me for over two, three months, till the business started growing and then, I was like, ready to have her with me. The early stages of starting the business was definitely challenging. One of the biggest challenges and hurdles was, you know, building that team. Gaining that trust in competitive market. Where, like, why did they hire Joseph? Why not? Other companies have been in the market for a long time. When your new potential clients want to know that you have experience and systems in place, even though, like, I know I have the drive, I do have the experience, I do have the support. But the systems weren't in place, so we had to work on it. It took us three, four months to navigate. The accounting system was a little bit challenging as well. The property management software, you know, like Yardi, when we implemented it, it was very difficult bringing data from other property management so, you know, we overcame this by leveraging our previous experience in the field, and we built a strong relationship with property owners and stakeholders. We also focused on creating a clear value proposition, such as offering customized solutions that met the unique needs of each client. Another challenge was, and a big challenge is, how to manage the cash flow, as with any new business, there were costs involved in setting up the system, the processes, even to cover the rent. I kept the sharp focus on delivering the exceptional service which helped to establish reputation. And with the help of Winnie and the management team that helped us grow the business over this short period of time.

Brett:

Yeah, that's awesome. And so Winnie, I have to ask you then, you know, looking back now, you know, back the two, three months that you were helping Joseph out, what were those signs that you were like, "This is a good spot to be in. Like, I know this guy has got it figured out. He knows what he's doing." And you were ready to help support him. Like, what kind of was going through your head during that time?

Winnie:

I think that that realization actually came before I started to get involved with the brokerage, you know, the opportunity that we had to have, like, professional interaction with one another on the board of directors for REIC and IREM, kind of gave us the opportunity to, like, see the potential in one another, and the drive that each one of us had, and the passion for the work that we were doing. And I think it, you know, like, even unknowingly, we kind of picked up that sense from one another, that we were both very just high-functioning individuals, that really had a lot to offer. So when I heard that he was starting his business, I know how hard a startup can be, you know, and no matter how determined or how strong or how driven you are, it doesn't make the task any less difficult or any easier, right? You're still going to face the challenges of time, resources, and I never doubted that Joseph could do it on his own. But it's always easier when you have support, right? So the first few months that I went there it was, I think the challenge for me the first couple months is, I offered Joseph, I said, "I'm just going to come and observe to see how you do things and kind of witness what you your processes are, and I'll give you some feedback on how you can improve the process or streamline and make it more efficient, right?" And one of the biggest things that I noticed, that I struggled with, was because I come from a professional, commercial background,

whereas now we're dealing with multifamily buildings and the residential side, the clientele is completely different. Some of the problems that you deal with are naturally different. But at the end of the day, you know, the joke that I always tell is, yeah, property management is easy if we're managing the building empty, right? It's the people managing that's the difficult part, right? So it's, it was learning—

Brett:

That's so good!

Winnie:

Yeah, absolutely. I used to manage, like, 4000 square feet office buildings, commercial buildings. And, you know, give it to me empty, and it would be operating fine, but then you throw in, like, 800 people in there, and it's a different ball game, right? But, I realized that that was something that I had to overcome. But the initial challenges, I think, also involved personnel, finding the right staff, people that you can trust. The thing that I discover is when you work with people who are just highly competent, it's sometimes difficult. It sometimes is difficult to find people who are at the same wavelength as you if that makes sense. We're very thankful now that we found somebody. And it sounds cliché, but like, when I speak and when I ask for something from one of the staff, they know exactly what it is that I want before I even finish completing my sentence. So it's finding that synergy between the people that you work with, right? That was a challenge. The other thing that Joseph mentioned was just the systems like, it's not that, it's not that the systems out there aren't reliable, I think, just the support that we didn't get, and it just didn't get set up properly. And sometimes when you acquire buildings and assets from other people, the information is missing, and, you know, just picking up pieces like that, but nothing that we couldn't overcome. And we've kind of like, like he's mentioned, come over that hurdle now and now, I think it's just a matter of keeping the processes going smoothly, because the business is growing exponentially. We're very thankful all of our growth has come from word of mouth and recommendations. We haven't advertised our services or our business at all, and that's what we value the most, is that we want people to come to us because they trust us, right? And somebody they know has used us and believe in our work, and, you know, trust our work and have the faith in us to recommend to somebody else that they also trust. So that's been a highlight of the journey as well.

Brett:

All right, so great. Both of you mentioned a lot of useful information about how just general property management practices have been beneficial to making sure that the company's running successfully, right? So what are some of those key aspects, whether through just your experience in property management, or even, you both mentioned having gone through the CPM[®], Joseph, you want to talk a little bit about what some of those best practices were for you and how that's helped you as a business owner?

Joseph:

Sure, a few key property management practices have really helped me succeed as a business owner. First and foremost, strong communication is crucial, both with the property owners and also with tenants. I make it a priority to be responsive, transparent and proactive in addressing concerns. This has built really a trust with my clients and tenants alike. It's a norm here, we have a building manager who deals with tenants. I changed that. I hired a call center. All the tenant complaint requests go to a call center, 24/7 to enhance our communication. No call will be missed because there is an army of people who are behind to answer any phone call anytime during the day, seven days. Secondly, efficiency and automation, like we started to build the procedures and the

processes, and we automate so that we don't have to invent the wheel. We are just rinse and repeat. When we get a new building, what are our procedures? What actions do we have to take? These are incredibly important. When we started the business, we implemented property management software that is all in. We streamlined everything from rent collection to maintenance requests, to advertising. This is not only to reduce administrative work, but also improve the tenant satisfaction. And you know, as a property management company, our main goal is to keep the tenant satisfied. We keep the tenant retention. That is our focus, because this is the most expensive item in the cycle of the business. To enhance the customer service, then your tenants stay more, your client income will stay stable. And then you focus on the preventive maintenance. And all these we learned and improved our skills by acquiring the CPM® certificates that set us aside of other property management because we had to go through 11 courses of maintenance, financing, tenant retention, like you, name it, all the courses that we took is especially focused on, how can we run this business, or run this profession in a way that we keep our clients' best interest by maintaining higher tenant retention, by reducing or keeping control or on expenses so that we can make more profit in that for that client. So we worked on reducing vacancies, we worked on improving long term profitability for properties. We ensure regular property inspections that are done on time, the quick response to issues, like, if you have a small maintenance issue, we send someone to address it right away. And instead of keeping it to make it, you know, more harm, we create a sense of community for tenants. All these, you know, practices that we involved in the business. I, to be honest with you, 99% I followed what I learned in the CPM® program I was doing day to day operation. My role was just to focus on when I used to be an employee. So my role is just to, you know, focus on tenants. I would say, request, complain, do the budgeting. But I didn't have all the practices in one place. When I started the business and I acquired the CPM® education, I start to implement all what I learned, and I see how I get to improve their business by just following these processes and procedures.

Brett:

Yeah, that's so great, and I have to bring it back up, because Winnie said it right, an empty building is much easier to manage, but you made a very good point, right? Like we need these tenants to stay because it's very cost prohibitive to have to find, you know, go out and market the property and find new tenants. So, you know, everything that you've said is just so indicative of how valuable it is to have that mindset of a property manager to make sure that as a company, you're really thinking about the number one tenant, which is your tenant, right? So just, thank you so much for sharing that. I do want to ask you now, Joseph, you can just share it, we have a lot of people that come to us and they say, "I want to start my own property management business," or, "I want to get into real estate. And what would be your advice to just young property managers that are looking to get into the industry, what would be your advice to them to start their own business one day?"

Joseph:

I would say, my advice would be to gain as much experience as possible and different aspects of the property management. Working both residential and commercial properties gets you hands-on experience with leasing, maintenance, tenant relation, budgeting. The broader the experience, the better prepared they will be when they start their own businesses. And the most important thing is to invest, invest in your professional development, whether it's through certification, like the CPM®, Certified Property Manager or attending industry events like surround yourself with like-minded people. Join IREM, attend the conferences. Network is crucial in this business, and IREM has been instrumental in helping us form lasting relationships with other professionals in the industry, like really, it opened the doors for us to get to sit down and talk with leaders in the industry that we would never had the chance to meet them in life if we would have been part of this great

organization. And finally, start with a solid plan. Understand the market and create realistic financial projections. And by knowing your strengths and weaknesses, you can start your business. Starting the business will be always challenging, but calculate your risk and with the right preparation and mindset, it will be an incredibly rewarding experience. I can't really explain my feelings, how I how I see—like I used to be an employee, and now I am a business owner. I see myself, I work harder, I work longer. But when you see the fruitful change in the industry that you can make, and also, like Winnie can elaborate even on another aspect, is starting a business and having more resources, even financial resources, allowed us also to make some change in the community, because we have that surplus that we can start helping young students from the MacEwan University. Winnie, can you please elaborate on how we took them for walkthroughs? How we start mentoring them with the efforts of the Real Estate Institute of Canada, for sure, because they had this communication. But that also allows us to give back to the community, volunteer more, allow us to have like, I don't say that we have now more time, but for sure, we have more resources.

Winnie:

You know, it's twofold. I want to say, yeah, we are working harder, we're working longer hours, but it's all very rewarding because it's your own business. And to be able to offer people in the industry a comforting place of work, to do something that they love every day with the autonomy that we trust them is something that I take pride in because the old saying is, people don't leave their jobs because of the work, they leave their jobs because of their leaders, right? And we're both under 40, and I don't want to play that generational card, but sometimes it's just a mindset, right? We understand that people come, and if you're responsible when we allow you to get your work done however you wish to get it done. And everybody's a grown responsible individual. In regards to what Joseph was talking about, getting involved with bringing the youth into the industry. We both sit on REIC. The efforts that we've put in there have allowed us to collaborate with McEwan University School of Business. They offer a property management minor in their program. It's a two-year program and what REIC has worked very hard to do with the McEwan University to sign a memorandum of understanding that allows these students to complete their required courses. I believe there are 8 courses in that minor program, and once upon completion, those courses will be considered equivalent transfer to the CPM® program so that the students don't have to come out graduating from their degree and then take another calendar year to complete the course material required to be certified as a CPM®. So that's something that's been in the works for about two years now. And we finally got that off the ground this summer. So we are very excited that the students have that opportunity because like I said, when I was going to university, property management was not a formal minor or major that you could choose to graduate in. And the fact that these young professionals have that option now to get professionally trained and get started in the field earlier, we're very thankful. We've invited them to come join our industry events so that they have an opportunity to see what the networking looks like, meet the people who are influential in the industry so that they can establish those relationships once they graduate and they need help. You know, I've also introduced property management companies to work with Grant McEwan College. They do have a kind of apprenticeship program where the students sign up to take a course and that course places them into a job opportunity with one of these property management companies. And then they get credits for towards their degree. And oftentimes the students will finish their term with the property management company and they end up being hired on as a full-time staff. And then it gets them hired and employed into the industry right off the bat. And I think that's amazing.

Brett:

Wow, yeah.

Winnie:

Yeah, it really is wonderful. And honestly, I see the potential in these young, a lot of them are younger kids here, and they're going to be great. And I'm so happy and grateful that I'm part of their journey through property management. You know, I value everybody's personal experiences and I think it's when you are able to learn from somebody else's experience that is even more invaluable because you don't have to pay the cost that that first person had to pay first hand, right? So, I love sharing our successes and our failures and our learning points, right, because when we succeed, I want to see everybody else succeed, right? It's not that I want to be up here and I want to see somebody else somewhere else. I just want to see everybody reach what their goals are, and what makes them happy. And property management makes some people very happy.

Brett:

I like how you threw in the "some people", right?

Winnie:

Yeah, maybe not everyone, but certainly a lot of people.

Brett:

Yeah, no. And I really like that you said that, right? Like you have to share the successes, but also the challenges and some of those failures because, yes, you both shared really great advice that you would pass along to the next generation of leaders. But also recognizing that those experiences that you can share of those failures of those challenges that you've had to overcome and that you've had to learn through are really going to be what makes you seem a little more human, right? Like yes, you're successful in the industry, you're successful in what you've done, but it didn't come from nothing. You had to work to get there. And I think that's just so important that especially younger people realize we see a lot of stuff, whether it be through social media, and it just has this lens of, "Look what I've done! Look what I've achieved!" You can do it too, maybe, right? But they don't tell you how they got there. Or they might tell you, but they don't tell you the challenges. So I really appreciate you both talking a little bit about that as well. And I wish you can continue the conversation just all day long. You both have such an awesome story to share. I do want to end on my last question to both of you. Joseph, we'll start with you. Five years from now, where do you see your company and what are your hopes for the next five years?

Joseph:

I have a big vision for the real estate company. Part of it is the real estate management. In five years from now, I see myself having contributed a lot in the industry here in Canada, involved to change or add some value to the industry by acquiring more buildings, putting better practices, in helping the next generation to grow. In five years from now, I see myself involved more in the education sector of it. I'm so excited about bringing young people into the industry and then help them to get their licenses through my business and after that provide them with job opportunities. That's my big vision. That is the most rewarding part honestly. Knowing that I help to create a space where people feel comfortable and well-cared for is incredibly fulfilling. Watching my company grow from just an idea to a successful established real estate company has been extremely, extremely fulfilling. And the ability to shape the direction of this company to set our own standards, offer better experience for both tenants and investors is something that I will be proud of every day. And again, without tiring, being and IREM member has been invaluable in building and maintaining all

this. Through IREM, I've gained access to a network of professionals who really share best of practices. They offer me advice to collaborate on business solutions and I can't be more thankful. I can confidently tell all my clients that I adhere to an industry-leading standard, which has helped me to foster strong relationships and reputation. Thank you so much.

Brett:

Yeah, that's great. Winnie, how about you? What's your five-year goal?

Winnie:

Yeah, so I don't know if everybody knows this, but Joseph and I also have a consulting business together. So I think five years from now, what Joseph touched on about teaching is what we wanted to focus on. We want to get involved teaching with IREM here as well. But alongside of all that, you know, the consulting business is just kind of helping investors or people who want to get started in the industry be a little bit more knowledgeable in what they're getting themselves into, and giving them the experience that we had and educating them on making the right decisions. So part of that, a big part of that is education, right? So we do want to find a way to offer the education in the courses that are involved through the industry and hopefully make everybody's property management journey a little bit easier. And I see ourselves just focusing on that and growing the industry leaders, people that are coming into the industry.

Brett:

Yeah, wow, that's awesome. So mark your calendars for November 2029, right? We're going to look back on this and see where we got here. And I know you both are going to be so successful in what you're doing. You already have been, right? It's been what, Joseph, you said seven months now since you started the business and it's just great. I've loved following along, seeing all the successes and you know, culmination here at the last Global Summit where you were awarded the Remy Excellence Award. It's just a true indication that you know the value of being a part of a network like IREM and REIC up in Canada as well. So with that, Joseph and Winnie, thank you both so much for joining me today here on From the Front Lines. We've had a really great conversation, and like I just said, just really looking forward to seeing what your future holds.

Winnie:

Sure, thank you so much for the opportunity.

Joseph:

Thank you so much, we appreciate your time.

Todd:

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