

## Standing out from the crowd

**You think your home is ready to go on the market. Then the home stager enters the picture and you find there is so much more to do**

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Tara Savelle thinks there's something fishy about my house.

"Are you a Pisces?" she asks.

No. I'm a Leo," I answer. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you have so many decorative fish!"

"I do?"

Savelle, a certified Canadian professional stager – someone who offers expert advice to get your home in prime shape before selling – has agreed to participate in a little experiment at my home. She is going to grade my home staging efforts.

For the last nine years, my husband, Robert, and I have lived in a 1,000-square-foot brick bungalow in North York, with two-plus-one bedrooms and two bathrooms. The first seven years were quite comfortable. But then came our twins, Callum and Quinn. Now, two years on, I'm convinced the house has shrunk. It's time to move.

I discovered Savelle on the Canadian Staging Professionals website ([canadianstagingprofessionals.com](http://canadianstagingprofessionals.com)), which claims to be "the best source for practical and effective training (for Canadian staging professionals)."

The site has a large bank of members who have completed an intensive three-day staging course.

For me, Savelle stood out from the others because of her sharp website, which is informative, organized and nicely designed.

To prepare for Savelle's arrival, Robert and I spent two solid weeks executing a Do-It-Yourself home staging, which essentially amounted to decluttering, adding flowers here, new bedding there.

My guess is that our fluff-abilities are pretty much on par with the majority of homeowners who have absorbed tips and tricks through home magazines and television shows.

I was feeling pretty good about our fluff job, but now that the fish fetish has come out, I'm not so confident.

Savelle, owner of Bowmanville-based Home On Display ([homeondisplay.ca](http://homeondisplay.ca)), says most people don't realize they have distracting knick-knacks in their home, too.



DAVID COOPER/TORONTO STAR

"Take down the family photos, especially pictures of children. It's a safety issue because you don't know who is going to be walking through your home," says Savelle, a mother of two young kids.

"Focus is another reason," she continues. "You want the buyer to focus on your house and nothing else. Don't bring them into your life. Model homes don't have personal items."

Home stagers have an amazing ability to examine where you live with pure objectivity.

Savelle points to various cracks, scuffs, chips. She also identifies paintings too small for the size of the wall – a common mistake.

"Scale and size are really important," she says. "When you put a framed picture over a bed, couch or chair, it should be two-thirds the size of the item it's placed over. If it's too small, it looks like it's floating."

We have a finished basement with a built-in shelving unit, once referred to as The Wall Of Toys. After a serious amount of editing, Robert and I transformed the unit into a showpiece of coffee table books and handmade ceramics. For easy access, we stored a selection of toys in decorative boxes from Ikea.

I'm watching Savelle's reaction.

"You've really cleaned this up," she says, referring to some "before" photos I had emailed. She nods approval and moves on.

"When I came downstairs, I first saw the corner of your sectional and then I looked over there," she says, pointing to a toy chest. "We need to move things around so the eye is drawn directly to the focal point, the fireplace."

Savelle pulls the sectional into two separate pieces, placing one on either side of the fireplace like a mirror image.

"This frames the fireplace, rather than blocking it off from view," she explains.

To unify the couches, she lays an area rug in between the two. At the end of one, Savelle places a square table, topped with a lamp.

"Lamps are great for creating atmosphere," she says. As a finishing touch, she places a large vase on the floor beside the table; it's stuffed with ceiling-high decorative sticks to create scale. It looks sleek and sophisticated.

All of these items – and more – are often available for rent through home stagers. The cost for a basic rental furniture package from Home On Display starts at around \$100.

A consultation, which involves a detailed room-by-room analysis, starts at \$175. From here, you can either take Savelle's suggestions and do it yourself, or pay a minimum of \$360 for a Showcasing, where Savelle and her team swoop in to rework the look of your home as she did with mine.

Is it worth it? Savelle points to stats that indicate professionally staged homes sell faster (three-to-six times faster) and for more money.

"It's an up-front investment," she explains. "What you pay in professional staging costs less than your first price reduction."

We head back upstairs for a snack. In between bites of bran muffin, I ask: "So, what's our grade?" Based on her compliment of the wall unit, I'm thinking that I've bagged a B.

"Here's what's good: Your house is clean, de-cluttered and organized," Savelle begins. "But that's not enough to sell a house."

Uh oh.

"You have too many personal items like the fish. Overall, I'd give you a C," she pronounces.

Later that day I receive an email: "I wanted to mention that most people would be about a C," Savelle writes.

I'll take that as a compliment, even though I wasn't fishing for one.

*Saturday: See the difference a stager can make and how to live with it.*

# Small investment pays dividends

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**Sherryl Sobie**

Special to The Star

Staging your home for sale is all well and good. But living in a staged home is a whole other matter.

In Thursday's Homes & Condos section, I shared my experience undertaking my own DIY fluff job, which I thought was pretty darn good, until certified Canadian staging professional Tara Savelle, owner, Home On Display ([homeondisplay.ca](http://homeondisplay.ca)), breezed through and gently but firmly told me otherwise.



I asked Savelle to grade my efforts, thinking that my husband, Robert, and I represent the average homeowner: whatever we can do, you can do.

What grade did "we" – that's the collective "we" – receive? We got a C. Yes, boring, bland, blah. Not good, not horrible. Not anything, really.

So Savelle rolled up her sleeves and began to transform my home. She rearranged furniture to better suit the room, took down framed prints, put up new ones in the right size and scale.

She worked as much as possible with what we had but ended up bringing in some props including side tables, a throw rug, prints and pretty pots.

I'll never know how much money or how quickly our North York bungalow would have sold presented as a DIY home stage. But with Savelle's fine-tuning, our house was snatched up in one week, in a competing bid, at \$12,000 over asking.

According to our agent, Diane Speer, Broker of Record, Royal LePage Urban Realty Brokerage, our home's quick sale and healthy price tag was not typical for the neighbourhood.

"The 2007 stats indicate that it took an average of 26 days to sell comparable houses, and only one-quarter were over asking," Speer says. "Considering yours sold within the first week is a definite testament to staging and correct pricing."

That's the happily-ever-after ending. But if ever there was a "no pain, no gain" situation, this was it, because what happened between the completion of the home stage and the sale of the house was, in a word, agony.

As Savelle says, a staged home should strive to look like a model home: livable but not lived in. That means no dishes in sink (clean or dirty), no soiled laundry, no piles of washed clothes waiting to be folded and put away; counters, tables, floors and tubs must be sparkling; bed linens tightly tucked, hospital corners and all.

For those who like to conserve water, you can forget right now about saving up for a second flush. In fact, just leaving the lid in the upright position is considered a major staging infraction.

Add young kids into the equation, food and drink spillage, tons of toys, goopy arts and crafts, and all of a sudden, living in a staged home goes from agony to AGONY.

With our 2-year-old twins, Robert and I suffered double the work. On the up side, Callum and Quinn go to daycare during the week so the house was under control throughout the day. But come the weekend, when showings are most popular, we discovered that it's best to make alternate arrangements for naps and meals.

Here are some other tricks we learned:

Have you ever seen a model home with food-encrusted high chairs as part of the decor? Diapers and wipes in full view? No, neither have we. Remove kids' stuff from common areas. When not in use, roll high chairs into the garage (or a neighbour's backyard), shove bath toys into a storage bin in the closet, ditto the diapers and wipes.

Small toys, like trains and tracks, can be plopped into matching decorative boxes, while larger, sit-on toys can be neatly parked in kids' bedrooms. Display books on shelves.

Throw a load in the washer every morning, deposit it in the dryer before dinner, fold and put away after dinner. Get the kids to help if you can. Stay on top of this or you might resort to hiding smelly clothes under your bed.

Every morning, we stripped old mismatched sheets from our bed and replaced them with "show sheets," a brand new set, crisp with colours intact. Our kids' cribs were simply tidied up.

Read mail as soon as possible. Put in a desk drawer, but don't forget it's there. Same with newspapers.

Scrub all surfaces, including floors, countertops, tables, sinks, bathtub and shower. Vacuum carpet. Dust.

Eat out as much as possible to avoid constant cleaning (see above).

Add an extra half hour or more to your morning routine.

Another option is to rent, or if finances don't allow, consider staying with family or friends. Then again, if you want your loved ones to continue loving you, accept the fact that living in a staged home is short-term pain for long-term gain.