

Young leaders blaze new trail in senior living

Editorial by Cheryl Slavinsky January 6, 2017

As a wave of CEO retirements is about to hit the senior living industry, an influx of young leaders are ready to blaze their own trail—not only leading but creating new options for older adults. Many are women and other executives who didn't come from the traditional industries of their predecessors who often worked in finance, real estate and as attorneys.

Reneé R. Ramsey and John Roach founded Mustang Creek Estates 11 years ago on the simple idea that assisted living and memory care should be affordable and homelike. They've designed, constructed and manage five residential-style neighborhoods in Allen, Frisco and Keller, TX —each with six to seven, potentially 10 homes, including two secure memory care homes. Each home houses 10-16 residents, each with their own bedroom and bathroom. A residential kitchen is the heart of each home.

Ramsey, CEO and co-founder, has a bachelor's degree in physical therapy, a master's degree in education and managed large and small senior living communities for over 14 years. Roach has a master's degree in gerontology, served as vp of an insurance company, owned a retail/restaurant establishment and has extensive business management experience in senior living.

Renee Ramsey, CEO and Co-founder, Mustang Creek Estates

They met as co-workers for a large senior living organization and often commiserated that if they could do it their own way, they would do something different.

"A lot of people couldn't afford assisted living, and many wouldn't feel comfortable in a resort-style setting," Ramsey said. "Some people didn't grow up that way or weren't accustomed to ordering off a menu or going to a restaurant setting for three meals a day. Others were so big with long hallways, and people on the second floor had to take an elevator. Just the sheer distance would cause them to retreat and stay in their apartment and eventually decline."

Ramsey and Roach traveled the country for ideas, and a lot of people told them their concept wouldn't work. "We thought our idea was just different enough that it might work," said Ramsey. "We used every bit

of money we had, designed, built and owned our first property in Allen, TX. It filled in six months, 100 percent occupied. That's when we knew it would work.

"We're providers at heart. It's about making a difference. There is something out there for everyone. I think that should be our goal in senior living—to provide a wide variety of choices so everyone can find whatever is comfortable so they can live out their days."

Josh Crisp, vp of Dominion Senior Living, believes there will be a trend toward a lot of diversity in models of care in the future.

Josh Crisp, Vice President, Dominion Senior Living,

"In my opinion, the real challenge—regardless of what business model you choose, what sector you choose to go after—is going to be delivering it in the most affordable method possible," Crisp said. "The next generation is not necessarily preparing to live in a high-rent senior living community."

In 2014, Crisp, along with Mark Taylor and Peter Hall—all entrepreneurs in their early- to mid-30s from Knoxville, TN—formed Dominion Senior Living as a brand to develop, construct and manage a new generation of senior living communities.

Crisp's background is in senior living operations, including development of new communities, management and acquisition. In over 10 years of senior living operations, he has led the start-up efforts for multiple communities throughout the U.S. and helped communities and management teams realize their maximum potential.

Taylor has been a highly regarded real estate banker, both with his own firm and with multiple national banking institutions. Hall's entire career has been in the development and construction business.

"What really brought us together to do senior living specifically was probably just our faith and the desire to create a rich culture and to do something different in the industry," said Crisp.

Dominion Senior Living of Richmond Rendering

"We're a mission-driven for-profit company. When people hear about our mission—honoring God through service to seniors—they want to put us into a nonprofit category or ask what denomination we're attached to. We're non-denominational.

"Our belief and the Dominion philosophy is that we believe it's a Biblical principle that God gives us each

these life experiences, unique talents and abilities. He has given us a certain place in life to use these for his good. Each one of us as partners, we truly believe that, and that's what we're bringing to the table. And in doing so, we want to use that for the good of serving senior adults and through that action to honor God in everything we do."

Dominion has developed six different community types and layouts that are assisted living and memory care. They've developed free-standing memory care a few times and will continue to develop more concepts and diversify into independent living. They also will probably look at home- and community- based services in partnership with their assisted living communities.

At Woodland Pond, a continuing care retirement community (CCRC) with 177 apartment homes and 24 private cottages in New Paltz, NY, the leadership team is comprised of a majority of females. Though Michelle Gramoglia, president and CEO; Christi Battistoni, director of finance; Brigitte Blum, director of human resources and corporation compliance, and Sarah Hull, resident service director, did not predict they would be holding the positions they have today, they are proud to make a difference by leading with their hearts.

From left, Woodland Pond leaders: Christi Battistoni, director of finance; Michelle Gramoglia, president and CEO; Sarah Hull, resident service director; and Brigitte Blum, director of human resources

Once a CPA excelling at the world's largest accounting firm, Gramoglia began working at Woodland Pond at the age of 31 and is now the youngest CEO of a CCRC (male or female) in New York state.

"The stereotypes I face have more to do with age than gender, especially in an industry like senior living," Gramoglia said. "I am challenging the status quo, but I think more people have accepted it as time goes on. I'm not allowing myself to be hindered by my gender or my age."

In 2013, she became executive director, and in March 2016, president and CEO. Not finding her previous work as an auditor fulfilling, she took a huge risk joining a not-for-profit, but her life dramatically changed quality-wise. She realized her physical health and relationships had suffered when her life was not balanced and there was not enough time for exercise, mental down time, family and friends.

During the hiring process for both positions, Gramoglia made a commitment to the community's board that she could provide the work-life balance that her team—many mothers like herself—truly desired. As a result, she created and continues to support a shorter, more productive work day. She also sets goals and policies that support an environment in which there is continuous satisfaction in the workplace.

Cheryl Slavinsky

Contributing Writer

With more than 35 years' experience, Cheryl has managed national media relations as Director of Public Relations and 24/7 spokesperson for issues management and crisis communications at Rite Aid; Vice President of Public Relations and Advertising for L'EQUIP, a healthy appliances manufacturer; and Manager of Public Relations for Hershey Entertainment & Resorts. Cheryl spent the last six years working in the aging services industry and served as Senior Public Relations Strategist for Varsity, a senior living marketing and sales consulting agency focused on occupancy for retirement communities, CCRCs, assisted living facilities and more. She is now also a contributing writer for SeniorLivingNews.com and a member of the HealthTAC team.

