

Her Heart Is Where the Home Is

Allison Melahouris and Benchmark Senior Living create comfortable places where seniors can go to get stronger

BY KASEY CHEYDLEUR

When she sees the words “nursing home,” Allison Melahouris of Benchmark Senior Living focuses on one word: “home.” In fact, she has built a career working to confront negative stereotypes associated with nursing homes. Melahouris helps develop senior living communities that embody hominess and replace “nursing” with a more progressive and desirable focus on the continuum of care.

Melahouris found her passion for working with seniors at a young age. As a child, she helped care for all four of her grandparents, and those experiences had a profound impact on her career. In fact, Melahouris decided to study gerontology while attending Molloy College in Long Island, New York, and even took an internship in the activities department of a local nursing home. That internship led to her first job, and she worked as an activities assistant in a nursing home for several years. Although she liked the job and the people she worked with, the design of the facility was identical to thousands of nursing homes throughout the country. So when she got the chance to influence the design of contemporary senior living communities as senior vice president of quality resident services at Benchmark Senior Living, Melahouris deliberately set out to create an atmosphere where residents and associates can make meaningful connections in a comfortable setting.



Allison Melahouris
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Melahouris chose calm colors, intentionally cultivated visiting spaces, and added details such as fireplaces to make people feel welcome and at home. She also strives to be at the forefront of technology, which can include earning LEED certification for portions of a community or piloting fall-prevention technology developed by researchers at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. When she gives tours of those communities, Melahouris says that visitors sometimes ask where the nursing home is and can't believe it when she says they are standing in it.

"It creates a much more natural visiting space for folks and a nicer place to heal," she says. "It's nice to look at something beautiful and really fight that stigma that nursing homes are bad, scary places. We are trying to create places where

people go to get well, to get stronger so they can go home, not necessarily places where they will live long-term—until they need to."

A recent success for Melahouris's team was Benchmark Senior Living at The Commons in Lincoln, a continuing care retirement community not far from the organization's corporate office in Waltham, Massachusetts. The previous owner of the property had designed the project to encompass the full continuum of on-site healthcare—independent living, assisted living, memory care, and a skilled nursing unit. However, only the independent living component had been completed. To that end, when Benchmark acquired the property in 2013, Melahouris and her team followed through on a promise to the existing residents by presenting designs

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for assisted living, memory care, and skilled nursing units, and oversaw the construction. The result, Melahouris says, was the most satisfying project she has ever been involved in.

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From choosing the floor tiles to the treadmills to the doctors, Melahouris was involved in every step of the process. She met with multiple hospitals and executive directors and was instrumental in developing The Commons in Lincoln’s partnership with the Mount Auburn Hospital System—a division of Harvard Medical School’s teaching hospitals. At the heart of the partnership is The Commons’ medical director, Dr. John Anderson, chief of the division of geriatric medicine at Mount Auburn Hospital’s Quimby Center for Geriatric Care, and an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School. Under Anderson’s direction, the community is fulfilling its objective to offer that continuum of care, including on-site physical and occupational therapy. And although not every resident will use the services, Melahouris says that many find it reassuring that it is there if they need it.

Melahouris believes senior living and health system partnerships like this have a great deal of potential for the

future of the industry. They offer shared savings for patients and providers and, most importantly, provide a higher level of care with easy communication between both sides. With the baby boomer generation now at retirement age, Melahouris believes such partnerships are the way forward.

And looking forward is at the heart of what Benchmark is all about. With fifty-four communities located in seven northeastern states and an imminent expansion into an eighth, Benchmark is striving to design the future of senior living. But as the organization grows, Melahouris emphasizes, they never lose sight of the resident-family culture and the value of creating an atmosphere of warmth and personal connection. She credits Benchmark’s CEO, Tom Grape, who founded the company in 1997, as a key reason for the culture and the company’s success. In January, at the start of the company’s twentieth anniversary year, Grape reinforced that culture by introducing a new mission: “Elevate Human Connection.” Keeping its promises to residents, families, and associates alike is one of the many ways in which Benchmark achieves its mission.

Melahouris gets chills every time she walks through the doors of The Commons in Lincoln, a place where she helped keep important promises, and seeing the building reminds her why she does what she does. And when she sees residents using the equipment she picked out or meeting with doctors she helped recruit, Melahouris knows she is at home. **AHL**