



**Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which
the first was made...**

*From poem Rabbi Ben Ezra
by Robert Browning*

Communities for *the golden age*

by Larry Clark

IT'S NEVER EASY TO A NEW HOME.

Just ask Barbara Nelson, a former account manager from Seattle. When her husband passed away, she moved from the century-old house where they had lived for 48 years. She has piercing eyes and a strong voice, but it trembles slightly as she explains: "It was so traumatic. After the estate sale, I took five things out of that house and walked away. I felt like I lost my neighborhood."

Barbara made the decision, consulting with her family, to move to a senior living community. She visited a number of locations in the Seattle area and two and half years ago decided on Mountlake Terrace Plaza.

On a quiet street in the suburb north of Seattle, across from a lush park and library, the building could pass for any upscale complex. It's become a new home, with benefits, for Barbara, her friends Mary and Pam, and about 75 other seniors. The three women are joined by Rosita Sandell '11, the community's executive director, after some tasty jelly-filled German doughnuts made from scratch in the building's kitchen.

Big band jazz plays from the speakers as the group describes the busy life at Mountlake Terrace Plaza: art classes, volunteering, yoga, Wii bowling, music, movies, barbecues, trips to Leavenworth for Oktoberfest, river rafting, and eagle watching, coordinated by their energetic activities director.

For Barbara, the active life and the friendly reception drew her into the community—oh and, she adds with smile, that she doesn't have to cook and do dishes.

Welcome to the rapidly evolving future of senior life, a blend of skilled nursing, technology, architecture, and business management all wrapped together with resort-style hospitality.

Sandell, who has been with the MBK Senior Living property for a couple of years, says the community, like a growing number of senior living facilities, provides a lot of what the residents need in a home, while allowing them independence. "You can't always tell someone who's 91 years old and made all their own decisions that this is the way it's going to

be.” Dressed in a red blazer with black slacks and shirt, Sandell, a graduate of Washington State University’s hospitality management program with a gracious demeanor, could be a top restaurant or hotel manager. She in fact has that background, helping start up concessions and catering at the launch of both Safeco Field and Seahawks stadium exhibition center, then later working at the Washington State Convention Center. Sandell grew tired of training her own managers, so she decided to get further education, first at Highline Community College and then WSU.

She was on track to go into the hotel industry, but a particular class her last year opened her eyes to senior living. “The ‘a-ha’ moment came when we visited residents and staff at a Seattle facility, and I saw the untapped potential.”

That place and others are a far cry from the past drab image of a “nursing home” with listless seniors just sitting around. The Mountlake Terrace community and thousands more across the state and country help seniors create new homes and enjoy their golden years. But the communities are swelling with the tide of Baby Boomers entering their active later years, and the need is dire for people like Sandell.

THE SILVER WAVE

With around 60,000 people a day in the United States turning 65, and senior living communities filling up and popping up all over, the industry is starting to feel the crunch. An estimated 90 million seniors will live in the country by 2050, and while some will continue living in their homes and “age in place,” many more will seek out apartment-style facilities or more residential active adult communities.

It was the pressing need that brought senior living executive Jerry Meyer to WSU and to Nancy Swanger, director of the School of Hospitality Management in the Carson College of Business, with a request in 2010. Meyer was then president of Áegis Living, a rapidly-expanding senior living company based in Redmond.

Rosita Sandell with Mountlake Terrace Plaza resident Sandell with a Mountlake Terrace Plaza resident (Photo Matt Hagen) “When I first met with Jerry Meyer, he said to me, ‘We want people with a hospitality background and not just a skilled nursing background,’” says Swanger.

At first she was a skeptic. “My 88-year-old parents still live in their own home. In my mind all I could think about was nursing homes. What was the connection to hospitality?” she says.

Meyer explained that similar skills are needed when operating senior living communities as running hotels and resorts. Since over a million more managers will be needed in the senior living industry in the next decade, he thought WSU was in a prime position to train them.

Swanger, who’s also associate dean at the Carson College and the W. Terry Umbreit distinguished professor in the 85-year-old hospitality program, agreed after visiting a Seattle Áegis Living facility. “I was blown away. It was like walking into the lobby of a really nice hotel.”

Although she recognized that many of the operations—food and beverage, concierge, housekeeping, recreation—were similar to hotels

and resorts, her own restaurant background wasn’t sufficient to develop a senior living-specific class. So Meyer helped create the course for fall 2011, joined by presidents and executives from other Seattle-area senior living companies: Bill Pettit from Merrill Gardens, Granger Cobb from Emeritus, and Jason Childers from Leisure Care.

“Those leaders helped develop curriculum, found speakers, flew them over the mountains on their own dime. The very second class period, all four company presidents were sitting in Pullman, Washington, to teach a class,” says Swanger. “We had competitors around the table multiple times, and you would think it was Thanksgiving dinner. It wasn’t about being competitive. And they weren’t there to market their own companies.”

That first class of 12, which included Sandell, started a one-of-a-kind program, with field trips to Puget Sound senior facilities and classroom training on finances, marketing, and other aspects of assisted living, independent living, and memory care.

“It’s not that we’re the only people doing something in this area; however, we’re unique in that most programs are in gerontology, graduate programs, and real estate,” says Swanger. “In a hospitality school in a college of business, we’re definitely it.”

The class size has now grown to 45 students across WSU campuses statewide. It’s led by Scott Eckstein, clinical assistant professor of hospitality and senior living executive-in-residence at WSU Everett. Eckstein joined WSU in March 2016, taking over for Merrill Gardens president Bill Pettit. A veteran executive with extensive

experience in the senior living industry, Eckstein didn't start in the field. He began in real estate in his native New York City. When the market turned sour in the late 1980s, his research showed growth potential in building for an aging population. The company he worked for was leery of the prospect, since they didn't have expertise with senior properties. But Eckstein's professional insight in 1991 had an unexpected personal connection as well.

"At that time, my paternal grandfather was in a nursing home and my grandmother lived alone in her Bronx apartment. She would visit him seven days a week, nine to ten hours a day, and that was her life," he says.

Eckstein's voice lowers. "She ended up having an aortic aneurysm, alone on her kitchen floor where she laid for nine hours. I was very close to my grandma and that had a major impact on me. I thought if she was around people, somebody would have said, 'Why isn't Mary at breakfast?' It is very possible she could have survived."

He decided to take a new career path, and began working in senior living development and then senior living operations. His work expanded in the United States, as well as Spain, Mexico, and Asia. He has worked for ARV (now Atria), Sunrise, and Aegis Living, followed by a stint with Emeritus (now Brookdale).

Now, as he teaches the ins and outs of this hybrid business of hospitality, healthcare, real estate, and finance, Eckstein shows students that modern senior living is not what they expect. "Senior living is not seen as sexy," he says, "A lot of the students want

to go into hotel business. They want to run the Hilton in Waikiki." When they visit some senior living communities, though, it opens their eyes to the resort-like atmosphere of many of them.

Eckstein notes that many millennial students don't want just a job, either. They want to make a social impact while making a good living.

"Imagine making a difference in the lives of grandpa and grandma and their families. We talk about doing well by doing good," he says.

THE OLD AND NEW COMMUNITIES

The idea of "retiring," especially to warmer climes, certainly isn't a novel idea. Thomas Edison had one of his houses in New Jersey dismantled in the 1890s and moved to Jacksonville, Florida, where he would winter and finally live permanently. He was soon joined by Henry Ford and his wife, and other wealthy families.

Eventually middle class seniors in the 1920s started heading south with their "tin Lizzies" pulling mobile homes to Florida for the winter. Hotels in Sarasota, St. Petersburg, Miami, and other cities also began catering to aging semi-permanent clients, the "Snowbirds."

The grand social experiment in age-restricted communities really took off around 1960 with Del Webb's Sun City in Arizona. The entrepreneur founded a large community featuring mostly smaller homes, which then expanded to similar communities in Florida and California. Webb's Sun City properties drew the middle class, with their pensions and their dreams of an "active retirement"

and country club lifestyles. They were often built around golf courses and maintained a strict 55+ policy for residents.

One of Webb's competitors, Ross Cortese, opened Leisure World communities in Laguna Hills, Seal Beach, and other California locations. Cortese changed the language from "retirement" to "active adult," with a concentration on recreational activities. The small, one-story homes were also more geared toward assisting seniors' changing health needs, such as bars by the tubs in bathrooms.

Fifty years later many senior living communities look quite a bit different. Down I-405 from Mountlake Terrace, just blocks from downtown shops, Aegis Living Bellevue also sits on a peaceful street across from a verdant park. Past the flowers and manicured landscaping, the busy lobby hosts an exercise class. A baby grand piano awaits a player under tall ceilings with chandeliers. It has the feel of a fine hotel, and one can see why WSU students like Sandell were impressed when they visited.

The manager, Patrick Mazzuca, greets residents by name as he leads a tour of the building, accompanied by his two vivacious goldendoodle dogs. Beyond a range of amenities, from a movie theater to gyms, beauty salon, a library, and more, Mazzuca says the most important thing is residents' happiness as they move in.

"Nobody says, 'I can't wait to move into senior living.' It's our job as staff to be compassionate and understanding, and to also help the families, who may feel some guilt," he says.

One common feature with many senior living communities, like Áegis Living, is the continuum of care. The residents are able to move from independent apartments to assisted living, memory care if they develop Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia, or other higher care needs.

In the memory care area, residents plant yellow flowers on a rolling cart. They're surrounded by nostalgic reminders: an alcove with vintage Coca-Cola signs, a back garden with a '50s-era car and a Sinclair gas pump, photos of their families. Mazzuca says it's all designed to ease residents, and help them feel safe.

Across the state, a similar experience awaits over 350 seniors at the Touchmark on Spokane's South Hill. Ken Alexander '94 manages the skilled nursing and assisted living area there, using his 14 years of industry experience. Beginning at an expansive lobby, he leads the way past apartments and through the dining area to recreation and art rooms. Large boards show the numerous daily activities. Nursing and memory care are in separate wings.

"We do a lot of transitions. As people age in place in the independent cottages and then might need extra help, they can move to nursing or memory care," says Alexander.

Apartment facilities like Touchmark and Áegis Living aren't the only model. Panorama, a 140-acre community in Lacey with 850 residences, comes from the same pedigree as Sun City. It was built 54 years ago as a "retirement" community, with 11 neighborhoods that hold single-family homes,

duplexes, and apartments. It also has an assisted living and care facility on the premises.

Howard Burton, Panorama's director of marketing, drives slowly through the winding streets, past the new pollinator garden (installed with help from WSU Extension), and to a recreation complex tucked amid the homes.

"It's changed. It has become more about lifestyle enrichment," says Burton, who's worked at Panorama for 24 years. He walks past exercise rooms and a swimming pool. "We have 108 hobby and interest groups, including a writer's group that's been around for 27 years."

At Panorama's 206-seat theater, where residents perform plays and hold film festivals, Burton introduces Katherine Billings, the effusive arts director. "We have an intelligent, engaged group that writes, directs, and acts in plays," she says.

"Some people may have felt invisible as they grew older," she continues. "No longer. They move to a community like this and they can learn and do things they've always wanted to do."

Burton notes that Panorama, too, has a long waiting list and a need for new staff. "The challenge is labor, in nursing and a lot of other areas. It's truly satisfying, though, and people really care what you do," he says.

Age-restricted and senior communities have not escaped criticism. Some claim they further fragment society by not engaging seniors but hiding them away, which can reinforce stigma around aging.

Another problem is financing. People are living longer, and wealth

inequities can put many senior living communities out of reach. Eckstein points out that labor is still 50–60 percent of the cost in senior living, no matter what people pay. Help may come from new business models, he says, or technology may help create efficiencies, like robots tending the growing population of seniors in Japan.

"We still need to figure out the middle market," he says, referring to financing for people with less money saved for their later years. "Maybe someone in one of my WSU classes will work that out."

Tens of millions of seniors, though, have already made new homes in age-restricted communities, and companies continue to evolve to serve their needs. For example, they've opened up affinity communities, such as ones for Chinese language speakers, religious affiliations, military veterans, and lesbian and gay seniors.

DOING WELL WHILE DOING GOOD

As the tens of thousands of senior communities expand and adapt, WSU's program also continues to grow. A new interdisciplinary senior living degree is in the works, with not only hospitality business operations, but also nursing, technology, and psychology, to reflect how many communities like Áegis Living, Touchmark, and Panorama serve a broad range of seniors' needs.

After starting the business class, Swanger began conversations with other faculty around WSU who had interest in the field of aging and senior living: Maureen Schmitter-Edgecombe in psychology, Laura Hill and Cory Bolkan in human development, Diane Cook in electrical engineering, and Catherine

Van Son and Shelly Fritz at WSU Vancouver's nursing department, to name a few. Swanger invited them over for lunch and the conversation led to the idea of a holistic degree and a research institute. The Granger Cobb Institute for Senior Living will focus on three dimensions: workforce development, collaborative management and sponsored research, and undergraduate education. It would be named for one of the founding fathers of the WSU senior living program and a pioneer of the industry who died of cancer in 2015 at age 55. Some of that research includes smart home technology, like that being tested by Fritz at Touchmark in Spokane.

WSU has also started a noncredit online certificate program that will allow people to train in senior living management over the course of a year. "The industry doesn't have the supply of people to even meet the demand they have currently to run their communities," says Swanger, and this certificate can help get people up to speed.

That means not just training, but generating interest. "We need to let students know this is a career opportunity. It's a lot like a hotel, except the people check in and stay longer, and they might be, on average, older," says Swanger. "If you want to be the manager of a hotel property, it can take 15 to 20 years or more to work into that position. Rosita was running her own building in a year."

The program still brings in industry insiders for classes, such as Patrick Dooley, chief operating officer of Vancouver-based Milestone Retirement Communities, the eighth largest privately managed assisted living company in the country.

Through classroom and online learning, and experiential field trips, the school continues to show students that senior housing is not what it used to be. As one example, for their final project, Eckstein asked hospitality students to write a group research paper discussing what future products and terminology Baby Boomers envision will be part of the senior living environment. Even that lexicon is changing.

"In all likelihood, we won't be using the term 'senior' as an industry," Eckstein says. "Boomers do not like the terms 'senior,' 'senior housing,' or even 'senior care.' We are alerting students early on to this upcoming change in the conversation to help them develop a different mindset toward 'retirement' communities, though even the term 'retirement' will also be changing as we move forward. The definition of retirement is to cease to work, withdraw, or stop. That is not how the Baby Boomers will be doing it!"

A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Whether it's called "retirement" or "active adult," back at Mountlake Terrace Plaza, Barbara, Mary, and Pat appreciate their life. They don't like the term "nursing home" or even assisted living, but they do like the camaraderie.

That still doesn't make it easy to call it home.

"At times, I feel I could have stayed at my house. Then I take a deep breath and say, 'No, I couldn't.' It was a very old house and needed a lot of attention. It was not a place to live alone," says Barbara.

The family environment, say the

three residents, is what makes it a true community.

"Everyone watches out for each other," agrees Sandell, and that makes it feel safer and more comforting. Sandell greets other residents with a smile and a friendly word as she navigates the remodeling work in the building. She turns pensive as she thinks about how she has benefited, as well.

"Personally it's even helped me with my grandparents," she says. "It's also helped me rethink how I talk to people. How do I want to be treated when I get older? Do I want to be taken seriously, or will I just be looked at as a person with gray hair who nobody listens to?"

Sandell says the emotional rewards certainly add satisfaction to the work. "There's a lot of empathy involved. People bring their heart to it."

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