

NOT A DESK JOB

Kathy Miller found her career by accident.

Back in 1979, Miller was 23 years old and had some bookkeeping experience. Living in Victoria, Texas, she was job-hunting when someone told her about a bookkeeping job. She was interested – until she learned that the job was in a nursing home.

“I didn’t want to work in a nursing home,” Miller says. Reluctant as she was, she took the job. And then something surprising happened. “I loved working there,” she says.

She quickly immersed herself in the business of running a nursing home. Within three years, Miller was a licensed administrator, and she was running the facility. “I was so young, people would walk up to me and ask to see the administrator. They couldn’t believe someone so young would be in charge of a nursing home.”

Today, Miller is the administrator of the Chandler Estate in Laurel Heights. Part of Morningside Ministries, the Chandler Estate is in one of San Antonio’s most historic neighborhoods and is a combined independent living, assisted living, nursing home and senior center.

“I can’t believe I didn’t want to take that job,” Miller says of that

first experience. What surprised her most, she says, was discovering that it wasn’t a sterile facility where old people go to wither and die. “I learned that it’s a community.”

Here come the Boomers
The youngest Baby Boomers turn 60 this year. The abundant, post World War II offspring of the Greatest Generation have defined American lifestyle statistics with their every move. They are the Woodstock Generation, morphing from heady teens with flowers in their hair to pinstriped corporate movers and shakers in the last decades of the 20th Century.

They are affluent, healthy and active. They expect a rich quality of life. And, as they near what we used to think of as “retirement

Women bring compassion and a sense of community to senior living

age,” there’s no sign that they’re slowing down. In fact, they’re expected to live longer than anybody has ever lived before.

Today, there are 35 million Americans age 65 and older. That number is expected to double over the next 30 years to 70 million, making older Americans the largest population segment in the country.

So, Baby Boomers are still defining American lifestyle, right down to the last golf cart, recreational vehicle and sea cruise. Before fading from the statistical radar, they’ll re-define at least one more thing: The way older Americans live and the role of senior living communities and care facilities.

Senior living communities and care facilities will grow right along with the baby boomers' surge to the senior ranks, making it a key industry deep into the 21st Century. It's true, Americans might be living longer, and, although we put on a good show, we are no less vulnerable to the aging process and the health issues that accompany getting older.

A good fit for seniors

"Baby Boomers are interested in quality leisure time," says Sandra Dietz, general manager of the Inn at Los Patios, an independent and assisted living community. "We have to keep coming up with new ways to provide that "something extra." The challenge, Dietz admits, is in doing that and keeping her facility's services affordable for residents.

Assisted living is an option that barely existed 10 years ago. Somewhere between living independently and needing constant care, many residents in assisted living communities need help with just a handful of life's necessities.

"Just a few years ago, assisted living was still non-traditional, more like a recreational facility," explains Ida Pichon Devane, the executive director of Kingsley Place at Oakwell Farms. A Registered Nurse who spent many years in rehabilitative care, she made the career shift to elder care 10 years ago.

Although Devane is responsible for the day-to-day operation of Kingsley Place, she only allows herself a short amount of desk time at the beginning and end of each day. The rest of her time is devoted to face-to-face contact

with residents, staff and family members.

She shifts gears quickly from the more social aspects of her job to the more administrative. Devane has to understand the balance sheet and the complexities of the ever-changing regulatory environment, not to mention the moving target of Medicaid and Medicare reimbursements.

Devane is quick to point out that many Kingsley Place residents lead very active, independent lives. "They're still in control," she says. "Assisted living fits well with the way seniors live." She describes assisted living

as a holistic approach to meeting the needs of older people. "The goal is that our residents are independent for as long as possible," she says.

Assisted living residents live in private apartments that they furnish themselves. Think of it as an exclusive, age-restricted apartment complex or condo community that offers amenities and activities geared toward older people, from yoga and Tai Chi classes to therapeutic treatments and transportation services, with a dash of help thrown in for good measure. Many offer packages that include housekeeping and linen services and meals in a restaurant-style setting.

Home is where you live

Pam Wasieleski also came to elder care through her background in nursing. As the general manager of Hearthstone at Windcrest – another assisted living community

– she strives to create a home-like atmosphere. "Residents decide how much assistance they want, and they lead their own lives," she says.

Wasieleski sees the shift to assisted living as essential. "Before assisted living came along, as people got older, they stayed in their own homes for as long as they could, sold, and either moved in with family members or went straight to the nursing home." The only in-between options were likely to be

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*Pam Wasieleski, General Manager
Hearthstone at Windcrest*

unlicensed "boarding homes," many of which turned out to be unsatisfactory environments.

Service and fun

Michelle Houriet Brosh also came to her job through a string of unexpected events. After years as a successful property manager in Houston, she returned to her native San Antonio to care for her grandparents and take classes toward a Physical Therapy degree. During that time, she built a deeper relationship with her grandparents. Later, she accepted a marketing position for a senior community. "I was hooked," she says. "I loved the industry." She wanted more and she got it when Independence Hill opened in San Antonio in 2001.

Independence Hill is one of several "hybrid" communities, integrating independent living, assisted living and 55+ living in

one campus in North Central San Antonio.

At 34, Brosh's youthful enthusiasm has left its mark. She has adopted a lifestyle metaphor for residents, likening the atmosphere and activities to those one finds on a cruise ship. "We offer restaurant-style dining, with a variety of foods, an endless activity calendar with events like concerts, parties and vacation getaways for residents."

Brosh's goal is to offer all the activities people enjoy doing in real life: Arts, theatre, fitness, learning, travel, shopping. "The trend today is to provide service and a fun environment."

She's quick to address the notion that the importance once placed on continuing to live "at home" is quickly changing for a lot of people. "Keeping a house does not equal independence," Brosh says. In fact, she suggests that trying to maintain that standard can be counterproductive. "When I was caring for my grandparents, I truly believed I was the one who would care for them – that being able to spend the rest of their lives in their home was the best way for them to live their golden years." But, Brosh quickly realized how long the days could be for them, isolated from friends, and how difficult it was for her grandparents to rely on her, and on each other.

Like other women in this industry, Brosh uses her personal experience caring for family members to help make life more enjoyable for her residents. "It is so nice to chat with friends over lunch...to give a birthday card to a neighbor, to be surprised by balloons at your door."

The long and winding road

Nursing homes, once regarded as a generally undesirable place to spend one's last days, are undergoing a transformation, perhaps, in part, because of the need to shed that perception, but also because residents and their families have come to expect more and the facilities are responding.

Darlene Evans and her husband are the owners of Autumn Winds Retirement Lodge. One of a declining number of nursing facilities that are still privately owned, Evans has cultivated the atmosphere of a comfy forest retreat set back at the end of a long, winding road lined with large oak trees. Evans started working at the facility back in 1977, when, new college degree in public health education in hand, she was considered overqualified for work in a nursing home. She accepted a job there as activity director, handing out games and scheduling group events. Before long, she went back to school to get her administrator's license. In the early 1990s, the owner approached her about buying Autumn Winds.

Evans recalls those early days warmly. "Sometimes that first job is the one I wish I could go back to," she jokes.

Evans admits the challenge of the nursing home stigma, but she's determined to change people's minds.

Like the others, Evans spends a lot of time talking with residents, checking in with their family members and connecting with employees and volunteers. Evans is proud of her low staff turnover; a sensitive issue for most in this

industry. "We are blessed with our volunteers," she says. Each one offers another smile, another handshake. Some of our volunteers have been coming for 30 years."

Evans makes sure that residents are involved in activities that bring people together. "Human beings need to be needed," she explains. She enlists some of the residents to help with tasks and to assist other residents. "This is a true community," she says. Like a mother, she makes sure that mealtime is that time of day where people come together. In a place where it could be easy to retreat and avoid socializing, Evans doesn't give residents the chance. "It's so important to connect with other people. Eating together really helps define the day."

In fact, Evans counts her motherly traits as a key skill she brings to her job. "It's the caring and nurturing, the softer side," she says.

Dietz agrees. "I'm always surprised how little it takes to make people feel loved and cared for. Consequently, they're happy with their circumstances in life. We give a lot of hugs in a day," she says. She counts among her greatest inspirations "people who choose to age gracefully, with dignity and concern for others."

By the book

A big difference between the care facilities of the past and present is the careful dance that facility administrators must perform with policy makers – the legislative bodies and regulatory agencies that define care standards. "Back in the old days, we measured using emotional data," says Evans. But instinct and intuition

Seven smart senior decisions

Thinking about senior living choices, but don't know where to start? Here's some advice from the experts:

1. Plan early. Long-term care insurance is a wise investment. But, if affordability is an issue, contact an elder law attorney who can advise on ways to use your funds to your advantage.
2. Make a move before you need to. Take the burden and guilt off of your children and suggest the move yourself. Don't wait for a crisis.
3. Educate yourself of the different types of facilities. Nursing homes, assisted living, independent living; each offers different levels of care. And within assisted living, there are two models, defined by the level of assistance residents need.
4. Don't base your decision on looks or price. The most beautiful building may not be well managed and the lowest price may not be the best deal.
5. Compare apples to apples. Know what you need to make an accurate comparison. Most assisted living communities have tiered pricing, with packages that offer a variety of amenities. Daily housekeeping may be included in the base price at one facility but may cost extra at another. Are stairs a problem? If so, look for a single-story facility. It's true, there are elevators, but consider worst-case scenarios: Could you get out quickly in a fire if you couldn't use an elevator?
6. Trust your intuition. When you walk into a facility, look around. Are people smiling? Do employees know residents by name? What's the condition of the facility? How you feel while you're visiting should tell you a lot, so listen to yourself. Have a meal, participate in an activity and visit with staff and residents. Also, listen carefully to the administrator or general manager. Her philosophy is likely carried throughout the facility.
7. Ask to see state inspections. Facilities are required to make them available for review. Look for problems that have repeated themselves over multiple inspections. If there are deficiencies, ask for an explanation.

don't stand up to government scrutiny. Hard numbers do. So, like everyone else in this business, Evans and her staff must commit a lot of time and effort to recording the details of residents' care. "There are so many external forces now that want to measure how we're doing," she says. "It has made the industry more accountable, but it's time consuming."

Evans sees her role as advocate for the industry as a necessity, especially in this age of documentation and regulation. "You can't complain unless you want to be part of the solution," she says. She is the president of the Texas Health Care Association and works closely with legislators and regulatory agencies to ensure that the need for information and what's good for residents stays in balance.

Even in an increasingly competitive industry, Brosh points out that forming good relationships with others in jobs similar to hers brings rewards. "Welcome and work with your competitors," she advises. "They will be your Number One fan, and you can't ask for a better referral."

This beautiful life

"This has been an amazing career," Brosh says. "It is a great career choice for anyone with strength, energy, compassion and patience, and who can change hats when the need arises."

Brosh admits that the job has its tough moments. "Illness and death happen in this work," she says frankly. "This is the reality, but I would not change the pain of these circumstances with the

joy we bring into each other's lives."

She's learned to take on roles that are common for women in similar jobs. "I have to be a counselor or a family mediator. Sometimes I'm the closest thing to family a resident has." But she says the rewards are worth it. "I'm seeing people who arrived here kicking and screaming admit that this was

the best move they could have made," she says.

"Sometimes, it hurts to live this beautiful life...but it's worth every tear because the joy of what I do is overwhelming."

Finding laughter

Evans says she doesn't need to look any further than her nursing home residents to see the humor in every day life. "I love seeing a

90-year old woman flirt with a good-looking man," she says. "We pigeon-hole people, we think old people shouldn't behave that way, but it's great to see our residents alive and happy."

"People have this perception of nursing homes. It's a place they don't want to go," says Miller. But, she adds, "They're really full of surprises and full of life."

Job security

If you're looking for a job in a growing industry, elder care is about as close to a sure thing as you'll find in the coming decades.

Visit facilities. Better yet, get a job – any job. "If you like working with the elderly, there are jobs at all levels. Get one and see how you like it," says Morningside Ministries' Kathy Miller.

Understand the range of senior living options, and where your interests and abilities fit. From exclusive 55+ communities to independent living, assisted living and skilled nursing facilities, each

has a different set of administrative requirements and the levels of care and activities vary.

Degrees and certifications

While you can work in a senior care facility without any specific degree or certification, there are several common professional paths:

- Registered Nurse, Licensed Vocational Nurse or Licensed Practical Nurse
- Physical/Occupational Therapy
- Public Health Administration Licensed Administrator
- Real estate property management