

A Place to Call Home

By Rosa Jimenez

Twenty years ago, 1963 business graduate Wendell White transitioned from operating nursing homes to developing one of the first senior housing communities in the Northwest where residents could live in a more home-like setting. Through Generations, the company he and his family founded, White is developing communities where seniors can receive the care they need in their own environment and also enjoy amenities for their mental and physical wellbeing. Over the past 12 years, the company has developed 25 retirement facilities and offers housing options of independent living, rehabilitation, assisted living, and home care services. Currently, the company operates 1100 units with an annual revenue of \$35 million. In recent years, Wendell and his wife, Betsy (Wagner) att., have been joined in the business by two other alumni, their son, Rob, a 1991 graduate, and daughter-in-law, Jennifer, a 1989 graduate.

How did you begin your career in this field?

My mother was a single mom, so I spent most of my time with my grandparents. In 1943, when I was 5 years old, they opened a nursing home for six people in Grants Pass, Ore. We lived in a small, attached apartment so I spent much of my time with the patients in the nursing home. I had wheelchair races in the hallways, and patients helped me with my homework. A man named Rudy helped me learn my ABCs. My sister-in-law was the cook, so I could always go into the kitchen at any time and ask for something to eat. I was treated like a little king. It was a wonderful experience to grow up in this unusual environment.

Did you work there when you were older?

I always had chores to do; I worked in the garden, washed sidewalks, washed dishes, and mowed the lawn. I worked as administrator for my grandparents for two years after college. By that time the

nursing home had grown to have 100 residents. Over the years, my grandfather, who was a carpenter, had added on to the building several times. When they decided to sell, they helped Betsy [my wife] and me buy a nursing home in Milton-Freewater. We operated Elzora Manor for 10 years until we followed opportunities in Portland.

How did your perspective about nursing care evolve as the years passed?

I always felt there had to be a better way. Traditionally, many of the older people who needed help with their activities of daily living went to a nursing home. Many of these people didn't need to be in a heavily medical environment. They could have a more home-like seating rather than an institutional environment. So we built a facility where everyone had their own apartment and brought their own furniture. They had their own space and their own doorbell so that they

had their privacy. We would give people more choices in what they would eat, when they got up, when they bathed, and all the things we do at home.



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Where were you first able to provide this home-like atmosphere?

We opened our first community—Town Center Village—in Clackamas [Ore.] in 1985. In 1987 we opened an assisted living facility at the same site, which had apartment-style living and also gave nursing care. At that time there were no other facilities in the state that offered this type of housing. Two years later we added independent apartments. We tried to create a resort-like setting with a spa, fitness center, church, bank, theater, and putting green.

Why did you believe it is important to give people choices?

It was my observation that as people age, they lose their independence, their privacy, their power to make choices. It is our goal to maintain the dignity of each of our residents, respect their privacy, and maintain their power to choose.

How did you begin your collaboration with Adventist Health?

Because we had been successful with Town Center Village, Adventist Health talked with us about developing a housing community on a parcel of land next to the hospital in Portland. We opened our apartments at CherryWood Village in 1999 and opened the assisted living facility one year later.

Wendell White and his family, including son Rob, opened Wheatland Village, a senior housing community in Walla Walla, in 2004. The community offers a fitness center, swimming pool, a church, and other amenities.

What is your most recent project? Any other projects on the horizon?

Adventist Health approached us about building a community next to Walla Walla General Hospital. We opened Wheatland Village two years ago. It has both apartment units and an assisted living facility. This fall we'll break ground for a housing community next to Paradise Valley Hospital in San Diego. It will have 500 units—our largest community yet.

It also sounds as if the White family is carrying on the tradition of working together.

Yes, we are. Betsy is on our board and is involved in an advisory capacity. My daughter, Melody [Gabriel], oversees marketing. She studied geriatric psychology at Pacific Union College and tells me she chose this major so she could understand her dad. Her husband, Chip, is in charge of development and construction.

And your son?

Rob is in charge of the management of our communities. Rob has a physical education background. He worked in fitness centers after college and first came into the business running the fitness center at one of our communities. Then he realized it might not be a bad idea to go into management. His wife, Jennifer, is our treasurer. She began her career in banking and joined the business in 1995.

In 1999, your company was voted Oregon Family Business of the Year by the School of Business at Oregon State University. What has made your family business successful?

What I've tried to do is have each person responsible for separate areas. We try not to interfere in each other's area of responsibility. We have a family meeting at least once a month, or more

often if necessary. The six of us get together to go over finances and make major decisions. Even though it can be difficult, I know I need to go along with the decision even if at times I don't agree with it. Also, once a year, we get away to do long-range planning. So far what we're doing has worked.

Do you have any plans to retire?

I'm never going to retire. With the day-to-day operation of the company in other hands, I now have the opportunity to do just what I want to do. Right now it's the interior design for our communities. In the past, I would hire someone to do this, but I always ended up picking out colors and pieces myself. Now, I'm having a great time doing it.

As you look back on your personal and professional life, what gives you the greatest pride?

That's easy. Having my kids in the business. We never asked them to or pushed them. Coming into the business is something they decided on their own. My children are the fourth generation of my family to be involved in senior housing. And we'll see with the rest of the family. When my grandson's school had a Career Day, he was asked what he wanted to be when he grew up. He said "a businessman like my grandpa." I get emotional about it because it means so much to me. ■

