

Bickford Senior Living: Serving a higher purpose and a greater calling

When all is said and done, succeeding in senior living ultimately comes down to resident, family and caregiver enrichment, embodied in respect, fulfillment and gratification.

These are the precepts that Bickford Senior Living has unwaveringly followed over the course of 27 years with 65 communities in 11 states.

Joe Eby, along with his father Don, mother Judie, and two brothers Andy and Mike, founded the family owned and operated business with its first 37-apartment community in Olathe, KS, where Bickford is headquartered today.

Bickford has grown primarily through development. A typical community has 65 apartments and is in a secondary market. Fill-up is generally accomplished within a year. It takes a regional approach

by targeting states where at least six to eight locations are viable.

Eby recounted during the 2019 Rising Leaders Fall Forum how his family got its start in senior living after the family matriarch, his grandmother Mary Bickford, struggled with Alzheimer's disease.

"This was when assisted living really didn't even exist," he recalled. "Paul Klaassen started doing it on the East Coast with Sunrise, and Keren Brown-Wilson was doing it on the West Coast with Assisted Living Concepts, but assisted living wasn't much of a factor.

"A doctor friend of ours said, 'I'd like to introduce you to these guys in



Joe Eby, Bickford Senior Living

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Kansas that are doing this thing called assisted living,' and it was Tim Buchanan and Steven Vick, who built their first Sterling House in Augusta, KS, which was a small 28-unit building.

"So mom and dad went to see these guys, and they introduced them to the concept of assisted living. My mom said this is this is exactly what I need for my mother, but there was nothing like that around us. My dad took everything he had, which wasn't a whole lot, and put it all into our first building. He got turned down 24 times by different lenders before he could build the first one. My mom was the marketing person," Eby remarked.

He explained how his mother, along with Grandma Bickford who was now a resident, would conduct marketing tours.

"My mom's closing statement to any prospect was, 'I'd be so honored to care for your family the same way I care for mine.' And she filled the building and still holds the record of 90 days with the new concept of assisted living in Olathe, KS. It's just one mile from our office."

Moving beyond Olathe, KS, Bickford began to grow and open new communities. But about 10 years after the family entered the senior living business, Eby's father was diagnosed with cancer.

"I was in college and working for the business doing property management, like mowing the lawns. But I really didn't understand assisted living until my dad had to deal with cancer. At the end of his life, he had been in the hospital for two months, and the



hospital came to us and said he had to be discharged,” Eby said.

Following a brief stay in a nursing home rehab unit, Don Eby told his son he wanted to return home, where Bickford caregivers were available around the clock.

“What I saw during that time was the bond that was formed between my dad and those caregivers. I started out in the business in property management and maintenance. I did development and construction. I got into operations, but without really understanding how important this business is to the families we serve. But when I saw my dad laying in the most vulnerable state of his life, having to rely on somebody to completely take care of him, you think about your life. That’s when I realized what we do as a business.

And there are so many things about this business that are great,” he stressed.

The bond that grew between Don Eby and his caregivers during his final days is at the heart of Bickford’s culture and operating philosophy. That connection and commitment are captured in the company’s caregiver manifesto:

“There is no higher calling, no greater purpose than that of a caregiver. Somehow, we’ve come to believe that caregiving is just for some of us and not all of us. Yet at our core, we are all made to love, to connect, to extend ourselves in service of others. The question is... do we have the will to love, to do what it takes, to risk ourselves in caring, even when the burden is great? In times of happiness, in times of sadness — we are that caregiver. Whatever it takes.”

Eby commented that “the real estate part of our business is relatively easy, but the ongoing operations are extremely difficult.

“We do a customer satisfaction survey across all of our residents. We only measure perfect scores. Almost 50 percent of our people gave us a perfect score, but we want that to be better,” he continued. “Ninety-eight percent of them are going to give you an A on a grading scale, but 50 percent of our customers gave us an A+. That connection with our residents and the families drives us.”

Bickford’s employee orientation and training are grounded in learnings from the Disney Institute, with a special emphasis on culture. Whether it applies to direct care staff, division managers or the finance



department, the company's overarching philosophy is a constant inspiration.

"Every shift across our company, even in our corporate office which we call Branch Support, goes through training and culture. Every day at a certain time we'll do a stand-up meeting. For our corporate office, for example, we'll talk about medication management. People in accounting can tell you exactly how we do medication management, because it's part of our culture. We train every day, on every shift."

Interacting with and responding to certain personality types is critical to Bickford's customer satisfaction success. Whether someone has a very difficult personality or is warm and outgoing, training is designed

to elevate communication and maintain positive relationships.

"We hire more for attitude, and we'll train for skills," Eby reported.

"We prefer somebody that has the whatever-it-takes attitude. It doesn't matter what the resident is asking, they're going to do it, because they want to make them happy.

"During the on-boarding process, normally somebody would come in and spend a few hours with somebody and then they would be put on the floor to work. But we have almost a month of training before we fully release them to work on the floor. We have 16 different building blocks they have to go through from culture to service. We review those with them on a frequent basis throughout the year to

“ We train every day, on every shift. ”



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see how they're doing with their attitude and how they're interacting with the others on the team.

"When we do our customer satisfaction surveys, we also do employee satisfaction surveys at the same time. When those come back, our teams go into town hall meetings. We say this is your feedback about us, and these are the things that we're going to work on that are most important to you. We'll have an open dialogue about it, and then we're going to report back to you. We, as a company, are checking on that every month and sending results out to make sure we're actually delivering on that," he said.

Bickford faces the same recruiting and labor challenges that have become so prevalent during the last several years. Turnover has averaged around 50 percent recently compared to 40 percent a couple years ago, while retention stands at about 70 percent after slipping from approximately 80 percent.

"We're working within leadership development and training to treat staffing as part of marketing, versus focusing only on marketing and then trying to do the staffing. We're working with the same systems in marketing and in staffing. What's our next scheduled activity? Where do we stand with A lead, B lead



and C lead? How do we create those same levels of expectations, consistencies and rhythms in recruiting? We're seeing huge results in that," he reported..

"We've had to go outside of the industry for people recently. We have interview questions and personality types. How do you rate this person's personality, and how do grade this person's skills? We use prompting questions to learn more about them," he explained.

Spiritual and chaplain services have long been integral to Bickford's culture. This is a

significant commitment within the annual operating budget, with three part-time chaplains at each of the 65 communities.

"They meet with all of our residents and caregivers," Eby said. "They also meet with all of our caregivers' families, so when they have issues the chaplains are there to help. We've done funerals and weddings. Families want our chaplains to do the funeral, because we're the ones that were there with them, holding their hand as they passed away." ■

“ We're working with the same marketing and staffing systems. ”