

## **OUR FEATURED ORGANIZATION: ACTS RETIREMENT-LIFE COMMUNITIES**

### **A Culture of Loving-Kindness**

Peace of mind, security, fulfillment—for most of us, these are qualities to which we aspire, and they are never more treasured than in the “golden years” of our lives. At ACTS Retirement-Life Communities (ACTS)—the largest not-for-profit owner, operator, and developer of continuing care retirement communities in the United States—all of these riches that we hold so dear on earth are possible through a culture of “loving-kindness.”

From Pennsylvania to Florida, the ACTS organization has transformed the way that seniors were once cared for in our country. Jerry Grant, President and COO, told Bill, “I think of the ACTS organization and the way it was founded as a perfect example of The Disney Way and Walt Disney’s vision of Dream, Believe, Dare, Do.”

When ACTS was founded in the early 1970s, the concepts of “respect” and “dignity” were not values that most senior living establishments espoused in regards to caring for the elderly. But in a suburban Philadelphia church, a pastor and his inspired congregation led the charge to create a new model for senior care. Out of the backyard of the church—literally on an adjacent parcel—the pastor and his small group of visionaries said, “Let’s build a retirement community that will lead the way in delivering compassionate care that exemplifies the honor and respect that our elderly deserve.” They initially built 20 independent apartment units and a skilled nursing facility where people could move when they aged and required a greater level of care.

This new concept of retirement living was so well received by the members in the congregation that the campus began to grow, and they decided to build a sister campus, which then led to a third campus, all within the local area. After building their second community, ACTS became a nondenominational nonprofit entity, and as of 2016, it owns and operates 23 retirement communities throughout the country.

The name ACTS is derived from the Book of Acts in the Bible, which states that all of humankind shares the responsibility of caring for the elderly, particularly the widows. The ACTS founders' deeply held beliefs became the cornerstone for the organization and remain a world apart from those of the typical nursing home in America.

In the 1950s, prior to the establishment of Medicare and Medicaid, there were essentially no federal standards for nursing homes. Each state was responsible for setting its own regulations, and they varied widely. In 1987, Congress enacted legislation called the Nursing Home Reform Act, which required nursing homes participating in Medicare and Medicaid to comply with a specific set of quality standards.

Yet it wasn't enough for ACTS to provide a "compliance" mode of living. In the mid-1990s, a successful businessman and ordained minister named Reverend George R. Gunn, Jr., began to establish the culture that endures today for ACTS. He developed a simple credo—"loving-kindness"—that would soon transform the entire ACTS organization that he was destined to lead.

With loving-kindness as its foundation, ACTS offers a lifestyle that includes Disney-style service, care, and fiscal responsibility. And, for the nearly 80 million baby boomers in the United States, lifestyle choices and high standards are essential elements in their

long-term retirement planning. Many of them desire the benefits of living in a residential environment with all the amenities, but they no longer desire the responsibilities of managing the family home. At ACTS, individuals who are at least 62 years old have the opportunity to live in a resort-style atmosphere in which an amazing array of on-campus activities promote the well-being of mind, body, and spirit.

When you are a member of an ACTS community, your social, nutritional, spiritual, and healthcare needs are treated as a top priority. Rather than viewing a retirement community as a place to end life, ACTS provides a way to begin life anew. Vibrant active seniors have the opportunity to live in a well-appointed apartment, carriage home, or villa with access to an array of activities and amenities to enjoy retirement life. Furthermore, when you move into an ACTS community, the cost is all-inclusive. Once you pay the entrance fee, you pay a monthly fee that will change only with an annual inflation adjustment. In other words, whether you spend 1 day or 1,000 days or more in your independent living, assisted living, or skilled care unit, your monthly fee stays at predictable rates, which provide residents with extra financial security from the increasing costs of healthcare services. And, as a resident named Ann shared with us, “Even if we run out of money, ACTS will take care of us the rest of our lives.” Indeed, the ACTS Samaritan Fund—made possible by donations from residents, family members, employees, and others—is available to any residents who outlive their financial resources.

By 2050, an estimated 27 million people will be paying for long-term care services, ranging from home care to skilled nursing. In order to support seniors’ living independently as long as possible, ACTS communities have a nurse practitioner

available to them at no additional charge. Those who find that they need assisted living or skilled nursing services after a certain time will be able to transfer to a more appropriate campus residence such as WillowBrooke Court, an on-site health center offering state-of-the-art, personalized nursing care. The environment in WillowBrooke Court feels very similar to an independent living arrangement except that it is smaller and has everything needed to provide the special care according to each resident's needs. What's more, when one family member requires a skilled nursing environment, visitation by a spouse or other family members is convenient because all levels of care are supported within one campus setting.

Within each of the 23 ACTS communities, the three levels of care provided require a staff of approximately 6,000 employees who embrace the culture of loving-kindness. And, with 42 different countries of origin coupled with the wide span of cultures and belief systems that are represented in the ACTS workforce, that's quite an undertaking!

For Charlie Coxson, Senior Vice President of Community Operations, immersing the entire organization in the ACTS heritage and the mission goes far beyond a responsibility. He explained, "Our culture of loving-kindness is enhanced in the way we treat our employees, and we make decisions based upon that. It may sound corny, but this is a family." Loving-kindness at ACTS does not mean there is no discipline or consequences for nonperformance. In fact, like Disney, ACTS holds its employees accountable so they always know what is expected of them.

Another connection to the Disney culture is that ACTS takes a long-term approach to developing their employees. As ACTS Chief Executive Officer Mark Vanderbeck said, "It's a daily practice of striving to create an atmosphere where every individual is valued

for his or her contributions and treated with fairness, sensitivity, dignity, honesty, and respect.”

From early in the organization’s history, enabling employees to develop their skills and granting them the freedom to move accordingly within the organization has been deeply embedded into the culture. For example, one individual on the management team, who has nearly three decades of history with the company, began as a busboy. Employees who share the heritage and a long-term history of service at ACTS help to create a consistency of purpose and message that permeates the entire organization. When Bill visited the Indian River Estates community in Vero Beach, Florida, after delivering a keynote address to ACTS management, he was moved by the passion conveyed by every staff member with whom he met. One of the employees, Kit, described her feelings upon joining the ACTS family: “One of my first days, I received balloons and a bag of goodies, and I felt so welcome. We truly respect one another in a loving-kindness way.”

ACTS employees also work together to create this spirit of unity with the residents as well. Becky is a registered nurse with a 12-year history with the organization. Becky described a heartfelt encounter: “We had a resident with no family who was having a birthday. We found out what she liked, and we went out and bought her a gift. It’s the extra steps you take—that, to me, is loving-kindness.” ACTS Chaplain Bill Mead agrees: “We can tell the employees you must treat someone with loving-kindness, but when employees act from their heart, there isn’t anything they wouldn’t do for a resident.”

When Bill spoke to the residents, the spirit of loving-kindness was also evident. Connie, a resident at ACTS Indian River Estates, told him, “It means to me that the

people here go beyond whatever their job description is and that they are my friends. Beyond the immediate staff, we all know the executives as well. I think it's all a part of being a family.”

Following its first several decades of successfully creating this special brand of senior living, ACTS continued to grow by affiliating with other like organizations that once operated independently. Now these organizations are under the ACTS umbrella, and look, behave, and feel like any ACTS community. The corporate team inspires and entrusts their affiliate leaders to carefully educate their employees as to the power and benefits of adopting the loving-kindness culture.

Perhaps the true “test” of any set of beliefs like that of ACTS is how their team members are perceived by mere casual observers. Several years ago, during an ACTS management team conference in Orlando, a gentleman observed the interaction between several of the ACTS team members and asked Charlie Coxson, “Are you with these folks?” Charlie replied, “Yes, I am.” The gentleman continued, “Who are they? I have been watching these folks all day. They interact, laugh, and have a great time together.” Charlie explained, “We all work together, and we truly like and care very much about each other. That's part of ACTS culture of loving-kindness, and it's not something you can orchestrate.”

The ACTS culture and set of core values have driven the company to reach the upper echelon of senior living organizations in America. CEO Mark Vanderbeck reflected, “Much like *The Disney Way*, we believe the ACTS loving-kindness model sets a standard for excellence that can be easily understood, striven for in daily behavior and decision making, and used to lift our entire organization to greater achievements.”

