A.G. Rhodes provides rehabilitation therapy and residential care to seniors at three locations in metro Atlanta. As a mission-driven organization for nearly 120 years, A.G. Rhodes has always been guided by what is best for their patients, residents and staff. With physical, social and psychological well-being as chief concerns, their caring culture drove the creation of a leadership development program that supported their workforce, which has ultimately led to better care for those they serve. A.G. Rhodes Wesley Woods location has been recognized as the number one nursing home in Georgia on Newsweek’s Best Nursing Homes 2022 list. Its Cobb location was showcased as the winner of “Best Nursing Home” in The Best of Cobb 2022, and its Rehabilitation Program for all locations won in the “Transitional & Rehab Facilities” category in Best of Georgia. We interviewed Deke Cateau, CEO, and Mary Helton, CHRO, about a challenge they had and their journey to resolving it.

What was the opportunity, issue or challenge you were trying to address?

Deke: To answer that question, you must understand the beginnings of A.G. Rhodes. The story goes that in 1904 Amos Giles Rhodes was approached by individuals who, for all intents and purposes, had a nursing home, and they approached him to replace the roof on that home. He took one look at it and said, “I would not put a dime into that building, but I will build you a new one!” That new building still exists today, which is our flagship location.

Obviously, with an organization this old, this enriched and steeped in history, you could imagine that the folks that ran the home back then were not diverse individuals. They were predominantly white men whose wives became the managers of the home. So, we started off with a board of managers which was literally the wives of these men, and they would go to the homes and replace curtains and volunteer their time to do other things. The men ran the homes financially very well. While times changed – our Atlanta home was integrated in the 1960s – the lack of diversity carried over and over for many, many years into our senior leadership of today. And that introduces the problem or the challenge that we saw at A.G. Rhodes.

Even when I came to the organization 13 years ago, I remember my first board meeting at the organization. The first thing that was extremely glaring to me was that I was the only person of color in that room. Great people, by the way, no malice intended. Whether you look at it from an ethnic or racial perspective, there was that lack of diversity. That became an issue for our organization where 90% of our workforce identify as Black or African American and about 40% come from different countries or ethnic groups.

When we started this journey, all three of our nursing homes were run by people who did not look like the staff in our homes. Not an easy problem to solve, because for one, these individuals, regardless of the race or origin, were doing a great job and still are doing a great job. So we didn’t want to come in and move people out of positions. The even bigger issue was when we looked down the pipeline, there was no one who could easily be identified as being ready to step into a leadership position.

I was very fortunate to become CEO and be someone that was in that pipeline because of the wisdom of my predecessor, Al Blackwelder. He gave me opportunities and made sure I was trained the right way. But from my position as the chief executive officer, I did not see any minorities coming up that pipeline.

Our solution was a leadership program to create a pipeline for underrepresented racial and ethnic groups.
Mary: All the social unrest that started a couple years ago prompted us to work with our Board of Trustees to form an Equity and Inclusion committee. It was overdue, but we just didn’t really understand the need for it until all this came to light. We wanted to create those opportunities for our staff, so the last couple of years, in many ways, have been transformational for us as an organization. The Equity and Inclusion committee has quickly become an integral part of our Board of Trustees with board members and staff collaborating to achieve its priorities and goals.

Deke: When we look at workforce development, what we constantly see is that the new generation of workforce wants to work for an employer where they can see themselves having a level of mobility in the workplace. I would say in decades past, you saw a lot of individuals who were satisfied as staying a CNA or LPN. Now, people want an opportunity to move up in the workplace, and it’s a responsibility of ours to give that to them.

What practical and replicable action steps did you take to address the problem?

Deke: We started our A.G. Rhodes Leadership Development Program aimed at a couple of weaknesses. While we do promote staff, we realized we were not equipping them with the tools and the skills to let them go further and be as productive as they can. We started this leadership development program for specifically that purpose, not just to create a pipeline, but to ensure that these individuals are properly trained, are able to represent us at their best, are able to truly be developed as leaders – and not just at A.G. Rhodes. We continue to say that we know we will lose some employees because of this, but we think it’s certainly a responsibility of ours to give that to them.

Mary: Our program has a few different components. One of the main components is shadowing. Participants have the opportunity to shadow our leadership at our support office and also within the homes themselves. They have the opportunity to go between all three communities, not just their own. This broadens their perspective on the organization and what leadership is.

There’s also a strong academic component, and it involves online courses focused on leadership, emotional intelligence, and effective listening. It is a well-rounded program. After making tweaks after the first year, we just started our second co-hort. Most of our graduates from the initial program have already been promoted into more advanced roles within the organization. I think our employees see this as an opportunity, but it's also a way we can show them we care about them. We want them to grow. We want them to learn. It’s an investment in them, because we’re paying them while they’re doing the shadowing and the coursework.

Deke: I love this program because it has two parallel tracks. Individuals have the opportunity to take the clinical route or they can take a business management track, which is designed for individuals who may be interested in nursing home management. It’s become a very competitive program to get into. In fact, this year we had to turn some people down, because we only had the capacity to accept a limited number of participants. The first year we accepted five, and this year we increased that to seven.

Who qualifies? We want to make sure that these individuals are the right individuals and are individuals who have that potential to take it to the next level. Enrollees must be employed with us at least 90 days. The first year, we only opened it up to full-time employees. This year, we also opened it up to part-time employees. The two main components of the enrollment process are writing an essay on defining leadership and what they expect to gain from the program and securing a recommendation from a supervisor or administrator.

What is your success rate? Surprisingly, despite the climate we’re in now, everyone completed the program the first year, and everyone’s still employed with us. I think that’s helped with

What graduates are saying about the A.G. Rhodes Leadership Development Program

“I have learned to value my inner potential, and I have discovered new skills. I have gained self-confidence. I have learned to overcome my own limitations, to face new challenges.”

“It was a wonderful opportunity to experience the different leadership styles of A.G. Rhodes. The online courses helped me learn the steps necessary to become a great leader. It was a great opportunity to improve the relationships around us by having a greater understanding and appreciation of all roles at A.G. Rhodes.”

“The Leadership Development program is the best program to prepare and empower upcoming leaders. The best decision I ever made was to apply for the program! Thank you, A.G. Rhodes!”
retention, because they see we’ve invested in them and they see the potential for advancement with our organization.

What were the results?

Deke: We were able to promote several graduates. One individual was promoted to the senior leadership of that community. One of the big things I have seen is increased confidence. I completely understand that, because as a minority myself, I too was once at that stage when I didn’t have a level of confidence to be able to express ideas and to be able to put my hand up to speak. Increased confidence in our staff has led to good outcomes, because when you have staff who are willing to express themselves and who are not afraid to express themselves, it generally leads back to good care.

For example, we have one individual who came to us as an employee in the Laundry Department, and her English was very poor. A few years later, she was one of the first graduates of this program. Her English is very strong now, and she is an Activities Assistant doing direct work with our residents. Another example is a receptionist who graduated and is now a social worker working directly with residents on the floor. We’ve seen people come out of their shells and using their skills and abilities for both management and resident care.

What has changed in the culture at your organization and how people work as teams?

Deke: We just graduated our first cohort, so we’re at the early stages. We did a DEI assessment. Some of the same things that we identified as the reasons for doing this are things that came out in the assessment. With so many ethnicities, we observe people on our workforce from one country who didn’t like people from another country. This program has improved that. And it goes further, as we now see people appreciating people from different cultures and different backgrounds.

Mary: Our program also helped bridge a gap between managers and frontline staff. That’s one of the most important relationships in the workplace, and for them to be able to spend so much one-on-one time with leadership, it’s helped broaden their perspective on the organization. It’s made more meaningful relationships.

Deke: The shadowing part of our program has broken that barrier between management and staff. It added cultural competency skills that managers need to have to understand the issues their staff are facing. Program participants have started talking about their days, events, and their families with managers, breaking down those silos that sometimes inhibit mobility. The idea of “managers up here” and “the staff down there” was just not good for building community.

What were the lessons learned?

Mary: First, get your leadership on board with understanding the true purpose and the importance of it from the get-go. For us, people at first were overwhelmed. It was hard work changing the mindset from, “This is just more work.” to “Wow, this is really important. This is going to make a difference. This is going to help me retain my staff and help improve their lives.” By the second cohort, everybody was excited about it.

Deke: The advice I would give anyone is don’t piecemeal this; you need to show your boards and leadership you have a budget for it. You also have to sell it to your current leaders and managers, because a lot of them think we are trying to bring people in to replace them. During the DEI assessment, people said they feared losing their job because of this program. You must do a lot of “tilling the soil” and speaking to staff to make them feel comfortable. When the graduates are back in the workplace, there is often a level of jealousy. Those real-life human dynamics happen, and we have to be prepared for them. And we have to prepare employees themselves, teaching them the right way to deal with these emotions.

Mary: Don’t micromanage too much what leaders cover during the shadowing sessions. They don’t have a checklist of things they have to cover. We gave them a lot of flexibility, and I think that really helped to make it more successful.

Deke: The final point I will make to other organizations is about sharing their journeys and their failures. We’ve probably given this program away to half a dozen other organizations. I’ve been told we should sell this program, but we just don’t think it is something to be sold – it should be shared. If we collectively share best practices like this, I think it benefits us all, and it definitely would benefit our industry in this time where we are struggling from a workforce development standpoint.

A.G. Rhodes Leadership Development Program is Facilitated by:

Duane K. Andrews, MBA, Leadership Instructor

As a principal of DKA TOOLKIT INC., an Organizational Effectiveness Consultancy, Mr. Andrews offers executive/leadership coaching, corporate training, psychometric testing, and online courses in leadership development, cross cultural communication, diversity & inclusion, team building, and emotional intelligence.

To learn more:
Email: duaneandrews@gmail.com
Website: www.duanekandrews.com

www.theberylinstitute.org
**About the Authors**

**Deke Cateau** is the Chief Executive Officer at A.G. Rhodes, a nonprofit organization operating three nursing homes in metro Atlanta. With more than 20 years of experience in long-term care, Deke is passionate about fostering a greater understanding of and appreciation for the aging population. As a leader in the fields of health care and aging, Deke educates the community through robust outreach and speaking engagements with local, national, and international audiences about the complex issues surrounding aging and long-term care. In addition to being a Licensed Nursing Home Administrator, Deke is a certified dementia care practitioner, trainer, and educator.

**Mary Helton**, a certified Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR), is the Chief Human Resources Officer at A.G. Rhodes. With more than 19 years of experience in Human Resources and health care management, Mary provides strategic leadership for talent management, DEI initiatives, leadership development, compensation, benefits, and wellness. Mary is also a Certified Eden Alternative Educator. She currently serves as Secretary on the Georgia Institute on Aging Board as well as Advisory Boards for Atlanta Technical College, Chattahoochee Technical College and South College.

**About A.G. Rhodes**

A.G. Rhodes is Atlanta’s premier provider of therapy and rehabilitation services, short-term recovery, and long-term care. As one of Atlanta’s oldest nonprofit organizations, A.G. Rhodes has set the standard for serving an aging community since 1904 and places an emphasis on improving care for those living with dementia. With a dedicated staff of approximately 500, A.G. Rhodes accommodated more than 1,100 seniors last fiscal year at its three homes located in Cobb, DeKalb, and Fulton counties. The mission of A.G. Rhodes is to provide expert and compassionate rehabilitation therapy and residential care to seniors in metro Atlanta.

**About The Beryl Institute**

The Beryl Institute is a global community of healthcare professionals and experience champions committed to transforming the human experience in healthcare. As a pioneer and leader of the experience movement and patient experience profession for more than a decade, the Institute offers unparalleled access to unbiased research and proven practices, networking and professional development opportunities and a safe, neutral space to exchange ideas and learn from others.

We define the patient experience as the sum of all interactions, shaped by an organization’s culture, that influence patient perceptions across the continuum of care. We believe human experience is grounded in the experiences of patients & families, members of the healthcare workforce and the communities they serve.