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Advice for Women Making Decisions for Aging Parents: Q&A with Cindy Baier, President and CEO, Brookdale Senior Living

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I understand that 65 percent of Brookdale residents, 75 percent of Brookdale's workforce, and 80 percent of key health care decision makers are women. Why do you think that is the case?



Well, because women live longer than men do generally, it's more likely that they will reach the stage of life where senior living becomes an important way for them to receive the care and support they need to live their best life possible. For much of our history, women have been viewed as the traditional caregivers for families. As a result, women generally have had more of an impact on health care decision-making and have traditionally turned those nurturing roles into career choices. That's what we've seen. Of course, we know traditions change and the types of individuals now in caregiver roles may shift the demographics for

caregivers or those who take on health care decisions in the future. Senior living is a relationship business; I believe that at Brookdale, we make a difference one relationship at a time. These personal connections between our associates and residents are one of the main things that make Brookdale an attractive employer for women, who often place a very high value on relationships and connecting with other people. For our associates, it really is a calling, not just a job. It's heartwarming to see the genuine bonds that form. I experienced this again recently when I joined in on a Mother's Day tea at our Brookdale Vernon Hills community in Illinois. I was filled with delight and so proud of our associates who made this very special day possible for our residents and their families. I know the success of the event was because of the genuine connections among our residents, their family members, and our associates.

Many of us, as health care decision makers for loved ones, need to discuss senior living options with them. How do we know when the time is right to broach this discussion?

Everyone wants what is best for the older people in their lives, and yet there's a natural reluctance to talk about the future when it involves difficult topics such as moving from their home or getting more help. Even though many older parents know they need help, they don't want to ask for it because they're afraid of losing their independence or they don't want to be a burden to their children. Instead, they suffer silently, often in isolation. The Health Resources and Services Administration found that loneliness and social isolation can be as damaging to your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. While many older adults dig their heels in to staying in their home alone, it's so sad to know that more than 43 percent of seniors feel lonely on a regular basis. Even introverts need regular social engagement in order to age more successfully! My advice is to have the conversation sooner than later. Having thoughtful discussions before a health crisis can save you from being forced to have crucial discussions without adequate time. From my experience, a vast majority of our residents and families report that they wish they had had the conversation sooner.

How do we begin those conversations with our loved ones?

A good place to start is by asking questions such as, "What do you want out of life? What is most important to you? Do you need help?" Make sure your loved ones have an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings and are truly heard, and then talk about senior living as an option that could help them have what they want,

and make it easier to focus on what's really important to them. Many of our residents are delighted to be relieved of the burdens of shopping, meal preparation and housekeeping or home maintenance, and appreciate being around other people. So many times, we hear from new residents and their family members that they wish they had made the move to senior living sooner.

What options should we consider when it comes to senior living?

Choosing the right senior living community is such a personal thing. There's no one-size-fits-all approach. You'll need to determine how much care your loved one needs and where you'd like them to be. Make sure that activities they enjoy are offered at the communities you're considering. Price plays a large role in determining the right community for your family. Be sure to consider that the total cost of living in a community includes many things you would pay for separately living in your single-family home, including food, utilities, home maintenance, property taxes, insurance, travel, entertainment, and health care.

How do most people pay for senior living?

Again, there's no one-size-fits-all when it comes to senior living. Depending on their financial situation, residents typically tap into a variety of payment sources, including investments, the sale of a home and savings. Our sales counselors work with each prospective resident to determine the best payment options and often help uncover hidden financial resources such as available programs and third-party vendors.

It is a powerful thing when your leadership reflects your workforce and the audience you are trying to reach. When you took over as CEO, one of eight Brookdale board members was a woman. Under your leadership, 50 percent of your board members are women. Why did you think that was important and how did you achieve it?

Gender diversity is important to Brookdale because, as you pointed out, many of our residents and associates are women and we need our leadership to reflect that. Studies have shown that gender diverse teams outperform those that are not diverse. To achieve this diversity, I provided the Board with a list of candidates to consider as they identified potential nominees to refresh the board. This list addressed both gender and racial diversity. It also addressed expertise and experience, because our board needed more representation within health care. I'm pleased that we have a more diverse board than we have had in the past. I'm also pleased that Brookdale recently received a certificate of achievement from "2020 Women on Boards" for having at least 20 percent women directors, and was recognized in 2018 by CABLE, a leadership organization for women's professional advancement, as a Board Walk of Fame honoree for having two or more female directors.

How do companies find qualified female candidates for their boards and senior leadership positions?

Boards have two main methods: they engage the expertise of executive search firms to source qualified candidates, and they look to their own professional networks. Brookdale has followed both paths, depending upon a variety of factors. In 2018, we decided to mine our own networks and reached out to programs that develop women for board positions. We looked for people, not just women, who had expertise in real estate and health care. From there we identified the best candidates. Four out of five candidates for one seat were women while all five for the other seat were women. The most important thing is to make sure you are considering qualified candidates, regardless of gender.

How has the dynamic changed at Brookdale now that you serve as the CEO and your board has complete gender parity?

I think we have more collaborative discussions and decision-making with a free flow of information. This is because we have more perspectives gathered around the table.

What do you see as the attributes of a great leader?

I believe that a great leader has to work harder than everyone else, and make sure that the credit for success is given to the people who made it happen. Leadership is a privilege and I also believe in servant leadership. Those are the two most important tenets. Throughout Brookdale's 41 years, the company has always had a model of servant leadership, which is so appropriate for our industry. As one rises through the ranks of a company, expectations increase. The higher you advance, the more people expect of you as a leader. I take this very seriously and I think about the constituencies who are important to Brookdale in all my decision-making. I always remember that I am ultimately responsible for the 80,000 residents we serve, the 65,000 associates who make Brookdale their home, and the shareholders who have trusted us enough to invest so that we can continue our mission. Our mission is so important; we must succeed for all of them.