

Lucas: Welcome to Bridge the Gap podcast, the senior living podcast with Josh and Lucas on our special series dedicated to COVID-19, where we're continuing to bring on experts in the industry to bring the love stories, the encouragement and the real life situations that we are all facing in today's new normal. We've got an excellent guest on the program. We have Ellen Belk. She is a SVP of resident engagement strategic partnerships and an industry veteran and a dementia expert come to the program.

Ellen: Oh, hey, thanks gentlemen. I appreciate you having me on.

Lucas: We're so glad that you're here. We were introduced by a mutual friend, Clint Lee. And right now in this day and time, you know, there's a lot of negative news. There's people who've been shut in for weeks and weeks and weeks, but you're on the front lines of this very important topic of how to engage residents while we are socially isolating ourselves and quarantining ourselves away from one another. Talk to us how your passions led into this field and what you're seeing being on the front lines right now.

Ellen: Well I again, I come to this industry very ubiquitously. I come from a very different background. I'm not a healthcare practitioner by education. So 20 years ago I'm a broadcast journalist, like, you know, so this is a fun experience. This is bringing me back to my roots of what I used to do. But why, why do I even mention that? Because when I entered healthcare 20 years ago, almost 20 years ago, I came with a completely different set of eyes into the business. I came with a kind of a don't ask, don't tell, let me just do, what I know to do is to be creative and unite people and tell stories and, you know, just try to engage people that actually voted very well for me and as I landed into the activity side of long term care. So I started in a nurse skilled nursing facility and then I very quickly was able to navigate the industry and here I am now a senior vice president of resident engagement.

So what we're doing and what I have done truthfully throughout my entire career, I wanna before I say what we're doing, I want to say something on the front end: the magic that has kind of happened. You have to remember pre-COVID, which if we can ever get back to that place then we will, we're on our way. We're going to get back to a COVID free lifestyle again. Pre-COVID, one of the things from a resident engagement perspective in long term care, most notably assisted living and memory support, we call our product memory support as opposed to memory care in our organization, one of the things on the front end of all of this is everybody thought like activity was big groups of people. You know, you felt like as an activity professional, you weren't doing a good job if you didn't have 15 or 20 residents in a circle or participating in whatever it was you were doing. Quite frankly, the marketing department likes to give tours when the groups are larger.

We started to talk more about in the last decade, the words and the terminology person-centered care kind of filtered into our, into our language. But that word very quickly became kind of white noise in the marketplace because it just was a buzzword. Fast forward to now. Now we're being forced because of the current condition to kind of residents one by one by one. Our activity professionals are going into the rooms of our residents, both memory support and assisted living.

But here's the other kicker. What's happening? We've got dining staff now who, remember the dining staff used to work in the dining room and we all came to them. So they would, they would wait on their table or they would, you know, navigate the 15 or 20 residents that they served at each meal out. They're going room to room. And delivering meals. Now the dining staff is being able to be participatory in brightening and shining a light of wonderful in the room of the people that they're serving. Our housekeeping people, they would clean the rooms when nobody was in there sometimes. So now you've got ancillary service providers under the roof of the assisted living who are now getting into the private and personal space where the pictures are and the mementos are. And we're literally seeing people know and learn about their residents for the first time in these conditions. And it's making significant, stronger hold, more long term and hopefully long lasting relationships once we clear this current condition.

So I want to be very mindful and thoughtful about how that's been kind of magical to see happen. And as an activity professional, I'm hoping on the other side of this, everyone will want to be an activity person from here on end because they'll know other departments are getting to see the magic that can really escalate when you have these real personal connections with the residents that you serve.

Josh: So what a fabulous point you bring up. Several great points there. Ellen and thank you for shining a and a reminder and a spotlight on that. Lucas and I enjoyed being able to share the stories from folks like yourself and all the positive that's actually happening amid difficult times from the resident side and from the team members' side.

So transitioning the conversation now after you've kind of helped us frame the conversation, tell us some things that you guys, how you have responded to this quick, a paradigm shift, not only in your, in your memory support side of what you're doing, but also just in your, your regular, everyday assisted living, senior living population where people are much more isolated, I guess you would say in their rooms and keeping that resident engagement at a high level, getting to know your residents better as you said. What have you guys done in a response to that?

Ellen: Well, it's been a multi, a multi-pronged approach. In our organization, we follow kind of a mind, body and spirit formula for how we create programming. Again, pre-COVID. But now we've just had, we've had to be, kind of take what we already do. And to your point, Josh is compartmentalize it. So now our activity professionals and their assistants are spending more quality time one-on-one. We already had, like in our, in our organization, one of our signature standards is a program we called the Essential Health Program where we're diffusing essential oils into the space where we're using warm washcloth, pre meal time for our residents in memory support that are infused with lavender in the evening lemon on the front end of the day. So we had those systems in place. Now we're doing them individually one-on-one. So now our dining staff is going into serve a meal and they're handing over a lemon infused essential warm washcloth to our residents with memory impairment. And there's a sensory stimulation. There's now food and nutrition will follow quickly, but then there's that engagement and that bonding between the two: the worker and the and the person in their room.

So that's a very personalized situation, but we already had activities. So now what we had to do is be very quick about, and I don't want to use the term dumbing down, but we had to COVID-friendly what we would do normally in a large group activities. So I, in my role, I kind of compartmentalized everything. We gave in room, in room programming. So here's what you do for, for example, in our spirit this would be for our assisted living residents who could, who could follow, you know, these simple bullet points. I called it a window workout where I said start stand or sit in front of your window with the shades and the blinds wide open so you can see the outside space placed your hand on your heart, the other one on your stomach at the belly button and breathe deeply through your nose. Hold for three seconds and exhale. Kind of like a modified yoga, deep breathing meditation situation. But there's only, there's three bullet points. There's a couple more that go. We're posting these in the resident rooms. We're asking that the caregivers who come and help the residents, you know, to get ready for the day to kind of guide them through this as well. So there's, there's in-room activity.

There's also some like over, some of our communities that are able to broadcast music over loudspeakers so that are piped into the rooms. So there's just natural familiar music being played. There's a lot of Skype, there's a lot of FaceTiming. That's, that's probably been the most magical thing which I'm really excited about. We use a couple of providers like iN2L and Life Loop, both of those platforms give you opportunities to engage visually and virtually with your family member. And for example, last week alone, I logged this cause I'm trying to make the case within our organization how important these personal connections are, not only between our staff and our residents, but the people on the outside who they don't get to see right now. In one week we had 838 pictures uploaded from family members through the Life Loop portal to the residents in our buildings. After Easter I just checked again on Monday, Gladys in one of our buildings, her family uploaded 33 pictures from Easter in a 12-hour period. So it's that type of magic that's also being infused.

And people I think are really realizing how critical that the human condition and when you are separated and you're being forced not to be able to see your loved ones, it's amazing how family members who might not have always engaged 100% before they now are really realizing, wow, I now I miss grandma and now I want grandma to see about our life. And these visual pictures are really powerful. And so we've, it's been exciting to see that. So technology is helping us bridge the gap, if you will.

Josh: Oh, that's so exciting. So, you know, we could dive into all of those awesome things and we may even want to, but one curiosity that I have to get your opinion on because you're right there on the front lines with your teams is as we move beyond COVID and which we will and it and, and go maybe in some ways back to what whatever normal was. What do you think the difference will look like? Because obviously so much has been learned during this time of point has been placed on resident engagement, on individualization of relationship building, on activity, resident engagement. So what do you think we're learning through this process that when things get back to the normal where we can engage in, in a little bit larger groups, what do you think we're going to carry forward that we've learned through this?

Ellen: That's such a fabulous question. My dream and my hope is that we don't go back into our silos. That the sales people who have had, who can't go out and market right now and who are being thought, in our situation, they're calling families and just giving updates. We're kind of using them as ambassadors because they can't go out and do what they usually were doing. So I think I now am hoping that when by

literally in this time talking to families the phone and just giving reports about how their loved one is doing well, that type of one-on-one contact in a situation that's stressful, depending on what's happening on the other end of that phone.

I'm hopeful that as we emerge from this from a sales perspective, we will remember that there's humans on both sides of the equation. Of course, we were all in business. We're a business and we need people to live with us so that we can serve them. But I'm hoping it'll soften the hearts a little bit of sales. I'm hoping that the dining people, now that I've know that they've been in the rooms of the residents now, I'm hoping when they go back and business as usual and you can have your meal in the dining room, I'm hoping that those things that they've learned about each other, that, that the the dining staff will talk about. Hey Mabel, how is, how was that granddaughter whose picture I saw at Easter time? That level, that heightened level of awareness of the importance of connectivity. We take it for granted when we're all around each other all the time. Now we've all been separated. So let's put, let's get back, just, let's not forget what that isolation feels like and let's make sure that when we are back together and we are back in our normal, that those elements continue to linger. That would be, that would be my dream and my hope and I have a feeling, and I have a feeling this family is, I will be, I'll be shocked if we don't see a spike in familial visits and familial engagement when this is all over. I'm, like I said, some families, you know, for whatever reason, no judgment. Some families aren't able to visit or call or talk as much as we on the inside would like to see. But maybe that'll change also on the other side of it. Now that you've realized how precious that time that you lost is. So those are my wishes.

And I actually had a pretty strong feeling that for quite a while I think what I'm just described, I think it's gonna it's gonna happen. I feel like, I feel it'll just be natural to the human condition that people won't forget this situation very quickly. And so these good vibes will carry on.

Josh: I totally agree. And you know, it's broad. I think for all Americans including those teams in the senior living communities and the residents and families priorities into perspective and made us all realize what's really important and where our priorities are. And I think to your point we're in the relationship business that too-

Ellen: -yep.

Josh: - too often, particularly on the marketing and sales side and sometimes in every department becomes a little too transactional feeling. So this has brought that into perspective as well. And on, on the touch and feel part, I can't wait to give Lucas a big bro hug very soon.

Ellen: Notice he's not saying anything.

Josh: He feels the same way on me. I can tell you.

Lucas: I'm laughing so hard. I'm clipping the microphone. Likewise. You know, I think that you know, one of our, our sayings here on the program is that we're better together and yes, we can do together virtually, but gosh, we just don't want to do that indefinitely, right? So there is an end to this challenge and so many things that we can learn. And what I'm happy about is that all of these love stories that happen everyday in our communities are happening. And more and more because of what I've always said about the industry is that makes it special is the people in the business and Ellen-

Ellen: -yeah?

Lucas: You are one of them. And we're really glad that we had you on the program today. Thank you for dedicating your life and your career to serving older adults in this way.

Ellen: It's my, it's my pleasure. I will tell you, guys, I get way more out of it than the residents do. I'm so blessed and I'm, it's like they say, if you love what you do, you don't work a day in your life. So thanks for saying that, but I'm the blessed one for sure.

Lucas: Well we believe you and we can see it. Thank you for spending time to come on and bring value to our audience and to our members, to our listeners. We just want to encourage you today. Let you know that we're thinking about you, that we're praying for you and that we believe in you. Thank you for listening to Bridge the Gap.