

Lucas: Welcome to Bridge the Gap podcast, the senior living podcast with Josh and Lucas and we have an awesome guest today, an amazing partner to our program. We want to welcome Barbara Conn, she's the CEO of Morrison Living. Welcome to the show.

Barbara: Hi. Thanks for having me. Glad to be here.

Lucas: Thank you so much for being here. So today we've got a lot to cover. Because you guys are really key components in the whole dining sector. We're going to be talking about technology and trends and workforce and staffing, health and wellness, so many things to cover. Before we do that, we'd love to hear more about your journey that has gotten you to senior living.

Barbara: Sure. I feel like I've kind of come full circle. So, the Compass Group is our parent company and I've started with them 20 years ago now, which seems like yesterday most days. So I started out on the procurement side of the business in supply chain and did that for a number of years and then moved into sales. So I was doing business development specifically for senior living in the Northeast. And so I really got my feet wet in senior living and loved working with the residents, loved working with the operators in the field. It was just a wonderful, wonderful experience.

But Compass is very devoted to growth and development for associates. So my next opportunity came about six years later and I joined the acute care side of the business and was working with hospitals. And I really did miss senior living a lot. I think like so many people, you're just, there's a passion for it and if you feel that there's a draw that you can't escape and you really just want to be a part of it. And I know that's the case with most of our associates. They are just really purpose driven and they really enjoy what they do. So an opportunity came back along a few years later to join senior living again. And so I was thrilled and I jumped at that opportunity. So I just find every day that it's such a rewarding and humbling experience that I just, I enjoy so much

Lucas: And we love those common threads, Josh. We hear them so much with a lot of the guests that we bring on and the people that we meet in the business. And that we share that together. It's a really great common bond that we have.

Now let's transition into, you know, your role as at a very high level here. And so you guys are in so many communities you get to see and really are trendsetters in many rights. Let's talk about some trends in the business as it relates to a couple of areas. And let's start with technology.

Barbara: Yeah. You know I do believe that the COVID virus is actually going to also be a real catalyst for technology. So sometimes we've been a little slow in terms of adopting and adapting technology, but I think now we've seen a breakthrough with that that's going to really change things. And specifically around online ordering. So many of our residents now are using online tools to actually place their meal orders because now they're eating in their rooms. They're not able to eat in dining rooms anymore as you know. So I think that... we've been able to expand that actually to include ordering groceries, produce, beauty aids, all of those kinds of things. So our residents are getting very adept at ordering

online. And so I think that's really going to change things. And maybe going forward they'll order groceries online even after this is over.

One of the things we've also done recently is text messaging. So we're able to push text messages now to all of our directors. So if there's an alert or something new from CMS or just something we want to recognize them for or give them some motivation and pats on the back, we can push text messaging out.

Now, we've also been using Workplace by Facebook, so Facebook is just so natural to so many people. They use it in their personal lives. So we extended that to our business and it's a great product for us to post pictures and insight, a little bit of a friendly competition with people, spread best practices, recognize and engage our associates. So those are some of the ways that we're using technology. We also have a great tool for surveying and assessing sanitation and safety and all of those kinds of things that's on a mobile app and we can go through and do audits that are very similar to the audits that CMS would do. So we're really pushing the use of technology and trying to expand that.

Josh: So as you all have been leaders in kind of deploying, adopting, creating technologies in these communities for the residents and the team members to use as of late, obviously people have been forced to kind of use more technology because things have been much more virtual. But what has been kind of the attitude and embracement of that technology from the team member side and the resident side? Do you find that they're enjoying using it and then when things are go back to more normalized, whatever that may look like as people are back in the dining rooms and back in social settings, do you see that that technology is still going to be like totally relevant and it's kind of somewhere where we've gone and we're not going back now?

Barbara: I think quite possibly a couple of examples of that: we actually were able to create on our time clocks, which seems like such a small thing. But a lot of times what happens is everybody shows up for their shifts at the same time and there may be 50 people in line for the time clock. Well, you know, that creates a bottleneck. Sometimes it makes people late clocking in, that sort of thing. So we've been able now to allow them to clock in on their mobile device. So we've got a geofence set up and if they're within X amount of space from that geofence, they can clock in. So the bottleneck's gone. And now with COVID, they don't have to touch the same screen that someone 50 people just touched right before them. So there's great benefits for that. So I don't think we'll ever turn back from that.

On the resident side, one of the things that we've done is we started streaming teaching kitchens into their apartments and so they actually can see the chef. We've actually in some cases sold the meal kits of what the chef's cooking so they can cook right along with the chef and follow along and make the same dish or we've made the dish. And then that's been what's for lunch. And we follow right behind the teaching kitchen serving that meal for lunch. And so I think that's been a big hit as well. I think a lot more residents will attend teaching kitchens and that sort of thing as a result. You know, we've seen so many people revert back to picking up hobbies that maybe they gave up years ago because they didn't have time or whatever. Cooking and baking being two of those. So the teaching kitchen streamed into the apartments has been a really popular thing that I don't believe will turn back from.

Josh: I love that. So you've been in the business a long time and seen the business from a lot of different angles. We know that there's been technology changes that have obviously impacted our labor, how we attract, how we recruit, how we retain how we train. All of that. But what are some of the key things as of recent that you think are our big marks in, in the staffing and the labor areas of, of our business?

Barbara: So one of them is we've begun to interview using video technology and it's pretty sophisticated. So they're running all kinds of artificial intelligence and looking at your facial tics and your eye contact and all of that, they're assessing all of that in the background while the interview is going on. So it's allowed us to really get our managers away from so much time consuming interviewing because it really filters out the people who may not be a great fit. And it's actually increased our ability to hire by six days. So it's cut that much time out of the hiring process, which is huge for us. So helping to fill vacancies and that sort of thing. So that's been huge.

The other thing for us is we now have an app that we use for labor pooling and with Compass Group, just like so many others, a big segment of our business has closed due to the virus. So K-12, most schools are closed, most colleges are closed, stadiums are closed. So in Compass Group, we have a whole lot of associates who have been put on furlough. And so what we can do is take, they can sign up for shifts and then our managers post open shifts where we have vacancies and all of that pool of folks can apply from that shift. And it's been a great tool to help us avoid having to use temp labor and overtime. And we know that there are associates and they're well trained and they're all about food and hospitality. So it also helps us just ensure that our brand standards are met. So I think those are two of the big ways around associates that we've been really blessed with. Great technology.

Josh: Well, so I would love to know more, you know, I know we can't spend a lot of time on it, but what you first mentioned with the interviewing process and the video and that kind of I can refer to it as artificial intelligence, that it's kind of weeding through a lot of the details and helping to interpret and do some analytics. Is that a, so that's a two way interview process between the employer, the interviewer and the potential candidate, the employee through a video screen and it's working all this?

Barbara: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. It's fascinating. Really great technology. It's called Higher View and we've been using it for a while now and it's been wildly successful.

Josh: I feel like we have just adapted things from the CIA into senior living. You guys are definitely cutting edge. So, tell us a little bit about some of the trends that are happening. Obviously so much has happened even as of recent relating to technology, the labor, but how has that all flowing into kind of the dining experience and what's changing and what do you see that might be on the horizon where this has kind of pushed everyone out of our comfort zones over the last several months? And what are some things that we may now be considering that we might not have been open to considering just a few months ago?

Barbara: Yeah, I think there's a lot of things coming our way with that. And it'll be interesting to see how it plays out. You know, I think in the general population, just retail consumers have been pulling away for a while from buffets and salad bars and that sort of thing. I think that's something we're all going to have to deal with in senior living, once we renormalize, whatever that means. I think that buffets, salad bars,

just the nature of the way the virus spreads is going to make us look at those things. So maybe instead we go to more a la carte dining or all day dining. I think even simple things like how place, you know, we'll all silverware be rolled going forward so that it's not out on the table for people to touch. Fountain drinks, getting a drink out of a fountain.

You know, we've always been so good about hydration because we know how important that is. Our hydration stations are beautiful, but I don't know going forward if a hydration station will be something that people feel comfortable with. I think just also dining, will we spread out the dining room so that tables are spaced farther apart, meaning that fewer people can show up at one time for dining. So will reservation systems be required everywhere. You know, generally as the doors open at 5:30, there's quite a line at 5:15 waiting to get into the dining room. And I think we're all going to have to adapt to that and do things differently.

Josh: I think those are great points and I think one of the, I guess encouraging things is kind of seeing how you guys employ so much technology and are so innovative. Some of the things that I'm seeing that, that have already been working really well, like you mentioned the all day dining, that seems like that's been a great kind of cultural change for senior living in the places where I've seen that deployed because traditionally we've kind of, it's kind of been like herding, you know, people in, during this small window of time. And, and I think of people like my parents who, you know, they kind of like enjoying some days sleeping in a little bit and have it in a more mid-morning brunch and things like that. Not having to be there at that window and not being in the big crowd.

So I think some of those things, even from a cultural perspective, this has over the last several months has kind of forced us into this new norm and allowed us to do some things that we might not have tried as soon before without being forced to, but, they could end up being great things. And I think the extra attention to infection control and just looking at all that, you know, the, the way that we've come about having to look at that, not necessarily pleasant, but I think there's going to be great and positive outcomes out of that.

Barbara: Yeah, absolutely.

Josh: So tell us a little bit, I mean, from, from the outside looking in, I always think of Morrison as the dining specialist, but you guys have a lot of different specialties in house and touch a lot of different pieces of a senior living community, including the environmental side, which I've recently learned of. Can you tell us a little bit about what is changing? I can only imagine with so much changing around the dining specific side of dining that when you start looking at the greater operation that there's so many things to consider. So how has your organization kind of led the charge on adapting to the new norms?

Barbara: Yeah, so environmental services is a part of the services that we offer in a number of communities across the country. And, you know, we've always had great process and great chemicals and great protocols in place for that. So, you know, for us, a lot of this is business as usual. It's what we do all the time because you know, this is very different virus, but we've also always been faced with norovirus and all of those other kinds of things that we've prided ourselves on keeping out of communities. So you know, for us it's largely about business as usual. Although I will say PPE has

become, you know, a battle cry, finding PPE and masks and securing those. And so thankfully we have a wonderful team on our supply chain side and they've been able to keep us safe and protected.

We also do cleaning in hospitals and acute care. And so, you know, we have best practices that we share across the company in terms of, you know, how long some chemical has to sit for kill time and all of those kinds of things, the best and the latest chemicals. So we stay up on all of that. And, you know, we take that very, very seriously. And, we've actually been very pleased with the few associates we've had that in fact actually contracted the virus. So that tells us that, you know, our protocols are working, our PPE is working, our training is working, and all of that is going very well. So it's a part of the business that we always take very, very seriously. And of course that's tightened right now for sure.

So switching gears just a little bit, Lucas and I've, it's no surprise to anyone. We're huge fans of our industry. We work in our industry, we love our industry. Our platform was created to share the love stories of our industry that we and you know, very familiar, but over the last several months we think it's even a positive thing how the spotlight has been really been shining on our industry and there's a lot of, through difficult times, there's been beautiful stories that have come out of that. And I think interestingly enough, as I'm having conversations, a lot of people, it hasn't scared them away from our industry, it's actually caused them to see the commitment level of teams and what teams actually deal with and a diversity of jobs and career paths in our industry.

So just for a moment, let's switch gears. You having spent so much time coming up through the ranks of the industry, being at a very high level of leadership now I'm sure serving as mentor to many young, young people that are starting to enter the workforce, speak to those individuals that may be considering getting into senior living and talk a little bit about the opportunities you see within your organization and even beyond that is going to be available there for, for the younger adult that's getting into the business.

Barbara: Yeah, I think that's one of the most exciting things that we all do right now. And I look across the landscape at what our own associates have done during this crisis. First of all, we've had fewer call outs than we've ever had. So despite what some people might perceive as fear, people are not calling out. They're coming to work and they're coming to work more so than ever because they want to be there to help and to do anything that they can do to help. And so our associates have been, so, as you said, just beautiful stories of, you know, hourly associates going out and buying 70 flower arrangements to deliver to every resident just to brighten their day and having their nieces and nephews write notes to people. So I think that a lot of people in our own company, where we had people furloughed in different sectors, initially there was a little bit of fear about, you know, oh, do I want to come into healthcare and you know, work even though I don't have a job, but I'd rather not have a job.

And so we did a video that basically says, this is your Nana, this is your pop. You know, this isn't scary. This is what we do every day. So we're prepared to keep people safe. That's our job. And we take that very seriously. So there's nothing to be scared of. So we've had a lot of folks come in that didn't, aren't from the industry. And I'll tell ya we're starting to see they want to stay, they don't want to go back when they're off of furlough and schools reopened. They don't want to go back. They want to stay in our industry because they find it to be a beautiful place to be as well.

So, you know, we're looking for, in the past, a lot of times people only wanted people who had been in senior living to come into the communities and work, particularly at a unit director level. But we're starting to see clients change their mind about that as we entice people in from hotels and from restaurants and from other hospitality related industries. And they absolutely love it. I mean, it's, it's very rare that you don't have a chef, for example, come in from a restaurant and just be like, how did I not know this existed? Because the gratitude and the relationships and the compassion and the comradery is just second to none. You can't find that everywhere.

Josh: Totally agree. And it's encouraging to hear you talk about that and the stories that you guys have seen produced within your organization. We've seen and, and we've actually experienced and seen some of those awesome love stories that you guys have turned out and shared those on our platform. It's awesome to have partners like you guys that come alongside our industry and help us be better. So we appreciate your leadership in mentoring and leading your organization as well as being a leader in the industry and look forward to connecting our audience more to you all. And for them being able to hear your encouraging words today.

Barbara: Thank you. It's my pleasure.

Lucas: Well you know, hospitality is being reimaged and you guys are right on the forefront of that and we're so grateful for all the work that you and your team are doing. Our audience can connect with you in the show notes and go to btgvoice.com. Send us a message. We'd love to continue this conversation on our social platforms. Dining is a big deal, and you guys are feeding our older adults and the experts at it. So bring your questions in. We'd love to cycle those through. And thanks everybody for listening to Bridge the Gap.