

Lucas

Welcome to Bridge the Gap podcast, the senior living podcast with Josh and Lucas, in DC., continuing our thought leadership discussions here at the NIC conference. We want to welcome a very special guest, Susie Finley. You're the founder and principal of Scent Living Communities. Welcome to the show.

Susie Finley

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Lucas

Yes. We have followed each other on LinkedIn for so long. We've you know, we've tried to connect in the past and it hasn't totally lined up and we're really excited to finally have you on the show because we love what your company is doing, because we get to see all the posts and the new developments and the culture that you're building.

Susie 01:22

Thank you. Thank you. Well, I'm really excited to be here. I'm glad that you've been following for us being local, just to Colorado. Sometimes people don't know the name of our company and they certainly do in Colorado, so we're excited to share our story with you today.

Lucas 01:36

Totally. So give us a, a makeup of your territory, your footprint the type of care, the type of communities that you're building. Sure.

Susie 01:47

Sure we, my husband and I own the company and we're local in Colorado only. We live in Lone Tree area. Our home office is in Centennial. All of our communities are in the greater Denver area today with plans to expand, but not outside of the state. We have independent living, assisted living memory care. We no longer do skilled nursing as of 2016. Although that was part of my background and our home office team is made up of 10 of us awesome team, and they do great work supporting our communities and have their areas of expertise in each of their positions.

Lucas 02:25

You know, this hasn't been an overnight success. You've actually been at this for a long time. How did you get started in senior living? Why did you get started in senior living?

Susie 02:37

So interesting question. I thought when I went to Ohio state and thought I was gonna follow in my mom's footsteps of being a school psychologist for children with developmental disabilities, and had the great opportunity my freshman year to do a internship at a school. And it just didn't resonate with me. And I started taking gerontology classes, had a professor that I fell in love with. And my senior year I interned at Carrington of Becksley, which is the original Sunrise in Columbus, Ohio. And I loved it. I worked in every department, but I knew at the end, I didn't wanna call bingo and I didn't want to do marketing. I wanted to be in a position where I could affect change. And I was really fortunate right out of college. I was hired by a private owner in Cleveland where I'm from Cleveland, Ohio, and I did

marketing and outreach for him and ended up getting my NHA license under him at a really young age, which was, I think I was 24 when I got my NHA license and then moved to Colorado in 2001 and spent 10 years with Brookdale original ARC and was an executive director for 15 years up until Tom and I,

Susie 03:50

he had started this company in 2008. We met in 2010 through a board I was on, and I ended up leaving Brookdale to join him so that we could make this dream a reality for our company.

Josh 04:02

Well, super excited to learn more about you, I know our listeners...you guys have a pretty strong social media presence as we were talking a little bit about that. So you've done really well with that. So I know so many people like us have followed you, but tell us a little bit more when you're thinking about your communities and then also the industry, talk about challenges and opportunities, because we feel like the two kind of sometimes go hand in hand. So our industry's facing challenges like labor, things like that, but on those, what do you see as some of the biggest challenges that will also become opportunities for our industry and how are you guys approaching that?

Susie Finley 04:39

I think for us, certainly I just I spoke on an operator's panel for Colorado real estate journal a few weeks ago. And of course labor was the topic of conversation for all of the panelists. And it is getting better. And we're excited to see our percentages for orientation actually show up for orientation that have been hired versus, it was about 40, 45% prior to now. And so it is definitely getting better. It's a huge concern for us as a company and being a local company, locally owned company, we have the opportunity to really be special and different. And whether that's centralizing our home office for human resources, where all of our associates, whether it's a caregiver, a dishwasher, they all come through our home office to do orientation. It's the same. They learn about the culture of the company. We get to eat lunch with them.

Susie Finley

They learn about our mission and what's important to us. And that's their first experience with the company, and just being able to be local and hands on. So our home office team is not on airplanes. They're not flying all over the country. They're able to go to all of our communities in a day if they want to. And that makes a big difference to those teams to feel supported and be able to. And know, just part of that local ownership also is the relationships with residents and families. And we just opened a community in February that was in a market that I operated in back in 2007 to 2013. And now I'm seeing second generation, the adult children whose parents lived with me years ago. Now they're the ones that are going to be potential residents there and are potential residents. So it's really special that local nature and being geographically disciplined is what we've held onto because I've got 20 years experience in the Denver market and senior living and so those are relationships I can't replicate in another market.

Josh 06:32

Well, I love that laser focused, a strategy. Holding fast to that. So on the development front, I assume you guys are doing some development. I think you said you want to continue to develop out in Colorado specifically. What does that look like? I mean, there's a lot of talks about a lot of operators moving into different, I would say untraditional, senior living markets doing active adult, things like that. So what does your development model look like going forward?

Susie Finley 07:00

So we just finished a large development that opened in February, 205 units held to high preserve. And so we're really excited to see that all coming to life and being now several months into the operation. Development, we don't have anything active happening right now. We were working on a project construction costs, of course, just like staffing and labor is a challenge right now. So we see our growth being through acquisitions and hopefully development. We would love to be able to work on a development. We love developing from the ground up and really being able to put our fingerprint on each area of the community. So those are certainly the two areas we're looking at for growth again in Colorado only not leaving the state. And we like independent, assisted living, and memory care combined. We'll do an assisted living memory care. We typically stay away from a free standing memory care. That's just not our niche. And we have reasons that we feel like we can't operate those in a way that we would feel good about.

Josh 08:05

So you said you were talking a lot about labor recently. Mm-Hmm, <affirmative> our listeners that are all that's on their mind everywhere. Right now. You seem to be doing a really good job at building the team culture. You're seeing improvements in your stats. Obviously I think you kind of alluded to a more hands on approach. Your team is able to service your communities maybe from a leadership standpoint, a little bit better than not having to spend all their time in a windshield or an airplane. Outside of that, is there anything cheat sheets, pointers that you can give to operators out there to help build their culture in a way that maybe they can experience some of the same improvement results that you're seeing?

Susie Finley 08:50

I think that you have to be able to deliver what you say you're going to deliver. You have to not just show up quarterly or once a year or twice a year at your communities, you really have to ingrain yourself into them. And whether that means - we had a concert a few weeks ago, we were there, our kids were there. We were helping put away tables at the end of the night. I mean, they see us and they know that we are there, we'll roll up our sleeves. And we're part of the team. And that certainly trickles down to our home office team, having that same culture and knowing that when they're in the communities doing visits, if something comes up in an associate is, let's say in a time of need, they know to come to us and that we will bend over backwards and do special things to support our team. And it's not, nothing is black and white. There's lots of shades of gray in how we operate. And that has led to a long tenure for a lot of our associates.

Josh 09:44

So what is changing in, in the labor market, obviously we hear tons that people are demanding more money. We're having to pay more money and things like that, but are there other things that you have picked up on that you see that are changing as far as what team members, prospective team members are looking for in a prospective senior living community to work?

Susie Finley 10:07

I mean, I think that the days of talking about people being afraid of senior living because of COVID and not wanting to work in that industry anymore, I don't think that that's the case. I would say in my now 25 years in senior living, I would say nurses are the most challenging positions for us right now. We've never

seen it this way where a nurse leaves and doesn't even give a two week notice and they just walk out and they can of course get another job that afternoon. So that's been a big challenge for us. Certainly the minimum wage in Denver has been high. It's been the leader for Colorado, and it's going up again in January and we try to be very competitive, even our lowest level associate, which may be a dishwasher position is not making minimum wage. We always want to ensure that they're over minimum wage so that we can really help them and not have them go work at a fast food restaurant and be able to have an experience in a senior living community.

Josh

So Lucas, I know you're getting jealous because I'm asking all the questions, but my, my last question before I pitch it back over, you guys seem to do an amazing job telling your story online, which digital is, is huge right now. So from a marketing strategy there's actually a ton of folks that don't do that good. So unveil a little bit of what your marketing strategy is that you think is helping you be successful in telling your story to kind of the new, the new customers that we're serving.

Susie Finley 11:39

Yeah. That's a great question. We had a social media genius who will be, I'm sure promoting this podcast for us, and she was working for us on a consultant basis and a little over a year ago, joined us on a permanent basis as a full-time home office employee. And she's fabulous and really helps to get our message out there in real time and keeps it fresh. And so whether it's for associates and recognition and, you know, last Friday, I took my labradoodle, who everybody loves. He's our CFO, our chief fur officer. And he came to one of our communities and our concierge there, Virginia, who loves him, has been asking like, she doesn't let me in the door if I don't have him. And so last week, you know, she's sending me selfies of her and the dog and Christina puts that on social media and people love that and it makes them feel good.

Susie Finley 12:27

And we were just actually talking with someone today saying from a satisfaction standpoint for residents, I mean, everybody knows the resident who calls their adult daughter and says, "I sat in my apartment today. There's nothing going on." And really now the adult daughter can be like, "mom, I saw you four times on Facebook in a cooking class, at an entertainer, and playing bingo." And so it's been really good because families love to watch that. They love to see their loved ones participating and online. And it just, again, it shows what's happening in our communities and it's, we have to keep it fresh for sure. And exciting.

Josh 13:02

Well you know, my high level takeaway from what you just said is you all have been very intentional at investing in team members that are highly professional to tell the great stuff that you're doing. And me and Lucas, we say this all the time, almost every operator that we talk to has amazing things going on in their community, but so often not an intentionality to be able to share that in the relevant platforms, that how people are gleaned information today. So what an awesome little treat. I know Lucas, we're going to want to connect this, this crew to all of our audience on the podcast, the platform, social medias. If they're not already following you, hopefully they will be after today.

Susie Finley 13:44

Thank you.

Lucas

Yeah, totally. Susie, we love hearing your story, you and your husband and, and we love entrepreneurs. And I, I think a lot of people may not realize how entrepreneurial the senior living industry is. It's been quite a journey and it is a very challenging journey. You have got to be all in, right? Because it's way more complicated. It's not just real estate. Does that resonate?

Susie Finley 14:08

Oh, absolutely very much all in. And for us, you know, being married couple who owns this company, there's not a lot of delineation between the work day and the personal day. And you know, we have to have that balance in order to not kill each other. I think <laugh>, but it's, I mean, clearly we're both very passionate about what we do and our communities and we live and breathe it and we love to bring our kids in and incorporate them into the community, clearly our dogs on our website. So it's very personal for us.

Lucas 14:36

Absolutely. Well, I have been always very vocal about my passion for this industry has really been driven by the people that I meet. Like you Susie. So wonderful story. Wonderful time together here at NIC. We know you're very busy. We're gonna get you back out to your, "speed dating." I'm sure you've got a lot of meetings, you and your husband. But thank you so much for spending time with us today.

Susie

Thank you both. It's been great.

Lucas

And for all of our listeners go to BTGvoice.com. You can contact us there. We'll see you on LinkedIn and you can connect with all of our other content there. Thanks for listening to another great episode of Bridge the Gap.