

Holly

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Lucas 00:33

Welcome to Bridge the Gap podcast, the Senior Living podcast with Josh and Lucas. We are at NIC in DC continuing these great conversations. We have a great friend on the show today, Holly Ballarotto, and you are the Chief of Staff at Brandywine Living. Welcome to the show.

Holly 00:50

Thank you. Glad to be here.

Lucas (00:52):

And a fellow future leader council member, if I do say so. And that's the way we really connected. You know, you've been an emerging young leader in this space for a while now. You know, this is something you've actually been at for quite a few years despite being so young and you've had a great climb. You know, your title is something that kind of begs the question. It's an interesting title that you don't really see often in seniors housing, Chief of Staff. What does that all mean?

Holly (01:24):

Sure. So I, I've been in this role for nine years now, so that means this is my ninth fall NIC conference. So it's, but it's been really exciting. The role has certainly evolved since I joined Brandywine, and it's probably worth going back and starting to telling you guys about how I found Brandywine

Lucas 01:41

Sure.

Holly 01:42

I think it's always interesting when you talk to young people in our field, "How did you get into senior living?" Because that's still an issue we're having in attracting talent. So like many people, I kind of fell backwards into it. I was on the hospitality side and had kind of a chance meeting with our CEO Brenda Bacon at a conference actually, and she said, you know, have you ever thought about senior housing? And I said, What? What's that?

Holly (02:04):

So I joined the company then as Chief of Staff. Her [Brenda Bacon] background, she had some involvement in politics, so the title Chief of Staff was very familiar to her, and that's where most people you know, have heard of it.

Lucas 02:14

Sure.

Holly 02:15

But it's becoming more prevalent in the business world. So there's a lot of Chief of Staffs out there, and I think the common theme is that we all wear a lot of hats. So it's really working alongside your Executive or Principal in a variety of ways. And so, you know, I work very closely with Brenda Bacon and our whole executive team, but mostly on operations. But a little bit of everything, you know, looking at development, looking at our ground up construction, a little bit of everything, all the hats.

Josh (02:45):

So you, you said, I wanted to make sure I caught this. So you met Brenda at a conference, but you weren't in senior housing yet, so something drew you to a conference where she was, so tell me about that a little bit more.

Holly (02:57):

Sure. So I was actually doing event planning.

Josh 03:00

Okay.

Holly 03:01

And so my company had been hired by Argentum, which was Alpha at the time, and Brenda was the board chair of Alpha. So I was a background person making something like this happen. And just met her kind of on the floor a little bit and had a couple discussions and one thing led to another and I moved to Philadelphia.

Lucas (03:19):

Wow. That's an incredible story. And we were talking even before we hit record here, what an incredible opportunity for mentorship. Obviously you have the skills and everything else, but that matched with that deep bench of experience in Brenda. You guys are, must really work well together and accomplish a lot at Brandywine.

Holly (03:42):

Yeah, certainly. I mean, just in general, Brenda's just an amazing leader to work for, but you know, you have to, in the Chief of Staff role, you have to have a great relationship with that Principal. So you know, we certainly blur the lines between colleagues, mentor, family, friends but we, you know, can anticipate each other's needs and finish each other sentences, and it's been a really, really great experience working for her.

Josh (04:04):

Well, so you've been involved for years now in great leadership roles. You actually just, thankfully, took some time for us. You and Lucas are on the FLC, the Future Leaders Council - I feel like it's the most covert thing, you guys work on the most cool things, and then we all hear about 'em way after they happen, but you just participated in a bootcamp.

Holly 04:26

Sure.

Josh 04:28

So for the listeners out there that aren't as lucky as like I am to get to talk to you guys on a regular basis, tell the listeners what you guys do with that bootcamp and I mean, you've literally just walked here from there, so it should be fresh on your mind.

Holly (04:40):

Yeah, I ran here. But the bootcamp is something that the FLC and NIC put on together. They've done the senior housing ones for a long time now, and, and we just started a skilled nursing one, so this was the second time we've done a skilled nursing bootcamp and it's geared towards people that are entering the industry. And it's really an interesting mix of people that end up attending, people who are operators that want to get a better understanding of what happens in a transaction and deal. And so what we do is we go through a case study and actually kind of debate what do you think that this person should do in this circumstance? And go through all the different areas of operations and capital stack and everything to consider when you go through that. So it's a really fun, interactive experience for new people entering the industry or people changing the industry or changing their role.

Josh (05:29):

Wow. So for Brandywine and your day job, you wear a lot of hats obviously, as Chief of Staff, I believe that's what we said the title was. What is the pulse of what you're working on right now? I mean, there's so much going on in the industry that we could sit here and talk all day about all the challenges, opportunities and things like that, but what would you say, where is your laser focus with your communities right now? Is it labor, is it occupancy? Like where, where are you spending the majority of your time?

Josh 05:58

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Lucas (06:09):

Yeah. What he said.

Holly (06:11):

Sure. Yeah, it's definitely an interesting time right now, you know, post pandemic, wherever we are with that. And things have changed. But right now my main focus is probably labor. I think the labor market out there is very interesting. And, you know, we had a shortage of healthcare workers before the pandemic. Now we're, you know, post-pandemic where we've experienced burnout. The workforce just hasn't come back. And I think there are a lot of challenges and opportunities that are going on in that right now. And so being the employer of choice is a huge focus of mine and Brandywine.

Josh (06:58):

Well, speaking of that, it seems like, you know, I follow you all, it seems like you're doing amazing things. What are some things that, I'm sure like a lot of operators are trial and error, you know, trying a lot of things, seeing what works in your communities, in your areas. What has been working? Is there anything where you're like, you could give a little bit of skinny to the rest of the operators out there?

Holly (07:19):

If I had the answer, yea, you know, that would be great. But I don't think there is one answer. I think there's a lot of creative things that operators and our partners are doing to attract and retain talent. And there's no one solution, but some of the things we're doing at Brandywine is a focus on flexibility and what tools you have available to you to give that flexibility to your workforce. We've seen, you know, the office industries change, people are working remote and how does that trickle down to frontline workers where they might not have that opportunity, but they need that flexibility and they want, you know, to plan their life and have that available to them. So we've created some tools, some proprietary scheduling platforms that allow our staff to pick up shifts, to trade shifts, to see all the options that are available to them. And part of the reason we're able to do that is because we have a concentrated portfolio of buildings. We'll have several buildings in a market and the staff can, you know, cross train, go to other buildings. And so there's certainly tons of hours available to them to work. So providing the tools to make that happen and keep them in our communities has been something we're working on.

Lucas (08:30):

Well, I got a little bit of a sneak peek to what you're alluding to Holly. When Brenda - you introduced her yesterday during the Future Leader Council meeting - and Brenda took questions - and I do feel like this was one of the bigger takeaways - was the impact that agency fees have on operators and what you guys have been doing, which is pretty much what you've just outlined, is really taking that in house and building out that program to help eliminate that outside agency, not only from a fee level, but also the impact that that has on your culture. Brandywine is very much known for the culture and the lifestyle, your brand. You guys have been amazing with branding. Talk more about that.

Holly (09:14):

Sure. Well, first of all, agency, you know, that's the elephant in the room always. I think we would love to say eliminating agency is on the horizon. I think we also have to be a little realistic in the market right now, that there's always going to be some factor of agency in our communities at some time. You know, that's just the nature of what we do every day, the complications. But you certainly can mitigate that. So we work hard on that and part of that is having a culture, a brand, a workforce that feels recognized and seen. And so you have to be conscious of that when you're looking for employees, hiring employees and giving a job to them and the benefit package you provide. There's so many facets of what you need to think about with your workforce. Again, no one solution, but certainly a lot of things that we can do to enhance that brand and for the employees to know that they're working for someone that cares about them.

Lucas (10:11):

Sure. Well, like you said, there's not one solution that's gonna solve that, and it's complicated and it's gonna take continual efforts. That said, moving past that challenge, what's next for Brandywine? Ground up. I mean, there's a lot of things. There's rates, there's cost, there's increases, materials, shortages or is it acquisition or is it both?

Holly (10:35):

I think there's opportunity for both. You know, I think we're certainly looking at everything. Ground up development is always a preference, you know, just having that control to design the product that you need is always desirable. But we're building in very high, buried, actually markets, so that opportunity is somewhat limited when we find the right ones. But we do have some developments that are underway right now, some repositioning, but I think there's gonna be a lot of opportunity going forward for both.

Lucas (11:05):

And so while you're here at NIC, and we're gonna get you back to your very busy schedule, are those the type of conversations that y'all are having? Capital providers? Deal making? I mean, is that really kind of the center or are you looking at technology and design, things like that?

Holly (11:22):

Yeah, I think NIC is more talking to the capital providers partners, but it's also checking in with other operators. What are you seeing out there? What are you guys feeling? You know, this is a very collaborative industry. As much as we all kind of compete against each other somewhat, you know, there's enough market share for all of us. So we all bring each other along together and I think that's one of the great things about NIC having that opportunity and the senior housing industry especially too.

Josh (11:47):

Well, what an exciting conversation. Thank you for taking time with us. Lucas, we're definitely gonna connect her with all of our audience. You're so connected online anyways, so that's gonna be easy to connect our audience to you.

Lucas (11:58):

Yeah. So much. And Holly, you're a great leader and you know, what a great opportunity, you have to be a great example for young people coming into the business and taking on these leadership roles and impacting. Thanks for taking time with us today.

Holly (12:11):

No, thank you for this platform. I think this is important in talking to a new generation, the next workforce that's coming in. So I love that you guys are doing this. This is such an important medium to address. So thank you for having me.

Josh (12:22):

Thank you.

Lucas 12:23

Oh, our pleasure. And thanks to all of our listeners that are tuning in and getting this great information and thought leadership. Let's not stop the conversation there. Go to [btgvoice.com](http://btgvoice.com), you can download this episode and many more connect with us on social. And we thank you for listening to another great episode of Bridge the Gap.