



Through its innovative whole-person wellness program, Kisco Senior Living has created a wellness culture that fosters community and connect- edness among its staff and residents

This is the final article in a series of 6 profiling the recipients of the 2005 ICAA Industry Innovators Awards. Presented by the International Council on Active Aging® and sponsored by SportsArt Fitness, these awards honor excellence and creativity in the health and wellness field, and recognize organizations that have created cutting-edge active aging programs. In 2005, the awards program expanded to include the Industry Equipment Innovator category.

Healthy Strides: making a difference every day

After Andrew Kohlberg bought his company’s first retirement community in 1990, the founder and president of Kisco Senior Living (originally Kisco Retirement Communities) asked himself 2 things:

- “If my parents were to live in a retirement community, what would I want it to be like?” and
- “How would I want them to be treated?”

These questions—and the ideas they stimulated—became the driving force behind Kisco’s senior living philosophy. This belief system, in turn, has guided the company’s growth and development over the years.

Kisco embraces a “personal approach.” With properties in several states, the Carlsbad, California-based provider has sought to infuse the values of dignity, integrity and compassion into its culture, and to provide “warm, secure and friendly environments.” The focus remains squarely on improving the lifestyle of all older adults who live in

Kisco communities. These properties now span the continuum from independent- and assisted-living facilities to active adult and (with a new property under development) continuing care communities. Company philosophy ensures that management balances the needs of residents, staff and business partners.

For its efforts, Kisco has netted awards for excellence in the workplace and in seniors housing. Healthy Strides, the company’s wellness program, has also garnered honors in the industry—the NuStep Pinnacle Award in 2002 and the ICAA Industry Innovators Award in 2005. Examples of the cutting-edge offerings provided under the Healthy Strides umbrella include theatre troupes and laughter clubs, as well as a behavioral change program for sedentary/inactive individuals and a cognitive fitness program.

Healthy Strides is integral to Kisco’s efforts to enhance the lives of its residents *and* associates (as the company refers to its employees). This program

Five key lessons learned in offering the Healthy Strides program

1. Collaboration between all team members (including vendors, families and resident volunteers) creates a significantly enriched program in which all members feel like owners and partners.
2. Do not overestimate the power of an encouraging smile and stating, “We are here for you,” during the first 3 months of transitioning into a community.
3. The greatest of all your capital is your human capital.
4. Never let chronological age define someone or your view of what that person can and can’t do. You just might be surprised by a 91-year-old surfer or 95-year-old golfer.
5. Teaching people to believe in one’s wellness not only leads to lower blood pressure and increased bone mass, but also enriches the souls of people who, in turn, go out and spread that gift of living well.

embodies the company's commitment to making a difference in people's lives every day, and addresses the needs of individuals in the 6 dimensions of wellness. Discussing the program's innovative nature, Director of Healthy Strides Kirsten L. Tierney explains that at Kisco, "we believe innovation comes from offering creatively designed programs that promote the spirit of independence at all ages and ability levels." She also believes that the program succeeds because it is woven into the company's culture.

The *Journal on Active Aging*[®] recently asked Tierney to describe how and why Healthy Strides was developed, and how the program has changed since its launch in 2000.

JAA: *Please give us a little background about Kisco Senior Living.*

KT: Andrew Kohlberg founded Kisco Retirement Communities, now Kisco Senior Living, in 1990 in an effort to offer a great place to live and enhance the lives of seniors. We have made a conscious decision to control our growth, and believe that the key to our success is maintaining our personal approach and high standards of quality.

Kisco bought the senior living assets of Transamerica Corporation in December 2001. With this acquisition, we have grown to include 24 independent-living, assisted-living and specialized assisted-living communities and apartment homes in California, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, North Carolina and Virginia, featuring more than 3,500 units and 1,700 employees.

JAA: *Why did Kisco initially decide to introduce a whole-person wellness program for residents in its congregate housing communities and seniors apartments?*

KT: In 2001, Kisco Senior Living decided to embark on its commitment to wellness. We believe that happy, healthy and well associates engage residents to become happy, healthy and well. Healthy Strides fosters a sense of community and connectedness to others. It is a way of being. At Kisco, we bring the lifestyle and the belief in one's ability to handle what life has to offer (self-efficacy); you do the living.

JAA: *How did Kisco go about developing the Healthy Strides program?*

KT: Kisco Senior Living partnered with nationally recognized wellness consultant Jan Montague, of Montague, Eippert and Associates, along with industry experts to develop a program that encompassed all 6 dimensions of wellness.

JAA: *Was it important to Kisco to engage residents in the fitness programming first, before expanding into other wellness dimensions?*

KT: No, Kisco believed in the equal importance of all 6 dimensions of wellness from initial concept to role out.

JAA: *How did the residents respond to Healthy Strides after the program was first rolled out? And how has that changed over time?*

KT: The residents had mixed feelings of curiosity and apprehension. This World War II generation had not been exposed to the verbiage *holistic* or *whole-person wellness*. Over time, the philosophy of living well became apparent and the program was embraced. Now our residents move in with the expectation of a wide range of programs to stay physically active, health promotion/education classes, and cultural enrichment.



Two women connect while working on a crafts project.

JAA: *How have Healthy Strides offerings for residents developed in the years since the program's launch?*

KT: The programs now have an increased attention placed on lesson planning and the professional topic of the course. The directors are expected to meet the diverse needs of our residents and their varied experiences and educational backgrounds. These expectations have taken Healthy Strides from simply activities to true wellness programming.

JAA: *What are the components of the Healthy Strides program today?*

KT: Our wellness program continues to have the 6 dimensions at its core. Healthy Strides continues to encourage residents and associates to develop personal health habits and develop in the 6 dimensions

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Men and women socialize on the patio of a Kisco community.

of wellness: emotional, intellectual, physical, spiritual, social and vocational.

JAA: *How have residents benefited from participating in the Healthy Strides program? Have you been able to measure the impact on fitness, for example?*

KT: Presently, all 21 retirement communities have >40% resident participation in the physical dimensions and all properties have >30% participation. We believe that one of the most important measures is resident satisfaction and the success stories we hear from our residents. For example, Jean Pence, age 75, told us:

"I think the program is excellent. When I miss the exercises for a week, I can really tell the difference in how my osteoarthritic hip moves. This is what I looked for when first coming to Abbotswood!"

JAA: *With Healthy Strides, Kisco has created a culture of whole-person wellness in its communities and its headquarters.*

Why did Kisco decide to weave wellness into the fabric of the entire organization? And how has Kisco achieved this objective?

KT: Healthy Strides is successful because it is part of the fabric of our company. The department of Healthy Strides reflects the company philosophy, which we call The Art of Living WellSM. This message starts with healthy living being incorporated into the building design, the products we use, the training we offer, and an environment in which living well is embraced. We believe that happy, healthy associates with happy, healthy residents makes good business sense.

JAA: *What impact has this culture of wellness had on the organization overall? And the relationship between the staff and residents, in particular?*

KT: Overall, we aim to create a positive work environment. Our company principles, values and beliefs (PVBs) are at the core of all we do (see the sidebar on page 81.) Wellness is reflected in

many of the statements in those PVBs. When we encourage independence, it is about the residents' wellness. When we foster a learning environment for our staff, we are addressing their wellness. This state of connectedness is what makes Kisco Senior Living unique.

JAA: *How does each community make the Healthy Strides program its own? And how does Kisco support the program in each location?*

KT: Each community has the ability to customize its programs to meet the customers' needs. It would be presumptuous of the home office to assume we know the individual needs of our residents, knowing the diversity of the locations and the people. We choose to allow those closest to our associates and residents to design a rich environment of programs that fits within the framework provided. This creates a wonderfully diverse program across the company and facilitates best-practice sharing.

JAA: *What key challenges and opportunities has Kisco experienced with the Healthy Strides program over the years? How has the organization responded to these challenges and opportunities?*

KT: A few challenges and opportunities come to mind:

- Staffing is always a key challenge given the comprehensive skill set required. We have responded by hiring a diverse array of talents, from individuals with masters' in Journalism/Communications to masters' in Exercise Physiology, to those with degrees in Music Therapy and Health Promotion.
- It is challenging to understand the differences between the desires of our various customers living in active adult apartments to independent- and assisted-living communities. We have responded by simply asking our



Residents get some exercise through the Healthy Strides program.

residents and having them actively participate in the programming. Additionally, staying in touch with new products and wellness programs arms us with the needed resources to be most effective.

- Engagement and participation in the programs are always a challenge. Personal touch combined with structured attention within the first months of moving in is essential. This early empowerment (to know what the programs are and where they are located) carries over into increased long-term engagement. Also, we believe what gets measured gets managed. So whenever possible we use targets and goals to assist the staff to stay focused on an area such as participation.

JAA: *In Kisco's view, what are the key achievements to date with Healthy Strides?*

KT: From year to year, Kisco Senior Living achieves high satisfaction scores from our residents and associates. Most importantly, our success comes from the ability of our staff and residents to make a difference every day in someone's life. The stories are neverending:

- Residents knit blankets for AIDS babies.
- Associates build homes annually for underprivileged families in Tijuana, Mexico.
- Residents and associates participate in walks for Alzheimer's and breast cancer.
- Residents perform their plays at local skilled nursing homes.

- Residents participate in the Senior Olympics and Senior Games.

This is our most significant achievement, because we have become integrated and part of the greater community in which we live and work. We are committed to spreading the art of living well.

JAA: *What are Kisco's long-term goals for the Healthy Strides program?*

KT: The long-term goals are to continue to deliver on the unique needs of our present and future residents and staff. We look for our associate wellness/worksites wellness programs to expand. We continue to explore all programming, and especially those that use technology, address cognitive fitness, and explore the arts (theatre, music and writing).

JAA: *Looking to the future, how has Healthy Strides prepared Kisco to attract and meet the needs of the Baby Boomers?*

KT: The programs offered by Kisco meet the needs of the present generation of seniors, as well as attract the next generation of Baby Boomers. Each of the highlighted programs has increased awareness in the community about whole-person wellness and the importance to have balance in our lives at any age—but especially as we age. ☺

The Journal on Active Aging® thanks Kirsten Tierney of Kisco Senior Living for her assistance with this article. More information about Kisco is available at www.kiscosl.com.

Photos courtesy of Kisco Senior Living

Kisco's principles, values and beliefs

We are committed to exemplary service delivered with integrity, dignity and compassion. Our communities for seniors are distinguished by warm, secure and friendly environments.

We will enhance each resident's lifestyle by:

- Offering high quality creatively designed programs
- Responding immediately to residents' needs and concerns
- Encouraging independence
- Promoting a sense of community and friendship

We the staff are committed to:

- Teamwork
- Continuous improvement
- Open communication
- Fostering a learning environment
- Being professional
- Profitability

We live by a standard of conduct which encompasses honesty, accountability, personal development and a passion for excellence.

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