



How One Operator Used “Hospitality Mentality” to Reach 100% Occupancy

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Whenever Tom Garvin passes an employee or resident of senior living community Waverly Heights, the CEO and president greets them by their name. It’s part of what Garvin calls the “hospitality mentality” that he brought to the Gladwyne, Pennsylvania-based community following his roles at Walt Disney World and the Four Seasons in Philadelphia. His career path from hospitality and entertainment to hospitality in senior living fulfills his lifelong passion to serve and to make people happy, a pledge that he views as special for this industry.

The personal touch is vital to their operation, and it shows. Waverly Heights is 100% reserved or occupied and has been for years, while the operator boasts a priority membership list that is almost 500 people on it. To Garvin, the hospitality mentality directly correlates to their high occupancy, because when residents and team members enter an environment that adopts a hospitality mentality, they are more likely to want to be there.

“I will never pass anyone in the hallway here without trying to say hello and acknowledging them, and I try to know everybody’s name. Resident, employee. I try to know everybody,” Garvin says. “And that doesn’t cost you anything.”

Knowing everyone’s name is just one part of the experience. Garvin seeks to integrate hospitality principles for every resident and staff member, work he’s doing along with the operator’s foodservice provider Unidine.

“When you create the environment and atmosphere, it’s a place people want to live, a place people want to work and it makes for a much more enjoyable living experience,” Garvin says.

Here is a look at the three steps his community takes to deliver “the hospitality mentality.”

Create venue choices that residents want

From 2017 to 2019, Garvin and the team at Unidine helped to expand the outdoor and al fresco dining setups as part of a continued evolution of the Waverly Heights dining program, providing choice in the dining experience.

“They were ahead of the game on that, and very good at anticipating the needs of the current and future diner,” Garvin says. Those outdoor dining programs were part of a broader trend from Unidine: listening to residents to help make new design choices.

“Things like ‘formal dining’ are becoming less and less important or desired by the resident of today,” Garvin says. “So Unidine helped us with looking at how we allocated our dining room space. There was still a need for formal dining, but what residents in many cases wanted was more casual service dining in an upscale atmosphere with great quality service. So, they helped design spaces where we could accommodate smaller formal dining, larger informal dining programs, and cafe dining that is really very modern.”

Build a unique culinary experience

The changes that Waverly Heights made to its physical dining spaces were accompanied, not surprisingly, by updates to their menu. A new lounge pub brought the opportunity for expanded wine offerings. The cafe dining meant an increase in choices. Moreover, spaces are designed for all sizes of catering events, from small private parties to large groups.

“The physical changes brought expanded variety of food offerings,” Garvin says. “Everything is made right in front of the residents. There are no steam tables. It’s fresh, made-to-order food. They brought in really unique equipment to accommodate an updated and current ever-changing menu.”

As part of its service offering, the dedicated Unidine team members who work directly at Waverly Heights include:

- A director of dining services
- An executive chef
- A resident dietitian
- A pastry chef

“I get tremendous feedback about our food from all levels of the organization, and that’s a reputation that gets out there,” Garvin says. “People know of the many great things of this community, but the food is one that is really highly talked about.”

Crucially, Waverly Heights makes sure that the food quality is the same in assisted living as it is in independent living. Garvin says this is something they are proud of — having the same hospitality and quality focus in health care and personal care areas is just as important.

“The quality of the food in AL or memory care is the same as the food in our residential area,” he says. “That helps people with recovery and gives them something they can look forward to.”

Reduce turnover with improved culture

As Garvin views it, building the right culture and treating everyone with kindness and respect is part of a winning combination for successful outcomes.

“Hospitality is a mentality,” he says. “It’s an action. It’s how people interact with each other. What people can do is hire the right people, train them on hospitality, make expectations clear and emulate the behavior of hospitality-focused, service-minded staff.”

That mentality is the reason that Waverly Heights worked with Unidine to create another key program: feeding staff members.

“We take care of our staff by providing everybody with meals,” Garvin says. “We like to treat our employees like we treat our residents. That helps with turnover and employee engagement as well.”

Waverly has never needed a staffing agency, Garvin says, because their turnover has stayed low, about 12-15% on an annual basis.

“We never really had to cut back on any programs or services in dining thanks to low staff turnover, high staff engagement and satisfaction, and I give Unidine a ton of credit for that,” he says. “It’s not by accident that that type of focus for communities will lead to higher occupancy, stronger quality results, better results on engagement surveys for both residents and employees. It leads to just better outcomes in general.”



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