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Christian Care Communities' Keith Knapp looks toward the future of elderly care

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Keith Knapp spends plenty of time thinking about the elderly.

He reads books about aging — a lot — and keeps abreast of cutting-edge technologies designed to aid those living in their own homes.

Having such knowledge is, after all, part of his job as president and CEO of Christian Care Communities, a 125-year-old operator of retirement and long-term care homes. Based in Louisville, the faith-based, non-profit organization has facilities statewide.

Knapp said institutional care will continue to expand somewhat, but the bigger opportunity is finding ways to help the elderly remain in their own homes — especially given the generation of baby boomers at or approaching retirement age.

Christian Care Communities' current strategy involves working with churches to provide information, resources and, sometimes, services to elderly people in their communities.

The changing demographics are "going to force us to be a little more innovative," he said. "It's not just (about) building more nursing homes."

Thought leader

Industry peers have taken note of Knapp's forward-thinking approach.

As chairman of the board of directors of the Kentucky Association of Homes and Services for the Aging, Knapp has been influential by promoting new ways of providing service to KAHSA clients and residents of homes for the elderly and disabled, said Timothy Veno, president and CEO of the association.



Keith Knapp, CEO of Christian Care Communities, is shown in one of the multi-use rooms at the Friendship House downtown.

PROGRESSIVE AGING

Specifically, he said, Knapp has helped bring to the forefront the idea of developing "smaller, more homelike settings" for residents.

"The nursing home arena has been pretty well stuck in a 1960s, institutional hospital mode," Veno said. "And, I think, through Keith's leadership, he has challenged us to look at things in a transformational way."

Knapp has a collection of rhinoceros figurines as the symbolic proof of his history of pushing for change in his field.

The Rev. Dr. Georgine Buckwalter, director of pastoral care at the Episcopal Church Home, worked with Knapp for about eight years, while Knapp led that organization, and said people gave Knapp the rhinoceroses to recognize his willing-

ness to "charge ahead." He also was willing to take risks, Buckwalter said, and a mantra under his leadership was "it can be different."

'Zest for living'

Charlotte Tharp, vice president of mission and outreach for Norton Healthcare Inc. and chairwoman of Christian Care Communities' board of directors, said Knapp was hired as COO for the organization in 2006 with the idea that he might one day be its CEO. When the position became available, a national search confirmed those expectations.

Tharp said Knapp was chosen for his knowledge and experience of caring for older adults, as well as his passion for improving the quality of life for the elderly.

PROFILE

Knapp seems 'very content in what his mission is in the world'

"He just has a zest for living, loves getting to know everybody and everything he can," she said.

"He's just wonderful at meeting people and making connections and making things happen."

Knapp also has his own brand of humor — one that friends and family describe as "dry" and "obscure."

"He is a punster," Buckwalter said. "I'm a wordsmith myself, and hearing him play with the English language was a delight to me. He's a very funny man."

His unconventional brand of comedy has spawned at least one family tradition. In addition to traditional birthdays, family members also are recognized on their "half birthday" six months later.

Wife Jane Knapp said this generally involves practices such as singing half of the birthday song, sending half a birthday card, serving half a birthday dessert or even giving half a gift if it is something that comes in pairs.

Her husband got others in on the gig, too — one year, daughter Kathryn Broadus received a test from a professor that had been cut in half.

"The professor just looked at her and said, 'Happy half birthday,'" Jane Knapp said.

The family still recognizes half birthdays, she said, including new additions to the family.

"We've got all the half birthdays marked on the calendar," she said. "It's just a fun way to recognize somebody other than the usual, expected times."

Parental influence

Keith Knapp nearly followed the footsteps of his father by pursuing a career in dentistry. Dr. Donald E. Knapp, who died when Keith Knapp was 16, was a professor and chairman of the Department of Oral Biology

at the University of Kentucky, for whom a memorial lecture series was named.

But Keith Knapp found that research "just wasn't people-oriented enough" and decided he did not want to become a clinical dentist. With two electives to go before graduation, he took a course in the psychology of aging.

"That's the first time I really got interested, in a professional way, in (elderly) people."

In other ways, however, his father's influence has stuck.

Keith Knapp called his dad a "unique bird," an anti-war advocate, civil-rights supporter and college professor during the tumultuous 1960s whose influence prompted Knapp to consider alternatives to the status quo.

"I grew up in a household that valued questioning authority," Knapp said.

Knapp said his inclination toward community involvement was instilled in him and his siblings by their father.

He grew up as the oldest of 11 children, and his mother later remarried a widower with six kids of his own.

"You learn a lot about time management, sharing, flexibility and the art of negotiation," Knapp said.

Faith important at work and home

Knapp emphasizes the "faith-based" part of his organization's mission — both with regard to tending to residents' spiritual wellness, but also concerning a sense of purpose for employees. And just as faith is an integral part of his employer's mission, it also is important in Knapp's personal life.

He and his wife, attend Covenant United Methodist Church, in La Grange, where they are involved with the choir and other "churchy stuff," Knapp said. He also volunteers time and serves meals through Residents Encounter Christ, a ministry pro-

BIG BLUE FAITHFUL

Keith Knapp is a church-going man, but he also adheres to another kind of faith — in University of Kentucky athletics. He and wife Jane Knapp have season tickets to UK football and basketball games.

Knapp, who considers himself a "campfire-proficient" guitarist, also plays the harmonica. Specifically, he plays the UK fight song at work — over the intercom — and in the section where they regularly sit at games.

He did the same for his children when they were still in the womb, his wife said.

With Coach John Calipari now at the helm of the men's basketball team, Knapp predicts the team's first Final Four berth in more than a decade.

"I already have my hotel (booked) in Indianapolis," he said. "I'll sell it to somebody if I'm wrong." |

gram for prison inmates.

"Being a servant (and) leader are probably the best two words I could come up with to describe him," his wife said.

Friend Tony Williams, a retired deputy warden for the Kentucky State Reformatory in La Grange, met Knapp nearly 25 years ago, when their sons were in Boy Scouts together.

Together, they helped form Boy Scout Troop 825 for inmates with mental or emotional problems, and Knapp was instrumental in developing a nursing-care facility at the prison, Williams said.

"I think he's really in touch with himself. He's in touch with what he does for a living. ... He just seems to be very content in what his mission is in the world." |

KEITH R. KNAPP

President and CEO, Christian Care Communities

Birth date: May 25, 1955

Residence: La Grange

Hometown: Ann Arbor, Mich.

Family: Jane Knapp, a recently retired teaching assistant for developmentally disabled children; son Kyle Knapp, 29, daughters Kathryn Broadus, 26, and Kerry Knapp, 23

Education: Bachelor's degree in general studies (arts and sciences), University of Kentucky, 1978; master's degree in hospital and health administration, Xavier University, 1980; Ph.D. in gerontology, University of Kentucky, 2005

Professional experience includes: COO, Christian Care

Communities (2006-09); CEO, The Episcopal Church Home of Kentucky (1999-2006); executive director/administrator, Christian Church Home of Louisville (1989-1999)

Other involvement includes: Assistant clinical professor, University of Louisville School of Medicine, Department of Family and Geriatric Medicine; chairman of the board of directors, Kentucky Association of Non-profit Homes and Services for the Aging; education committee chairman, National Association of Boards of Licensure for Long-Term Care Administrators; Kentucky Board of Licensure for Nursing Home Administrators; University of Kentucky Center for Health Management and Research Advisory Council; member, Downtown Louisville Rotary Club |