Kathy Ziegler – President / CEO Visiting Nurse Health System

Leading with Care and Compassion

Growing up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as an only child in a family of modest means, Kathy Ziegler didn’t have a clue that she would grow up to be a nurse - much less the chief executive officer of a $70 million, 900 employee not-for-profit enterprise based in Atlanta, GA. Neither did she expect the many honors and recognition that have come her way over her highly successful 30+year career in public health.

But ask her who had the most influence in shaping the leader she’s become and what she’s accomplished and Kathy will quickly tell you. “I had a very strong maternal influence.” Kathy credits her mother with not only providing her with an early belief in herself – “being all that you can be” – but also with encouraging her to pursue higher education. While her father thought a secretarial path was the right one for her, Kathy followed her mother’s advice which was distinctly different.

A providential path
Four years later, Kathy had defied the odds. With help from her mother and tips she earned from her summer job at a Sears coffee shop - plus a scholarship - Kathy became the first person in her family to graduate from college. She received her Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree with honors in 1969 from Mount Mercy College in Pittsburgh, an all female institution run by nuns.

Perhaps her choice of majors was providential, given the success of her life’s work since then. However, it was really a decision between nursing and teaching - the two dominant careers for women college graduates at the time. Kathy chose nursing. She also felt she benefited tremendously from the liberal arts curriculum to which she was exposed at Mount Mercy. In addition, Kathy received a federal grant in psychiatric nursing during her junior and senior years. She thought this would be her chosen field after college.

Against her parents’ advice, however, Kathy actually responded to a different calling and enrolled in Vista Volunteers, a Peace Corps-like work program and an early indicator of her care and compassion for others.
Awaiting the start of this new role, Kathy relocated to Florida and went to work in a state psychiatric facility - the only thing available in the mental health field.

What happened next would be life-changing for Kathy in several ways. She never made it into the Vista Volunteers’ Program. Instead, she met Myra Lentz who became a role model for her and put her to work as a field nurse in a tough economic area of Ft. Lauderdale. Myra directed her into public health and encouraged her to apply to graduate school. Kathy was accepted into the Masters of Public Health program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1970. Just before leaving Florida, she met a young insurance executive named Richard Ziegler – the man who would become her husband and life partner and the father of her two daughters.
Fast forward to 2002. Kathy and her family have lived in the Atlanta area for the past 28 years. She has been the President and Chief Executive Officer for the Visiting Nurse Health System (VNHS) since 1983 – having begun her career in 1979 as Director of Patient Services. In addition to her role in VNHS, Kathy currently serves on the board of Georgia Health Decisions and the Visiting Nurse Associations of America. She also serves in an advisory capacity for Emory University’s Rollins School of Public Health and UNC at Chapel Hill’s School of Public Health. Among her many honors are YWCA Women of Achievement, 1992, Georgia Trend Magazine’s “Women in Leadership,” December, 1995, and Business to Business Magazine’s “Divas of Atlanta’s Business World,” June / July 1998. She’s also “super wife and mom” to her husband and daughters.

Another measure of Kathy’s impact is reflected in the VNHS 2001 Annual Report. Some compelling highlights of the organization’s accomplishments under her leadership include serving over 22,000 patients, making more than 249,000 patient visits, providing over 38,000 days of hospice care, and completing more than 35,000 equipment deliveries and service calls, and furnishing over 20,000 hours of in-home respite care to Alzheimer’s patients in metropolitan Atlanta and across the state of Georgia. Equally compelling is the fact that the organization has operated in the black for the first time in three years following the drastic cuts in Medicare reimbursements by 45% and has launched a $20 million Capital Campaign to restore fiscal stability and to endow the in-home hospice program and the Hospice Atlanta facility.

What’s really impressive, however, is what’s behind these impressive numbers and accomplishments. It’s a leader who credits her team of professionals and volunteers for the organization’s success, who recognizes their courage and determination each and every day. Describing her view of leadership, Kathy said, “The most effective leaders hire the right people, create the environment that allows people to be all they can be, hold them accountable and support them, and back off to let them do their jobs. Assembling the right team is what makes the difference.”

To serve all patients regardless of economic state is one major decision Kathy, her board, and her leadership team have made together and have stood by through turbulent times. She believes this commitment has actually made the organization stronger, more efficient and a smarter company overall.

“VNHS could be much more financially successful,” Kathy continues, “if we only took paying clients, but that’s not who we are and it’s not reflective of our values. By the same token, we’re not going to be left serving only the poor and needy. What we want is to be the choice provider because we do what we do best.”

Given the character, courage, competence, and compassion that Kathy Ziegler possesses both as a leader and as an individual citizen, it seems very likely that VNHS will continue
to deliver on their promise to treat every patient as family and to help them maintain their independence and remain comfortable at home.

By Susan B. Hitchcock
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