

Nurse's health care vision crosses companies and world

By LINDA FRIEDEL
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After operating a consulting business for several decades, Kathy Dodd found another way to segue nursing into the marketplace.

"We've been following it as an industry for a long time," said Dodd, RN, MHA, chief executive officer and founder of The Corridor Group, Inc. and partner with LifeWise Renovations.

In addition to founding and operating The Corridor Group, advisors for home care and hospice, Dodd applied her nursing and entrepreneurial expertise to LifeWise Renovations, a remodeling company her husband, Mike, founded. Together, they developed a division at LifeWise addressing needs of people who navigate life in wheelchairs, walkers and/or with diseases causing deficits in all manners of functions. Between the recession and the future of healthcare, the Dodds decided to combine resources to serve people with disabilities and a growing population of Americans who are living longer.

"Remodel for life," she said. "We're really trying to brand that."

Dodd said a Gallup Poll determined that 98 percent of the American population wants to stay home as they age, so LifeWise addressed that. Instead of individuals feeling like their only option is to move into an assisted living facility costing thousands of dollars for a monthly stay, Dodd wanted to offer an alternative solution, and one that could be more effective in the long-run.

By retro-fitting doorways and installing adaptive fixtures and appliances, people can remain independent in their homes with a one-time cost, she said. With new options in home designs, aging people and people with disabilities can remain independent with the comforts of home, she said. Not only that, but with a little tweaking, guests, such as older parents and extended families with disabilities, will benefit from added safety features.

"Make certain a home still looks like a home," Dodd said. "It doesn't have to look institutional."

The Dodds hired occupational therapist Debbie Hartzler to make evaluations and propose changes with designers when they meet in clients' homes. Hartzler, who brings 30 years of acute and rehabilitation care to the table, said patients through the years have told her they want to stay in their homes as they age. She said pairing Kathy's medical expertise and Mike's remodeling experience make for a one-of-a-kind service.

"It's unique," she said. "There's nobody that's got them married like we do."

Hartzler said she and three other employees are Certified Aging-in-Place Specialists (CAPS), which gives clients an added value.



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Clients seeking adaptive home measures can view photos of bathrooms and kitchens in LifeWise Renovations' showroom. Debbie Hartzler, left, occupational therapist, visits with clients in their homes to help find adaptive solutions for people who use wheel chairs and walkers. Center, Kathy Dodd, RN, MHA helped to launch the medical division at LifeWise. Katy Dodd, right, is director of business development.

"That just means there's a commitment and knowledge base," Hartzler said.

Hartzler also works with clients to finance their medical makeovers. Clients range from veterans accessing federal funding to people with disabilities seeking low-cost loans for adaptive services, or others pursuing home equity loans, construction loans. Some finance the projects out of pocket, she said. Hartzler said they work within the clients' means, creating makeovers ranging from a Volkswagen to Cadillac design in the industry.

"You have to weigh the costs," Hartzler said. "People do different things."

Bathroom remodels include toilets for wheelchair transfers and sinks people can reach. Zero entryways for showers allow walkers and wheelchairs to roll uninterrupted. Strategically mounted grip bars add safety and grace. Dishwashers, freezers and refrigerators are within a wheelchair driver's reach and sensor faucets, like magic, give water with a finger's touch. Adaptive kitchen appliances cost the same as conventional appliances, Dodd said, so why not install them for your future needs?

"There is a return on the investment," Dodd said. "It's thinking outside the box."

Dodd said aging boomers are not willing to settle for their future homes in the same way as their parents' generation. They expect more from health care and their lifestyle, she said.

"I call us bossy," Dodd said. "We know what we want. What my parents are willing to put up with, I am not willing to put up with."

Dodd said she has always thought outside the box and

stretched her entrepreneurial spirit throughout her career. Early on, after several years as a floor nurse, Dodd initiated and developed a home health care division at Liberty Hospital before founding her own home health care consulting firm. She grew the company nationally, then internationally to Turkey, where she launched the country's first home health care company.

"I'm always scanning and moving," she said. "I can't turn it off."

Dodd said she is never satisfied with the status quo. She looks at spaces in her own home and relatives' homes the same way as she looks at the future of health care. It can always be improved, she said. For people facing chronic diseases such as Parkinson's or multiple sclerosis or other chronic conditions such as back surgery, diabetes or arthritis, she sees the affordable health care act in place, but deficient.

"The home adaptation piece is missing," Dodd said.

When Dodd took a three-month sabbatical from The Corridor Group to look at medical options for LifeWise she asked the question, why not us? She researched the market and applied nursing skills, home health care and risk.

"Why not us pioneer a medical model inside a construction model?" she said. "Pioneering an idea in a region that didn't exist."

In the next quarter, Dodd said she plans to take the company to the next level, offering franchises across the country.

"The sky is the limit," she said. "It's just one's willingness to be future-thinking."

Katy Dodd, Kathy's daughter, is director of business development in the family-run business. Katy said Kathy has received national recognition for advances she has made in health care as an entrepreneur.

"She is invaluable what she brings to the company," Katy said. "She's just really driven. She wants to help people."

Mike said blending the medical component with remodeling was a natural progression for LifeWise. He said they were looking for a niche market.

"It seemed to be a perfect adjunct to what we did," Mike said.

He said Kathy's guidance and input was a critical factor making that leap of faith in this marketplace. He said he couldn't do it without her breadth of knowledge in the home health care.

"I see her role expanding as time goes on," he said. "We're extremely grateful for her input and insight she's had."

Hartzler said Kathy's approach is holistic and practical. She is someone who looks at a more global picture, Hartzler said.

"She's a visionary," Hartzler said. "She has the ability to see the needs and find solutions. She has the tenacity and the guts to go for it."