

*Mather CEO Mary Leary sees the future of the Evanston, Illinois-based organization as 'helping people recognize that senior living offers one of the best options for Aging Well'*

# Mary Leary:

## Fueling forward-thinking 'next practices' at Mather and beyond

**This 2022 ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award winner guides her organization in creating 'Ways to Age Well'**

*by Julie King, MS*

*Launched in 2019, the ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award today highlights "Best in Wellness" communities, community centers and CEOs. The "Wellness CEO" category, introduced in 2022, honors five leaders that demonstrate outstanding dedication to fostering a thriving wellness culture in a senior living community or community center. Beginning with the last Journal on Active Aging® issue, this article series illuminates how organizational successes with wellness reflect the leadership of these award-winning*

*CEOs. Upcoming issues will spotlight three more leaders.*

After a fortuitous beginning, Mary Leary has dedicated her 30-year career to changing the narrative regarding senior living communities and the people who live within them. For more than two decades, she has applied her passion and talent as president and CEO of Mather, an 82-year-old not-for-profit organization headquartered in Illinois.

With locations in Evanston and Wilmette and in Tucson, Arizona, plus a new Tysons, Virginia, community opening in 2024, Mather has a capacity for 2,200 residents

*Continued on page 46*





# Mary Leary: Fueling forward-thinking ‘next practices’ at Mather and beyond

*Continued from page 44*



*Opening in 2024, The Mather in Tysons, Virginia, includes natural elements and patterns in its design (as seen in this indoor pool rendering) to prioritize wellness*

and a 750-person staff, plus an endowment totaling USD\$876 million. The organization has earned more than 350 awards and honors, including multiple ICAA NuStep Beacon and Pinnacle Awards.

Adding to Mather’s accolades is a 2022 ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award in the “Wellness CEO” category, presented to Leary. This award recognizes a chief executive’s exceptional leadership and commitment to a wellness culture in a senior living community or community center.

“A CEO has a tremendous impact on the adoption and implementation of a wellness culture, and the Pinnacle Award honors the best of the best,” says Colin Milner, founder and CEO of the International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA). “Mary Leary has been a powerful trailblazer and a tireless advocate who continues to influence the industry.”

## **A person-centric wellness model**

When it comes to industry impact, Alonzo Mather, the legacy behind Mather, was an early influencer. A humanitarian, inventor and entrepreneur, he identified wellness as a key component of his vision for one of the nation’s first continuing care retirement communities (now called life plan communities) in Evanston, a Chicago suburb.

“Wellness is our reason for being at Mather, and it’s definitely the most exciting aspect of senior living today,” Leary points out.

Mather defines wellness as “the individual and collaborative process of engaging in behaviors and decisions that enable people to achieve personal wellness goals and foster wellness citizenship.” Wellness citizenship is “one’s responsibility to contribute

to community and societal well-being, and the wellness of fellow citizens.”

At Mather, wellness citizenship plays out through a systems lens, with a focus on the individual, community and society. At the individual level are personal interests, values, beliefs and attitudes; the community level encompasses social networks and neighborhood resources; and the society level consists of culture, politics and economy. This comprehensive approach underscores that wellness is determined not just by individual choices, but also by community and societal factors that influence access to experiences, resources and relationships.

Guided by a vision to foster “an equitable society in which all older adults find wellness opportunities and resources to thrive within their communities,” Mather is laser-focused on its mission to create “Ways to Age Well<sup>SM</sup>.”

The organization uses its Person-Centric Wellness Model,<sup>1</sup> developed by research-focused Mather Institute, “as a compass in designing and implementing new initiatives, programs and services,” Leary says. Based on the institute’s research that people are more likely to benefit from a wellness offering when they choose it, when their efforts involve engagement with others, and when they feel like they can succeed, the model has three drivers:

- *Autonomy*—control and personal choice
- *Affiliation*—connection to others
- *Achievement*—sense of accomplishment on the individual’s terms

“Mather’s Person-Centric Wellness Model suggests that wellness is not about addressing specific dimensions of wellness, but about our collective responsibility to create conditions in which wellness is most likely to occur—that is, autonomy, affiliation and achievement,” Leary explains. “Because wellness is personal for everyone, each individual can choose which dimensions are most important personally.”

## Practices to support growth

To encourage residents in exploring wellness, Mather incorporates a philosophy of “Eliminating My Impossibilities” and employs a Possibilities Team of professionals. The organization also measures resident “willingness to try new things” and “improvements in wellness.” And recognizing the importance of employee wellness, communities offer team members wellness initiatives customized to their location.

A Mather committee strives to engage team members with wellness goals of “providing access to movement/fitness; supporting mental health; and focusing on self-care in the workplace.” Team members also receive reimbursement to assist with their individual wellness pursuits, Leary says.

Parallel to its resident approach, Mather measures the extent to which team members try new things and achieve sustained improvements in wellness. In 2023, the organization purchased a subscription to a leading digital wellness platform, enabling all team members to access customized fitness classes, recipes and menu plans. Trying new things is also part of Mather’s DNA. Numerous wellness pilot programs are underway, including Food and Drug Administration-approved electrical muscle stimulation suits to support building and toning muscles.

Significantly, residents benefit from further support the organization has built into its overall wellness approach to help them overcome barriers and achieve successes.

## Wellness in action

At Mather, a key component of the Person-Centric Wellness Model is wellness coaching. In this journey of self-discovery, residents meet one-on-one with their coaches to develop a personal wellness plan, while also participating in a nine-week group experience. The coach helps them identify individual wellness goals (autonomy); connect with others within a group format (affiliation); and build upon strengths and



*In Tucson, Arizona, a staff member and resident use percussive therapy at Splendido at Rancho Vistoso, a collaboration between Mather and Plaza Companies*

enhance specific aspects of wellness and lifestyle balance (achievement).

“We have found that our communities’ programs, forms of expression, and rituals of connection are successful precisely because they support autonomy, affiliation and achievement, and impact both individual and system well-being,” Leary notes.

Promoting a sense of community and social connectedness is a top priority in Mather’s wellness culture. Leary gives the example of using attendance to measure engagement, as often happens in the industry. “Just sitting in a seat alongside neighbors does not mean that residents feel a spirit of belonging,” she says. “Designing for connection means intentional consideration of technology used, facilitators trained to host programs and guide reflective discussions, and engagement enhanced through

environment such as chairs set up in rows or semicircles,” she explains.

Mather also looks beyond happy hours and garden parties to create rituals of connection. “We recognize the importance of coming together to experience or create music, dance, poetry, art and storytelling,” Leary adds, “so we use the arts as a tool for connection, communication and cultural contribution, not just recreation.”

Through its signature “Culture of Creativity” in its Life Centers (continuum of living), the organization also integrates creative cultural experiences and diverse forms of expression into programs to help residents adapt to personal physical or cognitive changes. “Moving to a higher level of care should offer more gains than losses, including opportunities for more

*Continued on page 48*



# Mary Leary: Fueling forward-thinking ‘next practices’ at Mather and beyond *Continued from page 47*



*Mather shares research-based #AgeWell Tips on a potpourri of topics with subscribers and through social media channels*

intimate and personalized experiences,” Leary believes. “Here, residents are not just consumers, but creators of culture; they’re participants in the human experience, not just recipients of care.”

Beyond internal programming, Mather demonstrates its commitment to the industry through efforts such as:

- spearheading a national initiative with LeadingAge to rename the industry category from continuing care retirement communities to life plan communities, which took effect in 2015<sup>2</sup>
- engaging other senior living providers in a wellness coaching pilot program developed in 2021 in collaboration with Wake Forest University and Virginia Tech
- joining The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and Georgetown

University in 2022–2023 to focus on a national conversation to advance creativity as a strategy for wellness and Aging Well

Additionally, in June 2020, with COVID isolating and worsening wellness for so many people, Mather partnered with Chautauqua Institution, a nonprofit education center in New York, to better reach and serve the nation’s 55+ demographic. The partnership had three primary components: “connecting communities for enriching online engagement; conducting research to inform services and support to adults 55+; and sharing research findings via online programming.”<sup>3</sup> Among ongoing joint activities, Chautauquans serve on research panels and participate in research initiatives that Mather Institute develops with partners.

## Research and measurement

Founded in 1999, Mather Institute today is a research resource and innovation incubator. The institute not only is the basis for the Person-Centric Wellness Model, but also collaborates with universities—Cornell, Virginia Tech and the University of California, Los Angeles, among others—to implement and disseminate wellness research that informs programming and identifies trends and opportunities.

For example, the longitudinal “Age Well Study,”<sup>4</sup> conducted with Northwestern University, surveyed more than 8,000 older adults over five years. This research study showed that residents of life plan communities report better physical, emotional, intellectual, social and vocational wellness than their community-dwelling counterparts.

Those results can be attributed in part to Mather’s goals for its life plan communities in creating Ways to Age Well:

- *Impact/Depth.* Strengthen Mather’s effect on how individuals Age Well and organizations contribute to Aging Well.
- *Significance/Breadth.* Expand Mather’s reach and build recognition as a leader in creating Ways to Age Well.
- *Sustainability/Endurance.* Maximize mission-driven activities while maintaining a sound financial foundation.

Examples of wellness metrics for each of these goals include percentage of residents achieving improvements in wellness (impact), number of organizations participating in Mather Institute research (significance), and percentage of residents achieving sustained improvements in wellness (sustainability).

Mather also considers traditional key performance indicators, such as resident falls and hospital readmission rates, but emphasizes its Person-Centric Wellness Model assessment tool. This tool measures support for autonomy, affiliation and achievement. It also assesses wellness program participa-



*Boy Scouts and residents work on art at Mather Place in Wilmette, Illinois*

tion and psychological resources such as optimism, life satisfaction, and purpose.

“This comprehensive set of measures enables us to continually assess core aspects of wellness,” Leary says, “along with areas in which we may wish to invest additional resources or pursue new opportunities.”

### **Investment and impact**

Mather’s entire budget is dedicated to wellness, according to Leary. In 2022, approximately USD\$20 million from Mather’s endowment was contributed to enhance the lives of older adults, with USD\$1 million given as financial assistance to residents of its senior living communities. The organization spends USD\$2 million annually on Mather Institute wellness initiatives, along with USD\$5 million each year on wellness programs for older adults living in the community-at-large.

The investments result in broad outreach. In 2022, Mather reports impacting 40,000

older adults directly and nearly 122,000 indirectly (e.g., Facebook followers, subscribers to Mather’s Age Well Tips, and virtual participants in Mather DIT [Do-It-Together] creative arts programs).

But this is just the beginning, Leary contends. Looking forward, she is focused on expanding Mather’s reach and supporting the wellness needs of diverse and underserved populations. The organization continues to prioritize evidence-based wellness research and to share information with senior living and senior services providers.

For that reason, Mather Institute is launching a five-year study of 2,500 Generation X-ers (born 1965–1980) to explore their lifestyle trends, attitudes and interests. Results from “Forecasting the Future: Five Years of Insights from the NeXt Generation” will help inform programming, ser-

*Continued on page 50*

### **Offerings by Mather: a sampling of wellness programs, initiatives and services**

- Musician-in-Residence—offering a variety of intimate musical experiences, such as meditation with a live cello performance
- Collaboration with NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center and the National Philharmonic—highlighting the relationship between science, the arts and wellness, and culminating in a virtual exhibition at the world premiere of *Cosmic Cycles: A Space Symphony* in spring 2023 (see “Resources” on page 50)
- Technology experiences:
  - InBody—body composition testing to inform a personalized fitness plan
  - TheraBody—percussive therapy, vibration rolling, and compression to relieve muscular tension and boost circulation
  - Wellness Binaural Vibroacoustic Technology Wave Bed—Quantum-Harmonic-Sound therapy to support mindfulness, meditation and deep relaxation through oscillation massage and audio frequencies
- Volunteer initiatives—participating in environmental action and Connections for the Homeless, supporting local food banks and animal shelters, mentoring students, and collecting toys for children in foster care
- Community-at-large—providing online programs for nonresident older adults, including fiber arts, yoga, creative mindfulness, brain health and more



# Mary Leary: Fueling forward-thinking ‘next practices’ at Mather and beyond

*Continued from page 49*



*The Saluté Spa provides spa and salon services for residents of Splendido at Rancho Vistoso life plan community in Tucson, Arizona*

vices and spaces for this upcoming resident population. Additionally, the institute is conducting its fourth study of diverse populations—this one with the University of Illinois Chicago, entitled “Positive Aging Among Black Older Adults.”

Leary is proud of what Mather has accomplished. “We’ve been steadfast in our passion to support older adults to Age Well and advance wellness within the industry,” she says. “Mather’s future is helping people recognize that senior living offers one of the best options for Aging Well.”

Motivated by the industry’s ongoing evolution, Leary adds, “We will continue to inspire industry ideas through analysis of trends and critical thinking that fuels new wellness ‘next practices,’ and thereby provide better experiences for older adults and those who serve them. We have the opportunity to take our organizations to new heights,” she states, “and to help current

## Resources

### Internet

**ICAA NuStep “Best in Wellness” Awards (Beacon and Pinnacle Awards)**  
<https://beaconaward.icaa.cc>

**International Council on Active Aging (ICAA)**  
[www.icaa.cc](http://www.icaa.cc)

**Mather**  
[www.mather.com](http://www.mather.com)

**Mather Institute**  
[www.matherinstitute.com](http://www.matherinstitute.com)

**Mather Institute: Age Well Study**  
[www.matherinstitute.com/agewellstudy/](http://www.matherinstitute.com/agewellstudy/)

**NuStep, LLC**  
[www.nustep.com](http://www.nustep.com)

### Partner websites

**Chautauqua Institution**  
[www.chq.org](http://www.chq.org)

**The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts**  
[www.kennedy-center.org](http://www.kennedy-center.org)

**NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center**  
[www.nasa.gov/goddard](http://www.nasa.gov/goddard)

**National Philharmonic Orchestra: Cosmic Cycles**  
<https://nationalphilharmonic.org/cosmic-cycles/>

### Multimedia

**NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center: Scientific Visualization Studio**  
*Cosmic Cycles: A Space Symphony*

(Released May 15, 2023. Updated May 16, 2023.)  
<https://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/14341>

### Print

The editors. (2022). ICAA NuStep “Best in Wellness” award-winners revealed for 2022. *Journal on Active Aging*, 21(6), 22–25. Available free with login to International Council on Active Aging members in the “Articles” library [“Wellness articles,” “Business profiles” category] at [www.icaa.cc](http://www.icaa.cc)

Mather Institute. (2020). *Coaching Review: Older Adults’ Motivators and Barriers to Holistic Wellness and Wellness Coaching Participation*. Available at <https://information.matherinstitute.com/wellness-coaching-older-adults-motivators-and-barriers>

and upcoming generations embrace healthy living through wellness.”

It’s an exhilarating time to be a leader in the active-aging industry, and Leary remains as excited today as when she began her career. “Because wellness is unique to each individual, senior living provides innumerable opportunities to innovate,” she says. “The sky is the limit!”

*Julie King, MS, has been a certified group exercise instructor and personal trainer for more than 25 years. She holds multiple certifications and a master’s degree in science (kinesiology). Over her career, King has led virtually every class format—including indoor cycling, mat pilates, yoga, kickboxing, boot camp and aquatics—at commercial health clubs, corporate fitness centers, wellness centers, schools and online. She also has served as a fitness director, fitness/wellness coordinator, health club manager and a contributing editor for Club Business International magazine. King has been published in Club Industry, Club Solutions, Campus Recreation, National Fitness Trade Journal, Recreation Management and Fitness Management. She can be reached at [julie.king1@comcast.net](mailto:julie.king1@comcast.net)*

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2. The editors. (2015, November 1). LeadingAge: Start saying “life plan community” instead of CCRC. *McKnight’s Long-Term Care News*. <https://www.mcknights.com/news/leadingage-start-saying-life-plan-community-instead-of-ccrc/>
3. Chautauqua Institution and Mather. (2020, June 22). Chautauqua Institution and Mather announce partnership. <https://www.chq.org/announcements/chautauqua-institution-and-mather-announce-partnership/>
4. Mather Institute. (2017, January 11). Older adults can #agewell using social media tips. <https://www.matherinstitute.com/about-us/in-the-news/older-adults-can-agewell-using-social-media-tips/>

Images courtesy of Mather



Resident artists created artwork for Mather’s collaboration with NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center and the National Philharmonic in spring 2023

## Passion uncovered and unleashed

Mary Leary didn’t intentionally set out on a career in senior living. A summer internship during graduate school proved consequential for Leary, who had earned a bachelor of science in health services administration from Cornell University and a master of science in health policy and management from Harvard University’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

At the internship, Leary’s supervisor left the company to join a real estate development firm, which intrigued her. So she applied for a real estate development job advertised in the *Washington Post*. Oxford Development Corporation was starting a senior living division, had never met anyone with her educational and professional background, and hired her as product manager.

“The rest is history,” Leary reflects. “I fell in love with the industry and have never looked back!”

Before joining Mather in 2002, Leary also was chief operating officer of Classic Residence by Hyatt, the senior living affiliate of Hyatt Corporation. She oversaw

the start-up and operations of 18 Classic Residence senior living communities with 6,000 residents, along with communities under development.

Today, Leary serves as a member of the Executive Board of the American Seniors Housing Association, the Operator Advisory Board of the National Investment Center, and the Advisory Board of the Cornell Institute for Health Futures. She also served on the Board of Caring Communities and until recently chaired its Risk Committee.

To enhance the industry beyond Mather, Leary founded Novare® in 2012, a national consortium of single-site and small-system life-plan community providers that exchanges ideas, advances current applied research, and defines best and next practices in senior living.

“This is not a mature industry, so opportunity for innovation abounds,” Leary observes. “And continually changing consumer profiles demand new approaches, which keeps my creative juices flowing.”