

Peter Thompson:

Transforming a bold vision into an impactful reality

This 2022 ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award-winning CEO introduces the next generation of community centers and looks back at what it took to develop the award-winning Center at Belvedere, recognized in the Pinnacle's Community Center category

by Julie King, MS

In 2022, the ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award recognized "Best in Wellness" senior living communities, community centers and CEOs. The award expanded that year to include Wellness CEO and Community Center categories to honor five leaders and five community centers, respectively, that embody an exceptional commitment to a thriving well-

ness culture. This Journal on Active Aging® article is the third in a series highlighting the winners in the Wellness CEO category. Upcoming issues will spotlight two further award-winning executives.

Founded in 1960 as the Senior Center Inc. in Charlottesville, Virginia, this self-supporting, nonprofit operates a community center where older adults establish connections, challenge themselves to grow, and contribute to the local area. To continue accomplishing this life-changing work for a growing older-adult population, the organization's small, institutional building was replaced in April 2020 by a 47,000-sq.-ft. modern facility on six acres. The new Center at Belvedere is recognized as a

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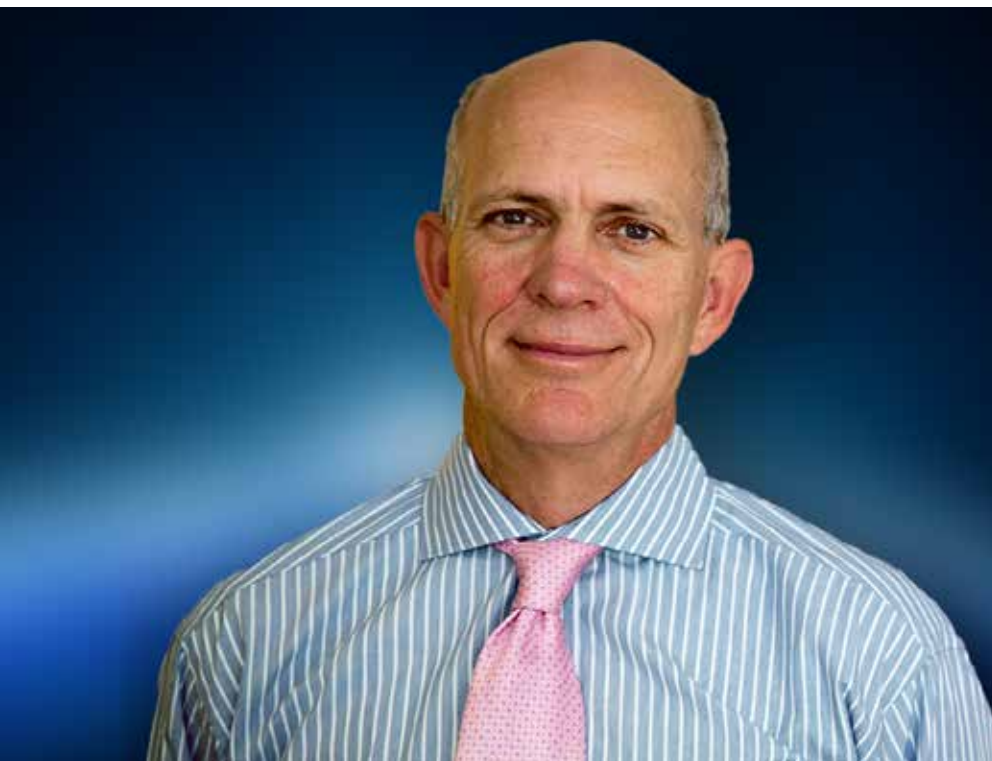
Members gather for karaoke twice a month in the atrium at The Center at Belvedere in Charlottesville, Virginia





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“The Center at Belvedere was designed to build bridges, particularly across generations, and our community hub will help fight ageism and create a more just society,” contends Peter Thompson. “Today, it is achieving what we envisioned and more...”

model of innovation based on multidimensional wellness.

[Ed. The *Journal on Active Aging*[®] previously profiled The Center at Belvedere in an article featured in 2022’s Issue 2. Later that year, the ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award program named The Center as the top-ranked winner in its first-ever Community Center contest. For more, refer to the “Resources” box on page 33 and see the sidebar on page 35.]

Leading the long journey to the striking transformation into The Center at Belvedere is Peter Thompson. He dedicated 24 years to fulfilling this vision to create an exceptional environment for healthy aging through social engagement, physical well-being, civic involvement, creativity and lifelong learning. Winner of a 2022 ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award in the new Wellness CEO category, Thompson shared his experience at The Center with the *Journal*

on Active Aging[®], now as its outgoing executive director. [Ed. Thompson has retired as of press time.]

“We applaud Peter’s invaluable contributions to the active-aging industry and are inspired by his perseverance and enthusiasm in re-imagining the possibilities of community centers,” says Colin Milner, founder and CEO of the International Council on Active Aging[®] (ICAA). “As the older-adult population grows, the impact of his efforts will expand throughout North America and beyond.”

The birth of a vision

Thompson’s career didn’t begin in parks and recreation, aging services, or nonprofits. Earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in history from the University of Virginia, he started his career in hospitality, and then led philanthropic development in public broadcasting. But he knew those were just stepping stones. “My goal was to leverage

my for-profit management and leadership experience to lead a nonprofit,” he recalls. “I wanted to make my avocation for community service into my vocation.”

While volunteering for a small local senior center, Thompson had a revelation that led him to the executive director position at Senior Center Inc. in September 1999. “I always saw older adults pushed to the margins, but I also knew that the face of aging was changing,” he reflects. “The Senior Center was a perfect fit for me—a healthy, established organization that still had lots of untapped potential. I quickly recognized that it could play a role in helping society see aging in a different light.”

To help fulfill this mission, Thompson earned his Master of Public Administration in nonprofit management from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2003. Why pursue the advanced degree? “While I had 10 years of mid- and top-level experience in the private sector, I thought this MPA program would provide context and skills around nonprofit management,” he says, “and it did prove valuable.”

In 2005, the Senior Center team studied the projected demographic growth of the local area and realized that its facility was too small to accommodate the booming number of older adults in the future. Participants and staff also recognized that the existing spaces were outdated and not designed to offer programs for all dimensions of wellness. “We had committed to ICAA’s Dimensions of Wellness model, so our Board of Directors, team and other stakeholders knew we had to build not just a new, larger facility, but a radically different one,” Thompson states.

So Senior Center leaders, Board members and participants dedicated five years to researching how best to design the new facility. As the chairperson of the National Institute of Senior Centers’ (NISC) New Models of Senior Centers task force, Thompson visited many senior and community centers across the United States.

He noticed that high-quality facilities typically led to higher-quality programs.

“We engaged community leaders from the local municipalities and nonprofit and business partners to fine-tune our vision,” he notes. “We also tapped international thought leaders like Colin (Milner) to learn what the most forward-thinking communities were doing to build a better future.”

What emerged was the concept of an age-friendly and ageless space that truly was multi-generational, where people of all ages could interact naturally and create relationships.

“American society segregates itself far too much and in too many ways,” Thompson suggests. “We all win when different groups engage with one another, and I think senior centers that serve a broader community will be our future.”

A decade in development

It took 10 years from the time a site for the new facility was identified until the new building actually opened due to the endurance and people power needed for the ambitious USD\$17-million capital campaign. It was the biggest local nonprofit philanthropy effort at that time, Thompson shares.

“It was a long time to keep up the energy of a capital campaign, so we scaled the project into two phases and fed our local image of being a world-class community that expects only the best, which resonated with many local philanthropists,” Thompson explains. “They tend to be inspired by ambitious plans, and this kept them interested and connecting us to their networks.”

These same local philanthropists also encouraged the fundraising team to seek capital investment from the city and county, even though the Senior Center previously hadn’t accepted government funding. Both the city and county provided one-time investments.

Along the way, the campaign periodically slowed down, but engaging the team at

every step of planning encouraged excitement and persistence. “We asked ourselves if the project was not what the community actually needed and if we needed to change course,” Thompson recalls. “But no one ever said it wasn’t needed, only perhaps it was overly ambitious—so we persevered. We never felt like giving up.”

The Center’s USD\$24-million development budget was ultimately funded 60% through private philanthropy, 10% through local municipal investments, 10% from the sale of the original building and the remaining 20% from a 20-year loan.

Thompson acknowledges it was understandably challenging to run the Senior Center while simultaneously building a new model. Hiring a finance director and adding program and facility staff helped maintain high-quality operations while he was pulled in many directions.

To stave off stress, he took up running early in the project. “It’s not an exaggeration to say that my running coach and friends deserve as much credit as anyone in helping this project reach fruition,” Thompson admits.

His executive coach also saw that she could play a part in keeping him going throughout the long undertaking. After a few years, she stopped charging a fee because she bought into the vision for The Center.

Joining a leadership circle with five other nonprofit executives, Thompson called it “a lifeline that gave me additional allies and sounding boards.” And his national network through ICAA and the National Council on Aging’s (NCOA) NISC was a vital support system as well.

Opening during a global pandemic

The Center at Belvedere was scheduled to open April 1, 2020, just two weeks after most of the United States shut down due to the advancing novel coronavirus. Suddenly, this new contemporary community hub

was lacking the most important players—the in-person community.

“The immediate impact of all our revenue streams declining or zeroing out caused our Board to consider multiple scenarios, which included possible major furloughs,” Thompson explains. “Fortunately, our team did a fantastic job of adapting and figuring out how to meet our mission in new ways. We moved to all-virtual programming within days.”

In June 2020, concerned about the effects of prolonged social isolation on older adults, the staff at The Center began hosting limited in-person activities. The first week included one morning and one afternoon program, and then programs were gradually added as more people began to participate.

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Resources

Internet

Bushman Dreyfus Architects
<https://bdarchitects.com/>

The Center at Belvedere
<https://thecenterville.org/>

Print

Larkin, M. (2022). The Center at Belvedere: Reinventing the senior center, breaking stereotypes. *Journal on Active Aging*, 21(2), 52–62. Available to ICAA members in the “Articles” library [search keyword *Belvedere*] at www.icaa.cc

Oldenburg, R. (1999). *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. Boston, MA: Da Capo Press (now part of Hachette Book Group)

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A 'hardy band of shovel-wielders' took part in the November 7, 2018, groundbreaking for The Center at Belvedere. Joining Peter Thompson were the project's architects, builder and project manager, plus Center and community leaders. After the brief ceremony, celebrations continued at the Senior Center Inc. building

"It helped that we had a new facility with high-quality air handling systems, large indoor spaces to socially distance and sizable outdoor areas," Thompson points out.

Over time, more people also began gathering at the social core of The Center—Greenberry's Coffee Company Café, which was deliberately incorporated into the atrium to foster intergenerational connections. Hosting the Sentara Family Medicine clinic, with geriatric specialists and family practitioners, was another intentional choice to make The Center a place for all ages.

"The mindful decisions around design and community partnerships have enabled us to create spaces that people wake up in the morning and want to go visit, even if they aren't attending programs that day," Thompson explains. "Too many communities don't think big enough when envisioning how a world-class facility can have a greater impact."

Integral to that impact is The Center's commitment to including a more racially and economically diverse population. Work is ongoing to promote understanding of and respect for issues around diversity, equity and inclusion.

"The Center at Belvedere was designed to build bridges, particularly across generations, and our community hub will help fight ageism and create a more just society," Thompson contends. "Today, it is achieving what we envisioned and more, while staying ahead of the curve of changing demographics and research on wellness."

Passing the baton

After a lengthy capital campaign, oversight of construction and two years of COVID crisis management, Thompson was granted a 10-week sabbatical in 2022 from the Board. Upon returning, he noticed that the leadership team had grown tremendously. "I came

back with fresh eyes, ears and heart, and it was quickly apparent that The Center was ready for an executive transition. I pledged that I would leave when I saw that, so I am."

To honor Thompson's significant contributions, the Board created The Peter M. Thompson Capital Renewal and Professional Development Endowment to support regular renewal of the facility and its systems, along with professional development for staff.

Stepping up as executive director is Melanie Benjamin, a four-year veteran of The Center as philanthropy director. "I knew that Melanie was ready to lead us into the future, and I'm thrilled that the Board agreed," Thompson says. "She will keep The Center at the forefront of our community and as a national model for others to learn from."

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The Center at Belvedere: A 2022 ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award honors a multigenerational and multidimensional wellness hub

Thoughtfully designed to overcome ageist stereotypes and foster a more ageless experience, The Center at Belvedere in Charlottesville, Virginia, is an example of the potential of community centers. With welcoming spaces for people to simply “be,” this nationally accredited nonprofit resource is intended to be a place where all people feel at home and can pursue healthy aging.

“Creating a type of ‘third place’ required a lot of thought,” points out Peter Thompson, The Center’s outgoing director. “Much of what is included was inspired by Ray Oldenburg’s *The Great Good Place*, which crystallizes how society needs spaces to celebrate community.”

The Center at Belvedere replaced Senior Center Inc.’s 60-year-old building, which had become outdated, less functional, and too small to meet the needs of a growing older population. After the organization’s 10-year mission to raise capital, the modern facility opened in spring 2020, exemplifying a vision “to be a community that understands and embraces the power of healthy aging and to positively transform lives.”

Intentional design and offerings

Fulfilling that vision are intentional spaces and programming based on the seven dimensions of wellness.

“Wellness is everything we do each day to develop holistic health,” Thompson says. “The goal is to thrive as much as we can by proactively seeking to be well in all aspects of life, rather than just avoiding frailty or disease.”

Also located in Charlottesville, Bushman Dreyfus Architects won a 2021 Design for Aging Review Award of Merit for The Center from the American Institute of Architects. Within 47,000 sq. ft. on six acres, the community facility features classrooms, a fitness center, a group exercise studio, an

art studio and exhibit space, a game room, a library, a 380-seat performing arts auditorium, and an outdoor terrace and spaces close to walking and biking trails.

To help facilitate intergenerational connections, The Center also includes the Sentara Family Medicine clinic and Greenberry’s Coffee Co. Café, which serves as a social hub in the 400-sq.-ft. atrium. “Positioning Greenberry’s as you enter The Center (not having its own separate entrance) illustrates from the moment you arrive that this is a welcoming space for all,” Thompson says.

More than 150 programs each week promote social interaction to combat the isolation that older adults can experience. A sampling includes tai chi, Parkinson’s yoga, meditation, core work, Chinese brush painting, games, wood carving, Latin-style ballroom dance, brain health, scrapbooking, theatre, music and more. A full-service Travel Center arranges day trips, getaways and international travel as well.

“Spaces and amenities that are appropriate to programming across all dimensions of wellness have allowed us to significantly expand the number and types of programs we offer,” notes Strategy & Communications Director Virginia Peale.

Community partnerships also add options, including weekly gardening sessions with the Piedmont Master Gardeners, healthy recipe demonstrations with University of Virginia dietitians, and presentations from authors and researchers through the Albemarle Charlottesville Historical Society.

Volunteering is encouraged, both to benefit older adults and to combat ageist stereotypes. The Volunteer Center matches people with local positions or roles at The Center; in fact, volunteers account for 60% of the labor required to operate the facility.

For staff, a flexible, family-friendly work environment and an employee assistance program are just some of the benefits. “We

expect a lot of our team, and we try to balance that with a focus on their personal and family wellness,” Thompson notes. In 2010, The Center earned a Family Friendly Employer Award from the Charlottesville Children, Youth and Family Services department.

Embracing diversity and enhancing access

Committed to diversity, equity and inclusion, The Center established a task force and developed a racial equity action plan. It is also developing collaborative relationships with organizations in unrepresented communities and continues to add culturally diverse programs. No-questions-asked scholarships are provided.

“Our vision for the community can’t be fully realized until people from all walks of life have a place to feel welcome, connect and contribute,” Peale observes. “We’ve set our sights on becoming a more vibrant and inclusive contributor, aligning our racial equity action plan with our strategic plan.”

Currently, The Center is working to increase access by extending its hours, providing better transportation options and broadening program reach for older adults of all capability levels. Eventually, it plans to deliver holistic healthy aging programs at satellite locations throughout the greater area.

“We strive to create a welcoming, inclusive environment by eliminating bias and removing barriers,” Peale says. “Our work and expertise align with our community’s priorities of improving health across the lifespan, using a modern, proactive approach with wellness as a guiding principle and a commitment to continue evolving.”

A feature article on The Center at Belvedere appeared in the Journal on Active Aging® in 2022. See the “Resources” box on page 33 for details about how to access the profile.

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A covered terrace with comfortable seating overlooks green space at the rear of The Center at Belvedere in Charlottesville, Virginia. The lawns can accommodate tents for both Center and rental events. Photo: Gene Runion

Lessons in leadership

As he retires, Thompson shrugs off the label of visionary. “I know how many people it took to develop The Center at Belvedere—people who appeared at the right time to connect the dots and solve problems. If being a visionary is pulling people together to see a different and brighter future, then I think I accomplished that.”

As for leadership recommendations from more than two decades at The Center, he shares:

- Listen. The power of listening is paramount. Remember the “two ears, one mouth” mantra to better serve everyone.
- Have a strong ability to assess risks and a high, but realistic, risk tolerance.
- Be a lifelong learner. Read a variety of resources, attend conferences and forums, seek mentors.
- Participate in professional organizations like ICAA and NCOA/NISC, along with

local groups in the arts, public health and workforce development.

- Embody humility and vulnerability, and also ask for help. (On Thompson’s computer is this Nelson Mandela quote: “It always seems impossible until it is done.”)
- Have fun! Don’t forget that’s what it’s all about.

Thompson remains encouraged by the vast potential of the active-aging industry. “We in the senior wellness field need to feed that sense of opportunity and build a realistic and more inspiring vision of aging. Although we aren’t fully there yet, the future is bright in how older adults look at aging and how society eventually will look at aging.”

On a personal note, Thompson adds, “Perhaps the greatest accomplishment in my tenure was making aging a priority for public, private and nonprofits in our area. I set out to make a difference in my community, and I feel I achieved that.”

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

Images courtesy of The Center at Belvedere

'Best in Wellness' communities and CEOs named for 2023

Two leaders dedicated to advancing holistic wellness in senior living and other settings revealed this year's recipients of their joint awards

In an era where wellness increasingly takes center stage in senior living communities, the International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA) and NuStep, LLC, have unveiled the winners of their 2023 "Best in Wellness" Awards. These accolades, symbolized by the ICAA NuStep Beacon Award and the ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award, shine a light on organizations within the sector that exemplify a comprehensive approach to wellness. Visionary executives who are leading the charge with wellness also were commended in the Pinnacle Award's "Wellness CEOs" category.

Plymouth, Michigan-based NuStep, a leading manufacturer of inclusive fitness equipment, has a long-standing history of supporting holistic wellness, including through its decades-long support for ICAA's initiatives in senior living and other active-aging settings. In 2019, to highlight and inspire excellence in the industry, the partners introduced their joint "Best in Wellness" awards program.

"As wellness continues to flourish in the industry, we are delighted to recognize organizations and leaders who are making a significant impact," states Colin Milner, ICAA's founder and CEO. "All our esteemed award-winners serve as inspiring role models, leading the way in promoting wellness for both organizations and residents."

The ICAA NuStep Beacon Award applauds North America's top 25 senior living communities that embrace wellness as a way of life. With wellness established as a fundamental principle, these organizations collaborate with residents, members, clients and staff to create meaningful opportunities that empower individuals to lead healthier, fulfilling lives. These award-winners serve as guiding lights—not only for the senior living sector but also for other

organizations that aim to foster multi-dimensional wellness.

Among the Beacon Award winners, the five top-ranked communities also receive the ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award. The Pinnacle Award honors these communities' exceptional efforts to foster a thriving culture of wellness. In the "Wellness CEOs" category, the award further recognizes five executives dedicated to cultivating wellness-centric environments.

In October 2023, ICAA and NuStep announced the following CEOs and communities as winners of this year's awards:

Pinnacle Award: top 5 wellness CEOs

- Dan Lavender, CEO, Moorings Park Communities (Naples, Florida)
- Mary Leary, President and CEO, Mather (Evanston, Illinois)
- Lynne Katzmann, Founder and CEO, Juniper Communities (Bloomfield, New Jersey)
- Doug Leidig, President and CEO, Asbury Communities (Frederick, Maryland)
- Leon Grundstein, Founder and CEO, GenCare Lifestyle (Seattle, Washington)

Pinnacle Award/Beacon Award: top 5 senior living communities

1. Asbury Solomons (Solomons, Maryland)
2. Splendido at Rancho Vistoso (Tucson, Arizona)
3. Juniper Village at Chatham (Chatham Township, New Jersey)
4. Bridgewater Retirement Community (Bridgewater, Virginia)
5. John Knox Village of Florida (Pompano Beach, Florida)

Beacon Award: finalists ranked among the top 25 senior living communities

6. Tapestry at Victoria Harbour (Victoria, British Columbia, Canada)
7. On Top of the World Communities (Ocala, Florida)
8. Asbury Methodist Village (Gaithersburg, Maryland)
9. Carolina Bay at Autumn Hall (Wilmington, North Carolina)

10. Maravilla Santa Barbara (Santa Barbara, California)
11. Maravilla Scottsdale (Scottsdale, Arizona)
12. GenCare Lifestyle Seattle at Ballard Landmark (Seattle, Washington)
13. Lakeview Village (Lenexa, Kansas)
14. Meadowood Senior Living (Worcester, Pennsylvania)
15. Berwick Qualicum Beach (Qualicum Beach, British Columbia, Canada)
16. Friendship Village Senior Living Communities (Sunset Hills, Missouri)
17. Asbury Springhill (Erie, Pennsylvania)
18. Moorings Park Grande Lake (Naples, Florida)
19. GenCare Lifestyle Federal Way (Federal Way, Washington)
20. The Moorings of Arlington Heights (Arlington Heights, Illinois)
21. Galloway Ridge at Ferrington (Pittsboro, North Carolina)
22. River Landing at Sandy Ridge (High Point, North Carolina)
23. Shell Point Retirement Community (Fort Myers, Florida)
24. Williamsburg Landing (Williamsburg, Virginia)
25. Covenant Living of Golden Valley (Golden Valley, Minnesota)

"The organizations and CEOs we're honoring recognize that the wellness model is not a static, one-size-fits-all construct," comments Jane Benskey, NuStep's marketing communications specialist. "Instead, they view it as a dynamic and ever-evolving model, which demands a creative, visionary approach to meet the needs of current—and future—residents."

Thank you to the entrants in the 2023 ICAA NuStep awards contests. And congratulations to the recipients of this year's Pinnacle and Beacon Awards. You are all inspiring examples of how to develop wellness programs, environments and cultures that encourage all parties to thrive. 🙌

Profiles of Pinnacle Award-winners will appear in Journal on Active Aging® issues throughout 2024. Learn more about the awards at <https://beaconaward.icaa.cc>