

PROFILE

Leading nonprofit to the future



Jewish Senior Life CEO Michael King oversees a \$58 million organization

Photo by Kimberly Simpson

By WILL ASTOR

Michael King's promotion from Jewish Senior Life chief operating officer to CEO in April 2015 came on short notice. It also came at a critical juncture in the organization's nearly 100-year history.

The organization was then on the cusp of kicking off a multimillion-dollar effort to build a series of Green House residences on the organization's 75-acre Brighton campus. It would be Jewish Senior Life's most ambitious undertaking since the mid-1980s move of its skilled nursing facility from the city to the Brighton campus it now occupies.

Since that move decades ago, Jewish Se-

nior Life has grown from a single moderately sized nursing home to a \$58 million organization with more than 1,000 workers that ranks among the region's 75 largest private employers.

The Jewish Senior Life organization still has a nursing home, the area's fifth largest. But it also includes assisted living facilities and provides services to seniors, including home visits, shopping assistance and adult day programs for independently living seniors.

The Green House units initially were planned to replace the organization's skilled nursing facility, a 1980s vintage 362-bed high rise known on the Jewish Senior Life campus as "the tower." Plans have since been scaled back. But as an \$83

million, nine-building project, it is still a big undertaking.

The revision came after the organization's board took a last-minute look at the project and decided to rework it, delaying its kickoff from 2015 to this year. Site work recently began on the project but buildings have yet to rise.

Jewish Senior Life's decision to trim the initiative partly was based on financial concerns, King says. Instead of 14 homes, it would build nine. And rather than transferring all residents from the high rise to the new structure, it would refashion the high rise, putting some of its floors into Green House mode.

Money was not the only driver, King adds. Some tower residents, it turns out,

like high-rise living and do not want to move.

One aspect remains untouched by the revision, King says: Jewish Senior Life's ongoing efforts to remake its organizational culture to reflect Green House principles.

An outgrowth of ideas promoted by Ithaca-based geriatrician William Thomas M.D., the Green House movement calls for long-term-care facilities to abandon what Thomas calls a medical model.

Instead of treating nursing home residents like patients to be managed, Thomas advocates giving them much more autonomy.

Green House residents, whom Thomas says should be called elders rather than residents or patients, are supposed to be able, for example, to make their own meals when they want to eat and likewise schedule much of their own time, sleeping and participating in other activities as they choose.

A Baltimore-based nonprofit, the Green House Project certifies facilities as worthy to bear the designation, subjecting them to a strict set of standards that is partly but not entirely centered on the facilities' physical layout.

Another Brighton-based nonprofit dedicated to Thomas' teachings, the Eden Alternative, also works to promote Thomas' long-term care philosophy, offering training and workshops to nursing homes.

Rather than being organized as hospital-like high rises with ward-like floors overseen by nursing stations, Green House res-

idences are supposed to house no more than a dozen residents each.

Facilities that have adopted the Green House model say the methods Thomas teaches work, making for happier residents and more satisfied staffs, but only if facilities completely change the way they operate.

Aides are supposed to be cross-trained to do a variety of tasks, which fosters an environment where caregivers holistically assume something like the role a family member might play in dealing with an aging relative in a multigenerational household.

"Moving into the CEO role is a whole different view of the organization."

Aides in Green House facilities are in fact not called aides. Using a Persian word chosen by Thomas that means fabled guardians, they are called shahbazim, shahbaz in the singular.

Given its overwhelmingly Jewish clientele, Jewish Senior Life decided to call its Green House staffers Adirim, King says. The title is Hebrew for strong ones. The singular is Adir.

Starting with senior management, groups of Jewish Senior Life staffers have been undergoing training at an Albany-area Green House facility for some months, observing and participating in care at a Green House-certified nursing home.

Transition to CEO

King took over as CEO on short notice after his predecessor, Daniel Katz, stepped down unexpectedly. Katz's retirement came three months after he took medical leave to deal with cancer.

Katz's departure, though unavoidable, came at an inopportune time for the organization, which was just beginning the Green House project.

Because he was well-acquainted with the organization and had been in on the Green House project from its start, King was a logical choice to at least temporarily step in as Jewish Senior Life's leader.

Had they followed the path often taken by boards in such situations, Jewish Senior Life's directors could have named King an interim CEO and set up a search committee to vet candidates.

The board members talked about doing that but quickly dropped the idea, choosing instead to hand the reins to King, said Ted Axelrod, chairman of the board at the time.

"To have somebody like Mike King waiting in the wings, we felt we were extremely fortunate," Axelrod says.

An experienced long-term-care facility administrator, King, 57, held senior posi-

tions with St. Ann's Community in Rochester and the Buffalo-area multilevel senior community Weinberg Campus before joining Jewish Senior Life in 2005. He had served as Jewish Senior Life's chief operating officer since 2011.

King is tall and mustached with tousled, graying, brownish hair that gives him an outdoorsy look. In fact, he used to ride a motorcycle but gave it up three years ago, selling the bike, a 2003 Harley-Davidson Fatboy 100-year Anniversary Edition.

A sometime hunter, King and his wife, Amy, run regularly.

A participant in half-marathons who also enjoys the obstacle course/foot race hybrids known as tough mudders, King organized a Jewish Senior Life tough mudder team. He downplays his own running chops.

"I don't run very fast, but I try," he says.

Neither overly formal nor excessively casual, King has an easygoing manner.

"You call him Mike, not Mr. King," says Emy Giacalone, Jewish Senior Life senior vice president of human resources. "He's attentive to staff and always remembers personal details. He has a way of making people feel comfortable."

Career path

A Corning native, King grew up in Steuben County. After earning a bachelor of science degree in business administration from SUNY College at Fredonia in 1982, he landed a job with ServiceMaster Co. Then based in Illinois and now in Memphis, Tenn., ServiceMaster provides services such as cleaning and maintenance to businesses and health care facilities.

King's first job with the company was director of housekeeping for Wyoming County Community Hospital in Warsaw. In 1989, ServiceMaster promoted him to director of operations for its Upstate New York health care operations. In 1996, it put him in charge of its Northeast territory's long-term care division.

The long-term care industry suited him, King says.

"I have a passion for working with elders," he says. "It's not episodic like in a hospital. You get to know them. It's a pure joy."

In 1998, King moved to Weinberg Campus as a vice president in charge of day-to-day operations. Weinberg, much like Jewish Senior Life, started out as a single-facility Jewish nursing home but later quit its original Buffalo location and expanded to an Amherst campus where it offered a greatly expanded menu of services and residential options.

King met his wife, Amy, who was then

Michael King

Title: CEO, Jewish Senior Life

Age: 57

Education: B.S., in business administration, SUNY College at Fredonia, 1982; master of public administration with an emphasis in health care, SUNY College at Brockport, 1996

Family: Wife, Amy; daughter, Amanda King, 24; son, David King, 20; stepson Jo Annunziato, 30, and stepdaughter Holly Annunziato, 23.

Residence: Henrietta

Activities: Running, competing in half marathon and tough mudder events, hiking, hunting

Quote: "I have a passion for working with elders. It's not episodic like in a hospital. You get to know them. It's a pure joy."

a co-worker, at Weinberg. They now live in Henrietta.

She is King's second wife. He has a 24-year-old daughter and son, 20, whom he and his first wife adopted as an infant. He is also stepfather to Amy's 30-year-old son and 23-year-old daughter by a previous marriage.

King's son is developmentally disabled. He and his ex-wife amicably share responsibility for their son, who is a client of the Mary Cariola Center.

Caring for their son and dealing with the health care system as a client has given him valuable perspective on his job as a health care administrator, "allowing me to have another view of how the system works," King says.

In 2003, King moved from Weinberg to St. Ann's, where he managed the Heritage, a 200-bed skilled nursing facility that St. Ann's formerly ran on its Irondequoit campus. He moved to Jewish Senior Life in 2005.

Few are as suited as King to the task that now lies before him, says Charles Runyon, CEO of St. John's Senior Services Inc.

Runyon pioneered the Green House movement locally, overseeing St. John's construction of a 12-occupant Green House in Penfield that was to be the first of 10 scattered around Monroe County.

But he was forced to abandon that plan when state officials would not let St. John's put the nine other Green House facilities it had planned under the same license as its 450-bed nursing home near Highland Park. St. John's instead doubled down on a project to remake the nursing home, turning its floors into a series of virtual Green Houses.

Runyon was disappointed when the state shot down St. John's Green House plan, he says. But while an ideal Green House might be a cozy single-story residence, successfully creating Thomas' ideal elder community depends more on an organization's culture than on its physical layout.

Runyon has worked with King and his predecessor Katz to help lay the groundwork for Jewish Senior Life's Green House project. He also has worked with them as members of the Senior Health Alliance of Greater Rochester, a nonprofit organization created by the area's five largest nonprofit nurs-

ing homes to facilitate money-saving shared services among the group's members, whom Runyon calls friendly competitors.

"Mike's been in charge of operations, so I've probably actually worked more with him than with Dan (Katz)," Runyon says. "The Green House project is really big. It will take a long time to get it right. Mike's done a really great job for the Jewish Home. I can't think of anyone better to carry it through."

King says that in continuing the project, his experience in overseeing Jewish Senior Life's day-to-day operations is certainly a plus. But still, moving into the CEO slot has been a humbling experience.

He believes he's up to the task, but, he adds, he feels a weight now that he did not feel before.

"Moving into the CEO role is a whole different view of the organization," King explains. "As COO, you focus on operations. Now I deal with the board and have fundraising responsibilities. As CEO, it's like I'm the flag waver for the organization. I'm just starting to get the feel of it."

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