

Women in Leadership: A Salute to Rear Admiral Kathy Martin



Kathy Martin

Recently retired CEO, Kathy Martin shares highlights of her 12-year tenure at Vinson Hall Retirement Community, which is located on approximately 20 acres in McLean, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. The not-for-profit organization established in 1969 serves former uniformed military service officers and immediate family members as well as members of specific government agencies.

A SECOND CAREER

In 2005, after serving 32 years in the Navy as director of the Navy Nurse Corps, Navy medical inspector general and deputy surgeon general, Rear Admiral Kathy Martin received a call from the retiring CEO of Vinson Hall Retirement Community. A life plan community supported by the Navy Marine Coast Guard Residence Foundation, Vinson Hall was looking for a replacement CEO. As a part of the military's process of scouting for leadership potential and ability, Kathy's name surfaced as an exceptional candidate. So after learning how to effectively "run a command," Kathy began another career using her love of team work to transform Vinson Hall into an exceptional retirement alternative attractive to boomers and beyond. As a testament to her good work, shortly after Kathy's retirement late last year, the organization received its first investment-grade rating from Fitch, something only 7% of non-profit life plan communities achieve.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

With no experience in the senior living industry, Kathy embarked on a self-directed plan to educate herself by meeting with CEOs in the market and asking, "How do you do this"? Welcomed by her colleagues, Kathy began comparing and contrasting collected information. As part of her two-year quest, she met with the CEO of LeadingAge and began participating in LeadingAge Virginia and National Leading Age events. Her intellectual curiosity in seeking industry knowledge proved vital to the transformation she was about to undertake.

CRITICAL TO CREATING A HEALTHY ORGANIZATION

As a self-described "person-centered leader and silo-smasher," Kathy set out to accomplish two key organizational changes – first, unify the board governance structure and second, create a matrix organizational model. According to Patrick Lencioni, author of "The Advantage," "at every step in the process, the leader must be out front, not as a

cheerleader or a figurehead, but as an active, tenacious driver" and that is how Kathy achieved the two goals of which she is most proud.

TAKING STOCK – GOVERNANCE ISSUES

When Kathy arrived at Vinson Hall, she reported to two boards – a foundation board and the Vinson Hall corporate board. The duplicative nature of the structure and the liability of having the two organizations incorporated in different jurisdictions presented obstacles to future growth and expansion. Overlapping board membership with redundant committees, responsibilities and authority presented inherent challenges. In essence, creating board alignment was essential to changing and growing the community. After two years, a single board structure was achieved with one finance committee, creating a more streamlined and effective process for strategic planning and new development.

TAKING STOCK – SILOS, INEFFICIENCY AND UNILATERAL CONTROL

In 2005, each building at Vinson Hall operated independently with a unique budget, staff, kitchen and purchasing capacity. Building on Kathy's belief that "you can't do it yourself, you don't know everything and different people bring such great ideas," she launched an effort to create a matrix organization. She hired a consultant to analyze operations and provide feedback on reducing expenses and streamlining processes. Results ensued with the creation of one leadership team, one budget process and the hiring of a new COO. One of the hallmarks of a matrix organization is an environment of collaboration and clarity. Bringing together directors of development, dining, facilities, human resources, marketing, administrative services and finance to sit at the table with the COO and CEO in joint decision-making roles proved challenging but rewarding. In an article by Michael Bazigos and Jim Harter entitled, "Revisiting the Matrix Organization" ("McKinsey Quarterly," January 2016), "a key area of strength for matrixed organizations lies in collaboration – a heartening discovery,

since cross-company teamwork is one of the chief aims of many matrices.” Improving accountability is also a byproduct of a matrix organization.

Delivering outcomes in a new and different organizational environment wasn't easy. According to Kathy, "it took five years to stick!" During that time, various teambuilding activities and resources were incorporated. A member of the C-Suite attended the BB&T Leadership Institute, in Greensboro, North Carolina. In addition, a two-day leadership retreat led by BB&T resulted in improved communication, cooperation and cohesion. Kathy felt that "this provided the impetus needed to better steer the organization toward a successful future."

NEXT STEP: MOVING FORWARD

According to Roger Schwarz, author of "Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams," using a mutual learning mindset and team work promotes accountability. "Although you may be accountable to one or more people, the purpose of your accountability isn't to ultimately meet their needs, or even your team's needs, but to serve the well-being of the organization." That's exactly what happened. Kathy succeeded in positioning Vinson Hall for the future by growing the organization through a series of renovations and the construction of a new residential living building and a new community building.

After an enormously successful financing in January of 2013, a very cohesive leadership team, with Kathy at the helm, led the campus redevelopment, including updating the exterior facades and interiors, renovating public spaces, and building new, modern residential living accommodations. A capstone of the redevelopment included a beautifully elegant and very functional four-story community building with dining venues and additional amenity spaces. With a nod to nautical appointments, Vinson Hall opened the new space in 2015. With huge, light-filled "porthole" like windows and well-appointed

interiors, they accomplished its mission. The team even managed to save "The Tree" outside of the community building, which became an important psychological goal in keeping with the campus' green and treed setting right outside Washington, D.C.

As Vinson Hall was undergoing major construction, the Navy Marine Coast Guard Foundation was busy raising funds to support residence assistance, resident programs and a new endeavor – Wounded Warrior Transitional Housing at Vinson Hall. This housing was the first of its kind to be incorporated into a life plan community. In 2014, two apartments were renovated and fully furnished to accommodate two wounded warriors and their families. These apartments are available to active duty wounded warriors who are being treated at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and seeking temporary housing. Although an unusual concept for a retirement community, the residents at Vinson Hall fully embraced it and view it as "old warriors caring for young warriors!"

True to Kathy's leadership style, she attributes the Vinson Hall metamorphosis, not only to her internal team, but also to her outside team of professionals including BB&T Capital Markets, SFCS, Whiting Turner, and ARI. With her person-centered style and the tenacity to bring about organizational and physical change, Kathy's goal to position Vinson Hall for future sustainability became a reality. Her "exemplary service, commitment and dedication" will long be remembered. In late 2017, the board bestowed, what Kathy said, "is the most wonderful thing that ever could be done" by naming the new community center The Kathy Martin Community Building in her honor.

Kathy continues to give to the not-for-profit sector by serving as vice-chair on the Army Distaff Foundation Board, which provides the oversight for Knollwood Retirement Community, and serving on the International Defense Health Board.



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