

Mastering by example

Resume

1978

Graduates with bachelor's degree in business/health services administration from Cornell University

1978

Hired as regional project director at CIDS Inc. and Special Children's Center Inc., to design and execute a program for training the parents of disabled preschool children

1982

Receives master's degree in health policy and management from Harvard University; Joins American Medical International Inc. as a strategic planning consultant

1990

Named national director of product development/sales at Classic Residence by Hyatt, the senior living affiliate of Hyatt Corporation

1998

Named COO at Classic Residence by Hyatt

2002

Hired as CEO and president of Mather LifeWays

2009

Oversees opening of The Mather, an award-winning Mather LifeWays CCRC in Evanston, IL



Mary Leary CEO and President Mather LifeWays

Everything Mary Leary needed to know about tenacity and resilience, she learned at home. Her father lived a full life despite injuries from World War II that left him fully disabled and forced him to relearn how to walk and talk.

"He lost so much but still managed to obtain two master's degrees and lead a very successful career," says Leary. An only child raised in upstate New York, she attributes much of her professional success in leading senior living and long-term care organizations to the work ethic and persistence her parents instilled in her.

"My dad never gave up, and because of that I've always had a drive to succeed," she says. It's a trait that hasn't gone unnoticed by colleagues and friends.

"I think the key to Mary's success is her inner drive," says Robert Werdan, vice president of marketing and public relations at Presbyterian Homes in Evanston, IL, and a former colleague at Classic Residence by Hyatt. "She never takes her eyes off the goal, not for a minute."

Leary holds big expectations for her employees as well.

"I set a really high bar, and then support and hopefully inspire people, and I think they often surprise themselves in what they're able to accomplish," she says.

Her employees agree that she can be tough, but add that she is always fair and respectful, and that she leads by example.

"She worked her way up in this world, and before she teaches something, she learns and masters it herself," says René Ristau, who served as Leary's assistant at Hyatt and now is vice president and director of asset management at Syndicated Equities.

With that disciplined work ethic comes a great sense of humor and compassion, says Joseph Zajdel, vice president of business development at Mather LifeWays. Photos from her time at Mather depict her taking part in employee team-building activities and workplace celebrations.

"She constantly celebrates the accomplishments of our team and brings a sense of joy into everything she does," Zajdel says.

Much of her drive for success stems from a fervent desire to change society's perception of older adults. That aspiration has occasionally sent Leary across the globe. Several years ago, for example, she and her husband, Richard Lin, DMD, spent time in Bhutan. The country in the eastern Himalayas measures prosperity by gauging its citizens' happiness levels, not by calculating the country's gross domestic product.

"This really resonated with me, and our Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging does a lot of work on positive aging and happiness, so I wanted to go and learn more about it," Leary says. She and Lin, a dentist, travel as often as their schedules allow, often to countries in South and Southeast Asia.

"We'd actually really love to live outside the United States during our 'repriment' — that time in our lives when we're finally able to pursue those pushed aside but not forgotten dreams, wishes and passions," she says. Before then, though, she admits she may need to work on learning a few more words in Thai, Vietnamese and other foreign languages.

"I'm not really good with languages, but you pick a country, and I know all the food words for it," Leary says. "I've honestly never met a food I didn't like."

— Amy Novotney