

*From the blog of Fletch Waller, Horizon House Board Member*



## “...the goal of living is to grow...”

Spring is in the air. Daffodil spears are poking upwards, and last month marked the end of my presidency of Horizon House, a wonderful, two-year learning experience from which I received much more than I delivered. (“President” might mislead, the role perhaps better described as chair of the board.)

For those who know it not, Horizon House is a vibrant community of 500-some retirees who live in a complex of apartments in downtown Seattle.



The campus sits between a cluster of medical facilities known colloquially as “pill hill” and Seattle’s unique Freeway Park, a water and garden expanse built on a lid over the Interstate that cuts through the heart of our city. The site offers easy walking access, via that park, to the artistic, cultural, dining and shopping core of Seattle.

Horizon House is the leading retirement community in the region because of three coherent but individual strengths – its residents, its professional staff, and its board of trustees. Well, every retirement community has residents, staff and directors; what’s so special? What have ours taught me about success?

**First, the residents:** they are a highly diverse group, ethnically, socially, religiously, but who share two attitudes – a commitment to participate in urban life and a determination to age creatively and actively in community with others. They do not seek withdrawal in retirement. I learned from them the value of neighborhood, of organizing and aggressively seeking to have an impact on their surroundings, of assertively taking charge of their lives. Our residents have their own independent non-profit organization funded through their own operated thrift shop, and run over 60 programs and special interest clubs. They volunteer around town, and also do not hesitate to badger management to support their interests and civic concerns. I learned from them the truth of e e cumming’s

*in time of daffodils  
who know the goal of living is to grow  
forgetting why  
remember how*



The result of that attitude? Our residents outlive actuarial expectations because of the stimulation of true community, because they are determined to extend their springs. And Horizon House, thereby, is given its distinctive character – a vibrancy and energy unlike any other community I have visited.

**Staff:** not-for-profit service organizations likely have a smaller pool of talents on which to draw than do for-profit enterprises but that does not

mean lesser talents. The professionals who choose the not-for-profit world are among the best. I've been fortunate to have worked under two outstanding corporate leaders, Bill Marriott and Jim McFarland (of General Mills.) What made them great? Their ability to balance a vision of the long term with attention to immediate details; their upbeat delegation to and support of subordinates; their personal exemplification of the corporation's values; and their willingness to admit mistakes and move on rather than fear admission as threat to their authority. Bob Anderson, CEO of Horizon House, shares those qualities. Though the scale of his operation is but a fraction of that of a Marriott or a General Mills, he stands beside them as an outstanding builder and leader of an enterprise.

**Trustees:** I feel honored to have been chosen to chair such a superb board. How often I felt humbled in the face of the deep experience and talent gathered around the table. Of the 16 trustees (one is a non-voting representative of the UCC, out of which Horizon House was grown,) one third are residents. This is virtually unique among retirement communities, which typically allow none to serve or perhaps one to "represent" residents. Our resident trustees are chosen for their talents and experience; each is trustee first, resident second. It is a working board, the work done in committees made up of trustees, residents, non-resident experts from the community, staffed by relevant department heads. We strive for board productivity through use of advance briefs, consent agendas to minimize time for status reports, workshop-style discussion of anticipated issues, and rigorous self-assessment. The board is intentionally diverse in experience, perspective and talent; trustees are term limited. Horizon House has taught me the value of experimenting and continually seeking ways to make one's board a substantive source of guidance and insight. The goal is to balance fiduciary, policy, and generative energy and attention.

**Another element: mission.** A not-for-profit enterprise can be truly mission-driven, undeterred and undistracted by demands of quarterly earnings goals, analysts' opinions, stock price and the rest. From Horizon House, I have learned how to tie annual budgets, objectives and action plans directly to strategies aimed at long term goals that, in turn, are rooted in mission. This format for strategic planning and annual action is better than any I worked with in industry (where long range strategic plans too often gather dust on the shelf), Marriott and General Mills included. It's a model, developed by former trustee Neil McReynolds, one that Jim Collins would applaud and one that should be applied to any enterprise, for or not-for profit.

**One other learning:** the babies of 1946 will turn 75 in 2021. And when that wave hits, the demand for aging services will begin to overwhelm their and our collective financial resources. In the next five years, this industry must challenge itself to develop new ways to facilitate healthy aging, to encourage community and combat isolation, and to cushion the social and financial impact of a huge increase in the elders of our tribe. At the same time, there will be “echo” growth in school-age population; we will face a competition for resources between education and aging. In ten years, this will be the most pressing political and social issue our nation will be dealing with. The aging issue will be even more pressing than here in China, Europe, and Japan, potentially a most destabilizing force to be reckoned with.