

Boston Business Journal

Volume 23, Number 33

September 19-25, 2003

▼ EXECUTIVE PROFILE

J A M I E S E A G L E

Senior mission

In 30 years with Rogerson Communities, Seagle has built a \$25M network of affordable elderly housing

BY JILL LERNER
JOURNAL STAFF

Jamie Seagle hesitates before pressing a button in the elevator of the Rogerson Communities offices.

The problem is, Seagle — who as head of the nonprofit organization supplying housing for the poor and elderly is a voluble proponent of physical fitness for his clients and residents — takes the stairs everywhere. When pressed into tour-guide service for a visiting reporter, the longtime president overshoots his floor.

“He puts the ‘m’ in ‘moving,’” says nurse’s assistant Genevive Tetteh, passing Seagle in the hall.

Physical activity for elders as a means to stay vital is part of Seagle’s overall philosophy that the last years of someone’s life truly be golden. As a result, the accommodations developed and maintained by Rogerson Communities from Roslindale to Beacon Hill seem more like luxury apartments than institutional residences.

His motivation is simple: “The end of your life is as big an event as the beginning of your life,” says Seagle.

In the 30 years since becoming manager of Rogerson House — at the time, a single retirement home for elderly men — Seagle has built the nonprofit organization now called Rogerson Communities into a \$25 million network of affordable housing services for elders, people with disabilities and low-income individuals and families.

From its beginnings serving 56 men at a



W. MARC BERNSAU / BUSINESS JOURNAL

Jamie Seagle, head of Rogerson Communities, visits Beacon House, a former hotel that Rogerson restored as a home for low-income elderly and disabled individuals.

single property on the Jamaica way in Boston, today Rogerson provides housing and adult day care services to more than 1,200 people in Greater Boston and oversees 17 facilities and programs that include one of the region’s most comprehensive Alzheimer’s day care programs. The organization develops its own buildings and partners with other like-minded nonprofits to help them develop and maintain their own housing initiatives.

Rogerson’s offerings are not only for low-income elderly, but also those with earnings between about \$30,000 and \$50,000 — underscoring what Seagle says is an increasingly vulnerable population: middle-income seniors. He notes the “vast majority” of elderly individuals fall into the middle-income category, but unlike lower-income

FROM THE FILE

Position: President, Rogerson Communities

Education: Bachelor’s degree in sociology and education, Denison University; certificate in nursing home administration, Babson College

Age: 56

Quote: “The end of your life is as big an event as the beginning of your life.”

seniors receive virtually no assistance from the state, rendering their ability to make ends meet all the more tenuous.

To help all of its constituents, Rogerson Communities last year launched a \$3 million campaign. Over the next four years, Seagle’s plans call for Rogerson to

help add about 600 housing units to Boston's stock, and the organization also intends to spend \$500,000 on new wellness and fitness programs.

While his vision is expansive, observers credit Seagle with success as far as its implementation.

"The organization is a remarkable combination, I think, of business acumen, real estate expertise, health care knowledge and human service commitment," says Tom Hollister, president and CEO of Citizens Bank of Massachusetts and an active supporter of Rogerson.

"To have all four of those elements in one organization is quite extraordinary. A great deal of that is Jamie," he adds.

In 1976, following three years at the helm of Rogerson House, Seagle was looking to spice up what had become a rather predictable routine: "I had one appointment on the appointment book each week, and everything was running along and I was bored."

That's when he began visiting other facilities and came up with the idea of turning Rogerson into a multiconcept organization. In 1979, under Seagle's direction, the renamed Rogerson Communities began to develop and manage facilities for the elderly outside of the original Rogerson House. Today, the original Rogerson House functions as an Alzheimer's center.

The agency first developed Farnsworth House in Jamaica Plain to provide rent-subsidized housing for elders, a meals program and social services programs to

elderly residents. Numerous projects followed, including Beacon House at the site of the old Beacon Chambers Hotel on Beacon Hill. When that building was gutted by fire in 1980, Rogerson Communities acquired the building and restored it. And, in 1983 with much of its architecture intact, Rogerson reopened the building with 136 apartments for low-income, elderly and disabled individuals.

Nancy Emerson Lombardo, co-director of the Institute of Geriatric Social Work at Boston University, who has worked with Rogerson Communities in both its caregiving and development capacities, credits the organization with being an efficient real estate developer while staying true to its core mission.

"They're very good at running a very efficient shop, in addition to being humane. ... A lot of nonprofits have difficulty managing the bottom line," says Lombardo, who sits on the board of Forward Inc., an organization that is working with Rogerson to develop a vacant building on Columbus Avenue into affordable housing.

And she says much of the credit goes to Seagle. "He and the team he's put together have made a huge contribution to Boston seniors. The landscape wouldn't be the same if he hadn't been there," she adds.

But the fact that Rogerson's development projects are mission-driven has not shielded Seagle from the slings and arrows that befall for-profit developers in Greater Boston — a region known for being resistant to new development.

"One of the major hurdles is the 'not in my backyard syndrome,' particularly since it's very difficult to overcome that houses are the major asset for most people," says Seagle, recalling a battle his organization lost about a decade ago in Newton.

The plan was to build a continuing-care retirement community, but city residents, including local elected officials, lined up squarely against the proposal.

"The appeals process in every community we've worked in has been difficult," Seagle notes.

Often-cited objections are that Rogerson's projects are "too big" and take away too much open space, and that's just the sort of thinking Seagle has spent his career trying to change in order to give aging individuals a place and a reason to embrace the end of their lives.

It's not that he loves older people any more than younger people, he says. Rather, Seagle, who after 30 years at the helm of Rogerson can see his own senior years coming into focus, claims a selfish motivation for his life's work.

"Everybody has to get there," he says of growing old. "If people really understand more about the aging process and the possibilities of personal growth and spending a wonderful time, they wouldn't be so afraid. If I treat you like you're worthless, then you get to feeling like you're worthless in not a very long time. Did it happen to Picasso? No. It happens because people are afraid."