

Pioneer in Senior care

By J. Craig Anderson


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Few business leaders — in the Phoenix area or anywhere — can honestly say their work has fueled the economy and created innumerable jobs while helping thousands of residents.

In a role that now spans almost three decades, the Plaza Cos. co-founder, President and Chief Executive Sharon Harper has earned a place among that elite group.

Harper and co-founder Dr. Harold Gries started Plaza Cos. in 1982 with the goal of developing a specific type of senior housing, still foreign to Arizona at the time, in which residents could receive intensive, on-site medical care without abandoning their privacy, independence or individuality.

Harper's business success has grown through the years, as have her philanthropic, economic-de-



Sharon Harper is president and CEO of Plaza Cos., which builds medical-care and assisted-living centers.

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See **HARPER**, Page D4

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Harper

Continued from D1

velopment and civic efforts.

Even members of Harper's own peer group, which include some of the area's most civically active go-getters, say they are in awe of her focus and her accomplishments. Harper is a member of the board of trustees of the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust and the boards of directors of the Arizona Community Foundation and the Banner Health Foundation. She is a two-time past chairwoman and a founding director of the Greater Phoenix Economic Council.

"The Valley is fortunate to have Sharon as a leader and champion," says Barry Broome, Greater Phoenix Economic Council president and CEO.

"She has an unwavering personal desire and commitment to make Arizona a robust and dynamic state, where science and technology-based companies can thrive. Sharon has been instrumental in building the region's health-care competencies and developing the strategy to increase foreign direct investment."

Harper also is a sitting member of the executive board for Greater Phoenix Leadership and the board of trustees for Brophy College Preparatory. She is a past honorary commander of Luke Air Force Base, a

member of the Governor's Film and Television Commission and a past board member of the Maricopa County Arts Cultural Task Force.

Harper earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., and says she had planned to be a career journalist until she found her true calling in the health-care field.

When Plaza Cos. began, life was good for typical Arizona seniors until they reached the age of around 75 and were no longer able to live independently, Harper says.

At that time, the inevitable transition to medical dependency led only one place, she says: a traditional nursing-home setting where open rooms were crammed with beds, privacy was non-existent and quality of life diminished.

Harper says she has seen communities in other parts of the country where residents' need for medical care was balanced with their desire for independence of thought, privacy and dignity.

But housing of that type, now commonly known as continuing-care retirement communities, or CCRCs, did not exist in retiree-friendly Arizona.

"We started to realize there was this void for people as they aged," Harper says.

Developing for-profit CCRCs in Arizona has be-

come Harper's passion and life's work.

Harper's company developed the state's first such project, a 185-acre master-planned community known as Plaza del Rio, in Peoria. Her company has gone on to develop several north Scottsdale projects, including Classic Residence by Hyatt and, most recently, Vi at Silverstone, which opened in September.

"It's an exciting, vibrant place," Harper says.

Plaza Cos. also has branched out over the years into a number of health-care and technology-related areas, including development and property management of medical-office properties such as Paradise Valley Medical Plaza in Phoenix, and the development of technology and biotech incubators such as Arizona State University Scottsdale Innovation Center, also known as Sky-Song.

The company estimates it has developed about \$1 billion worth of senior-living, medical-office and biotech facilities in Arizona.

Harper credits the company's continued growth and success to the directors of its numerous divisions, which include property management, medical leasing, construction, technical services and tenant representation.

The health-care industry has evolved over the past three decades, Harper

says, as the means of identifying and treating health problems have become more sophisticated and less invasive.

That evolution has led to a greater variety of specialized facilities covering a broad spectrum of medical services from preventive

care to minor surgery.

Hospital operators have diversified in an effort to serve more patients, such as by opening outpatient surgical centers that allow patients to go home within hours following a surgery or procedure.

Plaza Cos. also has

evolved, sometimes responding to health-care industry changes and at other times leading them.

"Our company has reinvented itself many times," Harper says.

Coming next Friday: Ann Reed, Fry's Food Stores.