

Residents of Bridgewater Retirement Community enjoy a peaceful evening by the campfire on an overnight trip to Smith Mountain Lake, a popular Virginia destination for recreation and camping

Rodney Alderfer:

Embodying energy for life at Bridgewater Retirement Community

Through his leadership, this ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award winner has fostered a culture in which older adults lead thriving and active lives as part of a compassionate community in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley

by Julie King, MS



This article is part of ongoing coverage of the winners of the ICAA NuStep Best in Wellness Awards. A joint endeavor of the International Council on Active Aging® and NuStep, LLC, the awards program highlights senior living communities, wellness executives and wellness directors that have won the ICAA NuStep Beacon and Pinnacle Awards.

Bridgewater Retirement Community's Rodney Alderfer admits he didn't choose a professional path in senior living—it chose

him. With a bachelor's degree in accounting, the BRC president spent more than a decade crunching numbers and navigating spreadsheets at local companies before joining the life plan community in 1998 as controller. At the time, the move was "simply to advance his accounting career," he reveals.

But Alderfer quickly saw potential beyond profit and loss statements. "I fell in love with the people and culture here, and I began exploring areas beyond accounting,"

he says. That included completing his Administrator-In-Training program at BRC, becoming a licensed nursing home administrator, and then taking the role of vice president of health services in 2005.

"I found myself drawn to the strong sense of community, and I experienced opportunities to build meaningful relationships with residents, families and team members

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At Bridgewater Retirement Community, an open-air pavilion is a gathering spot for events ranging from movie nights and community celebrations to farmers markets. The 2,000-sq.-ft. pavilion opened in 2017 as part of an outdoor activity area called The Oasis

in a way I never could in my previous positions,” he reflects. The environment at the Bridgewater, Virginia, community nurtured his personal priorities of long-term relationships, strong connections and purpose.

Named BRC president in 2008, Alderfer completed his MBA with a concentration in health service administration at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, in 2010. Today he oversees 600 residents and 450 team members on BRC’s 93-acre life plan campus, located in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley.

In 2024, Alderfer’s leadership earned him an ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award as one

of the top five wellness executives in North America’s senior living industry. BRC also won both ICAA NuStep Beacon and Pinnacle Awards in 2023 and 2024. The Beacon Award names 25 of the continent’s top senior living communities that are industry leaders in creating vibrant wellness environments. Of those 25 recipients, the top five communities receive the Pinnacle Award for their “Best in Wellness” achievements.

The International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA) and NuStep, LLC, a Michigan-based developer of inclusive fitness equipment, created their joint awards program in 2019 to recognize industry leaders that embrace multidimensional

wellness as “a core value that shapes culture, sparks innovation and enhances quality of life.” The program has expanded in the intervening years to include wellness executives and wellness directors.

Noting Alderfer’s Pinnacle Award recognition, ICAA founder and CEO Colin Milner comments that the BRC leader “has been steadfastly committed to encouraging older adults to thrive in a continually evolving wellness culture and community over his tenure.” Milner adds that Alderfer’s “consistent and influential leadership—and his passion for connection—continue to make a meaningful impact on BRC’s residents, staff and local area.”

‘A transformational shift’

Over 60 years, BRC has evolved from a small nursing home into the robust life plan community it is today. Welcoming independent living residents within years of its 1965 opening, BRC structured its operations in 1983 to offer independent living, assisted living and nursing. Its first Memory Support Household, Gardner House, opened in 2009, followed by its second, Concord House, in 2021. In the same year BRC also physically connected residents in assisted living, memory support and nursing to the heart of campus.

The 2010 launch of a household model for nursing was a turning point for BRC, Alderfer believes. Designed to promote autonomy and choice for residents, this approach includes private and shared bedrooms and bathrooms, shared living spaces, and a variety of common areas, including outdoor space. Six unique households have their own culture and traditions, and each is home to approximately 20 residents. Team leaders typically work only in one household for continuity of care.

“One of the most significant highlights of my career has been our transition to the household model in nursing,” Alderfer says. “Moving from a traditional, institutional model to a more holistic, energized approach was a transformational shift. It changed the way we think about supporting residents—moving from simply ‘taking care of people’ to helping them live their best life.”

What began in nursing has extended across the entire campus and become central to BRC’s overall philosophy of well-being. “Although people don’t always associate well-being with nursing households, that’s truly where it started for us,” Alderfer states. “Seeing how that shift has shaped our culture and continues to influence every area of BRC is something I’m incredibly proud of.”

The change also solidified BRC’s mission to “promote an engaging lifestyle within its compassionate community” and its vision to “enhance and energize healthy living.”



‘We recognize that well-being impacts all aspects of our organization,’ says Rodney Alderfer, who became president of Bridgewater Retirement Community in 2008

From wellness to well-being

BRC defines wellness as “the dynamic process of enhancement and growth, aimed at achieving one’s highest quality of life” for ever-changing, individual journeys. But Alderfer now prefers the term *well-being*.

“My understanding of wellness has expanded significantly over the years,” he explains. “The biggest shift has been moving from focusing exclusively on ‘wellness’—which often brings to mind only physical health—to embracing ‘well-being’ in all dimensions of life. I’ve grown to deeply appreciate this holistic approach.”

When BRC made well-being its top priority, the community wanted its efforts to be

visible, sustainable and meaningful. So, in 2022, the BRC Foundation launched the LiveWell campaign, with a goal of raising funds to support initiatives for residents, team members and the broader community. It significantly surpassed expectations by raising USD\$5 million.

This money supports many funds, including the Energized Life Fund, which provides innovative on-campus programming to enhance well-being; the Work Well Fund, which offers professional development scholarships, training opportunities,

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Following an ICAA Wellness Audit in 2024, Bridgewater Retirement Community set out to address outcomes in its strategic plan. One initiative involves beginning 'the phased development of a community garden and dining production farm'

and health and well-being programs; and the Community Outreach Fund, which expands access to healthy aging opportunities across the region, and more.¹

Additionally, funds raised by the LiveWell campaign fuel innovation grants. These grants allow team members to pitch ideas to fund projects that improve the lives of residents or enhance the experience of working at BRC. More than 20 grants have been awarded to date. Among them:

- adopting Tovertafel dementia technology
- purchasing a WhisperGLIDE wheelchair swing
- hosting an on-campus farmer's market
- participating in backpack food programs for local children
- pursuing intergenerational partnerships

Alderfer explained in BRC's 2024 *Impact & Well-Being Report* that these and other initiatives "exemplify our belief that no matter where someone lives at BRC, they should have access to meaningful experiences that enhance their well-being."²

One major well-being initiative made possible by land and money donations from residents was developing the Crist Farm Walking Trails, which opened in October 2023. Spanning 20 acres, the trails feature 1.2 miles of ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act]-accessible walkways, overlooks, a wildflower meadow, a labyrinth and more.

Resident-led committees on well-being, education and outreach, as well as natural habitat and plantings, helped shape and guide this project. "The joy these trails have brought to residents, team members

and the wider community has been truly remarkable," Alderfer shares.

Furthermore, residents in assisted living, memory support and nursing took two overnight trips to Smith Mountain Lake, a recreational area located in the Blue Ridge Mountains region, thanks to the LiveWell campaign. "Adventure knows no age, and meaningful experiences are always possible," Alderfer notes. "Watching the joy, connection and memories unfold—not only for the residents experiencing a lake boat ride and s'mores by the campfire, but also for the families who are so appreciative of the way we live our culture beyond our campus—has been incredibly rewarding."

In the spirit of living their culture, 54 residents, team members and board members celebrated BRC's 60th anniversary in May



Bridgewater residents experience a lake boat ride during an overnight trip to Smith Mountain Lake, located in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains

2025 by volunteering for 24 service projects across campus and in the local area. At that time, Alderfer also introduced the “60 in 60” initiative, challenging residents to complete 60 acts of service during BRC’s 60th year to honor the founders’ goal to support each other in the community.

Strategic restructuring

In November 2023, BRC formalized its senior leadership’s commitment to well-being by establishing a dedicated team that combines fitness, life enrichment, spiritual life, volunteer services, and technology education. This well-being team has resulted in stronger engagement and greater participation, plus a more connected campus culture.

“Restructuring our leadership to add a Vice President of Well-Being at the senior level demonstrates our commitment to being

the best choice for active aging and to practicing a ‘can-do’ philosophy,” Alderfer explains. “It provides focused opportunities for enhancing residents’ daily lives and offers vital vocational experiences where they can support one another.”

One early priority for the well-being team was to identify areas of strength and opportunities. To guide that endeavor, BRC participated in an ICAA Wellness Audit in 2024. It has since earmarked a dedicated section of its strategic plan to address outcomes from the audit.

Some specific initiatives have included:

- launching an on-site horticulture therapy program

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Success with wellness

When it comes to fostering a successful and evolving culture of wellness or well-being, Bridgewater Retirement Community’s Rodney Alderfer points to key things that have worked for his organization, which other leaders might want to consider. Some examples include the following:

- **Embrace a well-being vision.** Alderfer suggests that executives fully embrace the holistic nature of well-being and be a visible and vocal advocate throughout their organization. At BRC, he sets the vision, works closely with the board to ensure well-being initiatives are part of the strategic plan, and prioritizes well-being in its operations and budget.
- **Invest in team members.** Alderfer emphasizes support for team members in BRC’s annual community impact reports, noting that team members “[provide] exceptional service while embodying our values of compassion, innovation and service.”² Initiatives for team members, according to the reports, include Culture University, “a dedicated space for team member training and professional development”³; activities to promote well-being; and the BRC Leadership Academy.² All team members undergo Culture University’s BRC Beginnings (orientation) to set them up for success, including “welcome circles” connecting residents and team members through conversation.
- **Be flexible and value input.** “Flexibility and innovation are key, because every person’s journey is unique,” Alderfer says. “Above all, leaders must listen, because residents and team members often have the best ideas to build a thriving culture.”

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Resources

Internet

Bridgewater Foundation

<https://brcliving.org/brc-foundation/>

Bridgewater Retirement Community

<https://brcliving.org>

Bridgewater Retirement Community: Crist Farm Walking Trails

<https://brcliving.org/crist-farm-walking-trails/>

ICAA NuStep Best in Wellness Awards (Beacon and Pinnacle Awards)

<https://beaconaward.icaa.cc>

International Council on Active Aging (ICAA)

www.icaa.cc

NuStep, LLC

www.nustep.com

Additional websites

Cannability Consulting, LLC

www.cannability.com

Tover: Tovertafel

www.tover.care

Wellzesta

www.wellzesta.com



A volunteer pilots a trishaw (‘a three-wheeled cycle rickshaw’) bearing two ‘copilots’ happy to explore the Bridgewater campus, located in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley

- beginning the phased development of a community garden and dining production farm
- increasing local food sourcing in BRC’s dining program
- hosting community conversations to establish an organization-wide definition of well-being

“We recognize that well-being impacts all aspects of our organization,” Alderfer says, explaining that after the audit, BRC strove to truly determine how much of its budget was dedicated to wellness. The community, he adds, has continued to “ensure that funding supports all aspects of well-being growth at BRC.”

Innovation and evolution

With a core value of innovation, BRC and Alderfer continue to explore new ways to nurture a culture that prioritizes all dimensions of well-being. “We are committed to feedback, staying informed about industry trends, collaborating with others and adapting to the evolving landscape of well-being,” Alderfer says.

Part of that commitment was transitioning from paper-based engagement and communication tools for independent living residents to the Wellzesta technology platform in 2018. Calling this change a “notable challenge,” Alderfer reports that it has

been a valuable tool to harness the power of technology to promote well-being opportunities, strengthen engagement, track participation and gather feedback.

“For BRC, Wellzesta facilitates two-way communication and customization of well-being goals while offering curated resources to help achieve these goals,” Alderfer says. The platform has a greater than 90% engagement rate among 350+ users, who use it to register for events, check menus, read articles, watch videos and more.

Beyond technology upgrades and more traditional collaborations, BRC also established a partnership in 2024 with Cannability Consulting, a subsidiary of Westminster-Canterbury of Chesapeake Bay, a Virginia Beach life plan community. This partnership provides a guided, individualized process to safely introduce residents to the hemp-derived CBD products as options to manage chronic pain, improve sleep and reduce anxiety.

“We will continue expanding opportunities that empower our residents and team members to pursue their best lives, rather than simply following programs or activities,” Alderfer comments. “Our goal is to be a strong support system for each person’s individual well-being journey.”

Reflections and future focus

Looking ahead, BRC is developing programs that invite residents to engage with life in new ways, such as Adventure Club experiences, expanded outdoor and fitness opportunities, and innovative initiatives like e-bike programming. Alderfer says the community also is increasing its focus on sustainability, farming partnerships, and gardens as pathways to education, nutrition, connection and purpose.

“Longer-term goals include increasing our commitment to mental health support for residents and team members,” he continues,

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Shining a spotlight on Best in Wellness communities and leaders

The ICAA NuStep Best in Wellness Awards celebrate outstanding achievements in wellness within North America’s senior living industry. Launched in 2019 by the International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA) and NuStep, LLC, these awards recognize communities and leaders that are transforming aging by creating vibrant, engaging wellness environments to empower older adults to live their best lives.

If you want your community’s wellness achievements to be recognized, ICAA and NuStep invite you to enter the upcoming 2026 Best in Wellness Awards contest. Applications open April 2 and close August 15. Recipients will be announced November 17 at the ICAA Conference and Expo 2026 in Orlando, Florida.

The Best in Wellness Awards program presents two awards, the ICAA NuStep Beacon Award and the ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award:

- **Senior Living Communities:** The Beacon Award highlights 25 of North

America’s senior living communities that are creating environments where people thrive, with the top five communities also receiving the Pinnacle Award. In these communities, wellness is a way of life, shaping environments that prioritize overall quality of life.

More recently, the awards program has expanded the Pinnacle Awards to recognize the top five leaders in each of two additional categories:

- **Wellness Director:** This category recognizes individuals whose innovative leadership and dedication inspire transformative wellness experiences within their communities.
- **Wellness Executive:** This category celebrates visionaries who place wellness at the heart of their organizations, fostering enduring and meaningful opportunities for both residents and staff.

Visit <https://beaconaward.icaa.cc/> to learn more about the Best in Wellness Awards.

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Resident-led committees focused on well-being, education and outreach, plus natural habitat and plantings, helped to shape development of the Crist Farm Walking Trails. This area spans 20 acres on the Bridgewater Retirement Community campus. Among its features are overlooks, accessible trails, a labyrinth, a wildflower meadow and a bluebird trail

“and eventually offering individualized well-being coaching to help people define and pursue their own goals.”

As for Alderfer’s inspiration over so many years? “I’m motivated every day by the impact we’re making for our residents and team members, and I’m grateful and excited to be part of the transformation happening within our community,” he says. “Seeing the progress we’ve made—and knowing how much more is still possible—energizes me.”

Julie King, MS, has been a certified group exercise instructor and personal trainer for more than 25 years. She holds multiple cer-

tifications and a master’s degree in science (kinesiology). Over her career, King has led virtually every class format—including indoor cycling, mat pilates, yoga, kickboxing, boot camp and aquatics—at commercial health clubs, corporate fitness centers, wellness centers, schools and online. She also has served as a fitness director, fitness/wellness coordinator, health club manager and a contributing editor for Club Business International magazine. King has been published in Club Industry, Club Solutions, Campus Recreation, National Fitness Trade Journal, Recreation Management and Fitness Management. She is also a longtime regular contributor to the Journal on Active Aging®. King can be reached at julie.king1@comcast.net

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3. Bridgewater Retirement Community. (2023). *Impact Report 2022*. https://brcliving.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/BRC_Impact-Report_2022_Web.pdf

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