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Carol Shockley helps people find living situations for their parents and other elderly loved ones

Q&A by Dennis Carmody, Regional Producer - Business



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Carol Shockley, left, owner of Ask-Carol!, a business designed to help find home care or appropriate living situations for seniors, speaks to Carol Austin of Fair Haven, who used the services of Ask-Carol! to find housing for her father at Brandywine Senior Living at The Sycamore, one of the facilities where Shockley places clients, in Shrewsbury.

Carol Shockley owns Ask-Carol! Senior Living Guidance, Tinton Falls

Describe your business: I offer free help to families to find appropriate senior living and care for their elderly parents, most often assisted living, but sometimes independent living or even home care.

When did you decide you wanted to be an entrepreneur? My husband has been an entrepreneur most of his life, and I've helped him over the years, but I never had the 'entrepreneurial spirit' and starting Ask-Carol! was not something I had ever planned.

Why did you start this business? My Mom lived at home, by herself, for many years after my Dad died. During that time she fell twice and both times broke a shoulder. She really wanted to continue to stay home, but the handwriting was on the wall that she couldn't be safe any longer, so I started searching for solutions. Like many, I kept putting it off, and then she fell and broke her hip. I found out about assisted living from a nurse and started visiting them, finding one that I thought was just right, but it wasn't so I had to move her. A year later I found she had been eligible for a VA pension for assisted living because my Dad served in WWII. I got the pension for her, but couldn't understand why no one had told me about it back when I placed her. That cost me a lot of money. Friends started calling me and asking questions about their own parents, and I soon found myself building a business without even knowing it. One day the facility where I had my mom told me they wanted to pay me for referrals. Up to that point I was just a volunteer. I said 'yes' and the rest is history. Now I work with over a hundred facilities in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and well over 1,000 in other states.

Were there any challenges that made you think twice about striking out on your own? Oh, yes. The primary one was that I was semi-retired and not really planning to continue working. I was more interested in volunteering, and the thought of a full-time business, advertising it, visiting facilities, and so on was a big challenge for me, but I talked it over with my husband, Bill, and he promised to help me (which he did, and still does) and I got started.

If you could do it again, what would you do differently? I don't think I would do it differently. I started it part-time and took it to full-time, then slowly added staff to help me, and then started a franchising program, and for me that was the right thing to do. I hope to hit \$1 million in revenue this year.

What's the best business advice you have ever received? Think outside the box. My husband was an innovation consultant and said that all the time. What it meant to me was if I was going to start a business, I had to do it differently. When I looked at my competitors, I saw that they were all big companies and very impersonal. I decided that I would be different by spending a lot of time with families getting to know their needs, and that is what made the difference. All facilities that I work with say I do the best job helping families and that the referrals I send them are the best that they get.

What personality trait helps you the most? I'm a good listener. Dealing with a parent whose health is failing is very difficult. They don't teach you in school about it, so for every family it is new and difficult. Some people who call me are in tears, and I give them a shoulder to cry on, settle them down, and help find a solution..

What's the hardest part of the job? Sometimes, though fortunately not often, there's a family I can't help. I try to point them in the right direction, but I feel badly if I can't help them.

The easiest? I love what I do and when I get up in the morning, I can't wait to see who reached out to me overnight. Many of my inquiries come in the middle of the night, because that's when many families are laying awake thinking about what to do about Mom. You wouldn't believe how many emails come between 1am and 6am.

What surprised you the most about running the business? I was surprised to find how many families go through exactly what I did. Most people who reach out to me tell me that their 'story' is just like mine.

Describe your most unusual customer, job or work experience. I received a phone call one afternoon from a guy who was on an airport car rental bus in Orlando. He had just arrived from New Jersey to visit his Mom and was trying to decide how to help her. He called me back a few hours after seeing her and said he had to bring her back to New Jersey right away and asked me to help find the right assisted living facility. He said he would place her wherever I thought was best. I called a number of facilities, found what I thought was the best match, and he took her right there from the airport and moved her in. Later I got the most wonderful letter of thanks from him.

How would you like the business to grow and change? Last year I decided to expand my business through franchising so that I could help many more families. My husband joined me full time to run it, and we opened our first franchise last summer, another this fall, and a third one in December. A fourth one is about to open. It's exciting teaching others how to help families. We've added staff to help with the franchising, and I'm enjoying every minute of it. While most of my time is spent helping my franchisees, I still take calls from families every single day.

In one sentence, tell us why customers should go there. No one I have placed in an assisted living facility has ever moved out because they didn't like it – I have a 100% success rate.

What do you love about the community where your business is located? My family has been in Tinton Falls since the 1940's. As a child, I summered here with my parents, then my aunt built a very small house and after she died, my parents moved into it and expanded it. My husband and I now live in that house. Tinton Falls has everything I could ask for, except Saks and Bergdorfs. After all, I was born in Manhattan. Bill was born in the Midwest and he likes Tinton Falls because it reminds him a bit of home. We have a trout brook in our back yard and horse farms around us, yet I can get to NYC in an hour. It's the best of both worlds.

When you leave work, do you leave the office behind, or are you always in contact? I work at home while Bill works at our office on Shrewsbury Avenue. He is much better at leaving the office behind than I am. I constantly check my voicemail and email to see if anyone needs help, from the time I get up in the morning until I go to bed. If someone needs help, I want to be there for them.

What do you do in your off time? We do have a life outside the business. We take a lot of short trips to bed & breakfast inns, especially in the Poconos. And we love Key West and Mexico. Not to mention dinner in the City. And I can be anywhere as long as I have my smartphone and iPad. Bill set up our databases in the Cloud, so I'm not tied to the office.

When you leave the business behind someday, what will you do? My daughter Lisa has helped me part-time from when I started, and she has just become a franchisee to learn that part of the business, and will eventually take the business over. So I suppose I will be helping her, rather than the other way around! But I would also like to travel more with Bill and spend more time on our trips. And maybe spend a month or two each winter in Florida.