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## Agemark Senior Living and Memory Care Communities Managed From Orinda

By *Sophie Braccini*



Forrest and Richard Westin, right, in Agemark's Orinda office Photo Sophie Braccini

living opportunity came a few years later.

"I had bought a gorgeous building in Tacoma, Washington partnering with Jesse Pittore," remembers Westin. "It was an old YMCA built in 1906 and we had the project to leave the exterior intact and transform the inside into an office building. We went to the bank to get a loan and the banker said, 'I'm not going to give you a loan. We have too many office buildings in Tacoma.' I asked if there would be another use he would give us a loan for and he answered, 'Have you ever heard of assisted living?'" This was in the 1980s, when these types of facilities were not being developed much, but Westin looked into it and decided to go for it with Pittore, who is still his Agemark partner today. "It was totally fortuitous, and I fell head over heels in love with the business," says Westin, "because unlike renting apartments to interchangeable renters, now I'm taking care of very frail elderly at the end of their lives and I have a chance to make a difference. I truly found my calling."

Westin's business philosophy came from his years as a young adult, when he worked with Club Med in Europe as a sailing and ski instructor. Gilbert Trigano, founder of Club Med, is one of his mentors and it was there that Westin learned about hospitality and dealing with large groups of people. "When it came time to design programming and lifestyle for the elderly in our various locations I tapped into this background. We truly do Club Med for the elderly." Westin is full of stories about his residents, whether it is about taking memory care residents bowling or boating, or offering other diverse experiences to assisted living clients, who he believes still want to have fun. "We had a lady who turned 102 in one of our Baltimore properties who said to me that she had never been to a Baltimore Orioles game. Ten days later, when the New York Yankees came to town to play the Orioles, she threw out the first pitch. That is the Club Med in us." Westin sees his business as social first, fully engaging residents. Westin believes that the multiple awards Agemark won are a result of this policy. His son, Forrest, has been involved for the last 12 years as well.

Lamorinda does not just have retail or small business operations. Some larger companies are run from offices tucked away in commercial areas, like Agemark. Founded 36 years ago by Orinda resident Richard Westin, Agemark owns and operates assisted living and memory care residences across the country, employing 800 people.

"It's become my passion and mission in life," says Westin.

Throughout Westin's professional life, the lawyer, turned commercial property investor, turned assistant living community business owner was able to recognize and seize opportunities when they came his way. When he was practicing law, a client asked him to lend him money to enter a real estate deal. Westin offered to partner instead, launching his career in commercial real estate. The assisted

Agemark residences are either for assisted living, memory care or a combination of both. Today the partners own 15 properties, with an additional three under construction and five in the approval process. Many of the properties are old grand hotels that were built in railroad towns at the turn of the 20th century. "We have these gorgeous hotels that were very fancy, where a lot of social functions took place, that fell out of favor when the railroads fell out of favor," says Westin. "In the '80s we came along and bought them, and donated the air rights and facades to local historical societies so the buildings would stay forever." All kinds of important social events are taking place in the facilities again. "There is something charming in these older buildings filled with people who went to their high school proms in there, and then 60 or 70 years later the kids from this generation are coming back to celebrate their proms, filling the place with youthful energy. We become a serious part of the community. We do not warehouse or isolate people."

There is no Agemark community in Orinda, Lafayette or Moraga. But that might change in the future, says Westin, a longtime volunteer in the community who was named the 2012 Orinda Citizen of the Year. "We own a property next to the Wilder development site," he says, "and there is a need in Orinda for a first-class project." So far it has not worked, but Westin says that if all goes as planned an application will be filed with the city in the first quarter of 2016.

"If you're persistent and hopeful," he says, "something will happen."

Lamorinda Weekly business articles are intended to inform the community about local business activities, not to endorse a particular company, product or service.

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[back](#)

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