

# Success Story

By Lou Sorendo



## Joseph Murabito

### Healthcare Entrepreneur Creates Network of High-quality Senior Housing Facilities

**I**t's a question of balance. For entrepreneur Joseph Murabito, striving to achieve balance in both his professional and personal life is goal one.

Murabito, an Oswego native, took over ownership of the former Sunrise Nursing Home in Oswego in 2012, transforming and modernizing the business into the 120-bed Morningstar Residential Care Center, a skilled nursing facility.

From there, Murabito created one of the largest networks of senior residential care facilities in the region.

Murabito, who will turn 44 on Dec. 27, acquired the Waterville Residential Care Center in Oneida County in 2014 with partner Judith Harding-Staelens. It is a 92-bed skilled nursing facility. The 106-bed Gardens by Morningstar assisted-living facility, formerly a skilled nursing center

operated by Loretto in Oswego, was renovated and opened by Murabito and business partner Atom Avery last February.

His facilities employ 350 people while caring for 318 residents. Morningstar and The Gardens employ 195 workers.

Murabito said his focus is on striving to keep personal balance at work and home.

He and his wife Ana Maria have been married for nearly 18 years, and have two children: Isabella, 11, and Joseph, 9. Murabito noted Ana Maria has grown to be as much of a professional partner as a life partner.

"It's hard to separate work from personal life sometimes," he said. "Work for me doesn't ever stop, nor does being a husband or dad. I work hard to weave it all together. I think I am doing all right keeping the overall balance."

While his business network is impressive, Murabito said it is more a byproduct of other goals.

"I am really not motivated by the scale I am creating," he said. "The scale is simply a necessity in today's healthcare environment. Like anything, scale can be as much of a good thing as a bad one. I try to live by our tag line of 'Life in Balance' daily."

Morningstar, Waterville RCC and The Gardens are a developing continuum of post-acute healthcare services in the community.

The collaborative provides skilled nursing services, long-term residential care, short-term rehabilitation and assisted living services.

In 2017, outpatient services will be offered in Oswego and Waterville and home care services will be offered in Oswego.

#### A star shines

"I enjoy seeing people be successful in their personal and professional lives," he said. "I am motivated by positive energy and do my best to create a stable positive environment for my staff that I love very much,"

said Murabito, a resident of Baldwinsville. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in health administration from Ithaca College and a Master of Health Administration degree from Cornell University.

Murabito said there is a general recipe for operational success in the skilled nursing profession, as all skilled facilities are governed by the same regulations and reimbursed by the same state and federal entitlement programs like Medicare.

"Balance within one's operations is important," he said. "How do you keep nearly 750 people satisfied on a regular basis? It is a challenge."

Creating his network of organizations is not the fulfillment of a life-long goal for Murabito.

"I would say, however, that I have enjoyed throughout my life the opportunities I've had to work with people from all sorts of interest groups," he said. "Growing up, I was an athlete and musician. I loved art and writing, fishing, hunting and cooking. I was blessed to have a large family and was surrounded by people both young and old. I have family members who are well-rounded people as well as my mentors."

Murabito said healthcare is a profession where he is surrounded by "all sorts of people, of all age groups, with all sorts of talents and interests and experiences."

"Working in healthcare gives one a full life's experience in a single day. I feel like I am doing what I was meant to be doing. I can't say I knew my goals from the start, however. I was simply following my instincts like a lot of people do."

Murabito credited his success in the healthcare arena as being a product of persistence in a single service area and an interest in continuing to grow and develop personally and professionally.

"I am in a position now where my focus today is very different than it was even a year ago," he said. "I have a better sense of the scale I need to maintain a safe and comfortable working environment for all the staff, and at the same time assure the personal involvement and family management style that represents our collective culture."

### **Team-building focus**

At work, Murabito spends a great deal of time daily working with ad-



**Morningstar**



**The Gardens**



**Waterville**



*Fitness room at the Gardens by Morningstar assisted-living facility in Oswego.*

ministrators and regional support staff to help them lead and integrate their efforts into the bigger picture.

"My professional goals are to create a strong high-level management team between the sites who work collaboratively together with some common understanding of our overall goals and a strong ability to reach consensus for the betterment of the whole," he said. "My work life seems a bit more ambiguous at times because I need to stay at the correct distance to allow my partners and managers to work effectively within the organization. This is a learning curve for everyone."

Murabito said there are always challenges in helping individual people, or smaller groups of people, work better together.

"This is the area I love the most. This is what keeps me going more than anything. There has been significant growth and development in and between people in the organization," he said. "We have created and refined our operations greatly in the last few years especially."

Outside work, Murabito's personal daily pursuits are busy as well.

"Not only are the kids and Ana Maria busy with athletics, music and school, but I keep myself active and diversified personally all the time.

"My mind needs the variation. I train in mixed martial arts three times per week, play trumpet in the Phoenix Community Band and coach Isabella's basketball team. In between, I am an

avid hunter and fisherman, love to cook and make wine."

He also enjoys boating and playing the piano.

"The more I stay in this game, the more my immediate family influences me. I ask myself everyday, 'What am I working for?' and 'What am I working toward?'" he said. "Tough questions really."

Murabito said some of the most successful and reputable business people in the world are also some of the most un-centered and unbalanced people.

"I don't want this. Do I live to work or work to live? We have to move forward and be persistent in all we do, but at the same time not take ourselves too seriously," he said. "Ultimately, we all only have about 30-40 years of individual professional productivity — some more, some less."

### **Bureaucratic obstacles**

Murabito has been met with challenges in terms of renovating and launching his new businesses.

"Just because you think you have a good idea doesn't mean it will work exactly the way you think it should," he said. "The healthcare bureaucracy and the sheer number of people and entities involved in the provision and development of healthcare services make things very challenging.

"It is like running a perpetual marathon with no finish line. One must gain satisfaction from running with others and enjoy growing a team

to run with. At some point, the baton is going to pass and the team needs to keep moving forward."

Murabito said he focuses on a servant leadership style as much as he can.

"Trying to lead people in the best direction so they can pass it forward and do the same for another growing leader is very gratifying," he said. "I love working with committed leaders who find their success within the company."

Murabito said there is a basic and fundamental working understanding of structure and roles that is a necessity.

"The system is rigid in a lot of ways and if one doesn't understand that structure and

proportions of our system and how it applies to an individual facility, it is very difficult if not impossible to be successful," he said.

Most nursing facilities nationwide are made up of roughly 70-75 percent Medicaid residents.

"We have a finite set of resources. We must have a positive operating margin and steady cash flow just like any other business," he said. "Without this strong operational base of understanding, it is nearly impossible to grow a successful team and provide the care effectively in today's more unforgiving market."

Meanwhile, baby boomers and millennials have a much different perspective on life than generations before them, Murabito said.

"Technology and information are more accessible than ever before," he said. "Statistics are endless and one can easily find numbers to match already formed opinions. While communication between people is at a volume and pace like the world has never seen, the actual human connections we have seem to be sinking in a sea of digital information. There is a dangerous sense of entitlement that divides us both as a nation and as individuals."

"Health care is about personal relationships and personal accountability," Murabito said. "Always was and always will be.

"We can't forget this — no matter how much our phones and computers may be replacing our brains."