

## Healthcare HEALTH SPECIAL

By Lou Sorendo



*Joseph Murabito is the new owner and operator of Morningstar Residential Care in Oswego.*

### **Morningstar Residential Care Center**

## **The Rebirth of a Local Health Care Provider**

**W**ho would have thought that playing piano would change Joseph Murabito's life forever?

Murabito is dedicated to a career offering skilled nursing services to people in the community.

Murabito, 39, an Oswego native, recently took over ownership of the former Sunrise Nursing Home on Sunrise Drive in Oswego and has developed the business into Morningstar Residential Care Center.

Nearly 20 years ago, it was his musical talent that provided the spark that ignited his career.

Murabito said he went to college not knowing what he wanted to do. "I enrolled in general business and did not

click with the professors. I met Carla Wiggins in the elevator who was the chair of the health administration program, a small program of 19 people at Ithaca College, and she suggested I stop by and consider her program. I enrolled the next day," he said.

Through the health administration program at Ithaca, he completed two internships at the Syracuse VA Medical Center. In his travels at the VA Hospital, he discovered a nursing home on the eighth floor of the building.

"I began playing the piano for the guys and ended up as a news story with [TV news anchor] Carrie Lazarus. The response from the guys and their families was overwhelming. By the end of the summer, I had a large regular group

around the piano singing 20s, 3's and 4's music.

"I felt that I really had a positive impact on their quality of life and I was hooked," he said.

"If I was to narrow it down to one person at the time, I'd have to say the person who made up my mind to go into long-term care was a gentleman veteran named Al who had but one tooth in front and was a former Vaudeville singer," Murabito said. "I saw him one day in the hospital library looking up lyrics to the songs I played. He knew the tunes, but he couldn't recall all the words. That was a very powerful moment for me and still is. I felt that my influence was making his time more productive and increasing his quality of life."



## Healthcare

### HEALTH SPECIAL

The Baldwinsville resident earned a Bachelor of Science in health administration degree from Ithaca College and a Master of Health Administration degree from Cornell University. Murabito said he feels he is in the right profession for his skill set and interests.

"No one ends up working in healthcare by accident; the work is too hard and stressful," he said. "If someone does not get a sense of satisfaction and is not motivated by helping others, they don't stay in this profession."

**Finding his niche** — Murabito's career in senior care extends far beyond his involvement in Oswego.

"I feel lucky so far in my career that I have been associated with some very good people and companies," he said. Ironically, he began his career at the same point where he is now: the former Sunrise Nursing Home.

"I recognized that my family's experience was not in healthcare despite owning and operating a nursing home since 1995," he said.

Murabito's grandfather, Joseph Castaldo, was the contractor for the construction of the Oswego facility during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Castaldo eventually became the property owner and then in 1995 the operator.

"My grandfather has been a strong influence in my life both personally and professionally. I credit my work ethic and determination to my relationship with my grandfather. I have a lot of love and respect for him," Murabito said.

Murabito later affiliated with the former Hallmark Healthcare, now known as Capital Living and Rehabilitation Centers based in Albany. Its CEO, Patrick Martone, became a mentor and remains a professional associate and

friend today.

Murabito then worked for Wingate Healthcare out of Boston, for nine years and was promoted to vice president of operations. "I had very good relationships and mentors in Wingate. I would not have gone as far as I did in a relatively short amount of time without the guidance and support of people like Steven Tyer and Bob DiFrancesco," he said.

At Wingate, Murabito had operational oversight responsibility for nine skilled nursing facilities between the Hudson Valley and western Massachusetts with 1,500 beds, 1,300 employees and an operating budget in excess of \$100 million annually.

In late 2008, Murabito received a call from his grandfather requesting assistance with a suffering Sunrise Nursing Home.

The facility had been struggling



Staff at Morningstar, from left, are Pam Aquilitania, Cindy Murray, Andrea Doviak and Greg Callen.



## Healthcare HEALTH SPECIAL



*Joe Murabito, wife and their two children at Morningstar Residential Care Center.*

with inconsistent clinical and financial performance and was approaching a point where the operations could no longer support the business. In an effort to assist the facility and his grandfather, Murabito began doing his homework to understand the nature of the obstacles at Sunrise.

Murabito introduced Alternative Solutions Group to Sunrise Nursing Home in early 2009. ASG provided an integrated set of back-office services and support that the facility was lacking. With these tools in place, Murabito was able to begin managing the operations from a distance while still with Wingate.

**Spearheading a comeback**—“With ASG’s systems in place, I was able to hire an administrator and work with Sunrise in the same capacity as I worked with my other facilities with Wingate,” he said. Murabito said ASG provided a “window” to see the mechanics of the operations and “allowed me to make management decisions critical to the

turn around.”

From April through December 2009, the operations at Sunrise began to turn around. “This was a very stressful and critical time for the facility. I honestly did not know if things would turn around in a timely enough manner to prevent the business from going under. I was confident that I had identified the steps to take to get things back on track but it was a race against the clock given the organization’s cash flow problems,” he added.

Simultaneously, Murabito had been experiencing the “itch” to move away from Wingate as the heavy corporate structure and politics that he flourished in for several years began taking its toll on his personal and family life.

He is married to Ana Maria and the couple has two children, Isabella, 7, and Joseph, 5.

While helping to facilitate a turn around at Sunrise, Murabito accepted a job as an administrator for a 160-bed facility in Ventura, Calif. “I was get-

ting very burnt out with the corporate dynamics and I had an opportunity to manage a 160-bed facility basically on the beach in California. I almost moved there when I realized that professionally, it was a step down and appeared as if I was ‘escaping’ something,” he said.

Rather than move to California, Murabito approached ASG and became vice president of business development for the company in 2010.

“I respected the systems that helped me at Sunrise and ASG was looking to grow. I never worked in any sort of sales capacity before. My expertise was operations—fortunately this position was about selling operational expertise—so it seemed to fit and I gave it a shot,” he said.

ASG works in multiple capacities in several facilities across the state from full-service back-office support to smaller contracts for billing services. ASG is affiliated by ownership with Absolut Management LLC, owned and operated by Israel Sherman. Absolut

# Healthcare

## HEALTH SPECIAL

owns and operates 12 facilities in Western New York.

It wasn't until early 2010 that Murabito would recognize the potential opportunity to come back to Oswego as the owner-operator of a nursing facility.

"My original effort to help my grandfather with Sunrise was with no preconception that I would move from the Hudson Valley back to Oswego. I did not know if Sunrise would or could turn around fast enough to keep the business going. Once realizing the opportunity, I had a lot to think about as I was very well settled and enjoyed life in the Hudson Valley."

**The rise of Morningstar** — By mid-2010, it was clear that Murabito would be coming back to Oswego with his family to own and operate the nursing facility. The transition took two years to solidify.

"In addition to the transition of ownership process, which at times seemed like a full-time job in itself, was the tall task of nurturing the business back to viability and developing a concept and brand of service from which to move forward," Murabito said. "We had to re-identify with ourselves as a team and as an organization and redefine our whole business process if we were going to stabilize and grow."

Sunrise as an organization had many long-standing and dedicated employees and some key leadership that was the platform for growth.

"My goal at Morningstar, similar to previous facilities I've managed, was to build a strong and independent management team. We are a people business and balanced leadership is the only way to assure success. Morningstar today is blessed with many high caliber professionals, more than I could mention here. At the same time there have been a select few who, without their leadership and influence, I would not have been able to bring our organization where it is in 2012," says Murabito.

Andrea Doviak is Morningstar's director of nursing services, and was basically raised at the facility. Growing up on Sunrise Drive, Doviak has been a certified nursing assistant, RN unit manager, and minimum data set coordinator and "brings all of this experience along with a charismatic approach to Morningstar," Murabito said.

Doviak is passionate about her

work and the service she provides to the people receiving care at the facility, he added.

"In the last two years, Morningstar's clinical performance has been very solid due to Andrea's leadership. Morningstar is an organization that's takes pride in the ability to effectively manage a higher and broader spectrum of clinical acuity by offering IV therapy, advanced wound care and behavioral management programming in addition to its growing short-term rehabilitation program," Murabito said.

Cindy Murray has been an employee for 17 years. Murray is the director of environmental services at Morningstar.

Murray's role has grown significantly during the last few years due to her meticulous management style and high level of initiative, Murabito said. "Cindy takes care of many details behind the scenes and is devoted to our success," Murabito said.

Pam Aquitania is Morningstar's director of rehabilitation services. As a physical therapist, Aquitania has been instrumental at building Morningstar's short-term rehabilitation program.

Just three years ago, the facility had few short-term clients. Today, the facility average 15-18 short-term care residents per day and discharges many individuals back to the community after a successful sub-acute rehab stay.

"Pam is a steady and consistent performer and has worked through many obstacles to grow her department," Murabito said.

Greg Callen most recently joined the Morningstar team and is the organization's director of marketing and admissions.

As the founder of Move Along, Inc., Callen brings a strong business sense and a determination to succeed, Murabito noted.

"Greg has developed solid connections with many area businesses and healthcare providers and has been successful helping Morningstar continue to grow its patient census and clinical mix," Murabito said.

Murabito said it is also important to mention the important role Karen Crisafulli has played in the transition from Sunrise to Morningstar.

Now retired, Crisafulli's job as business office manager through the

transition process was invaluable on many levels.

"Karen's cool and steady approach to problem solving and ability to effectively interact with anyone was very important," Murabito said. "I feel very blessed to be surrounded by such good people here at Morningstar. This is a special group and I am proud to be a part of what we have. I've worked with many people and many teams over the years, and the Morningstar teams ranks among the best," says Murabito.

For the first time in his career, Murabito is working with his wife, Ana Maria. She is gaining experience in the business office and manages accounts payable. "We are a family operated business and I value and need all the love and support I get from Ana Maria, and my children Isabella and Joseph," Murabito said. "As a young family, we've gone through a lot of changes so far, and I am ready to face whatever the future holds for us together."

**Life in balance** — Morningstar's mission as a family-owned and operated skilled nursing and rehabilitation facility is to provide people in the community with healthcare, customer service and support to overcome or adapt to their physical and cognitive limitations so as to achieve their individual best quality of life.

The facility is in the process of re-branding and redefining itself to the community. Morningstar has embraced its strengths and has become a competitive health care provider in the Oswego county community, Murabito said.

"Given the facility's long and variable history, we have been very successful in developing strong community relationships and in many cases changing people's minds about who we are," Murabito said. "In my view, we have the strongest and most capable skilled nursing team in the area when it comes to delivering balanced and effective care. It takes time for the community as a whole to see this. Good news sometimes travels slow. But it does travel and we continue to work on this."

"We have a lot of momentum and energy and we will work as hard as we need to in our efforts to be the premier provider of sub-acute care in this area. Morningstar has a unique niche that is needed in the Oswego County community," according to Murabito.