



**Willow Towers
Assisted Living**



IN THE NEWS

**Westchester County Business Journal
Profiles Nora O'Brien, New Executive
Director at Willow Towers**

Just recently, Nora O'Brien became Executive Director of Willow Towers Assisted Living, the award-winning not-for-profit assisted living residence that is an integral part of the United Hebrew "Campus of Comprehensive Care" in New Rochelle. In its Oct. 8 issue, the *Westchester County Business Journal* [featured](#) an interview with Nora, showcasing the talent, experience and warmth she brings to life at Willow Towers:



**At United Hebrew, a
Therapist Changes Career
Tracks in Elder Care**

"Hello, Ruth," said Nora O'Brien, passing an elderly resident in a hallway at Willow Towers Assisted Living in New Rochelle. "Hello, Carmen," she said, greeting a smiling elderly man stepping slowly from an elevator with the help of a health care aide.

"I wanted to learn everybody's names - residents and staff," said O'Brien, who has started a new job and a new role in elder care in a familiar place as executive director at Willow Towers, a 126-unit assisted living residence on the United Hebrew Geriatric Center campus in New Rochelle. That feat of memory would include 134 current residents of the 8-story tower, 26 case managers and 84 other employees.

Has she done it?

"Yes," said O'Brien with a smile.

She smiles often, and has made it part of her management style. "I believe in fostering staff development. I believe I get more with a smile than I do with a sharp tongue," she said.



She walked briskly through the lobby to a courtyard, where workers moved patio furniture out of the potential path of Hurricane Joaquin, which threatened a stormy weekend visit to Willow Towers and United Hebrew's 7-acre elder care campus on Pelham Road near Long Island Sound. O'Brien worried the temporary hut raised in the courtyard for Succoth, the Jewish holiday, might have to be taken down early to avoid its destructive dismantling by Joaquin.

"I had a great love for Willow Towers even in my previous role," said O'Brien, who has replaced her physical therapist's uniform and comfortable work shoes of the rehab clinic with a female executive's wardrobe of dresses and high heels - and more frequently worn lipstick - in her new executive director's office.

A physical therapist with a doctoral degree, O'Brien arrived on the New Rochelle campus in 2006 as director of its newly opened Burke Rehabilitation clinic for short-term rehabilitative care. She was employed at Burke Rehabilitation Hospital for 21 years before accepting the administrative position at Willow Towers. In her nine years heading Burke's United Hebrew operation, the clinic grew from four therapists to 22, she said, "because United

Hebrew is committed to providing excellent rehabilitative care."

In that role, O'Brien also trained staff and did consulting at Willow Towers. "When I made this transition, I knew 50 or 60 residents well" who had received care from Burke Rehabilitation, she said. "So for them it was a good change because it was a familiar face moving in."

Rita Mabli, president and CEO of United Hebrew, said she was impressed by O'Brien's "exuberance and her innate kindness." As a physical therapist, "She could help somebody get better but also help them to feel better at the same time."

O'Brien herself called her method as therapist "a very human approach." That ability and compassion might owe in part to O'Brien's early experience in her own family.

Raised by her maternal grandparents and her grandmother's sister from the age of 7, O'Brien was 9 when she was inspired to her first vocation by a made-for-television film that told the story of a car accident victim who learned to walk again with the help of a physical therapist.

"I turned to my grandparents and said, 'Whatever it is, that's what I want to be when I grow up.' That's corny, but it's absolutely true," she said.

At 26, employed at Burke and the mother of two girls, O'Brien became the primary caregiver for the aunt who had financially helped the scholarship student through her undergraduate education in physical therapy at NYU.

"It was a full-time job" that left her physically and mentally exhausted, she said. "It is taxing in a way that people who have not been a caregiver cannot understand."

At United Hebrew, "I'm a firm believer in promoting from within," Mabli said.

Looking to replace an executive director who had taken another job, she saw in O'Brien an able candidate who knew well United Hebrew's campus of comprehensive care, which includes a long-term skilled nursing home, apartments for independent seniors and home health care services in addition to assisted living at Willow Towers, which has a dedicated floor and program for residents with dementia or Alzheimer's disease.



"She was a champion of our mission" - that is, to treat elderly persons in United Hebrew's care as family. "Bringing her to Willow Towers was a natural," Mabli said.

"Rita saw I had a hunger," O'Brien said, "and she made me a part of her strategic planning committee" at United Hebrew.

O'Brien had served three years on the committee when Mabli offered her a career transition with the executive director's job.

"She embraced it within an hour," Mabli said. "She went out of my office and came back an hour later and said, 'I accept.' And she said it enthusiastically."

O'Brien joined a nonprofit organization with a long history of caring for the elderly in New Rochelle. It began in 1919, when the United Home for Aged Hebrews was founded by a charitable society of Austrian Jews. The founders in 1921 opened a rambling home on Pelham Road to its first elderly residents.

"Our campus is built where that home once stood," O'Brien said.

While its essential mission has not changed, United Hebrew Geriatric Center - its name was changed in 1988 - is now a nonsectarian organization. About 55 percent of Willow Towers residents are Jewish and many of the rest are Catholic, O'Brien said. Across the United Hebrew campus, a majority of residents are Christian, she said.

Opened 12 years ago, Willow Towers was the first assisted living facility in Westchester County to be triply licensed by the state as an assisted living residence, enhanced assisted living residence for people with extra health needs and residence for people with dementia.

"It was certainly cutting edge in 2003," O'Brien said. "Now we hear about assisted living in many places. But United Hebrew was ahead of its time."

O'Brien said the geriatric center serves 800 people daily in New Rochelle. "It's a campus of comprehensive care. I think that's what sets us apart from so many of our competitors."

Responding to community needs, United Hebrew is completing a \$26-million gut renovation of its former skilled nursing pavilion to add housing for low-

income seniors and elderly living with dementia. Expected to open in December or January, Meadow Lane will offer 32 units of affordable housing and Willow Gardens will have 40 units for residents with dementia.

At Willow Towers, "I have to have the bar be high" for staff performance, O'Brien said. "People are paying a great deal of money to live here. They should have excellent customer service, no matter who they're dealing with."

"They view us as their extended family," she said of residents. "Our frontline staff, they view our residents as family as well."

"It's a vibrant place to live. People don't come here to die; people come here to live ... When residents move in, they have a greater energy. They have a greater zest for life because they meet people here.

"We want people to come here and enjoy life," O'Brien said.

About Willow Towers

Willow Towers, *The Beverly and Alfred J. Green Pavilion*, is an assisted living community of individuals and couples who value their independence and want to live life to the fullest. Triple licensed by New York State to operate as an Assisted Living Residence (ALR), an Enhanced Assisted Living Residence (EALR), and a Special Needs Assisted Living Residence, Willow Towers can provide customized care to residents if their needs change. Its Griffin Program offers half-day or full-day supervised activities for residents with mild memory impairment, and one floor is devoted to the Phoenix Memory Care Neighborhood, which allows residents to live in a secure memory-impaired supported community.

Willow Towers is located on United Hebrew's campus of comprehensive care in New Rochelle, giving residents access to other services such as skilled nursing and rehabilitation. For more information, call (914) 636-6565 or visit www.willowtowers.com.

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