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From athletes to residents, a journey of passion



[Jack York](#)



Jack York, It's Never 2 Late

I've had the pleasure of writing blogs for McKnight's for several years, with many of my stories centering on the remarkable elders I've met over the years. These men and women are the backbone of all that's good about our country.

I always enjoy those connections and those stories. But over the years I find myself gravitating towards writing about the people that make senior living communities tick. I am interested in the myriad of journeys people have taken. It's often never a straight line, but a zig-zag pattern that involves serving these remarkable older adults.

Today's story may be my favorite example of one of those journeys, a true outsider working her way into the fray. What are the odds that a female sportscaster and writer would weave her way into dementia expertise? It's a long-shot for sure, but UMBC did beat Virginia this year.

I first met Ellen Belk in a small restaurant in North Carolina just outside of Charlotte. As is my usual MO, we were meeting about iN2L and her company (Milestone Retirement Communities) to discuss a partnership to bring technology to her residents. Eventually we did get around to the business side of the equation, but as we began talking my eyes lit up. I'm a sports junkie, and Ellen had many stories to tell.

Ellen grew up as a successful athlete in her own right. Tall for her age, in fifth grade she was invited to play on the eighth grade team. From there she took off. She played on the Varsity team in high school as a freshman, then went on to earn a Division One college scholarship.

As part of a wildly athletic family, Ellen began opening doors that ultimately guided her early career path. In college, she majored in broadcast journalism. She wrote for the school paper and the college radio station. Initially, her dream was to be a political correspondent. But when she received an internship offer with the Milwaukee Brewers her political reporting took a back seat to sports.

That experience led to a myriad of freelancing opportunities, from ESPN Sunday Night baseball to ABC golf and later working in Milwaukee at WTMJ radio, flagship of the Brewers, Packers and Milwaukee Bucks. She went to WISN radio in Milwaukee and WBT radio in Charlotte, doing drive-time radio sports talks for the respective local teams.

Within a year, she was offered a producer position at WFAN radio, the No. 1 sports talk station in the country. She became a game day producer for the NY Giants, on-site producer for both the Jets and the Giants, Monday night coaches show. The pinnacle of her career was cohosting an evening sports talk show on the pioneering eYada.com internet radio. This was the pre-cursor to Sirius & XM satellite radio. In those early days, listeners had to tune in via their computer. It was at the height of the dot com era! And, it was a wild ride of trailblazing. If she could make it there, she could make it anywhere!

So how did this hustling sports reporter wind up in the field of senior living? Her life changed on September 11, 2001. She was living in New York at the time, and being near that unspeakable tragedy changed her views. She felt compelled to be closer to family and her roots, and she saw that back home, in Milwaukee, the 'broadcasting landscape' was exactly as she'd left it. The same folks, in the same positions. That wasn't the direction she wanted to go. Healthcare was more stable and would tie to her desire to do meaningful work.

Ellen thought and hoped her background would help her get into the world of communications in healthcare, but the folks making hiring decisions simply could not overlook her sports background. They did not see the fit and weren't welcoming at all. In a couple of instances people were downright rude. But she was undeterred. In fact, the more doors that closed in her face the more tenacious she became about breaking into the healthcare industry.

Finally, she got a job as an activity assistant at a skilled nursing home in Menomonee Falls, WI. Six months earlier, she'd been sitting courtside at Madison Square Garden and now, here she was, planning activities for folks with dementia in Wisconsin. Within weeks, she was hooked.

Ellen knew this was her new direction and it felt good and purposeful. Today, 17 years later, she has become a change agent when it comes to dementia care solutions and senior living activity programming. She still maintains her rebel streak, and Milestone allows her to keep that passion. She continues to challenge the status quo of the industry.

On many levels, she still consider herself an outsider despite having had great successes and recognition for her innovative solutions and programs. Milestone is a great fit for Ellen, she explains, "I'm incredibly fortunate to work for an organization that embraces my passion and my ideas for developing programs that stand out from our industry peers. The ownership of Milestone has yet to ask me to 'dial it back' or discourage me from implementing my strategic vision. In fact, it's quite the contrary; they are amongst my biggest cheerleaders."

Ellen's story begs the question of what she learned in sports journalism that translates into senior care. The most difficult part of her career transition was going from the male-dominated industry of professional sports into the female dominated industry of healthcare, she says. Previously, she'd witness 300-plus lb. offensive lineman throwing punches on the practice field but within an hour, they were playfully snapping towels at each other in the locker room. Healthcare was significantly more challenging for her to navigate. She didn't speak their 'language' very well. No one was in any rush to assist or guide her.

So Ellen approached healthcare like she was a beat reporter. She voraciously studied and learned the terminology and 'language' of this new business. She figured if she could survive the world of New York media she could survive this.

Today her life at Milestone is a mix of working with nearly 200 lifestyle and leisure directors and trying to capture her own moments of bonding with residents. Her words say it all; "To see a resident snuggling with a baby goat or a group of folks making doggie treats for the area Humane Society makes my heart swell with pride. To see pictures of our residents with dementia on a field trip to a museum or enjoying themselves at a local chocolate shop, makes me delighted. Seeing images of a group of folks around the fire pit roasting hotdogs or another group taking a carriage ride behind a Clydesdale makes me believe that our activity professionals are truly embracing the direction I'm trying to take us. And, that's a great day for me!"

A lot of lessons to be taken here from a remarkable woman. As many of you sit and watch your favorite baseball team through the dog days of summer, stop and think that a beat reporter taking it all in could be the next leader in your organization. Don't be confined in where you look for talent. Passion and competitiveness go hand and hand, whether its sports or activity programming. Ellen, thanks for the work you do for the residents and for the entire profession of senior living, we're all the better for it! And next time you're in Denver lets go out to the local rec center and let's see who's got game!

Jack York is the president and co-founder of [It's Never 2 Late](#)® (iN2L).