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Home Is Where The Heart Is
Roberta Farnum's Home Instead Franchise is A Standout in Senior Care
By Ramsey Harris

In 1996, Roberta Farnum and her husband, Les, found themselves in a situation that growing numbers of Americans face: They needed to find care for an elderly relative who lived thousands of miles away. "We were looking for someone to help my husband's mom," Farnum says. "She was 80-years old and caring for her 100-year-old mother all by herself."

Unwilling to pack up and leave their familiar surroundings, Les Farnum's mother and grandmother, like so many elderly Americans, chose to remain living independently at home, instead of moving in with their families or into an assisted living facility. Unfortunately, without the proper support network in their community, they were unable to maintain their independence for long, and both women were soon forced to move into an assisted living facility.



This experience planted a seed in Roberta Farnum's entrepreneurial mind. Eight years later, her company, Home Instead Senior Care of Charlotte, has served the needs of almost 600 senior citizens, and, inadvertently, helped hundreds of families, like her own, cope with one of life's most difficult transitions.

The Charlotte chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners recently recognized Farnum as its 2004 Rising Star of the Year. The award is presented to a NAWBO member who has demonstrated entrepreneurial creativity and determination in successfully managing a business that is less than five years old. As it draws public attention and community recognition, the business Farnum refers to as "our baby" continues to grow up fast and healthy.

Prior to purchasing the Home Instead Charlotte franchise, Roberta and Les Farnum lived in Knoxville, Tennessee, where she co-owned a management consulting business, and he managed a garment manufacturing plant. She traveled throughout the United States, Europe and Asia, consulting Fortune 100 companies, including GE Capital, Lockheed and Motorola. He managed over 400 employees at a manufacturing plant. As the garment industry slowed, and Farnum grew tired of life on the road, the couple began looking for new opportunities.

“We came upon Home Instead, and we researched it for about a year. A couple months into it, we knew that this was what we wanted to do, but we didn’t know where. Because it’s a franchise, we looked at the different demographics, knowing we wanted to stay in the Southeast. Charlotte was available, so we purchased the rights to the Charlotte franchise and opened our doors in February of 2000,” Farnum recalls.

In order to finance their endeavor, Farnum continued on with her consulting business, while her husband began the difficult task of establishing a new business in a new town. After a year, Farnum was able to resign from her consulting business, in order to devote herself full-time to the family’s already booming senior care business.

“We got started by getting familiar with other people and companies serving seniors in the area. We were really surprised by how quickly the business took off,” she exclaims.

With over 12% of the population aging beyond 65 years, according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics, it is not surprising that the Farnums have enjoyed remarkable success. With the number of elderly rapidly increasing, Americans are demanding more options in senior care. Farnum knew the opportunity for non-medical caregivers in Charlotte was great, and, as the first business of its kind, Home Instead gained a large market share in a short period of time.

With over 450 franchises, Home Instead is the world’s largest provider of non-medical home care. The Farnums paid \$45,000 for the franchise in 2000 and posted \$1.2 million in sales in 2003. Farnum attributes their success to the need for their type of services in this community and to their “dedicated and compassionate care giving staff.”

Home Instead offers services for seniors who need companionship or help with daily activities, such as meal preparation, light housekeeping and medication reminders. Their services are designed to help seniors remain safe and independent at home. The company charges from \$14 to \$16 hourly, depending on the service provided, and offers special rates for overnight or live-in caregivers. Families may call the Charlotte office 24-hours a day, seven days a week for services as their needs arise.

“We must be available to our clients in case of emergency,” Farnum says. “If somebody gets discharged from a hospital, and no one from their family can be with them, we can get one of our caregivers to them in two hours.”

According to Farnum, accidents in the home often result in seniors needing a greater level of care and ending up in a senior care facility. Home Instead seeks to help families prevent such accidents.

“Our client relations manager visits with clients and their families to make recommendations on how to make homes safer,” Farnum claims. “For example, she may suggest installing a grab-bar in the tub.”

Home Instead Charlotte now employs over 125 administrators and caregivers, and Farnum credits the company's success to her quality staff. She has applied the skills she gained through management consulting to her job as manager of Home Instead. Each caregiver undergoes 14 months of in-house training and participates in an award-winning Alzheimer's care certification program before their first house call.

Farnum meets with each of her employees once a month for lunch to set goals, review progress and listen to their concerns. The Farnums pride themselves on their compassionate leadership rather than their micromanagement skills.

"I worked as a management consultant for many organizations where good leadership values were not practiced, so I set out to create a company that really lives by the values we believe in," explains Farnum.

According to Arlene Curley, the Home Instead Staff Coordinator, who transferred from Atlanta to Charlotte when she accepted the position one and a half years ago, the business is a "labor of love for Les and Roberta."

She asserts, "They are very caring and compassionate bosses. They understand life, and so few very successful people do. They make sure everyone's voice is heard."

Curley knew that Home Instead was a unique place when she interviewed for the position. Farnum invited the entire office staff to participate in the interview. This is one of the many strategies she implements to promote an open environment, where the staff works together as a team to determine Home Instead's future.

Throughout their first year of business, both owners worked as caregivers, themselves. The time they spent on-call gave them an appreciation for what it takes to service the needs of their clients. Today, they trust that their staff can handle the daily responsibilities that keep the organization running smoothly.

"Our staff has the authority to offer a client free services if that client calls in with a complaint," says Farnum. "The client comes first. There could be a million things going on here, but if a client calls, everything else is secondary."

Farnum's "the client comes first" philosophy affects every aspect her business. Although she acknowledges that the industry has gotten more competitive since she moved to Charlotte, she believes that Home Instead's caregivers keep her business above the competition.

Since its establishment, Home Instead Charlotte has received recognition from its corporate headquarters. One of their caregivers, Levy Owens, received the Southeastern Region's Caregiver of the Year Award, out of 17,000 caregivers. Owens formed such a close bond with one of his clients, an Alzheimer's patient, that he actually delivered the eulogy at his funeral.

The caregivers are a constant source of inspiration for Farnum. She calls them the “unsung heroes” of Home Instead, as she tells some of their touching stories. “We received a call from a client who had just lost his wife. He needed someone to take him to Catholic Church on Sundays. The very same day he contacted us, a former nun walked into our office to apply for a position. She has been his caregiver ever since,” recalls Farnum.

Margaret Hines, a caregiver who has worked for Home Instead since its inception, had lost her husband to Parkinson’s disease prior to learning about the company. The same day she interviewed for the job, a client with Parkinson’s disease walked in the door. Four years later, she continues to provide care for that very same man.

Home Instead cultivates an environment where seniors maintain their dignity. Farnum believes that our society is at fault for many of the problems aging Americans face, and she looks for caregivers who appreciate the gifts the elderly can give. She explains, “We value youth in our society. We don’t value aging or the stories the aging have to offer, but the people we have working for us do.”

Even in a youth centric society, aging is inevitable. By 2010, the number of Americans over the age of 65 is expected to increase by five million, according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s projections. As the baby boomers begin to retire, Americans may be forced to reevaluate their approach to senior care. When that time comes, the Farnums will find themselves on the cutting edge of an important industry.

By combining Roberta’s internal management skills with Les’s external networking and marketing aptitude, the Farnums have realized their goal. “We wanted to give to a community on our own terms – as business owners,” Farnum says. “I think we give back in a big way here.”