

# Using Storytelling Can Help A Caring Culture Resonate

By Sara Wildberger

**T**ell me a story. It's one of our earliest requests, and it never gets old.

Storytelling is also a natural addition to senior living, where book clubs, writing groups, memoirists, and sharing tales with friends abound. Memory care often uses storytelling activities as well, either with words or visually.

Stories can even cause the brain to release oxytocin, the chemical that motivates empathy, trust, and caring, according to neuroscience research by Paul Zak, founding director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies.

And stories are no less effective in a business setting, Zak says, in *Harvard Business Review*: “They provide guidance for daily decision-making as well as the motivation that comes with the conviction that the organization’s work must go on.”

This and similar research led a team from Watermark Retirement Communities built off this research to make storytelling an integral part of its hiring and retention. Watermark calls it its Ripples associate engagement program, which launched this year.

## The Ripples story

Tammy Farris, MBA, is director of strategic innovation at Watermark, based in Tucson, Ariz. She tells the story of how the company developed the Ripples program: Watermark was growing fast. And everyone wanted its unique culture to grow along with it.

To do this, the company looked first at using a top-down training model similar to those used in high-end hospitality companies. But within about six months, “it morphed into something much different,” Farris says.

The company wanted associates to embrace the idea that their actions extend well beyond themselves; their actions ripple.



“Why don’t we build a framework that allows them to express and create meaningful action?” the team asked.

That framework was story. Rewarding and celebrating good stories would be the catalyst to creating more meaningful interactions, which would then turn into stories—a renewable cycle of engagement.

## Culture from the first contact

Watermark changed its approaches to recruiting, interviewing, and onboarding to support the Ripples goal of creating culture one story at a time. “We want to attract natural ripple makers and storytellers from the beginning,” Farris says.

Recruitment ads tout “waking up each day wanting to make a difference” and “making every interaction matter.” Interviewers might ask a jobseeker to describe how they made a difference in someone’s life.

Before onboarding, new associates are introduced to a cultural commitment policy where creating a positive impact is a basic expectation.

There are reminders throughout that ripples don’t have to be big gestures or ongoing initiatives to matter. Really listening to residents with full attention, getting a chilly family visitor a blanket, or playing a shared favorite song qualify. “It’s not about creating a program or event,” Farris says. “It’s about one-on-one connection: One associate looking straight into the eyes of one resident, thinking of something that would really delight that resident, and then making it happen.”

## Stories every day

Once associates are on staff, the culture of storytelling continues. Associates can start a meeting with a story, post one to a slideshow

on displays around the community, or earn rewards for creating ripples. Watermark has shared an example of one of these stories: visit [vimeo.com/325240946](https://vimeo.com/325240946).

The provider has gotten associate feedback to make participation a simple and natural part of a workday—and it's part of managers' and supervisors' job to respond as much as possible.

For instance, an associate who discovered a resident liked birdwatching might go to a supervisor and tell them they want to install a bird feeder outside the resident's window. The supervisor would purchase the bird feeder but allow the associate to tell the resident. This keeps the associate front and center with the resident, Farris points out.

### Ripples in action

While the Ripples program encourages storytelling, what associate Pam Waters shares sounds more like poetry: "7-Up cake, old-fashioned pound cake, bread pudding, strawberry caramel cheesecake..."

Waters has been the baker at The Fountains in Boca Ciega Bay, a Watermark community in St. Petersburg, Fla., for five years, working 4 a.m. to noon to create what residents call stellar desserts. They ask for her in the dining room, so they can personally offer praise. And she makes custom dishes for residents on special diets: "Just because they can't eat something doesn't mean they shouldn't get dessert," she says.

What makes her story a ripple—and what she was recently honored for at Watermark—is that she brings the same giving spirit to the surrounding area. She buys quantities of food from local stores, takes her car to neighborhoods or people that need a little extra help, and gives it away. No questions, no judgment. Just helping people who, as she says, "might need to choose between buying food and paying the light bill."

"Pam is what a ripple looks like," says Fountains executive director Suzanne Burtzloff. She has been an executive director at the community for 13 years; some of her staff have been at the community for as long as 30 years. Though she knows her commu-



## PRO TIPS ON CREATING A STORYTELLING CULTURE

If you're a fan of The Moth Radio Hour, you might have heard Ritija Gupta's story about her grandmother's food.

But in addition to performing, she's a communications consultant—with an MBA from Columbia Business School and a master's degree in public policy from Georgetown University. She coaches leaders at corporations including American Express and Google on how to tell a good story. She's currently leading the live show "Mistakes Were Made: Stories About Failure."

"Trustworthiness can really differentiate a company in a way that drives greater attraction and retention," Gupta wrote in an email interview. "When we trust an organization or a brand, we tend to gravitate toward it. Storytelling can definitely help build greater trust and memorability with people."

If you're nervous about telling stories, Gupta writes, "We actually tell stories all the time, and we may not be aware of it! So you're probably better equipped than you think."

**Gupta advises:**

- Have a few prompts ready. Sometimes people already know a story they want to tell, but if you or someone you're interacting with is struggling a bit, try asking them about a moment when they were most proud, or what the best part of their week was last week. Ask them about a book or movie that really touched them.
- Think about the "why" of the story—what do you want your listener to take away from it?
- Use and encourage details. What made this particular moment memorable? For example, did someone say something funny? Was there a familiar smell or sound? The more we can immerse ourselves in what you experienced, the more we'll connect with you.
- Finally, ensure that there is tension and a pivotal point to your story. If a story feels "flat" to you, think about the climactic moment and bring us there. Why was this important to you? For example, if your story is about running a 10K for the first time, why did the race matter to you? And what were the struggles you had to overcome to get there?

"Sometimes, a story can bring home the value of a message more meaningfully than pure data."

nity well, she has learned new things about staff and residents since starting the Ripples program. Managers' meetings open with the question: Did anybody hear a good story?

Farris says that kind of discovery is happening in other communities, as well. "You

find out what is important to associates," she says. Through the stories, she says, "You find out what makes them want to get up every day and pour themselves into the lives of the residents they serve." ■