

Transcript

Ms. Sonya Newton Interview

10.03: "From Stubborn to Servant"

Andy: Well, today on Biblical Perspectives on Aging, I have the administrator from the Ozark Branch, and that is Sonya Newton. And Sonya, you have been administrator with The Baptist Home or Baptist Homes and Healthcare Ministries now for just about a year or so, but could you introduce yourself and share what led you to follow the path of serving senior adults in general, please?

Sonya: [00:00:24] My name is Sonya Newton and I guess what got me started in healthcare was my mother. My mother is currently a resident at the Baptist Home, but when she was working, spent 25 years as a director of nursing and long-term care. So I grew up in the industry.

I remember being eight years old going with her when she was called in at night to start IVs at a nursing home and she was teaching me to start IVs. You know, not having me do it, but having me watch and learn. [00:01:00] And so I grew up in the industry. And I'm the youngest of three girls. And I think she always thought that all of us, or at least one of us, should be following in her footsteps. But that was not what I thought I wanted to do. At first, I went to Missouri State University and my degree, what I was studying, was psychology and criminal justice. And so, my senior year of college, [was] actually my last semester of college.

I sat down at the table with my mother and I said, "I'm really struggling. I don't know what path I'm supposed to be taking." And I was being very prayerful. And I said to mom, "I'm considering going into law, taking my LSATs, and going into law or working on my master's degree and going into counseling."

I said, "I'm not quite sure what I'm going to do." And she said, "Well, I'll tell you what you're going to do." I waited on the edge of my seat and what she said hit the floor. [00:02:00] "I'm short of staff. I gave you four years of college. It's time to pay me back." And I said, "Excuse me?" And so I showed up at the nursing home where she was a director of nursing and she looked at her staff and she said, "This is my daughter. She needs to be humbled. She probably won't last a week, but have at it."

So my first day in a long-term care facility, where I was actually employed, [I] spent in a soiled utility room, rinsing out all the dirty linens that no one else wanted to do for a full eight hours. And [as] I choked and gagged, I thought, "Oh my goodness. I'm not going to make it, but I wanted to prove her wrong."

I was stubborn too, so I wanted to prove [her] wrong. So on day two, I showed back up at the facility and I was actually able to meet a resident. And the resident was named Cora Patton and I walked into her room and she said, "I'm cold." [00:03:00] And I said, "Well, I'll go get you a blanket." And she said, "Well, you won't come back. They never come back."

And it broke me. I said, "Not only will I come back, I'll make sure everybody else comes back." And so I stayed. I went ahead and got my CNA (certified nursing aide). I did that until I graduated from college. And then I still worked as an aide for a little while and then went into the social work side of long-term care.

And I did that for a while. And then I, again, in facilities, did admissions and marketing. And then finally my boss at the time said, "Are you always this way?" (I was being a strong patient advocate and going through the building, making sure everything looked good.) He said, "Are you always this way?"

And the whole staff said, "Yes, she is." Then he said, "Then you need to get your administrator's license." So I got my administrator's license at the age of 25 [00:04:00] and I've been in healthcare. The total this year makes my 30-year mark. So I've been a nursing home administrator for 26 years. I've been in long-term care or healthcare in general for 30 years.

I served as a nursing home administrator for several years, and then I became an area administrator where I was over multiple homes. And then, at one point as a nursing home administrator, the owner of the company that I worked for also purchased a hospice and my boss brought me to the owner and he said, "Do you know why you're here?"

And I said, "No." And he said, "It's because you are passionate about end-of-life care." My father passed away and that changed my course as well. And so I became very passionate about end-of-life care. [00:05:00] And I was very blessed to open the first palliative care unit in our area in a long-term care facility.

So he wanted to know what I felt about hospice and everything. I told him. He said, "Well, I just purchased one." And he said, "Now you're going to be over it." So I became a director of operations for a hospice company for 13 years. And I oversaw nine offices with hospice for 13 years.

Andy: [00:05:24] Hmm.

Sonya: [00:05:25] But [by] then my mother had gotten older. She's 83 years old. And I sat down with her and I said, "Mom, you know, you've always known about healthcare. You are smart. I want you to make your own decisions. What do you want to see for your future for healthcare? What is your care path going to be?" And she looked at me and she said, "I want to be at The Baptist Home and I want you to be the administrator."

Andy: [00:05:54] Hmm.

Sonya: [00:05:55] And I said, "Well, no pressure there." But I said, "You're in luck. [00:06:00] They have an opening [for which] they were interviewing." And so I told her, I said, "I will be out of respect for you. I will apply. And then I'll pray about it and you pray about it too." Well, I think she had all of Second Baptist praying for it; I think there was a massive prayer chain, but several interviews later, Ron Mackey extended an offer to me.

And I've been here, like I said, for the last year.

Andy: [00:06:25] That's great. Well, thank you for that background. So, as an administrator, and you've been doing this for many, many years, since shortly after college; but what are your primary responsibilities? And we'll just narrow that in on the Ozark facility, but what are your primary responsibilities as an administrator there?

Sonya: [00:06:42] Well, if you read the guidelines, it says you're responsible for everything. I mean, as an administrator, you are ultimately responsible for everything. And until you, I guess, hold the chair and put your license on a wall, [00:07:00] the weight of it doesn't sink in. But that means even though you've got very qualified department heads, they have staff and then you have the residents.

So you are, and I said I believe in servant leadership, but you are serving your employees. You're serving residents. You're making sure that the building, environmentally, is maintained financially.

You're making sure that the home is sound and so that you can sustain the level of care. So basically, bottom line, the buck stops with the administrators...

Andy: [00:07:37] ...all other duties as assigned kind of thing.

Sonya: [00:07:40] Exactly. Multiple hats. And if someone calls in, then you step in, I mean, it's just, that's how it is.

Andy: [00:07:47] So you're at Ozark, The Baptist Home's Ozark facility. Is there anything that makes that particular facility unique among the various Baptist homes, here in Missouri?

Sonya: [00:07:57] Well, I do think every [00:08:00] campus has its own unique features, just because of the location that they're in. You've got some environmentally, the outside characters of each campus that vary, but ultimately, I would say it's the staff. In my 30 years of doing this, I said, I've walked into many, many nursing homes and ultimately the home adopts the personality of the staff. And so, if you interviewed every Baptist home campus administrator, they would say, "Well, I've got awesome staff." Well, that's true about mine, but their personalities are different. And so even though each campus has amazing, dedicated staff, their personalities are different.

And so, this campus takes on the personalities of the staff that I've got. And so, it makes it unique in its own.

Andy: [00:08:57] Okay. Okay. Very interesting. [00:09:00] Now I want to shift gear because, as an administrator, as somebody who has spent your entire life helping senior adults, you have written a couple of children's books and you did that to help understand the process of dying and what senior adults, even from a hospice perspective, would bring, so can you share a little bit about each of the books that you wrote and your goal for each of those?

Sonya: [00:09:26] Well, the first book came about because what I had seen, like I said, 13 years with hospice, I saw so many times where people would try to shelter children from what was going on. They would try to keep them away from visiting the elderly or the person that was sick and even at funerals, cause I've gone to countless funerals as a representative from hospice or even with my own family.

And there would be times where they would say, "Well, I didn't bring the [00:10:00] kids cause I didn't want to expose them to the funeral or I didn't want...;" So it's like society. I saw a lot of times where we try to shelter children from death; they always say the only two things in life that you can count on are death and taxes.

So we've seen it happen. In my opinion, instead of trying to avoid it, I felt like we should educate and prepare children to cope with it in their own way. And what was the ultimate catalyst? [It] was in one of the facilities that I went to see one of my residents that had passed. I'm walking down the hallway and the mother, which was [a] lady standing in the doorway and she was crying. Her children had been running up and down the halls. They were just playing like kids do, but the lady was crying in the doorway [00:11:00] and her mother was one of the residents of the home and had just passed. Well, the little girl runs up to mommy and said, "Mommy, why are you crying?"

And she said, "We just lost Grandma." And the little girl said, "Well, do we need to go look for her?" And it's the terms that we try to explain to children and they don't truly get it. Cause they're so legitimate, they want the actual loss. "Well, what do we need [to do] to go look for her?" And they had not prepared the little girl to say, "Grandma's sick. "This is why we're here. We need to spend

time with Grandma.” Nothing had been prepared. And because I had explained it, I have four daughters and I had explained it to my kid’s death, I felt like, “Well, this is something I feel led to do.” And I prayed about it. And that’s when *Chance’s Journey* came about, to try to explain why it was important to visit those that are. [00:12:00]

In the last stages of death, it’s important to be at that bedside [so] that no one should die alone. And that’s just something I’ve committed [to]. No one should die alone. When I studied hospice and I found out the fears of people that are dying, I honestly thought the number one fear of people would be pain that they would not want to suffer or be in pain. But it was not, it was being alone.

And so that was the number one fear. And I thought, well, if that’s the number one fear, we’ve got to embrace that and make sure no one dies alone. And in fact, make sure children realize why it’s important that no one dies alone. And so that was the first book. And then the second book was literally because of my owner.

He had purchased, like I said, we had one hospice and he purchased three more offices and it was a separate company. [00:13:00] And I thought they were going to merge those three into the existing ones and put them under the same umbrella. But he said, “No, I’m keeping the name the same. It’s going to be a separate company.”

He said, “So you’ll need to do the same thing you did for the first company: create a children’s book, but you’ll need to create another one.” Well, I had prayed a long time about it as well, and it was amazing the year prior had been a very stressful year and the verse that got me through it was the verse that inspired me to write that book.

God works in mysterious ways, but I feel like I had to go through that to be able to write the second book. But that’s why there was two.

Andy: [00:13:44] Okay. Okay. Do you mind sharing what that verse was?

Sonya: [00:13:48] Yes, it is Psalm 91.4. And literally at the front of the book, it says, “He will cover you with his feathers and under his wings, you will find refuge. [00:14:00] His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.” but it’s Psalm 91.4. And I put at the beginning, I put a reason why for the book, but it says I’d like to dedicate this book to my family for their inspiration and constant support. The book was envisioned after going through a rough period in my life.

Similarly, I said faith and hope the two little birds in this book find refuge under the wings of their mother. It is my wish that this little book would bring joy to your children. Bring about a sense of understanding of hospice services and offer a sense of faith and hope in time of need.

Andy: [00:14:39] Hmm. So the two books, *Chance’s Journey*, and then *Faith and Hope* are the name of each of them. Yes. So you mentioned even within *Chance’s Journey*, but especially in faith of hope that the idea of being together as people are at the end of their lives, that idea of loneliness or being alone for [00:15:00] most everyone in, in long-term care COVID has severely damaged the ability for anyone to come in and to be with their moms, their dads, their uncles, whomever that might be, in light of your books.

What thoughts would you share to help people process those realities? The realities that we’ve all faced in this last year, but, but especially in light of how COVID has impacted the ability to see spouses, grandchildren, grandparents, et cetera, and perhaps take those realities then and discuss,

give some encouragement, provide some encouragement for, for how to move forward. We can't fix the past, but how can we move forward from here, Sonya?

Sonya: [00:15:44] Well, COVID was, 2020 was, a horrible year. I mean, it was just a difficult year. Everyone will say that. In fact, my brother-in-law had COVID, was in the hospital, and he was put on a ventilator.

[00:16:00] We were fearful that he was not going to make it, but [through] lots of prayer, God healed him. So we're thankful for that. But part of my prayer was this way: "Please don't let him die in a hospital where family can't be around him..."; because I just knew it's harder for families.

To not go through that process, it's harder for them not to be there at the time of death. And I will say in 2020, there were probably countless people that were not let into hospitals and did not have that time. And the grieving process and the healing process in my opinion will probably take a little longer.

Because they didn't get to see and be there now in long-term care, I think there was a difference in a hospital setting. We truly are here every day. We spend more hours here than we do sometimes within our own homes. And we all become extended parts of the family for them. [00:17:00] And so for a while, when no one was allowed in, we were those surrogates to hold their hands to be there.

And we did FaceTime and phone calls and things like that, but we become that extended family. And because [of] that closeness and they know us and they trust us, I am grateful that the state did allow what they call compassionate visits. So towards the end of this COVID pandemic, they were allowing compassionate care visits. So if we knew someone was in the end stages of life, we could invite families in and we were able to do that and I'm grateful. It was just a difficult time.

What I will say is, I heard this, I won't take credit for this, but I heard a pastor say this: "If we watch the news, we get anxious and stressed out because of what we see on the news. If we watch the history channel, a lot of times it's like, [00:18:00] 'Ah, I already know the end of this story because it's the history channel. I already know how it ends.' And because we are people of faith to God, everything we're going through is the history channel. He knows the end. So we have that hope and we know how the story ends because he gives us a book that tells us exactly how it's going to end. And this is just a temporary place for us. This is just where we're passing through. And so the end is our hope; Jesus is our hope and we have a hope. So this, too, shall pass and we have an ultimate hope."

Andy: [00:18:47] Amen. Amen. Yeah. That's great encouragement. Thank you for that very much. As we begin to wrap up the interview today, then, Sonya, is there anything else perhaps a question that you wish I'd asked, [00:19:00] but something else that you might like to share with the audience today?

Sonya: [00:19:03] I don't know. I know that I feel truly blessed to be a part of the Baptist Home. I feel like I said this to someone the other day in 30 years of doing this, the Baptist Home here, particularly, I can't speak for the other campuses, but I'm sure they're the same. It's like a unicorn, it's a unique thing.

It is not the typical environment. It is not the typical nursing home. It is close-knit and it is special. And even though we went through COVID and it was stressful, I know without a doubt that we were not alone walking through that. And I do think that's what makes it unique as well.

Andy: [00:19:59] Hmm. Hmm.

[00:20:00] Before I ask how people might pray for you, if there were parents or grandparents that wanted to purchase your books again, could you share the names of those books and are those available like on an Amazon or where can people get those books and that they might be able to speak to their children and families about it?

Sonya: [00:20:21] *Chance's Journey* and *Faith and Hope*, [but] they're not for sale. Like I said, when I worked with hospice, the owner of the company had me write the books; thought it was a good idea to have the books. And I had countless people coming to us, even St. Louis University. There was a professor that asked for books so that he could teach his class. I had people asking all the time, and so I went to the owner and I said, "You know these do cost us to print and people [00:21:00] are asking for these books, what would you like me to do? Would you like me to put a price on them and put them for sale?"

And he said, "No, it was about the service, not about the revenue." So it was about the service. There's not a price on them. They are free and they are with the company that I worked for before. If they needed to contact me, I could probably still get them copies, but it's not something [available] to purchase

Andy: [00:21:30] Okay. Okay. So if someone wanted to perhaps try to get one, how might they contact you or would you refer them? Would it be better to refer them directly to your previous company?

Sonya: [00:21:48] I can tell you *Chance's Journey* was written for Preferred Hospice and they have several locations in the state. If you go to preferredhospice.com, they can look them up. [00:22:00] There's probably an office close to them and they would be happy to send them. The book, *Faith and Hope*, was written for Regional Hospice and they are located in Springfield, Missouri. They, too, will have the books and they could send copies.

Andy: [00:22:19] Okay. Okay. So *Chance's Journey* [is through] Preferred Hospice, if I heard that right, and *Faith and Hope* [is through] Regional Hospice. So again, just go to those websites, if you are interested in procuring one of those books for your family. Thank you for that information for them. Sonya, as we close today, then how can our listeners pray for you? Perhaps for the Baptist home there at the Ozark facility? How can we pray for you at this time?

Sonya: [00:22:51] Right now? I feel like God has been very, very fortunate. We are just really blessed. [00:23:00] So as far as needs, we don't have that, but I will say I would like prayer for guidance and direction as we go through.

I guess the next phases of what's going to happen. I do know that [in] our government there's a lot of turmoil and there's a lot of things changing and I do feel more scrutiny toward churches and religious organizations. I would like to, again, ask for strength as a leader, but also a hedge of protection for our home.

Because I think sometimes people attack just to attack, to see what the response is. And so I just, again for God's hand to be on the home,

Andy: [00:23:45] Okay. Okay. Well, thank you. And Sonya, on behalf of your ultimate employer of Baptist Homes and Healthcare Ministries, I thank you for joining us today on this podcast, Biblical

Perspectives on Aging and just giving a little bit more [00:24:00] insight into what you do as an administrator for the for the books to help families with that.

And just sharing a little bit about your own journey in this. So again, thank you very much for your time today.

Sonya: [00:24:12] You're welcome. Thank you.