



Diversity, Equity & INCLUSION



By **Dr. Nancy Koury King**
President, Senior Options

This article is the fourth in a series on Diversity & Inclusion.

In this article, I speak with Suzanne Pugh, CEO of Aldersgate.

Aldersgate – Dimensions of Diversity

Aldersgate is a life plan community in Charlotte, North Carolina, located in the middle of a very diverse area. That includes the wealthy and the poor, the oldest country club in the city, the Spanish Quarter, Little Vietnam, a high African American population, a mosque, a Buddhist Temple, a synagogue, every church denomination, and an LGBTQ community. The area has representation from nearly every dimension of diversity. And Aldersgate, with its population of generally conservative, white residents, sits in the middle.

I interviewed **Suzanne Pugh**, CEO of Aldersgate, who explained that the most significant barrier to marketing was its location. In 2011, as the board and leadership embarked on a strategic planning process, Suzanne asked the board, “Are you ready to embrace our location? Because we can’t be sustainable or amazing if we don’t embrace it.” She then shared that the organization would not be successful if it continued to be a board of white men over 60. And she clarified, “It’s not an insult, it’s a demographic fact.”

So the board entered a seven-month discernment process regarding its lack of diversity in committee and leadership roles.

At the end of that period, the board made commitments to diversify. A new mission, vision, and values were written to use more inclusive and intentional language.

Aldersgate

Embracing Diversity & Inclusion

We are an inclusive organization that values the richness of ...

“... Allows each individual the opportunity to contribute their gifts in significant ways.”

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Intentional Community Engagement

“Peaceful Protest”



Aldersgate set a goal to be more intentional about community engagement becoming a better neighbor. The organization hosted an international sandwich festival along the community’s front and opened its green space to all sorts of food trucks representing many different ethnicities. Entertainment was a part of the day and included everything from a gospel choir to belly dancing. Neighbors stepped onto the Aldersgate campus for the first time. Some of them would even say, “We were afraid to come here.”

When George Floyd was killed, Suzanne wrote a letter to her team acknowledging the pain and horror of the event but wanted to do more. The organization hosted a listening circle for 25 black employees, who sat outside under a large oak tree and talked for two hours. Suzanne remained outside the ring and listened. During the discussion, one team member said, “There is a cloud of racism at Aldersgate.” Suzanne was heartbroken and confused but took it in and listened. Then one of the men in the group broke from the circle and asked permission to ask Suzanne a question. He said, “What did you do the moment you realized COVID is here? What were your steps?” Suzanne responded with a list of things they had done, including learning, seeking experts, conducting daily huddles, seeking PPE, evaluating funds, and preparing people to be CNAs. He said, **“So here’s my thing. The real pandemic is racism. Why would you not put forth the same effort and resources toward racism as you have toward covid?”**



That was a jarring call to action. The group discussed how to go forward with a response and a plan. The plan was to hold a peaceful protest. They then made decisions around who else could be on the Aldersgate Diversity Equity and Inclusion Council.

“Racism is the Pandemic”



At the close of the meeting, each person got the chance to say how they were feeling. A medication technician had one of the most poignant comments. **“I am sitting here thinking about how grateful and blessed I am that I can sit in this circle and say what I feel. And then I wonder, if that tree could speak, what would it tell me about what has happened here.”**

The group organized and held a peaceful protest on the community grounds. Seventy-five residents participated along with the staff. Members of the listening circle made the signs with “It could be my son,” “I can’t breathe,” and “Black Lives Matter.” The march was led by people holding a banner saying, ‘Racism is the Pandemic.’ And the gentleman who pointedly challenged Suzanne in the listening circle carried the bullhorn and led the chants. The following week the community held another protest off-campus.

What should leaders expect regarding resistance and barriers?

“People will try to wear you down, thinking that you will give up, so you have to be ‘all in.’ It has to come from such a real place.” Aldersgate encountered obstacles along its journey. There was resistance from staff who thought the chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer should have been black; she is Latina. One resident told Suzanne it would have been better to spend the money on fixing the food instead of the diversity and inclusion officer position. Some residents objected to the hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter. They wanted to use the phrase ‘all lives matter.’ Suzanne responded by saying that it was essential to support their black team members. **“Your lives have always mattered, and honesty, black lives have not always mattered.”**

Residents also voiced dissatisfaction when Aldersgate opened up its campus to neighborhood group meetings claiming they did not feel safe. Suzanne pointed out that for 70 years, Aldersgate has been open to scouts, choirs, and other community groups and asked what was different now. A resident bluntly said, “Well they are black.” That was the end of the conversation.

How should a leader open the dialogue on diversity and inclusion?

According to Suzanne, “First, have the courage to look inside – you will fall flat if you don’t. Then, have the willingness to see what was in the ground around you. Then, be interested in other people’s ground. Finally, be willing to listen, to push and be pushed, and to give up power. And you have to be willing to put your name on it.”

What’s next for Aldersgate? Recently, to provide opportunities for underrepresented minorities, Aldersgate had implemented a policy on interviewing candidates for the supervisory, managerial, and executive levels. The procedure requires that managers interview two qualified candidates from an underrepresented minority on that level before they can make a selection. “We’re going to pick the best person for the job. We need to do the right thing by doing the work to put the opportunity forward.”

“There is risk and hard work. There are always steps backward. You realize that people are in different places. If you are inclusive, you can’t be inclusive just to people who think as you do. We have to invite those voices that maybe aren’t that far along. It’s never-ending. Once you start, you cannot stop. It requires energy, kindness, courage, and grace. **Grace** is the word we live by here.” Suzanne added.

At the nudging of the organization’s first female board member, the organization will be implementing a living wage for its employees. This action will create movement toward the equity portion of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Aldersgate is also building mixed-income and mixed-age housing, which will be for both elders and workforce families.

Suzanne Hodge Pugh, NHA, ALA, CMP – President and Chief Executive Officer has been with Aldersgate UMRC, Inc. for 24 years. She served as the Director of Marketing for over ten years, and after receiving her Nursing Home Administrator’s license and certification as an Assisted Living Administrator was named the CEO. In 2011, she became President and CEO and continues to serve in that role today. Suzanne is a 2012 alumnus of the LeadingAge Leadership Academy and serves as Vice-Chair on it’s Board of Directors. She also serves on other boards including the Board of the United Methodist Association, and Charlotte Will, a non-profit organization dedicated to raising awareness around poverty and socioeconomic mobility. When she is not working, Suzanne enjoys spending time with family and loves to mountain bike, kayak, and fish with her son, Wyatt.

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