

THINKING INVENTIVELY ABOUT SENIOR CARE

Personal experience with parents inspires a company

BY CARA FEINBERG

Andrea Cohen, MSW '84, was already experienced in the world of professional eldercare when her own parents got sick. Seven years out of graduate school, she had been the program director at Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services for more than half a decade, and had just founded Elderlink, a non-profit direct service organization serving lower-income seniors. "Here I was arranging care for my parents so they could stay in their home, and with all I knew about the field, I still couldn't do it," she said, listing their needs one-by-one until she ran out of fingers: transportation, medication, daily household chores, home modification... "I knew there had to be easier ways to keep seniors in their own homes."

This goal has become Cohen's life's passion and days' work. Born in Summit, New Jersey, to two parents over the age of 40, Cohen has wanted to work with seniors for as long as she can remember. "My parents used to joke they'd be my first clients," she said. Indeed, Cohen arranged home care for them for about half a year; they passed away within a few months of each other in 1991.

After working in eldercare for more than 15 years, in 1998, she co-founded HouseWorks, a Newton-Massachusetts-based private-pay company dedicated to helping seniors age in place. By providing everything from hourly to live-in home care, medication assistance, and companionship, as well as basic home modification services—building wheelchair ramps, installing grab bars in the shower, moving a bedroom to the first floor—HouseWorks has been a pioneer in private home care. As the company's CEO, Cohen has overseen its growth from a small service organization in Massachusetts to one of the largest of its kind in the country. Now a nearly \$16 million company with more than 500 associates, HouseWorks opened a second office in 2008 in Bethesda, Maryland, serving the greater Washington, DC, area.

"Private home care is a fairly new industry," says Cohen, "and it's wonderful to find success." But as a social worker, she says she also finds the work extremely fulfilling: "These are people's lives we're changing, this is peace of mind for their families." Her social work background, she added, in one sense provided excellent preparation for the entrepreneurial world. "This is a business that



ROSE LINCOLN

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Still, she said at a GSSW Alumni Association event last March when she received its Distinguished Alumna of the Year award, she had gotten no business education: "I was trained as a social worker. Running a business was not on my radar screen." She accomplished with sheer determination what GSSW students participating in the Social Innovation and Leadership curriculum will be able to do with their entrepreneurial training. Those new skills, she predicts, "will open up whole new possibilities."

Her own long-term vision is to change the way people age, "to effect a paradigm shift," she says. Today, 13 percent of Americans are over the age of 65, but according to 2008 US Census Bureau projections, by 2030, that figure will jump to 20 percent. By 2050, 89 million Americans will have aged into that bracket. "People are looking at how their parents struggled, and they're saying they want to age differently," said Cohen. "They know where and how they want to grow old; we're giving them a way to do it."