



Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska, Inc.



An interview with

Ruth Henrichs
Lutheran Family Services
President and CEO

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Ruth Henrichs, President and CEO of Lutheran Family Services, grew up in Scribner, NE, about an hour outside of Omaha. Her childhood life on the family's farm taught her many values, including the importance of hard work and fairness. The small town atmosphere of Scribner helped teach her the importance of integrity and the value of having an upstanding reputation. Her childhood instilled many important ethical values that she has carried throughout her life and into the Board Room.

After starting her higher education at Drake University in Des Moines, IA, Ms. Henrichs discovered social work to be her life calling and thus made her way back to Nebraska. Here, she completed her Undergraduate degree and a Graduate degree in Social Work while attending the University of Nebraska – Omaha. After her Graduate School graduation, Ms. Henrichs began her work for Lutheran Family Services in 1976.

During the proceeding years, Ms. Henrichs has helped serve the Omaha area and the many people who need everyday help. It is her goal that all people should be treated with the respect and dignity that a human life deserves. She has managed to perform this work with a level of integrity, professionalism, and heart that leaves many colleagues and business professionals flocking to her for advice.

You have been with Lutheran Family Services for over 35 years. Could you talk a little about your career path?

I came here in 1976, right out of Graduate School, and began in the direct service aspect of LFS. I handled pregnancy and adoption work for the first four years. Then, I moved on

to individual, marriage, and family therapy services for the next several years. Finally, I became the director of the Omaha offices, followed by President and CEO in 1984.

It is clear that Lutheran Family Services provide many different services to the community. Where does most of the organization's business come?

We have three areas of core competency. You are absolutely right. We are a multi-service agency and we are statewide. LFS responds to many different needs in communities across Nebraska. But we have, for ease of understanding LFS, really divided our services into three areas of core competency. The first would be Children Services, and this is where you would find all of our adoption, foster care, respite care, and early childhood interventions. We have a significant program, which has been implemented for over twenty years, where we provide mental health treatment to children who have been sexually abused and who are acting out sexually. We have located this program in the new Project Harmony Building. All of the services related to children are located inside of this core competency area man-



aged by a statewide administrator.

Our second area of core competency is what we call Behavioral Health. This primarily serves adults, and is composed of outpatient, mental health, and substance abuse treatment. We, too, provide these services all over Nebraska. It is a very large component of our work. four years ago, we began a mental health program of trauma treatment for veterans and active military personnel. This program is called At Ease. We also have an incest perpetrator program where we treat people who have committed incest. It is a very intensive mental health treatment program. In addition, we also have many other drug and alcohol related programs under this area of core competency.

Our third area of competency is what we call Community Services. This would be where one would find our refugee resettlement programs, our immigration legal work, our employment services, and our AmeriCorps program. AmeriCorps is a very large program, a great program for students, where we provide opportunities similar to an internship, except students receive a college scholarship after their year of service.

This might be an unfair question, but is there an area where you are most proud?

No. I am proud of different parts of all three areas of our core competency. The history of LFS goes back to 1892, and the roots of our organization are in children services because we began as two orphanages, one in Fremont and one in Omaha. We have provided children services for 120 years, this year. These are our rooted, historic, long-term programs. Many people, to this day, still know LFS as a children services organization. In the mid-1980s, we developed our out-patient mental health and substance abuse programs. They grew to be the largest book of business that we do statewide in our Behavioral Health segment.

One of the things I am most proud, in both children and adult mental health, is that **it did not take a “Penn State” for LFS to know 25 years ago that children were being sexually abused and there were incest perpetrators that were re-committing on children.** We started programs to address these issues, twenty-five years ago for the incest programs and twenty years ago for the children programs. It did not take a “Penn State” for us to say, “This is going on and we need to do something”. I am very proud of these programs. They are not popular programs. Twenty-five years ago, they were not popular programs! But, they were and are the right thing and I am very proud that this organization had the courage and the integrity to make the decision to do what was right. Today, everyone is very proud of these programs.

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When you think “ethics”, what does that mean to you?

Ethics, to me, means trying to do the right thing.

It is a discernment process to me. I think ethics can be muddy water; some times it is very difficult to discern what is the right thing to do in a situation. But, it is always worth the time that one invests to act with integrity and to make informed decisions.

Do you feel that your personal ethics were formed by the way that you were raised?

Yes. I think it is part of the formation of my personal ethics. I think we learn ethics throughout our whole life. As children, we learn a lot growing up. We learn in school, in our faith communities, in

businesses, and in our colleges and universities. You are learning and you are putting together your own thoughts about ethics just by being students. All of our experiences inform us. But many times, as you become leaders in organizations and situations confront you, there is not a clear black and white picture about what is right and what is

wrong. **The “tough stuff” in ethics occurs when the path is not clear and there is not a law or regulation to help point the way.** You have to use ethics as a discernment process and make a tough decision. It can be difficult.

[Have you found that ethical decisions are more difficult as CEO and President than when you first started with the organization?](#)

Decisions are complicated these days. I say that with a smile. What I am debating internally is that I have also continued to grow as a person over my career, and I am not sure whether there are more ethical dilemmas in front of me or whether I am simply more aware of these situations because of my experiences. I believe that over the course of my career, I have become more informed about ethics. I think about it more

and ethical words are more a part of who I am over the last twenty years. It is probably a combination of the two as to why ethics is so important to me at this stage of my life. Life is complicated.

[Would you care to share an ethical decision that you have faced today or have faced recently?](#)

One of the things I do face, and I am sure all people in my position do face this whether the company is for profit or not-for-profit, is that people will call me and say, “Ruth, my son, or daughter, or grandson, or granddaughter is graduating, has a degree, and would like to work with kids. I was just wondering if you would interview them and if there would be a job for them at LFS.” Maybe this person is a donor or maybe this person is on an advisory committee or whatever. When this happens, I am always very clear with people. Lutheran Family Services is about quality services. One of our values is integrity and I am not going to hire you because you are someone’s child or friend. I am going to hire you only if you are the right candidate, with the right set of skills, for the position that I have available. We deal with human life here. It is very important to me that we are role models in how we treat human beings.

Integrity is very important to me. Everyone is going to make mistakes in their lives. But I truly believe that the employees that I want working here are the employees that recognize when you make a mistake, you own it and learn from it. You do not cover it up. You have to acknowledge this mistake and learn from it and move forward. **We all make mistakes. Integrity is critical.**

[Do you do anything here at LFS to foster values such as Integrity?](#)

We do. Well, we have had mission statements for 120 years. We have had a statement of values, a corporate philosophy statement, a theological statement of understanding, a conflict of interest statement, etc. We have had all of these since the early 80s and had those long before not-for-profits were required to have them. Eighteen months ago, we invited a speaker to come to a Board of Directors meeting and give a presentation focusing on ethics. We also do leadership summits every winter where we deal with ethical scenarios. How your leaders deal with problems will help set a tone and example for the whole organization.



With a spotlight being shined on ethics these days, do you find that there are more or less ethical dilemmas?

I do not know if there is a stronger awareness, in terms of ethics, where people are able to identify when there is an ethical dilemma, not just an ordinary problem. People are more aware and knowledgeable of the whole study of ethics and the language of ethics. I know that here at LFS, we are able to think about the situation, name it, and then have a discernment conversation where we do not even have to make a decision.

Ethics is one area where I believe that the conversation and the discernment are just as important as the decision that one makes at the end.

Whether I decide to give benefits to a relative of a donor may not be as significant as the discernment process that my staff goes through in terms of thinking about the implications of the actions and the integrity in which we conduct ourselves. Calling ethics into the front of my staff's mind and making them think about what the values are here at LFS is very important.

So at LFS, you use ethical dilemmas as a teaching method

for educating your employees?

Absolutely. Life is messy and we deal with the messiness of life at Lutheran Family Services. The programs that we offer are not "clean" programs. We do not manufacture widgets. Every person that comes into LFS for mental health therapy has an issue he or she is dealing with in life. We must do the best that we can to be the best that we can for the individual that needs our help.

Here at LFS, we always stress that just because an action is not illegal does not mean it is the right thing to do. A lot of the time you find leaders who believe that, "well it is not illegal, so it is okay for us to do it." I do not think that is an ethical decision. Just because something is legal does not mean that it is the right thing to do.

How do you feel talking about ethics?

I am very comfortable talking about ethics. I think everyone needs to talk about this subject.

What is the biggest challenge that the younger generation of business professionals will face in the work place?

Technology and the use and abuse of it. It will be a huge issue for the younger genera-

tion. They love it and live on it. Technology is a huge legal liability for us. The use of confidential information and how it will be shared is a huge area of concern. If you lose your iPad and have confidential information on it, just think of the potential legal liabilities. Think about the exchange of email today as everyone communicates constantly on their smart phones, whether it is with friends, co-workers, and clients. It is a whole new generation with new ethical situations that are still to be encountered. This makes the study and use of ethics even more important.

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