

MARY RUIZ

CEO, MANATEE GLENS » BRADENTON, FLORIDA

Mary Ruiz grew up as the oldest of six. Her mother is Cajun French. Her father's work as a pipeline troubleshooter took the family from her birthplace, Morgan City, La., to Houston for her early school years, and then on to New Orleans to finish high school. And along the way, Mary, like her father, discovered a certain talent for seeing and then fixing things that didn't "connect" properly.

As a newly arrived sophomore in her New Orleans high school, Mary saw how a popular school tradition—the hazing of freshmen—was experienced as "fun" by upperclassmen but as terror by younger students. With quiet encouragement from her mother, Mary boldly asked, "Is this who we are?" in the school newspaper. The practice was stopped.

Mary's skill in seeing business problems stems in part from that early boldness: the ability to look fearlessly into what she calls "the gap between what's real and what's possible." But the key to her successful, 25-year career at Manatee Glens is in translating this fearlessness into problem solving. "If I see a problem, I have to solve it," she says, recognizing that solutions mean changes and that changes don't always work at first. "If you're taking risks, you have to realize that failure is an option," she asserts. "My management process is 'keep failing until you succeed.' It's the giving up that's not an option."

At one time, Mary, who loved her work as Manatee County's community services manager, envisioned a career as an acute-care health executive. But in 1987, when Manatee Glens offered her a spot as corporate services director, Mary found a valued mentor in CEO Bob More. She led a team in creating managed-care services, developing a winning formula that effectively served 30,000 consumers in an at-risk, capitated contract. Years later, this approach led to the creation of FloridaHealthPartners, a partnership between Value Options and non-profit centers that manages \$35 million in annual Medicaid behavioral health contracts statewide.

While Mary says that effective service solutions must be financially sustainable, seeing service needs is an intuitive process. "Fifteen years ago, I had a call from a mom whose daughter, who was bipolar, was in jail for cocaine possession. She was at her wits' end, because as one problem would get treated, the other would re-emerge." Because there were no services for co-occurring disorders, "I didn't know what to tell her. But my intuition was to change Manatee Glens so that I could answer that question the next time."

She put the problem to her team, who launched a screening program that found some 65 percent of incoming consumers had co-occurring disorders.

This finding drove "a big evolution," forcing clinicians and counselors to cross-train in mental health and addictions, then coordinate in creating and delivering new levels of care and putting Manatee Glens ahead of the game in co-occurring treatment. The change wasn't easy, and certainly wasn't cheap, but the lesson was clear, says Mary: "Doing the right thing for the customer makes a better business."

Thanks to experience in heading Manatee Glens Hospital in the early 1990s, Mary, who became Manatee Glens President



and CEO in 1996, knew what to do to meet a local crisis caused by closure of a state psychiatric hospital in 2002. The solution, "a hospital without walls," enabled two-thirds of the former state patients to live locally in their own apartments with the help of supportive services. At the same time, it reduced the cost of care by over \$130,000 per patient annually. To address overcrowding in local emergency rooms, she worked with local officials to make Manatee Glens the county's designated, 24-hour behavioral health receiving facility. This designation leveraged the capabilities of Manatee Glens' access and crisis centers, its 24-bed addiction treatment center, and created a new triage center for alcohol and drug cases. This change not only reduced overcrowding in local ERs, but also helped reduce the local jail population by 25 percent.

In a field shaped in part by financial limitations, Mary says that the greatest challenge is "to serve as many as you can effectively. But the question is, how?" Answering that question in recent years has meant new changes. Mary and her team have closed some residential beds at Manatee Glens to expand the availability of

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lower cost alternatives: a wraparound team for children, intensive outpatient treatment for adults, a call center, and a walk-in clinic. Together, these have increased the number of consumers served from 10,000 to 12,000 annually.

While it takes a lot to keep the organization moving forward — everything from involvement in state and local politics to a significant fundraising effort to support charity care — Mary Ruiz continues to enjoy the challenges of leading "good people, benefiting people who need it." This, she says, "is the best work on the planet."