

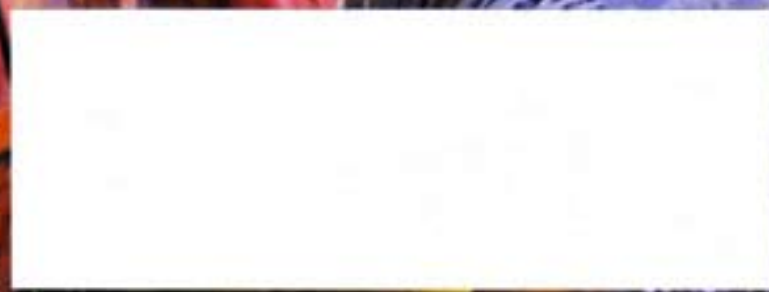
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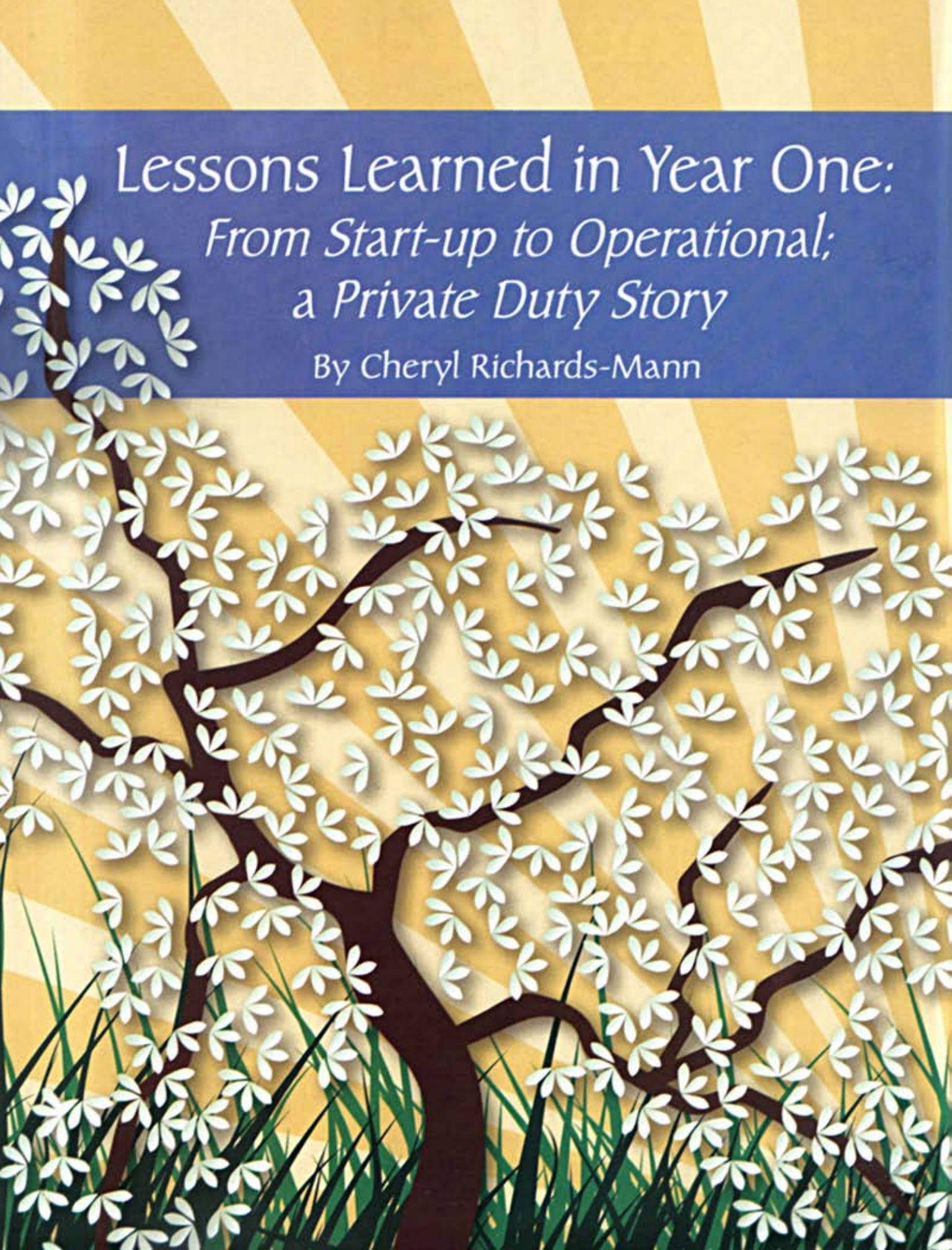
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The Growth of
Private Pay:
Customized
Care at Home





Lessons Learned in Year One:
*From Start-up to Operational;
a Private Duty Story*

By Cheryl Richards-Mann

Several years ago following some personal events that necessitated a career change, the need for safe and secure long-term care at home became an obvious business choice for me.

Starting up a private duty agency has become a viable business model with the care needs of America increasing daily, but succeeding in the business ethically and having those with a care need find your face in the crowd are no easy tasks.

After researching the available avenues for starting our agency, choosing the option of hiring a business consultant and purchasing her private duty business manual, my husband, Lewis Mann, and I founded Atlanta Home Care Partners on Valentine's Day, 2007. (See the *CARING* June 2007 issue for an article on how I selected the model for starting my agency.)

Now, a little more than a year later and more than a year wiser, much has been accomplished in the business and for our clients. Though my husband and I both had extensive experience in caring for and coordinating care for family members, and I had many years of corporate management experience from which to draw, I learned very quickly that in this industry, it is vital to be flexible and accessible at all times.

Because we selected and utilized a business consulting services which had previously founded and profitably run a care managed home care private duty agency, we were at an advantage in regards to certain situations that would have caused serious drawbacks if we were not prepared to handle them effectively. Through expert guidance and the helpful tips compiled in its private duty business manual, we were able to anticipate potential problems and develop methods to deal with situations as they arose.

For instance, our consultant stressed the importance of managing client and family expectations from our initial assessment so potential clients would understand immediately who we are, what we offer, and what their role is in the relationship. Clients need to view us and their situation in a realistic manner. We inform our clients from the first con-

tact as to what we can and will do, as well as what we cannot and will not do. This up-front approach decreases the chance of failure, and increases the chance of a long-term happy client. Preventing our caregivers from being taken advantage of or putting the client in a compromising situation is the key to success.

Hiring a full-time care manager was something else our consultant advised us to do to the benefit of the company and our own sanity. In the beginning, we were not able to hire a care manager immediately, and Lewis and I struggled to adapt to a new type of work schedule – on call, 24/7. Sleeping with our cell phones on the night stand and filling in as caregivers no matter what time of the day or night soon became a regular part of our exhausting routine. Since hiring a care manager in November 2007, our schedules have definitely calmed down. With more than 18 years of experience in the industry, not only does our care manager handle all the calls after 9 pm, but she also helps us identify and solve potential problems daily and can fill in as a caregiver if necessary since she is a CNA.

As an agency owner, you find yourself extremely occupied with managing many different facets of the business, but you don't want to spread yourself thin when it comes to the all important task of managing employees and schedules. Even though we are a small agency, we find it essential to have a care manager on staff who can dedicate her time fully to scheduling and finding the best caregiver/client matches.

One of the challenges we've found more difficult than originally anticipated is the marketing component, which is so different from my corporate background and training. Since private duty services are desired only on an "at need" basis, many people do not know about the services available until that need arises. Obtaining a good understanding of and creating ongoing relationships with referral sources is crucial to our success. Fortunately, we took the advice of our consulting service which has created a turn-key monthly marketing communications program that provides all the necessary marketing tools for us to identify and keep in

contact with a variety of referrals without costing us hours of valuable time on our end. From helping us identify the best referral sources for increasing our billable hours, to targeting and managing our database more effectively and efficiently, the program is helping transform our weakest link into a marketing powerhouse.

In any business, it is an unspoken truth that there are some things you cannot plan for and must simply deal with as competently as possible. One unexpected roadblock showed up in the process of applying for our state licensure.

In the state of Georgia, all home care services, both non-medical and medical, are lumped together under the same state licensure umbrella. Because of this, everything we applied for had to be written in a complicated language common within the government-funded agencies like Medicare and Medicaid. In addition, the level of recordkeeping required to keep the license is very strict, and we were required to submit to a formal audit for compliance of state regulation to gain approval.

This problem has much to do with the fact that the home care/home health industry in Georgia has taken off at

a rate no one was prepared for, including the state. The current system cannot keep up with the current growth rate, which had the potential to cause frustration. However, on the advice of our consultant, we did everything we could to become educated on this particular situation, minimizing repetitive or unnecessary communication for both us and the state during the approval process. We're happy to report that we received our permanent license on May 7, 2008, and were only cited for three infractions in the audit – a number, according to the auditor, that is extremely low for a new home care company.

Now that we have the necessary state licenses, we are ready to take the agency to the next level. Currently, the company has 13 employees. Having met and/or exceeded all of our goals for our first year in business, we have identified a number of objectives to meet in the following year. Short term, we hope to reach the goal of 1,000 hours per week by the end of this summer, 2008. Additionally, in preparation for our next big growth phase, Atlanta Home Care Partners is officially in acquisition mode, on the market for smaller existing home care companies in the Atlanta area that have decided to sell.

As part of our long-term strategy, initial planning is in the works for developing a state-approved training program for in-house caregiver training. The program, which will assist the agency in tracking and evaluating caregivers, will provide the training at a minimal cost to the caregiver. Not only will the program serve as a valuable recruitment tool, but we believe it will help us maintain high-quality caregivers, lower employee turnover rates, and differentiate us further in the marketplace.

One piece of advice I'd like to share with other owners/operators of private duty home care agencies is to get involved in the community in which you serve. Since several of my clients suffer from Parkinson's disease, I decided to become active in the Parkinson's Association, and have been elected to its executive board of directors. Not only can I stay on top of new research and developments with the disease, but it is also an outlet to give back to my clients in a way that could affect them on a personal level.

From start-up to operational, one year later, I can honestly say that running a private duty home care company is what I'm currently meant to do. It is allowing my husband and me to meet our personal goals for working in an indus-

try that makes a difference in people's lives. We are becoming better business people as we encounter and conquer new obstacles. The gray-ing of America is bringing with it a need to find a better way to stay safely and affordably at home, and private duty home care, in conjunction with its certified agencies, is positioned to make that happen.



About the Author: Cheryl Richards-Mann, BS, is president and CEO of Atlanta Home Care Partners, Inc, Atlanta, GA. She brings a wealth of highly professional and intensely personal experiences to the business. Her background in customer satisfaction, striving for quality, and sensitivity for the aged come together to place Atlanta Home Care Partners on the cutting edge of high quality services for the homebound elderly. Cheryl can be reached at cheryl@atlantahomecarepartners.com.