

# DESIGN FOR LIFE NEWSLETTER

Interview with C-Suite of Aventur, Exploring Possibilities, Transforming the Future + Sleep Challenge Has a Design Solution.

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Gretchen Cobb



Dina Capek



Carter Smitherman

## EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES, TRANSFORMING THE FUTURE: AVENTUR'S VISION FOR SENIOR LIVING

In a candid interview, Aventur's senior leadership team: Gretchen Cobb, CEO; Dina Capek, COO; and Carter Smitherman, CFO — share their perspectives on the organization, its mission, and its vision for the future. For Gretchen, a career in senior living was never part of the original plan. For Dina, it was almost inevitable. For Carter, it is more about agape — the most admirable form of love — than the numbers. Their paths converged at Royal Oaks in Sun City, Arizona, where decades of hands-on experience and a willingness to challenge conventional thinking helped shape a new vision for nonprofit senior living: Aventur. Which is built around a simple premise: strong senior living organizations can do more when they rethink how they operate, embrace the right partners, and prepare for a future that will be more complex than the past. *"I never saw myself in senior living," Gretchen says. "But once you experience this*

*field, you quickly realize how rewarding it is."* Dina's connection is more personal. Inspired by her two grandmothers — both of whom she describes as her best friends — she became a nurse after watching one grandmother lose her sight to unmanaged diabetes. That experience sparked a lifelong commitment to improving the lives of older adults. She eventually joined Royal Oaks as an RN, but her ambitions extended beyond clinical care. *"I wanted to help make living conditions better for people as they age,"* she says. That philosophy became central to the evolution of Royal Oaks — and ultimately to Aventur.

### **From One Community to a Broader Mission**

Royal Oaks demonstrated that a nonprofit senior living organization could be financially strong while continuing to expand its mission. As its reputation grew, other communities began seeking its expertise. Those conversations planted the seeds for Aventur. *"We realized that what we've built at Royal Oaks — with our team, board, and years of experience — gives us an opportunity to help others create sustainable organizations and evolve their missions,"* Gretchen says. The timing mattered. Royal Oaks, now 43 years old, had become a strong single-site organization — but remaining a single site presented long-term risks. The challenge, as Dina describes it, was protecting what had been built while finding responsible ways to grow alongside organizations that share similar values. In 2025, Aventur Senior Living was formed as a parent nonprofit by Royal Oaks Senior Living, assuming management of Royal Oaks and The Glen in Shreveport, Louisiana. That development reflects a core leadership



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philosophy: growth should be intentional, not growth for its own sake. *"We're not on a fast track to become a large organization."* Gretchen says. *"We're looking for partnerships where genuine value can be created — communities that share our culture and want to protect their mission while strengthening their future."*

### **A Pioneer's Mindset**

Innovation has long been part of Royal Oaks' DNA. When Dina arrived, the community consisted of an independent living building, a skilled nursing facility, garden homes, and a single dining venue. Over the years, Royal Oaks added programs, services, and levels of care as healthcare, technology, and resident expectations evolved. The philosophy was straightforward: senior living organizations cannot afford to wait for change to become unavoidable. *"You can't be the last — you have to be the first, or you're last."* Dina says. Royal Oaks was an early adopter of paperless systems and among the first organizations in Arizona in its CCRC and skilled nursing environment to implement a fully electronic medical record. But innovation is never a one-time achievement. Technology changes. Regulations change. Resident expectations change. Organizations have to keep evolving alongside them. Regulatory complexity has also increased. Changes such as Arizona's directed care requirements can affect residents, families, caregivers, staffing, and operations simultaneously. For Aventur, deep operational experience is one of the most valuable resources it brings to those challenges.

### **Boots on the Ground**

What distinguishes Aventur is not simply its years of experience. It is the nature of that experience. The team has worked throughout senior living organizations — from the bedside and clinical operations to finance, food service, facilities, and administration. That means understanding decisions from the perspective of residents, frontline employees, boards, and leadership teams alike. *"It's not just sitting in an office or meeting with your leadership team,"* they explain. *"It's being embedded in the organization."* That presence can mean knowing frontline employees by name, recognizing when a change in behavior has a personal explanation behind it, showing up at 7:30 in the evening during a fire alarm evacuation, or stepping into a frontline role when staffing falls short. It reinforces a fundamental belief: senior living is ultimately about people. Occupancy matters. Budgets matter. But every operational decision eventually

becomes part of someone's daily experience. As Gretchen puts it: *"Every spreadsheet turns into a resident experience."*

### **Technology Can't Replace Connection**

The industry is entering another period of significant change. Technology, artificial intelligence, staffing pressures, and the expectations of incoming baby boomers will reshape senior living in the coming years. Aventur's leaders see real potential in new tools — but also a clear boundary. Technology can streamline administrative work and give employees more time with residents. It cannot replicate compassion, empathy, or belonging. *"We can make many things faster and more efficient,"* Carter says, *"but we can't make compassion faster."* The goal is not technology for its own sake, but technology that enables people to spend more time doing the things technology cannot do. People entering senior living will continue to want connection, purpose, and a sense that they are valued.

### **Addressing a Growing Housing Gap**

Demand for senior housing is growing across the spectrum, while the cost of land, construction, and capital has increased significantly. Some communities may be able to expand existing campuses. Others will need new sites or strategic partners. In rural areas, the challenge is compounded because demand may be distributed across several small communities that cannot individually support the cost of new development. The middle market presents another critical opportunity. Aventur believes the industry must explore ways to standardize homes, units, programs, and services so that quality senior living becomes more accessible and affordable to a broader population. Partnerships will be essential — whether with other nonprofits, for-profit organizations, government agencies, or philanthropy. Philanthropic capital, in particular, may help address needs that traditional financing cannot easily accommodate, yet it remains one of the least familiar and most overlooked options for many organizations. For Carter, the nonprofit model is central to this vision. Like the communities it serves, Aventur is structured as a nonprofit, allowing resources to be reinvested directly into the communities and residents it serves.

### **Exploring Possibilities. Transforming the Future.**

Asked to summarize Aventur's mission, Gretchen offers: *"Exploring the possibilities."* Dina's answer: *"Transforming the future."* Carter's: *"To go beyond the ordinary."* Together, those ideas capture the organization's approach. Aventur is not pursuing growth to become larger. Its goal is to help more residents live meaningful lives while helping senior living organizations become sustainable enough to serve future generations. *"The time to prepare for the future is while you're strong,"* Gretchen says. *"When you have the opportunity to choose the right partners — not wait until circumstances force those choices."* For organizations wondering what comes next, Carter offers a direct invitation: *"If you're a single-site organization and don't want to be alone anymore, reach out and talk to us. But it works the other way, too. If everything seems fine today but you're wondering what happens after you're gone — who will carry the baton or take the organization to the next level — that's the time to start thinking about your future."* Behind every strategy, spreadsheet, and capital plan is a resident whose life should ultimately be better because of the decisions being made today. That, for Aventur, is what the future of senior living is about.

*Interview edited for length*

