The Prime Player In Westchester's At-Home Healthcare Field

Fearless, determined, and devoted to helping others, Rosa Kittrell Barksdale founded Barksdale Home Care Services in her early 40s—and 33 years later she's still top dog.

BY SUSAN WOLFERT

Looking back on her path from a Depression-era childhood, during which she dreamed of dancing with the Rockettes, to an executive office filled with awards, accolades, and all the trappings of success, Rosa Kittrell Barksdale can recall many challenges but says she always knew she would make it. At age 78, Barksdale has much to be proud of: a successful business, a loving family, and the energy of someone half her age.

Barksdale is the CEO and sole owner of Pelham-based Barksdale Home Care Services Corporation, a business in an industry she is passionate about. Founded in 1982, the company screens, trains, and places home health aides and nurses in clients’ homes. Clients include individuals as well as vendors such as the Visiting Nurse Service, managed care companies, and insurance companies. With a hearty nostalgic laugh, Barksdale remembers, “We started with nothing and kept evolving, evolving, evolving.”

Today, the company has roughly 250 employees on call for placements. Services include hospice, companion, and traditional aide functions like helping patients with personal care, as well as general home care for both disabled children and older adults. The company promotes home care as a way to keep families together, maintain patient independence, and promote
healing. “If you live long enough, most of us are going to need home care,” Barksdale says.

Born in Mount Vernon the middle of seven children, Barksdale learned early the importance of independence and helping others. “My father was the only one on the block with a job,” she says, noting that her mother would bring food to neighbors who were enduring hard times.

Barksdale aspired to become a teacher while attending Mount Vernon’s A.B. Davis High School, but she was accepted to the Long Island Hospital School of Nursing in Boston with a scholarship. With some of her siblings already in college, the scholarship made higher education possible for her. All of the children in Barksdale’s family attended college. “Whether we had money or not, we just had to find a way of doing it,” Barksdale recalls. While money was short, and even shorter by the time it was the middle child’s turn for college, “The family financed each other,” Barksdale explains, with siblings, aunts, and uncles all pitching in. Barksdale’s grandfather and father graduated college, and her aunt Flemmie Kittrell earned a PhD in 1935. “We all wanted to go. It was understood; it was instilled,” says Barksdale.

A New Path

After graduating nursing school in 1958, Barksdale married her first husband, a dentist, and worked as a nurse in Washington DC for three years. Following the birth of her son, Rudy, the family moved back to Westchester where daughter Kellye was born five years later. (Today, Kellye Davis is a Westchester-based journalist and wellness writer who also serves as VP and COO of her mother’s company. Barksdale’s son, Rudy Davis, works for Delta Airlines in Atlanta.)
Once back in Westchester, Barksdale’s life began turning in different directions. She earned a bachelor’s degree in education from The College of New Rochelle and held several teaching jobs, but ultimately, she was laid off during a period of budget cuts.

Then, in 1974, as a now-divorced mother of two, Barksdale felt restless and applied for a job as a professional hospital representative in the White Plains office of California-based Abbott Labs. She received a job offer “just like that,” she says, when the company saw she had both teaching and nursing experience. Her next step, in 1977, was selling cardiac instrumentation for the manufacturer Gould and Statham with, she recalls, “a big raise and a company car too.”

Success in sales came readily for the effervescent Barksdale, but the demands of job travel proved incompatible with her home life. While working at Gould, Barksdale met the man who would become her second husband; they were married within six months. So with two children and a new husband in her life, “I wanted to settle down a bit,” she explains. Barksdale took a position as a home-care coordinator with Personalized Home Care of Yonkers, and the seeds of Barksdale Home Care were planted.

An Intuitive Entrepreneur

Barksdale faced no shortage of challenges in starting her business in the early ’80s: finding office space she could afford, securing a bank loan, finding home health aides she could trust, and, most of all, finding clients. But she felt her success in sales would lead to success as an entrepreneur.

Barksdale worked tirelessly, even pitching in as a home health aide when she could not find someone to fill the position. She negotiated a lease for office space, advertised where she could afford to, offered client discounts for weekly...
instead of monthly payments, and, as the company took off, began training aides in-house to ensure quality.

Throughout her journey, Barksdale has relied on intuition, which she describes as a combination of guts and knowledge—“and without it, you lose.”

“I’m not impulsive, but when there’s something in your mind that eats away at you, you have to do it,” Barksdale says. In her book, The Intuitive Entrepreneur, Barksdale argues that people are reluctant to rely on their intuition in business settings and gives examples showing intuition as a powerful tool.

Through her book, Barksdale hopes to inspire others to start a business or pursue a professional dream. A good brain, strong motivation, and a healthy dose of chutzpah are her ingredients for would-be entrepreneurs. That exact combination propelled her when striking out on her own to start Barksdale Home Care. “Everywhere I worked, I figured I was more knowledgeable about the business. I knew I could do it,” she says.

Though juggling child-rearing and starting a business was challenging, particularly at a time when African-American women were not a part of the Westchester business community, Barksdale, “really made a go of it; she makes everything look easy,” says Westchester County Legislator Alfreda Williams, who has known Barksdale and her extended family for years. Williams cites Barksdale’s determination, as well as a kindness that runs in the family.

Williams also credits Barksdale’s compassion and energy for her success. “Whatever it is, she’ll try to handle it. She’s a genuinely caring, smart person who understands the need to give back,” Williams says.
Barksdale’s extended family—and their accomplishments in community service—played a large role in shaping the person Barksdale is today. Barksdale singles out her Aunt Rosa Kittrell in particular, for whom she is named; Kittrell started the first charter nursery school in White Plains. She was also a community activist, a founder of the Port Chester-based Carver Center, and an organizer of the White Plains Mental Hygiene Group at the Grasslands Hospital (now Westchester Medical Center). The Kittrell Park on Fisher Avenue in White Plains is named in her honor. “[Kittrell] worked tirelessly to alleviate the problems of people who lacked advantages and opportunities and instilled the need to serve in Rosa’s generation,” Williams notes.

Barksdale began to make her mark on the world before the world was accustomed to seeing women and African Americans in positions of power. “I needed to be better than my competition because I was a woman. I needed to show extra effort,” she recalls.

But the landscape has changed, and Barksdale says it’s about time. “We’re getting our due. We’re exercising our strengths and talents. We’re becoming top dogs,” she says. “It was a man’s world before. They didn’t want to see how powerful women could be.” Barksdale also notes her good fortune in having supportive parents, as well as a good education, and encouragement from her children and her second husband, LeRoy Barksdale, who is retired from the New York City Transit Authority.

Barksdale’s many achievements have not gone unnoticed in Westchester County. Among the myriad plaques adorning her office are the Golden Harvest Humanitarian Award from the Westchester Public/Private Partnership for Aging and the Madam CJ Walker Award for Economic Development. Barksdale Home Care has not gone unnoticed either. According to the CEO, the company was the first home-care agency in Westchester to be accredited by the Joint
Commission (the nonprofit organization accredits healthcare organizations throughout the country) in 1995.

Looking ahead to the future of home care, Barksdale explains that growth is key. “The larger agencies get the business. If you're too small, you drown,” she says. Critical to growth is keeping up with ever-changing regulations and developing new client sources. “When I first started, overhead was lower and compliance requirements were not as great. Today I would need partners and much more capital to get started,” Barksdale says. New laws and compliance documentation take up inordinate staff time and have challenged the company to find ways to cut expenses without sacrificing quality, she adds.

As for her own future, Barksdale may slow down her hours in the office, but she’s not one to stop. “Hopefully I’ll stay as active as I am now and will write, travel, and spend more time with friends,” she says. She would like to write a second book and pen a column on issues for 21st-century seniors. Barksdale hopes her daughter will continue the business when she is ready to retire. “She knows the ropes and is good with people,” Barksdale says, noting that her son will also assist with the business.

She succeeded against the odds and found her calling personally and professionally, and Barksdale is proud of her accomplishments and the difference she has made in the lives of others. Just as importantly, she is still evolving. She says, “Life is searching. You don’t know where you’re going to land.”