ERS Honors Doug Spitler for 34 Years of Extraordinary Servant Leadership  
By Baihley Grandison

Doug Spitler understands that his legacy will be measured not only by his accomplishments but also by the successes of the leaders he has developed. He has been on the forefront of putting systems in place to ensure that leadership development remains a consistent and constant focus for aging care.

—Laura Lamb, Executive Vice President, in her nomination letter to LeadingAge Ohio for the Leadership Award of Honor

ERS President & CEO Doug Spitler remembers vividly the first time he stepped foot in a nursing home from days gone by: He was 8 years old, visiting a favorite uncle who had recently moved, and the experience was anything but pleasant. “It smelled funny, had ugly fluorescent lighting and carts in the halls—it was nothing like my uncle’s warm and welcoming home I’d visited many times as a kid,” Spitler says.

While Spitler’s career path didn’t lead directly to retirement services—he spent some time as a guitarist in a professional rock ’n’ roll band—that memory, along with a desire to care for the elderly, never left him. Shortly after graduating from Miami University in 1972 with a degree in gerontological studies, he did consulting for senior living operations and worked as an assistant administrator at two convalescent centers before joining ERS as vice president. Five years later, he was promoted to president and CEO, a role that he’ll have spent nearly 30 years developing.

“He’s a visionary,” says Kathy Ison-Lind, ERS’s Vice President of Affordable Housing and In-Home Services. “He’s very knowledgeable about the industry; the whole time I’ve been here, we’ve always been just on the cusp of the front end.” Ginny Uehlin, Vice President of Residential Housing and Healthcare, agrees: “Doug is able to ferret through all of the stuff that is going on out there in the world and spot the next thing that needs to be on our horizon.”

But beyond Spitler’s skills as a leader, recently recognized by the Cincinnati Business Courier with a C-Suite Award for top CEO and LeadingAge with the Visionary Leadership Award of Honor, those who know him best speak again and again of his understanding, compassion and willingness to serve.

“Doug is the best boss I’ve ever had, and I’ve worked for some big corporations and companies,” says Ken Paley, Vice President of Marketing and Public Relations. “He treats everybody with respect, never says a negative word about anyone, and develops the best in people based on their strengths.”

Spitler is confident that when he retires, the core elements of the ERS culture—caring for each other and for the people they serve—will be sustained in the years to come. He and his wife Kathy, both avid adventurers, are eagerly looking forward to this new life chapter. “We’re ready to have time for traveling to new places, trying out new things,” Kathy says. “We like to do everything together.” And Spitler? He’s also mulling over going back to school (“I want to learn Spanish”) and doing consulting for other retirement services organizations.

Until then, his focus remains on his service to ERS residents, staff and communities.
“I want to create a culture where people feel like they really belong, where they are permitted to learn; and if you make a mistake, you’ll be supported in learning and growing from that,” Spitler says. “We all respond much better if we’re treated with respect.”
I have been fortunate as ERS Board Chair to have worked side by side with Doug over the past few years. He is a kind and thoughtful leader, a visionary and a CEO who knows how to utilize Board resources to the fullest to support and grow the ERS mission. I wish him much happiness in retirement!
—Robin Smith, Chair of ERS Board of Directors

Doug is a leader’s leader; he is the person who inspires and directs. In so many ways, he’s the leader I hope to grow into being.
—The Rev. Darren Elin, ERS Board of Directors

### 1990s
- Deupree Meals On Wheels program expands into eastern Cincinnati (1990)
- LeadingAge National House of Delegates (1990–93)
- ERS receives national accreditation
- Founder of Linkage (1994)
- Award of Honor from LeadingAge Ohio (1996)
- Parish Health Ministry program begins (1998)

### 2000s
- Founding member of Caring Communities Insurance Company (2001)
- LeadingAge Ohio Board Chair (2005–07)
- ERS acquires Cambridge Heights (2007)
- Additions completed to Deupree House featuring 60 new independent living apartments
- Living Well Senior Solutions established to provide home-based elder care planning and management services
- ERS partners with the Lutheran Benevolent Society to manage St. Paul Village in Madisonville (2008)
- Deupree Cottages open, ushering in ERS transition from traditional institutional care model to person-centered care (2009)
- LeadingAge House of Delegates (2004–10)

### 2010s
- Next Generation Leadership Development program established
- Pillar Award from Smart Business and Medical Mutual (2011)
- CARF accreditation (2012)
- LeadingAge Policy Congress (2012–15)
- LeadingAge Ohio Foundation Board (2013–14)
- JubiLee Renovation Project at Marjorie P. Lee is completed (2010)
- Board of Executives for Long-term Services and Supports (2011–17)
- Cofounded the Post-Acute Care Network (2013)
- ERS welcomes many new affordable living communities
- C-Suite Award from Cincinnati Business Courier (2016)
- Visionary Leadership Award of Honor from LeadingAge Ohio (2016)
Many Facets of Leadership

Dr. Corning Benton was a Marjorie P. Lee resident and Board member. When Corning became terminally ill, I remember going with two Board members to visit him and present him with a token of our thanks for his service to the Board and, in a way, to say goodbye. And he was so gracious because we were uneasy about having this conversation. But he was comfortable with where he was in life. Not that it was easy, but he made us feel more comfortable. It was inspiring really.
—Doug Spitler

“One of my proudest moments as CEO was when we opened Deupree Cottages and made the decision to commit to a better, more person-centric model of services for older adults who are more independent,” Spitler says. “We serve some truly wonderful residents, and we do our best here to provide the finest care possible.”

Doug Spitler has done an outstanding job of guiding and growing the business during his long career. —Mike Schueler, former ERS Board member and CEO of The Schueler Group
Leadership At Its Best

When Doug sees you and he turns on that great smile that he has, it just makes you feel wonderful!
—Cece Mooney, Deupree House resident and former member of ERS Board of Directors

What constitutes an ideal ERS CEO? Knowledge of organization? Personality? Ability to field questions? Understanding of problems and ability to help provide solutions? Genuine concern for residents and for the ERS mission for person-centered care? I didn’t have to go further. I was, of course, thinking about Doug.
—Mary West, Deupree House resident and former member of ERS Board of Directors

Doug is a leader, and one of the things a leader does is listen. Doug appreciates what his staff, his board members and we, as residents, have to say.
—The Rev. David Lowry, Marjorie P. Lee resident and member of ERS Board of Directors

Thank you to Doug for making our Affordable Living communities, especially St. Paul Village, possible. I couldn’t recommend it more!
—Astar Daniels, resident at St. Paul Village

Reminiscing

I believe that it has been Doug’s leadership that led to the formation of an outstanding EXCEL team, which under his guidance has led ERS to where it is today and has set the stage for its bright future.
—Chet Cavaliere, Deupree House resident and former member of ERS Board of Directors

When the employees are happy, then the residents are happy, and that all goes back to Doug.
—Bob LaShelle, Marjorie P. Lee resident and former member of ERS Board of Directors

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Leadership At Its Best

Inside the ERS Culture

Doug is a wonderful leader with a deep commitment to the person-centered care ministry of ERS. What is remarkable about Doug’s leadership is his respect for the dignity of each person—each resident, each staff member, each client—regardless of their position or possible contribution to the organization. —Bishop Thomas E. Breidenthal, Diocese of Southern Ohio

Doug Spitler is a visionary who is devoted to the purpose-driven mission of ERS. Our company is better able to accomplish our mission because of our relationship with Doug and ERS. —Steve Smith, CEO of The Model Group

I have worked with many nonprofit and for-profit CEOs in my consulting work, and Doug stands out as a unique and highly effective leader. He shows unwavering attention to the people ERS serves and to the ERS organization—every day it’s about them, not him. In my 11 years working with Doug, he has kept ERS looking forward, not backward, with Deupree Cottages, tremendous Affordable Living growth, the Post-Acute Care Network (PACN) and the Episcopal Church Home affiliation as notable examples. —Harry Kangis, former member of ERS Board of Directors

Spitler’s co-executives can’t say enough about how much he’s impacted them and the positive growth of ERS. “Oftentimes, you’ll get a visionary. Oftentimes, you’ll get someone who is very people-oriented—but they have no vision. Or you’ll get someone who is really brilliant about looking at finances or something,” says Ginny Uehlin, VP of Residential Housing & Healthcare. “But to get the whole package in one person? It has really been a blessing to our organization. Doug’s a rare commodity.”
Doug led our strategy to divest a community, and rather than sell to the highest bidder, Doug looked for an organization that would take care of our residents the way that we would.
—Paul Scheper, CFO

If you live in Cincinnati and the subject of senior housing comes up, especially affordable living, you are going to hear someone say, “Episcopal Retirement Services, that’s the best organization around.” And you wonder why is that? One very important reason is Doug Spitler. He is a Blue Chip, highly talented, always ahead of the game and very compassionate leader. And the culture Doug has created here has been essential to the quality of care ERS provides. When employees feel good and valued, it’s going to be very good for the residents.
—Mike Krug, former member, ERS Board of Directors

While we can look at the “measurable things”—numbers of residents, AL growth, etc.—I think the most impressive accomplishment is the quality of the organization that Doug has developed and led. This includes staff, Board and volunteers. He has a keen sense of knowing how to get things done through others. This is perhaps most vividly demonstrated by the longevity of the key Board members who have stayed with ERS for literally decades and who have dedicated countless hours on a volunteer basis.
—Bill Knodel, ERS Board of Directors and Chair of ERS Foundation Board of Directors
Leadership At Its Best

Kathy and Doug Spitler are looking forward to Doug’s retirement from ERS and the freedom to spend more time traveling together.