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BUSINESS

FINDING A SAFE PLACE

Gilbert Guide reviews Bay Area long-term care homes

- Carolyn Said, Chronicle Staff Writer



Chronicle / Darryl Bush

Brother and sister **Jill and Jason Gilbert** inspect the AgeSong Hayes Valley Care facility in San Francisco.

During his 35 years as an oncologist, Dr. Harvey Gilbert was dismayed by how difficult it was for patients to find long-term living facilities.

"It's nerve-racking. Only later do you find out whether you made the right decision or the wrong decision," he said.

So Gilbert decided to create a systematic approach to finding long-term care -- such as assisted living, skilled nursing, hospice, adult day care and at-home care -- through a guidebook that would give unbiased reviews. He enlisted his two grown children, Jason, 34, and Jill, 37, to run the project, invested a substantial sum of money (he declined to say how much) and the initial result is just hitting the market now.

Gilbert Guide aims to be a kind of Zagat for long-term care. The first guidebook, focused on San Francisco, San Mateo, Marin and southern Sonoma and Napa counties, provides detailed descriptions of a variety of places, based on visits and interviews conducted by geriatric care managers and social workers.

But the business plan is much more ambitious than a single guidebook. The Gilbert family intends to offer books for metropolitan areas all over the country. Versions for the East Bay, Dallas-Fort Worth and Kansas City are already in the works. More importantly, they hope to inspire facilities to improve their levels of care.

"We only publish the best in an area. Everything we put in the guide is a place we would trust with our own parents," said Jason Gilbert, the company's chief operating officer and chief financial officer. "As the Gilbert Guide grows nationwide, we hope facilities not in the book because of their standards of care will want to improve their standards so they can be included."

Ironically, Jason and Jill Gilbert say they didn't get along particularly well as kids. But now, running a small business with five employees out of Jill Gilbert's San Francisco apartment, they seem like an effective team.

Jason, who previously worked as a software designer, and Jill, with a background in the film industry, are quick to admit that they're newcomers to the world of social services. But that also helps, because they want the books to serve people who are equally naive, as well as professional caregivers. Jill Gilbert, the company's president and CEO, said they've hired people who do have strong backgrounds in geriatric care to act as their eyes and ears in evaluating facilities.

On a recent afternoon, Nina Pflumm Herndon, a geriatric care manager, visited Laguna Grove Care, a new facility in San Francisco offering assisted living, hospice and Alzheimer's care for 56 patients, to assess it for the Gilbert Guide. As she toured the freshly renovated building with Chad Lewis, vice president of AgeSong, the company that runs it, Herndon asked a series of questions from a lengthy checklist and also interjected some of her own.

Some were fairly obvious: "What diets can you accommodate?" "Tell me about the training process for the caregivers."

Some questions were in response to the environment: Looking around a light-flooded common room with tables for dining and a large-screen flat-panel television mounted on



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Nina Pflumm Herndon, a geriatric care manager, evaluates the Laguna Grove care facility.

the wall, she said: "One question that comes up is how much time are residents with memory impairment spending in front of a television?"

"We prefer if residents don't spend time in front of a TV," Lewis replied, "but we'll provide a flat screen in their room if that's what they want."

The Gilbert Guide reviews, usually about two pages, lay out basics about the size, cost and location of a facility, then discuss amenities and features, trying to give a portrait of the tangibles and intangibles that form the character of a senior residence.

While it's clearly more objective than advertisement-driven guidebooks to senior care, the Gilbert Guide is not yet as broad as the Zagat Guide, which from its start relied on contributions from thousands of amateur restaurant reviewers, a grassroots approach that founders Tim and Nina Zagat called "organized word of mouth."

Harvey Gilbert, who runs the Ben Schaffer Cancer Institute in Lodi, said he could see the guide following that path in the future, soliciting input from senior-care residents and their families, for instance. While the first Gilbert Guide does not rank facilities, he said, future versions will use some kind of ranking system. The Gilberts plan to update the guides regularly, perhaps as often as once a year, to keep them current.

The Gilberts are toying with the best way to present information on their Web site at www.gilbertguide.com without the well-known problem of cannibalizing sales of the print version. The Zagats, backed by some \$31 million in venture capital, put most of their content on the Web a few years ago -- and found that it actually helped increase sales of the maroon guidebooks.

The Gilbert Guide, which was published last week, is available through regular bookstores. In addition, the Gilberts are tapping a diverse array of retail outlets, pegged to its mission. For instance, they're hoping that hospitals will carry the guidebook in their gift shops, bookstores, health education centers and libraries, and that hospital discharge planners will recommend it. Pharmacies are another nontraditional sales outlet.

While the business is set up as a money-making endeavor, Harvey Gilbert said that's not necessarily its ultimate goal. He wants it to be self-sustaining, which could happen if it turns a profit, or if it becomes a foundation, he said.

The Gilberts declined to say how many books they need to sell to break even, although Jason Gilbert said they're not expecting to come out ahead on the first edition. But since the book's \$24.95 price tag is small compared with the \$3,000 to \$5,000 a month cost of many senior living facilities, they hope families will see it as a worthwhile investment.

Social services professionals said they think the Gilbert Guide fills a need.

"One of the hardest things that families face is figuring out what's out there in the way of help," said Dr. Elizabeth Edgerly, chief program officer of the Alzheimer's Association of Northern California. "In the Bay Area, we're fortunate that we have many options, but along with that comes the challenge of trying to sort through those options. This has nice depth in an easy-to-understand format."

Donna Schempp, program director at the Family Caregiver Alliance in San Francisco, said that the guide will help families narrow their search when seeking care. "People's biggest problem is they don't know where to start," she said. "You still have to visit the facilities and check out what violations they've had," but the book should make that a more manageable task. (California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform, at www.canhr.org, maintains an online database of all 1,400-plus California nursing homes, including information about government enforcement actions and consumer complaints.)

Gyana Bays, director for case management and social services at St. Luke's Hospital in San Francisco, said she particularly likes the book's clear breakdown on costs, including such vital details as whether facilities accept Medi-Cal patients. "It helps screen what's - affordable for families instead of sending them for Cadillac and having to settle for Hyundai," she said. "It eliminates unnecessary calling only to find out" that a facility is unaffordable.
