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2019 Most Admired CEOs

2019 Most Admired CEOs: Liwanag Ojala, CaringBridge

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Liwanag Ojala knew at a young age she wanted to be a lawyer. After completing law school at the University of Minnesota, she worked as an attorney for several years, ultimately focusing on consumer digital business.

In 2014, she took a break to think through how she might use her skills beyond adding shareholder value. After careful consideration, she took the position of chief operating officer at CaringBridge – a nonprofit organization providing private websites to keep people connected during a health care crisis. In January 2016, Ojala took the helm as CEO upon the founder's retirement.



NANCY KUEHN

Liwanag Ojala of CaringBridge

"How do you follow in a founder's footsteps? What do the next 20 years look like? To build and execute a strategy was very exciting," she said.

"Liwanag managed the succession with respect, candor and integrity," said Leigh Bailey, CEO of The Bailey Group and former CaringBridge board member. "In recent years, CaringBridge has been challenged both to diversify revenue streams and to turn around a decline in site visits. Liwanag has led both her team and the board to confront these challenges successfully."

Ojala said it's not only an honor to be a leader of CaringBridge, but also a huge responsibility. More than 300,000 people per day visit a CaringBridge site and the organization has an impact on millions of people every year.

"I get a lot of gratitude, and I get to hear the difference the organization has made. I extend that to the team. People know who we are and know we're doing good work," she said. "You can't imagine the number of hugs I get and people telling me we made such an impact on their lives."

Ojala credits her parents as her first leadership mentors. Immigrants from the Philippines, she said their resiliency, work ethic and support helped her and her three siblings live the American dream.

She also said she has an incredible network of friends, mentors, board members and local C-level executives who have been honest with their advice and generous with their time.

"Sometimes this is a lonely job, but you can't do it alone. At the end of the day, you sometimes have to make tough decisions and you're alone sometimes in that decision, but everyone needs to be on board to help support and make it happen," Ojala said.

Outside of CaringBridge, Ojala focuses on her husband and two children. She serves on the board of trustees of Minnesota Public Radio/American Public Media and mentors others.

"As a CEO who is a woman and an Asian American, I think it's important that the vision of what CEOs look like are what America looks like, and that's an honor for me," she said.

More from Ojala ...

When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up? When I was in middle school, I decided I wanted to be the first woman lawyer in the family.

What was your first job? My first volunteer job was being a candy striper in same-day surgery at Bayshore Community Hospital. My first paying job was scooping ice cream at Baskin Robbins.

What was your first management position, and what surprised you about that leadership role? I became president of SimonDelivers when I was 32. Looking back, I'm surprised by the many people who wanted to help me be successful as a young executive: my board, my team and mentors. I received terrific advice that I've carried forward with me and have shared with others.

What does being a leader mean to you? Having the opportunity to set an example for what leadership could be, beyond the common perceptions. We're humans before we are leaders. There's a responsibility to actively develop, motivate and encourage team members to be the best they can be. I also want to set an example for my kids on how leaders can make a difference to others in the world.

What's the toughest part of leading a company? Decisions need to be made, but they are not always popular or understood. As CEO, you must be OK with that and keep moving forward.

What's the most rewarding part of leading a company? Seeing other people in the company be successful at their role and elevating their own personal and professional

development. When I see our employees persevering through opportunities —and see the positive impact of their work — that's a source of joy.

If you find yourself in a meeting at work where things are not going the way you want them to, what do you do? If the meeting is moving us forward, it doesn't matter if it's not going the way I anticipated. But there are times you have to hit the pause button. Ask questions to deepen everyone's understanding, including mine, and level-set to define the issue we are trying to tackle. Once there is alignment, I trust the team to help develop the right solution.

What do you hope to accomplish in the next year? Professionally, I want more and more people to know about CaringBridge and how valuable it is on a health journey. Personally, working with my family to keep Team Ojala a strong team.

Looking forward, what legacy do you hope to leave behind? I want to launch two good humans into the world. It will be a great joy to me to see my kids become impactful adults. For CaringBridge? We seek to ensure that no one goes through a health journey alone. Additionally, when you consider the challenges of the health care system, we believe that a virtual social support tool like CaringBridge can help millions of patients and their family caregivers each year. This will not only reduce the stress in their lives, but also make the whole system work better.

What is your theme song? I love so much music it's hard to choose one, but "The Best Is Yet To Come," by Tony Bennett.

Fast facts

Age: 47

Years with company: Five

Years as CEO: 3.5

Education: Bachelor of Arts, history, Northwestern University; Juris Doctor, University of Minnesota Law School

Family: Husband, Eric; son, Cameron; daughter, Ana

Hobbies: Travel, music-theater-art appreciation, cooking and cheering on my kids as they pursue their interests

Board memberships: MPR/American Public Media Group board of trustees

Employees at company: 46

