

**Transcript:** Be Where You Are: Leadership, Caregiving, and the Courage to Pause with Carla Davis | Part One

**Melody King:** 0:00

Everything rises and falls on leadership. The ability to lead well is fueled by living your cause and purpose. This podcast will equip you with the tools to do just that. Live and lead with cause and purpose. And now, author of the book *The Anatomy of Leadership*, and our host, Chris Comeaux.

**Chris Comeaux:** 0:22

Hello and welcome. I'm so excited today. Our guest is Carla Davis, executive in residence for Cressey and Company. Welcome, Carla. It's good to have you.

**Carla Davis:** 0:30

Thanks, Chris. I'm thrilled to be here with you.

**Chris Comeaux:** 0:32

I know most people know who you are, but I'm going to read from your bio. So Carla is an experienced and innovative industry advocate and executive leader. She leverages her passion for increasing access to care and her extensive operational and growth experience to transform end-of-life care across America, having served as an executive leader across numerous multi-service line care providers with the national footprint. Currently, Carla is an executive in residence with Cressey and Company. She recently served as the SVP of Hospice and Powder Care Operations and Business Development for LHC Group, which was owned by United Healthcare. Her diverse operational and sales experience also includes roles as Chief Executive Officer for Heart Hospice, Chief Operating Officer for VistaCare, and Vice President of Sales, Marketing, and Market Development at Heartland Home Healthcare and also Hospice, a division of HCR Medicare. She has a strong background in compliance, which makes her a bit of a unicorn, including experience with one of the country's largest Medicare administrative contractors, we affectionately call Meadow GBA. Carla has also proudly served as a board member for the National Hospice and Powder Care Organization, NHPCO, on the Hospice Action Network, Home Care 100, and president of the Louisiana Mississippi Alliance for Advancement and End of Life Care. So, Carla, did that leave anything out that you want our audience to know about you?

**Carla Davis:** 1:50

Well, I mean, that's certainly a lot. Um, but I think uh probably the most important thing is that um when I was 19 or 20, I had a calling. Um, and I learned about this thing called hospice. And I knew at that time that I was going to spend the rest of my life helping to get people care at the end of theirs. And never would I have imagined sort of the path

that I've been on that you just described. Um, but I'm really grateful for for knowing that so early on in my life.

**Chris Comeaux:** 2:22

I think that, well, there's many reasons why I think you're a bit of a unicorn, but you really were kind of the first person because they're, you know, now they have actually an a student reached out to me the other day. She's a PhD student, kind of in the end of life care realm. And they didn't have that when I was kind of coming up. And you were kind of created your own pathway, but I think you were kind of the trailblazer in many respects, which maybe we'll get to a good segue. What is your superpower?

**Carla Davis:** 2:48

Well, as a huge super fan of this show, um, I've listened to most every one of your podcasts uh while working out mostly over this last year. And um, and I've given that a lot of thought. And it's actually really a hard question. Um, but I think that um I am authentically able to connect with people um in a way that inspires them to this mission. Um and I think ultimately that's really my superpower. Um I asked uh several people that um know and love me mostly um and um you know what their perspectives was, and that's sort of where it um uh gathered. But then my mother called, I asked her too. Um, and she knew I was gonna be taping the podcast today. Um, and she called last night. She's like, well, I you haven't asked me again. You haven't asked me again. Um and she had written down some notes and um and her first word that came to her mind was determination. Um I think maybe it's both of those things. It's just a huge passion and a determination to help more people at the end of life.

**Chris Comeaux:** 3:58

I could, I could mirror both of those back to you. And I just I want to give a shout out because I I feel like I could really call you a friend now, which is awesome for me. Um, this podcast has just been such an amazing platform beyond anything. I mean, I didn't want to do the podcast, by the way. It was a team of Meyer's like, we need to do a podcast. And but to see how it's been now used and um the fact that Barla Davis is actually a listener of our podcast, oh my gosh, I'm just so humbled. But beyond that, I feel like we've become friends, especially over this past year as you've had a really kind of unique experience, which we're going to talk about. And so, first off, please know to call you a friend is an honor of my life because I've always kind of held you up on this. I hope you'll throw something at me for saying a pedestal. But I've always said one of the top two smartest people in the hospice space, Carla Davis, and now to call you a friend, um, where we could pick up the phone and call each other really is an honor and a privilege. And I would mirror those superpowers back to you and maybe that determination slash tenacity. But I know some people that are tenacious, but it doesn't come off in the right way. So I think

both of those, like a yin and yang within you, that passion for the mission. Um, you've done some beautiful kind of volunteer work within our network this year. And I'd say kind of calling us back to the mission was evidence of that superpower. So I'm just mirroring it back at you. So I've kind of been begging you to do this podcast, and you were a little reluctant. Um, and not because you don't want to be on the podcast, but I think because what we're gonna talk about. So you've had a, I'll call it an opportunity this past year, but it may not have felt like an opportunity when it came to you. There was a necessity of you needing to take a year off from hospice and powder care after a pretty incredible run. What are you willing to share about that?

**Carla Davis:** 5:41

Sure. Um, well, I've I've been working for 31 years in this work, um, um, since 1994. And so, you know, to to take a year off was definitely a a change from my DNA. Um, but in 2024, we learned that um my mom had an issue, um, a healthcare condition that was going to require surgery. My mom at that time um was 88. Um, so that obviously that's a very serious decision, but she she didn't have any other serious chronic illnesses. She's completely mentally capable and competent, believe me, completely. Um, and um and she, you know, wanted to to live if that was possible. Um, and the the surgeon believed that was possible. And so uh we decided to to go for it. Um, and that meant that she was gonna need a lot more care. Um, and so I decided, um, and now looking back on it, it was actually an easy decision to step away from a 31-year career um to be with my mother and to help her um through this uh through this time period. Um as it as it ended up, she's had four major surgeries, two of which were planned, two of which were not planned. Um, and the timing couldn't have been more perfect for my resignation um in that year, you know, to begin. Um, and I'll tell you just an experience, you know, in the first month I had the opportunity to take her from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina to Charleston for a doctor's appointment where the Medical University of South Carolina is. Um, and so that's a two and a half hour car ride. Um, and we're in the car and she is talking a million miles a minute. Um, like I've never heard her talk. Um and I'm like, mom, mom, just calm down, just calm down. She's like, well, I just feel like I have to get every word in, every word in. Um, because you're usually on the phones. Like, you're usually on a conference call. You've got two phones going. Um, and she's like, I don't know what to do. I don't know who you are. And I said, I don't know either. So that was the moment, and I'm sorry for getting emotional, but that was the moment where I was like, This is gonna be a journey, such an opportunity, really, to uh first off, what's your mom's name? Trisha.

**Chris Comeaux:** 8:12

Hi, Trisha, because I know she's listening to the show.

**Carla Davis:** 8:15

Oh, she's definitely listening to the show.

**Chris Comeaux:** 8:18

Wow. And what a gift to you and a gift to her in that moment. Well, that's such a cool kind of segue. Cause obviously I think uh you you you did choose this, but in some some respects, life chose this. And we want uh I want this to be a a a a gift to you, but I also want to be a gift to the hospice in how to cure space because a lot of our peers were a bit of the sandwich generation. Uh and so there may be other decision points for people similar to this as well. And also some people may have the opportunity to take a sabbatical sort. I had my first in 2024, and uh man, those first couple days like you, because we're such hard chargers, uh there it was almost like a detoxing of cause you live at that pace and you step off of that pace. It's weird. It's you're twitchy. Was that does that does that kind of resonate with you?

**Carla Davis:** 9:08

Well, I think um to start with, I made a few rules for myself. Um, and I wouldn't even let myself make a list for a couple weeks. Um, and for those of you who don't know me, sort of I run an agenda, I have a backup agenda to my backup agenda and um a plan C and D and E for everything. Um my DNA is uh frenetic, I would say, um, in mostly a good way, but sometimes not such a good way. Um, and I knew that coming into this period of time, um regardless of what sort of help prompt the make the decision, I was gonna need to question um sort of how I value myself. And I knew that too much of or I thought my bias was coming into this, too much of my worth, um self-worth was um defined by career success. Um and maybe productivity, if you wanted to use that word. Um and and so I I knew that it was gonna be a challenge. Um I didn't understand exactly how that was gonna go, but I I knew for myself that I needed to have sort of a period of time that was the anti-Carla um period of of time. Um and I, you know, deliberately tried to structure myself in an unstructured way. So um It's brilliant. Well, I don't I don't know that it is, but it was helpful for me to sort of deliberately kind of push myself into a pendulum swing. So I did things that I don't normally do. I didn't set an alarm most days. And I can't tell you. I mean, like even on Saturday and Sunday, I set an alarm just in case I sleep too late. Um, and so my sleep eventually got regular. I wasn't waking up in the middle of the night worried about something other than mom and worried about work. Um, I uh exercised more. And do you know I took yoga classes in the middle of the day? Like, like, do you know that there's all these people at the gym in the middle of the day? And I'm like, I didn't even know this whole world like existed. Um, you know, I made four batches of lemon cello. I um I spent a whole day researching uh who has lived in my house before me. I live in a house built in 1796 and um, you know, just enjoyed spending time leafing through archives, literally. Um, you know, and I I spend a whole week planning out every single detail of a trip to Portugal. Um you know, that that those would have been sort of

luxuries that I never would have allowed myself um to do, really. I mean, probably back to, you know, college or high school, even if you if you think about it.

**Chris Comeaux:** 12:08

So so my you you kind of jumped in really my first question, but if there is, I want to ask it just in case it unearths anything else at a tactical level. But if there's anyone else considering a break of this type, you what recommendations do you have for them?

**Carla Davis:** 12:23

Yeah, I mean, I don't think that I'm in a position to give recommendations because I think you have to figure out what works for you. Um, I do think that any break is helpful, um, any amount of time is helpful. Um, I was fortunate enough to have uh a year, um uh really more than a year um off. But I think anything that changes your routine um is sh you gain perspective on things. Um, you know, even if you go a different way, you gain perspective and notice things that you haven't noticed before. You notice things about just even the place that you live, you notice um, you know, different things about the people that you're surrounded with and the people that you love. Um, and you notice different things about your perspective on work or life or anything. Um, and and most importantly, I think you you're your challenge to to see yourself differently.

**Chris Comeaux:** 13:25

Um, and that was incredibly helpful to me. Um that's a great answer. And just several things jumped to mind. There's a a blog that if it's okay with you, we're gonna put in the show notes. It's called The Rhythms of Life. And I it's wisdom I harvested from Mother Teresa, Dr. John Morris, and a guy who used to be a pastor of a mega church and left it and became a kind of disciple of Dallas Willard and started a monastery in Colorado. So obviously a very eclectic group. And it's a blog that we give all of our new employees. It's called The Rhythms of Life. And here's a couple of the pieces of wisdom. It you should take a Sabbath every week, not a religious Sabbath, a something every seventh day, something to feed your soul. Turn the email off is something. So Sabbath first, every seventh week, take some time off, whether that's a three-day weekend, you're part of an organization that has a vacation policy. And then every seventh year, take a sabbatical. Mother Teresa had the nuns that worked for her practice that. And that's the best analogy. It creates a rhythm in life because I'm sure some people are gonna listen to this and go, well, I was glad she could take a year. And most of us may not be able to, but that some version of what I just said is possible. So it's okay with you. We're gonna put that actually in the blog. The other thing I wanted to share that we'll put in the show notes at TCN, we built a sabbatical policy into our beginning of an organization. And one of the things I bumped into in Intel, because hard-charging individuals like us, so much of our identity is in our job. So we prepared these questions to wrestle with. And I was the first

one to kind of journey this. But what do you want out of life? Are you living your best life? What needs to change? What is that that you truly value? What do I want to do differently? What gives me fulfillment and how can I do it more or more of that in the future? Of course, in my organization, Telias, going forward, how could I steer more of my day-to-day task into more meaningful work? So it kind of helps give some sense of purpose. You should have a detoxing period, but then wrestling questions because people may be in that time like you, and it's so disorienting because it's so different. Like I love you said, the anti-carla. And if you don't give them something during that time. So we're gonna include that in the show notes. But did you have anything like that to like to grasp onto once you very smartly disoriented yourself? Did you grasp onto something to give you a structure after that?

**Carla Davis:** 16:05

Yeah, and I'll get into the structure, but I do want to say um that you were one of the first people that I talked to as I began this year. Um, and and you shared with me those questions. So that was really helpful. But you also gifted me a book um by Ruth Paley Barton called The Invitation to Solitude and Silence, um, which was a lovely gift. Thank you. Um, and I did, I I read it um sort of to create some structure for myself almost as a um devotion. Um, and I would read one chapter and then really, you know, pray on that, and then go back and read that chapter and read the next chapter and sort of kind of kept building, building up. Um, and I think, you know, one of the things that I I read that resonated with me right away, sort of on this, on this concept of time, is you think that if you have more time, you will exercise more, you will eat better, you will spend more time with God, you will read more, you will journal more, you'll do whatever it is that you um always wanted to do if you have more time. Um, but the thing about time is it does, it fills itself. Um, and so this year um went incredibly fast, like faster than any other year that I've ever, ever had. Um, and the other thing that I learned from that particular book was that I don't need to always have an agenda. Um, and even sort of in my relationship with God, you know, perhaps I come with an agenda um to my conversations with God. And so um, you know, it it was it was the balance of those two things, which is, you know, if you're not intentional, time will fill itself and it will pass, right? But also you need to um be open to what is in front of you and what is around you um to hear what you're supposed to hear and for you to be able to share with other people what you're um able to share. So I think, you know, kind of helping to to learn those two things. I started then after my um sort of self-imposed anti-carla time, um, which was a couple months actually, two to three months. I uh allowed myself to start engaging in more conversations with uh people um from sort of hospice and home care and care at home um space and and and friends and and people that I would have called friends but didn't really know um as well as I know now, um, and really show up in those conversations in such a different way. And I can't explain it except for that um I had time. Um, I wasn't representing a role or a company or

any specific agenda other than trying to learn, trying to get advice. I wanted to learn from people's lessons that they've learned and what they would do differently if they had a chance to do sort of something differently or how they think about any particular topic. And it was fun. It was really fun. And and to the point of our friendship, I feel like I I became truly friends with some people that I've known forever, but didn't really know. And my mom is one of those. Like I've known my mom, but we became friends, which was absolutely wonderful.

**Chris Comeaux:** 19:54

That's so cool. Which is gonna get to my next question. But one thing I just want to mirror back at you, that thing about time will full itself is so well said. And think about this work that you and I have and many and all of our listeners who've dedicated hospice and powered care. We get a front row seat to many people uh have major regrets on how they spent their time. And we, you know, there's no do-overs in this life. And we get the front row seat where people express those regrets to us. And sometimes I think we're oblivious to maybe the most important life lesson of all right before us. And you that feels like part of the gift of this year's. What did you learn this past year that would be helpful for others to know?

**Carla Davis:** 20:35

I think first of all, that that. Um, and then the other thing, as I started to settle into some of these conversations um and and have fun in them, thinking about this work, thinking about how we can do it better, thinking about how I can be a better leader. Um you know, I started doing things like I I started spending more of my time, not because I was getting paid or because I had a job or because I had a responsibility, but I started um, you know, lean leaning into it because I loved it. Um, and I think uh, you know, really finding joy in it. Like I I attended more conferences in 2025 than I ever have on my own time. Um, I spoke more. I I raised my hand to help when I could, um, when it was permitted. Um, and um, you know, just for fun, because it was fun and I wanted to help people. And I think, you know, kind of getting back to the core of who I am and why I am versus a role or a company or a job, I think was was really critical to me to inform sort of how I want to spend the the next phase of my life. And I really tried to come into these conversations. Conversations without a bias. Um which is hard because you have one, without a bias about sort of what the next phase is gonna look like, including potentially not working or not working in this space that I have called my life for hospice and palliative care. Um, but as I started to have conversations and started to get into it, like this is absolutely what I love. And I love I love the work and I love the people that do it.

**Jeff Haffner:** 22:30

Don't miss part two of this episode coming this Friday.