

INTERVIEW WITH GWEN FAULKNER FOR CONNECTIONS MAGAZINE

BY CICILY CORBETT

Q: How did you get into the area of special care planning?

A: I signed up to work with MassMutual just as they were launching the program. I was very interested in it from the beginning because I have an uncle with special needs, and my sales manager had a special needs child. So we were talking about it a lot, and he kind of brought me on to it.

Q: Is there anything that stands out in your mind about the class?

A: It's just a completely different market. This is something that involves a large portion of Americans. A lot of people know somebody who's disabled, but most advisors don't know what to do or what's the best answer for these people. This certification is teaching things I feel most people don't know.

Q: What sets MassMutual's program apart?

A: I feel that the MassMutual difference is that we are individuals. Instead of being trained to sell to this market, we are being trained to basically follow our own passion and our own desires. We can utilize their resources, but we do it all ourselves. Every time I meet with another *SpecialCare* planner, I feel like we're the same market, but we're handling it all very differently.

Q: Do you feel any sense of community with other *SpecialCare* planners? Did you network at the school?

A: Yes, as I said, my sales manager is also a *SpecialCare* planner, so we always collaborate on ideas. I'm very open to sharing ideas with other people. I feel very comfortable talking to the *SpecialCare* planners that I have become friends with. Getting or giving advice if I'm struggling, or if they're struggling. It's just a really different group of advisors. We're not trying to outdo each other, in other words.

Q: How do you find your clients?

A: I've gotten very much involved with the community. I'm on two boards fulltime. I picked two different nonprofits, Autism Speaks and the Devereux School. I'm doing seminars for the parents and support groups.

Q: How specifically do you draw clients from that?

A: Well, what I've been trying to do with Devereux, which is a little bit different from what I've done in the past—and I hope it works out for '07—is speaking to parent support groups. I tell them what I do and really educate the people who work at Devereux so then they can come to me when there's a problem and not wait until it's too late. I just got an email yesterday from a social worker through Devereux. It said basically, Michael's mom just died and left him an inheritance. What do we do? I said this is the information you need to get me, and then I got an attorney involved and we're going to try to figure out a way to solve this child's problems.

Q: How large a segment of your business is the *SpecialCare* market at this point?

A: 75%. It's a large portion. It took three years to get here, but it's finally starting to flow. If parents don't have the flow of income to work with, it's difficult. But I've finally established a medium where there's people who can use my services and I can help them, and that's what has taken three years to accomplish. It's definitely starting to take over my practice, which I like.

Q: How do you think the *SpecialCare* market can benefit the rest of your practice?

A: I have gotten clients because they figured I must care a little bit more, or I'll have more patience with them. If you're on the street meeting somebody and you tell them you do this, all of a sudden their attitude changes and they're willing to talk to you more.

Q: What resources does the *SpecialCare* program provide you besides this certification class?

A: They actually provide a consistent amount of material with the same logos. My favorite part is, you can get your own information printed on it so it looks like it's yours. It *is* yours, but you have the whole consistency of everything looking the same. There's everything from postcards to resource guides to actual folders to put everything in, which is nice for marketing and branding.

Q: Can MassMutual help you with getting a team together for a family?

A: Yes. MassMutual has an estate planning team; they can't physically draw up documents for clients, but they can give them legal advice. I have called them if I didn't like what I heard from an attorney and gotten a second opinion from them. You'd think an attorney would be turned off by that—instead they're willing to talk to the MassMutual attorney directly. It makes the parents comfortable, too. I tell them I don't make any money off of any of these legal recommendations. Then they have more trust in the system.

Q: What are some of the challenges to building a practice in this area?

A: You have to allow time to build trust. It's hard for an individual not to make a lot of money the first few years. It's hard for an agency to support an advisor who's not

making a lot of money, maybe barely making their contract. If I was an experienced agent and gone into it, it would have been a different story, but I started out by doing this. I had to spend a lot of time having coffee with people, getting to know them and not giving a high-pressure sales approach for almost two years before I got to this point. It does take time.

Q: Is there a story you have to tell?

A: I had an article written about me and a lady who read the paper called me and said, we need to meet. My mother-in-law died and my husband's sister is disabled. For the last fifty years she's been hiding it. They never realized that the sister was having a lot of issues. Kate—the woman who had called me—had three children out of college and was ready to retire with her husband. Life was grand, and then her mother-in-law died. She spent two years cleaning up the mess that her mother-in-law had created and hidden from them. We took care of all the investment issues; she actually had an old long-term care policy, which was a miracle, and we got her hooked up with some state benefits that she wasn't even aware that she could get. Now everything is fine. She called me two years later and said, Gwen, I finally went to the doctor's. I hadn't been taking care of myself; I hadn't realized how much this had taken over my life. If it wasn't for you, I don't know that we would've been able to get through all this.

Q: Do you have any words of advice for anyone considering going into this field?

A: If they're going to do it, do it for real. Not to do it to add another market out there for themselves. Not to do it because they heard me say I made some money doing it. You need to really want to do it, because it's a lot of work. This is not an easy niche.

About Gwen Faulkner

Agency: First Financial Group

Practice Area: South Jersey

Years in business: 3

Hometown: Philadelphia, PA

Family: Single

Education: BS in Finance Westchester U of PA

Interesting fact: Military brat who's lived all over!