

Fostering Success

Former foster child Rick Jackson persevered through risk and failure to build the thriving Jackson Healthcare staffing company

BY KATJA RIDDERBUSCH · PORTRAIT BY AUDRA MELTON

A BUSY LUNCH CROWD swarms through a lavish marble-floored lobby into a sunlit plaza that feels like you've been transported to Italy, with clusters of cypress trees, a grand central fountain, and a shaded bocce ball court. But few notice the tall man in a pristine, dark pinstripe suit quietly talking with a coworker.

The man is CEO and Chairman Richard "Rick" Jackson, the founder of Jackson Healthcare, one of the nation's top healthcare staffing companies. Jackson, 70, is responsible for creating this place where quality of work and life are inseparable. And the location—although it may look like a town square in Southern Europe—is the company's corporate campus in Alpharetta, 26 miles north of downtown Atlanta.

It's a place that, several decades ago, seemed like a galaxy far away for Jackson. As a child growing up in the foster care system, the odds were against him. Yet his journey has become one of corporate America's most powerful rags-to-riches stories.

Some might say he had a lot of excuses not to make it. "But I never bought into that narrative," says Jackson, who describes himself as "a serial entrepreneur with fierce determination to never give up."

Over the last two decades, Jackson Healthcare, which is privately held and employs about 2,500 people, has expanded through both acquisitions and organic growth. Consisting of 19 highly specialized staffing, search, and

technology companies, it has placed more than 20,000 clinicians in healthcare settings across all 50 states; it reported a revenue of over \$2.5 billion in 2023.

The corporate campus was inspired by Italian architecture, with the piazza at the center; an elliptical-shaped Colosseum building with a cafeteria and gym; and columns, arcades, and giant sculptures showcasing the main buildings, which are called Rome, Florence, and Venice.

"I don't believe in reincarnation, but if I did, I had to have lived in Rome," Jackson says with a laugh.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The campus's opulent architectural design contrasts sharply with Jackson's humble demeanor. It goes back to his past, a personal story that he's shared in small increments over the years. He grew up in public housing near Georgia Tech in Midtown Atlanta. His father left when he was a toddler, and his mother was an alcoholic who brought some violent men into his life. Police were called to the house often. Jackson attended eight different elementary schools.



By the time he was 13, "I wanted out of this life altogether," he says. After one particularly difficult night, his uncle, who was wheelchair-bound, used his disability check and called the boy a taxi. The uncle told him the state would provide him with a place to live. The next day, Jackson checked himself into the system. He was placed with a family that he liked and later lived in a children's home. His foster care experience made him passionately independent—and helped him thrive in the corporate world, he says.

Jackson graduated high school but didn't have the money

“Failure is the fastest way to get where you want to go.”

—RICK JACKSON

to finish college. But he has always had a keen sense for business and a strong entrepreneurial spirit. He started working in collections, then got on board with a secretarial staffing company, switched to executive search, and soon after, bought the owner out. He founded his first physician recruitment business in 1978. Over the years, he started other companies, almost went bankrupt in 2000, and then relaunched his business in the form of his current venture, Jackson Healthcare.

Jackson is convinced that "failure is the fastest way to get where you want to go." Admitting to mistakes, analyzing what went wrong, and applying lessons helps individuals and organizations do better next time, he says.

FREEDOM TO FAIL

Shane Jackson, president of Jackson Healthcare, can testify that his father practices what he preaches. He remembers a situation many years ago when Jackson fired an executive for his disruptive management style. When he discussed it with the team, Shane recalls his father claiming responsibility for hiring the wrong person.

"By owning the problem, you also own the ability to influence the situation," Shane says. "And it enables you to lead and implement change."

That's why Jackson wants to cultivate an environment where employees have the freedom to try new ideas, the freedom to fail, and the freedom to change course. But he does have a few pet peeves. The biggest one is people who are unable to say, *I don't know*.

Jackson feels that success boils down to common sense and humility and the idea that good business must be guided by good ethics.

Ethical considerations have also played into recent acquisitions. In 2021, Jackson Healthcare bought Bristol, Tennessee-based USAntibiotics, the only manufacturer of amoxicillin products in the country. Commonly known under the brand names Amoxil and Augmentin, these medications are among the most prescribed broad-spectrum antibiotics worldwide.

Today, China controls the market for antibiotics.

Jackson says that buying USAntibiotics may not have been the most lucrative business deal, but he felt it was a matter of national security. “You could also call it venture philanthropy,” he says.

GIVING BACK

Philanthropy and community volunteerism are deeply ingrained in Jackson’s personal beliefs, as well as in Jackson Healthcare’s corporate culture. Employees are encouraged to give their time and talent to charitable causes. The company also organizes medical missions around the world.

Supporting foster children is a cause close to Jackson’s heart. He serves as chairman of a nonprofit called Fostering Success Act (FSA) that assists young people aging out of the foster care system. Without some level of support, “these kids are doomed for misery for the rest of their lives,” says Jackson. In 2023, FSA raised more than \$11 million in tax credit funds to assist foster children with tuition, rent, transportation, medical care, mentorship, and more.

Jackson is also the chairman and chief benefactor of FaithBridge Foster Care, a Christian child placement agency. “Rick is an all-in guy. He pours his whole self into

supporting the kids,” says the organization’s president and CEO Bob Bruder-Mattson.

But philanthropic work also benefits the bottom line. “Today, organizations mainly run on culture,” Bruder-Mattson notes. If a business engages its employees in a culture that goes beyond the profit, “it’s a win for everybody.”

Jackson has also made a name for himself as a film producer. Among the movies he’s been involved in are *90 Minutes in Heaven* (2015), *Queen Bees* (2021), and *Green Border* (2023), an award-winning drama about the recent refugee crisis at the border of Poland and Belarus.

His family is at the center of Jackson’s universe and—quite literally—on prominent display in his office. There’s a set of small, 3D-printed figurines created from photos of his wife Melody, their three children—Shane, Chad, and Dana—and eight grandchildren. Chad heads the Jackson Family Foundation; Dana is not involved in the business.

While he doesn’t plan on passing the baton any time soon, Jackson says he’s now at a stage where “I’m moving from success to significance to creating a legacy.” He considers himself “a steward of God’s money,” and he wants to make sure he spends it with intent and impact. But he has no desire to be recognized while doing it.



JACKSON HEALTHCARE