

## National Funeral Directors Association's Pursuit of Excellence

### 2020 Innovative Activity

Heath Funeral Chapel, Lakeland, Florida

#### **Rationale**

As we ushered in the New Year on January 1, 2020, so commenced our 61<sup>st</sup> year of serving families with the same steadfast care and support that our founder, Foster Heath, provided in 1959 as families gathered to mourn the lives of their loved ones. But no one envisioned the drastic disruption in 2020 that would upend communities, countries, and nearly every corner of the world as families grappled with grief during a global pandemic.

As the year unfolded, and the Covid-19 virus spread, we held onto hope that the strict safety and sanitation measures being implemented would bring an end to the infinite challenges and ongoing frustration experienced by grieving families and our staff. As time went on, and weeks turned into months, we began searching for ways to bring some sense of normalcy back to the lives of families in our community. So when Heartland for Children began publicizing their 16<sup>th</sup> annual Rudolph Round-Up Holiday Toy Drive, we decided to participate in the program, which we have previously supported, because their efforts provide direct assistance to local area families.

In fact, the core mission of Heartland for Children, a social services organization, is "Improving safety, permanency, and well-being for all children in Polk, Highlands, and Hardee Counties" in Florida. Since 2003, Heartland for Children has served as the systems administrator of a comprehensive child welfare service provider network of services that includes adoptions, family preservation and support, and foster care.

The overall objective of Heartland for Children is to ensure support and positive outcomes for these children and their families. In turn, the goal of their 2020 toy drive was to fill this unprecedented and challenging holiday season with magical memories of hope and joy for the 1,500+ local children they assist.

## **Detailed Description**

During November and December 2020, Heartland for Children promoted their annual program by contacting previous business partners and distributing giant gift-wrapped boxes to collect toy donations. We immediately agreed to support their program again, knowing the difficulty many businesses were experiencing just trying to remain open and staffed. And although we had our share of challenges, we were open and available to assist at a time when the community needed our support.

Due to the unprecedented situation and pandemic protocols, rather than advertise and request assistance *from* the community, we supported the toy drive from within *to assist* the community. As a result, we did not spend resources for print ads or media buys, but used a portion of our annual community service funds to purchase toys and games. Heartland for Children collected the donations in early December, transported them to their local office, and organized the gifts for delivery to local foster families.

Conversely, in a typical year, we would have held our annual December Service of Remembrance for families we have served. For this traditional “Angels Among Us” event, we usually decorate our Tribute Center accordingly with white candles, angel figurines, and beautiful poinsettias tied with festive ribbon and greenery; hire a professional caterer to serve a selection of hot and cold hors d’oeuvres along with an array of desserts and beverages; invite a community speaker and a local choral ensemble; and provide a memorial rose dedication for families in attendance.

In lieu of hosting our 2020 service program, we recorded a tribute video for our website and reminded families of our ongoing grief and community support services.

## **Benefits to Funeral Home and Staff**

Participating in the Heartland for Children annual toy drive encouraged us to continue our tradition of community outreach and provided us with an opportunity to stay involved during this unprecedented year, extend support to a local program and share the hope and spirit of the holiday season with local children and their families. We all directly benefited from participating in this local toy drive and look forward to supporting the program again in 2021.

## **Benefits to Families and/or Community at Large**

Heath Funeral Chapel chose to support local children and foster families during this particularly challenging year to ensure they were able to celebrate the hope and wonder of the holiday season. Toys and games provide many benefits by enhancing fine and gross motor skills and cognitive, language and social development, and by encouraging children to play, which supports creativity and imagination and provides positive experiences that will last a lifetime. And in the year 2020, these benefits were priceless.

***“A SINGLE ACT OF KINDNESS THROWS OUT ROOTS IN ALL DIRECTIONS, AND THE ROOTS SPRING UP AND MAKE NEW TREES.” –AMELIA EARHART***

The past year and a half has been unlike any other time that we have experienced before. Our team has worked harder than we could have ever imagined. We have had to juggle the challenges of our work and home lives.

In addition to working at our funeral homes, many of our team members are parents. Being a parent during this unusual time was particularly challenging. Along with having to adjust our lives to meet the demands of distance-learning and unusual schedules, we saw many of our children work through the difficulties of their lives being turned upside down.

Since we knew, first hand, the challenges that our children have had to face over the last year, we wanted to plan a community outreach activity that would benefit children in our community. Our city has a summer camp program that many parents had to rely on in order to continue to go to work. This camp was designed to meet the needs of all children from varied socioeconomic backgrounds.

We reached out to this camp to ask if we would be able to do something special for them. We offered to send a shaved ice truck to the camp as a surprise for the campers. Shaved ice is similar to a snow-cone. As the name implies, the ice is finely shaved and then topped with a variety of flavored syrups. The camp was thrilled with our offer to send the truck and gladly welcomed the idea.

As simple as this offer seemed, we were confident that this small gesture would mean so much to these children. Even though we couldn't be there due to COVID restrictions, we know that the shaved ice truck was greeted by many excited campers and staff. Over 100 campers and counselors were able to enjoy the shaved ice. We were thrilled to see that in the midst of a challenging time, something as simple as a shaved ice truck would brighten each person's day.

This past year has taught us more than ever to think outside of the box and hold on to the beauty of even the smallest experiences. We have had to look for different ways to reach out to our communities with support and care. We have also had to find ways to support our communities from a distance. The needs of children in our area has been an especially important part of our outreach. By coordinating the shaved ice truck, we knew that we were showing our community members how much we care about them. We are thankful that this small act of kindness brought smiles to so many children's faces.



***Above is a “Thank You” poster that was sent to our funeral home. It was signed by over 100 campers who enjoyed the shaved ice truck.***

## Minnesota Valley Funeral Home & Cremation Services, New Ulm, MN

Essay: Innovative Practice: Sparking an Interest

When it comes to the career of funeral service, it is commonly known that interest in the field is severely limited when it comes to finding youthful talent from one's own community to join the industry. Funeral service is rarely thought of among most high school students looking at potential career endeavors out of school. Funeral was honestly one of the last fields I personally thought of when I was eighteen years old, thinking, "What am I going to be when I grow up?" It was with my own personal experience, that I thought, there has to be a way to make this career seem more enticing to the youth. I personally found a way to partner with my local high school's career studies class to educate potential students, and use my platform as a manager of a local funeral home to personally spark that interest. In partnering with the local public school system, I give two classroom presentations a year that I use to educate the students as to what this field entails. These lecture series classes tend to go quite long being once a few good field related questions start coming, they don't want to end. Besides the classroom lectures, I also invite the classes for behind-the-scenes tours of our facilities where I am able to show students that this career isn't all doom, gloom, and the prep room. I am able to show them how most of our work is done serving families and organizing service. I am also able to show the students that many things in the funeral industry that have been stigmatized as scary, are simply a part of life. When you're able to show someone the process of a cremation by explaining it, instead of the imagery portrayed in the movies, it makes a lot more sense to them. The same is true for the prep room. When they are able to visualize this workspace as more of a medical procedure room, their creative imaginative thoughts of what goes on down there are diminished. In partnering with this program only 2 years ago and by efficiently keeping up with it year to year, I have been able to guide and encourage 4 local students to pursue this career path already. Any students in this class that show true potential and want an experience to explore the career path further, we hire on as paid part time staff help to assist with funerals and visitations to give them a clear understanding of what a funeral director truly does day to day. I feel that this is something that more small-town funeral providers need to actively partake in to help alleviate the strain of a lack of directors in the career. This partnership has not only helped students find a career that they, like me, maybe would not have thought about, but also helps smaller communities retain its citizens. I know that many of these essays tend to focus more on what unique strategies we do to better serve our families, but I feel that what we are doing has been doing just that. We are helping place a spark in students in our community that will be better suited to serve the families that they grew up knowing and loving.

Olson Funeral Home & Cremation Service, Sheboygan, WI

Olson Funeral Home & Cremation Service has always had a long-standing relationship with the area school districts for many years. Not only through financial support through activities, sports, and theater but through volunteering and interacting with the students through programs like Reality Check, FBLA and the National Honor Society.

This year though, due to the pandemic, the opportunity to go out to the schools did not happen as schools were shut down and distance learning was utilized. But we still feel we needed to reach out to the kids, teachers, and staff in the way we always have. So, this year we came up with a little twist on our 'normal' outreach.

After speaking to the business teacher at one of our local high schools, we came up with an idea to invite teachers into the funeral home for a true "behind the scenes" tour of a working funeral home. The teachers we selected all taught classes related to the funeral industry. Besides the regular obvious classes like biology and chemistry, we also invited the business, accounting, tech ed, marketing, finance, psychology and even the English departments to come along. Invitations were sent out via text and email to the teachers and the chosen date was May 26, 2021, at 5:00 p.m.

Not many people have any idea what a funeral home does besides the obvious care of their loved one. But as we toured the funeral home, we discussed the day to day running of a business. We showed the tech ed teachers all of the video, music, and broadcasting equipment and programs used for printing memorial items and what kind of data bases we use to keep track of everyone. The business, marketing and accounting teachers got a lesson on all of the things we do to promote, advertise, and market our businesses. The English teachers also saw the importance of teaching students how to write business letter as this is something we still do on a daily basis. Not everything is done by text and email as our own apprentice had to learn. Of course, the biology and chemistry teachers got firsthand experience in learning about embalming, the chemicals used, the science behind evaluating a body to decide what chemicals to use and the best method to carry out the embalming. We also talked about all of the current methods of disposition available in the US now including alkaline hydrolysis and human composting as well as traditional burial and flame cremation.

I can tell you there were more questions than I ever thought there would be. The teachers got to see practical applications of what they teach to an industry that no one really knows about. To see firsthand that you will actually use algebra and chemistry after high school was very enlightening. The teachers then went back and built a lesson plan around what they learned here at the funeral home to share with their students in each discipline. Not only were the teachers very excited about this, but the students were as well. And who knows? Maybe, just maybe we sparked interest in one kid who may choose the funeral industry! All in all, it was a great learning day for the teachers and the staff of Olson Funeral Home & Cremation Service. We hope to implement this idea as a yearly program that we can offer to all of seven high schools in our community.

# Roller-Swift

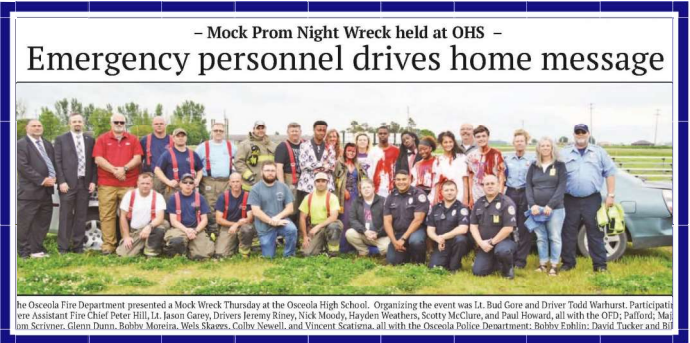
## Basic Requirements: Essay “Operation Prom Night”

In April of 2019, Roller-Swift Funeral Home along with Osceola High School, the Osceola Fire Department, and the Osceola police Department organized an education presentation “Operation Prom Night.” The presentation’s target demographic consisted of high school students as well as the community as a whole. The event was covered by the Osceola Times and broadcast on Facebook Live to reach as many people as possible.

“Operation Prom Night” is a program, we have held about once a year, geared toward informing the public about the magnitude of the impact that distracted driving, as well as driving under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, could have on a person, a family, and the community in its entirety. This public service presentation can best be described as a “mock wreck” involving teens on their prom night.



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The mock wreck was used to highlight the tragedy caused by the irresponsibility of getting behind the wheel after drinking at an after-prom party. Roller-Swift Funeral Home’s role in the event consisted of our staff arriving to the scene of the mock wreck and taking the deceased into our care via the funeral coach. Our funeral home and staff intended our role in this presentation to bring the seriousness of these types of situations and the extreme consequences that follow them to light. To get this message across, a young girl was placed on the hood of a destroyed car portraying a person who had been thrown through the windshield upon impact. The sight of the teen girl in her prom dress, on a day that was meant to be magical, sprawled out on the hood of the car, sticking out of the windshield of the wreckage, covered from head to toe in blood set what was, to say the least a tragic scene.

Roller-Swift was called to take the teen into our care. The staff helped to lift her lifeless body out of the debris and place her onto a gurney. She was then, placed into the funeral coach giving the appearance that she was deceased. These actions emulated the very reality of how truly devastating the effects of driving while intoxicated or distracted can be.

We here at Roller-Swift Funeral Home take our roles in the community seriously and with the utmost respect. We were grateful to be able to take part in, “Operation Prom Night”, helping teach such an important lesson. We are truly honored and look forward to continuing to have an impactful and mutually beneficial role in our community.

