

Bailey Family Funeral Homes
Wallingford, Connecticut

Bailey Funeral Home, Plainville, CT; Carpino Funeral Home, Southbury, CT; Connecticut Funeral Care, Waterbury, CT

When a local hospice has a child's case, we frequently get the call from their social worker asking if they can introduce one of our directors, Amanda, to the caregivers shortly after their hospice has been introduced. She prefers to be introduced sooner than later with children cases, because it then gives her and the funeral home time to develop a relationship with not only the child, but more importantly their caregivers and family. She doesn't want to be a stranger that they one day will inevitably hand their child over to – but rather wants them to at least have the comfort that their child's body will be taken care of by loving and familiar hands. This ideology on these particular cases has been successful for our funeral home, as the families always comment how much they appreciate building a relationship with us prior, and are thankful that Amanda took an interest in getting to know them and their child beforehand. They've expressed that even in this difficult moment, they're at the slightest ease knowing their child is in the care of someone they feel comfortable with and know.

When Amanda was first introduced to Jeilany's parents, they were reserved and scared – their daughter's abrupt and failing health was out of their hands as they and their other children witnessed helplessly. Of course, adding a funeral director to the mix only makes the nightmare they're in more real. But after sending a lengthy email introducing herself, her background, and how she wished to walk alongside them in this new party of her journey, Amanda was welcomed into their home. With laundry piled up covering the couch, several children buzzed around in excitement wondering who this new face was. Jeilany's mother, Vivian, gently introduced Amanda to 7-year-old Jeilany – swaddled between pillows on a pullout bed in their living room as her half-sister lovingly curled her hair in her fingertips as she laid beside her.

Over the course of the next few weeks, her parents and Amanda stayed in contact, as well as hospice giving us weekly updates. Her family wanted her care to be at home, due to lack of accessibility to the hospice facility and with several other children in the picture. We made a "plan" for when Jeilany would die at home, and how/what it would look like when we came to transfer her body. However, the nurse and social worker both warned us that the parents seemed anxious for that moment and to expect that they may call 911 – so we actually anticipated this route...

We did eventually get the call that she had been taken to the hospital and had passed there shortly after. Her parents, beside themselves, asked for a few days before coming in to finalize arrangements and gave us permission to embalm their daughter for eventual burial in the meantime. When Amanda placed her body bag on the embalming table and unzipped it, the large Organ Procurement toe tag immediately jumped to her attention – realizing that the family she was caring for selflessly donated her heart when it was time for them to inevitably say goodbye to her. When Amanda finally saw Vivian the next day and brought up the fact that Jeilany was a donor, she simply smiled through her tears and told her all of the things her daughter was going to do as she lived on through another child given a second chance at life all because of her donation.

We wanted to do something for them, to give back for that generous and enduring gift to another family also in immense pain and fear of losing their child – all without feeling the need to tell anyone about this act of kindness. They did it purely for the love of their child and the compassion they held for others in this position. Since Jeilany had been out of school for a few months at this point, we decided to reach out to her guidance counselor to see if he could help facilitate a small project Amanda had thought up for her service. She had made a heart template and asked if her guidance counselor could connect her to Jeilany's teacher – to see if her fellow students could each color a heart which we could display at the service. After speaking to him, we learned the children had been told that she died and offered to be a resource to any extent. When he asked about the heart template, Amanda told him that her parents made the difficult decision for her to be a heart donor – and that we wanted to honor them for this at her service. Also stunned, he happily obliged. We don't often think of children as donors either...

When Amanda went to the school a couple days later to pick up the hearts, she was handed an envelope bursting with over 200 hearts by her guidance counselor. They were an array of bright colors, all scribbled with messages of love and loss to Jeilany – spanning from the kindergarten class all the way through the elementary school. Once they heard the news and project, the entire school decided they wanted to help show their support to Jeilany’s family. We were overwhelmed with gratitude and awe of this community coming together to support them.

Jeilany was a little girl that loved unicorns, butterflies, rainbows, pinks, purples, and everything magical. For her service in our funeral home chapel, we ordered a rainbow tulle backdrop that hung behind her casket, strung up paper lanterns in every shade of pink, decorated the funeral home with rainbow balloons and ribbons, set out baskets of her favorite candy and lollipops for the children that came to enjoy, and attached 3D hologram paper butterflies to her casket embracing her laying within. Outside the funeral home, we lined our driveway with the hearts strung up on yarn between posts so that everyone coming was also immersed in this experience of her donation and the love outpouring from her classmates. We also taped them up in our entryway with a sign explaining them. Throughout her service, so many people gasp with tears in their eyes once the sign caught their attention – they learned about her gift. For her burial, we also took some of the hearts and created a lane of them for the procession of her casket from the hearse to her grave.

This family taught us so many things with the biggest thing being that we now have the courage to broach the topic of donation when meeting with an imminent-need family of a child – because ultimately that can alter our “plan of action” when the death becomes near since they will have to be placed in a hospital setting. It also taught us the power of community – in healing and even simply acknowledging her transition to death. As a result of this service as well, our funeral home has also implemented ways to connect with the schools of children that we’ve cared for that pass away – to extend ourselves as a resource to the school and students as they may be working through grief. When Amanda brought all of the colored hearts over to their home in a special box after the service, Vivian embraced it in her arms with tears streaming down her cheeks as if she were embracing her own daughter once again. Jeilany’s heart has not only affected one child, but many – all of us.

Bayliff & Son Funeral Home Cridersville, Ohio

Bayliff & Son Funeral Home is located in Northwest Ohio, a rural farming community in business for over 80 years and is now in its fourth generation. A big part of our success comes from listening to families. The importance of this was shared by John Bayliff, the second generation. The third generation added to this with Napoleon Hill's "The Habit of Going the Extra Mile."

Listening is a very important step to form in connecting with families. When families feel listened to, they feel loved and understood. It is a form of emotional support, helps in building a strong relationship and trust. Sometimes you become a sounding board for families, and it is important to be patient. As funeral directors we must ask open-ended questions, seeking to understand the meaning of what is being said. Active listening helps us detect challenges, difficulties, and problems. We listen intently to ideas and how to make this time special. Listening well may also prevent us from missing something.

Our challenge is to capture their ideas and thoughts. With that knowledge we want to give them something extra. Each family is given a personalized and caring experience. Bayliff & Son has a great deal of plastic bins of themed ideas. We have Ohio State, Cincinnati Reds, different sports, garden, flowers, butterflies, patriotic, John Deere and many more. Smell is important in memories and creating an atmosphere. We use Scent Air and have Christmas, Grandma's Kitchen, Sugar Cookies, Hot Apple Pie, Vanilla, Fall Scents, Popcorn, fresh cut grass, lemon verbena, ocean scent and others. If we don't have something we give our directors an allowance to purchase something for the family, like homemade cookies, a special cake, or special bracelets for the little ones. Doing this we are honoring the family in a special way. Our goal is to do better than what is expected.

We work with one family that the deceased did not want anyone to be unhappy - "No Sad People". His favorite time of year was Christmas, so we put up a Christmas Tree. She loved playing games, so we did two scavenger hunts for grandchildren with items that were meaningful to the family. We use a Christmas Tree scent with cinnamon.

There were a couple families that were racers. So from the entrance of the cemetery to the grave we had race flags on display.

Another Family we had pumpkins positioned different areas from the funeral Home, past their family business, to the cemetery. Each pumpkin had a message or symbol for the family.

When we do infant or children's services we decorate with flowers and sometimes butterflies. When there are siblings, we do something there sometimes butterflies. When there are siblings, we do something special. We have given butterfly bracelets, balloon releases, and special books.

We pride ourselves in listening, talking, what is special to family, ideas and as John Bayliff says "We put feet on it. We try very hard to have the person's personality present.

Our staff will wear special attire to honor the family. Animal print, PINK neck ties, special color.

This has been of great value to our families, staff and business, listening has helped expose the staff to others, thoughts and looking at something from a different direction. We are continuing ways and our imagination, seeking new and better ways, and strengthening bonds with our families. This increases the trust placed with us, opens the door to service new families, reduces family stress, and possible upgrades. Dale Carnegie wrote "People work for money, but go the extra mile for praise, recognition, and rewards."

Howard K. Hill Funeral Services
New Haven, Connecticut

Howard K. Hill Funeral Services, Hartford, CT; Henry L. Fuqua Funeral Service (A Division of Howard K. Hill Funeral Services), Bloomfield, CT

At our funeral home, we have developed a distinctive approach to honoring the lives of our loved ones by offering innovative and commemorative experiences in addition to offering the highest level of service. Our commitment to personalization and community engagement has inspired us to incorporate unique elements such as unique hearses, stunning displays of vehicles and personal items, and visually stunning LED wall presentations. By intertwining these elements, we aim to create meaningful tributes that genuinely reflect the individuality and passions of those we serve while fostering a strong sense of comfort for family and the community.

To pay tribute to individuals who had a strong connection to their profession or hobbies, we have introduced customized hearses. For example, in conjunction with our families, we have modified a traditional tractor-trailer into a hearse to honor truck drivers, allowing them to showcase their love for the open road even in passing. Likewise, adventure enthusiasts can choose to have all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and motorcycles displayed inside the funeral home, providing a tangible representation of their loved one's spirit of adventure and passion for the outdoors.

In order to create a visually captivating video backdrop that encapsulates the essence of a person's life, we have implemented LED walls that showcase custom-designed visual presentations. These dynamic displays feature a compilation of photographs, videos, images and meaningful quotes, creatively representing the journey and milestones of the departed individual. By carefully curating these visual stories, we offer families a unique and impactful way to celebrate their loved one's life, fostering a sense of connection and remembrance among attendees. This tribute remains concealed until the casket closes, unveiling itself as a final homage to friends and family.

Incorporating personalized elements in our commemoration experiences benefits families and the wider community. Firstly, it offers comfort and solace to grieving families as they witness their loved one's life celebrated in a truly distinctive and meaningful way. This personalized approach helps create a healing environment and supports the bereavement process. Additionally, these innovative displays act as conversation starters, encouraging attendees to share stories and memories, fostering a sense of community and connection during a time of loss.

In conclusion, through our innovative commemoration experiences, our aim is to celebrate the unique lives and passions of those we serve. By infusing our services with as much love and personalization as possible, we create an atmosphere that honors the individuality of the departed, providing comfort and healing to grieving families. Moreover, our efforts foster a sense of community support and engagement, bringing people together to remember and celebrate life's journeys.

Hughes Family Tribute Center Dallas, Texas

Hughes Family Tribute Center has always believed in trying unconventional things to better serve our families and community. From transforming our chapel into Hogwarts for a Life Celebration, to hosting our own Day of the Dead event, to partnering with the City of Dallas to hold an art exhibit and art program, we have done so unusual things in our community. After we received feedback from many families who had loved ones who loved margaritas and alcoholic drinks, we decided to purchase a frozen margarita machine and make alcoholic margaritas and virgin daiquiris for our Life Celebrations and community events. Our purchase not only caught the attention and excitement of families, but it also opened the doors to partnerships. It was because of one of our community events with our margarita machine that an events director at Parsons House Preston Hollow, a local assisted living center, requested to rent our machine for a Luau Party she was holding for the residents. We told her not only would we provide the margarita machine, but we would also help sponsor the event to give the residents a great time! The event director was very excited about our desire to help and serve the residents.

At the Luau Party, residents were encouraged to invite their families to enjoy in the festivities. There was lots of music, decorations, libations (including our margarita machine), and even a professional hula dancer. We came in before the party to start preparing our machine, and during that time, we got to talk to various staff members. We stayed throughout the event to work the margarita machine and to help our where we could during the Luau Party. Not only did we make great connections with Parsons House's staff, but we also had great interactions with the residents and their families. We watched as the residents kicked back and had a great time, talked with families who inquired about our margarita machine, and even a little girl dressed up as Queen Elsa dance with the hula dancer.

As a result of our participation, we have a great working relationship with the assisted living center to provide end-of-life information, access to community events for the residents, and the ability to go in to join them for other events. We hope to continue this relationship further, and provide these fun-loving residents equally fun and creative Life Celebrations when their time comes. We are very appreciative of our experience at Parsons House Preston Hollow and our ability to give people a good time with our margarita machine.

Life Celebrations Group – Radney Funeral Home
Alexander City, Alabama
Langley Funeral Home, Camp Hill, AL

“Opening a Can of Worms: Cremation Memorial Displays”

Radney Funeral Home has always been a place where any member of the community is welcomed. Since its founding in 1938, the Radney name has been a respected name with a business for compassion, dignity, and respect for the families served under its roof. A lot about the funeral service has changed in the past 85 years of its existence, but the one thing that remains is the extra mile that its staff is willing to go to in order to give loved ones a beautiful goodbye. It's no secret that the rate of cremation is steadily increasing with every season that passes. With that increase in cremation, funeral homes need to find new and inventive ways to keep with the business aspect as well as finding ways to help families who are shying away from holding services. We are having to change our mindset of what we once thought of cremation families. They are still in need of the same healing power of a service that a traditional burial family would receive. Whether it is a casket or an urn, there is still someone's loved one contained within. There is still a whole life that was lived, hobbies that were enjoyed, accomplishments that were achieved, family trees that were grown. Every life deserves to be celebrated regardless of disposition preferences. The question most people ask is, "What do you do for a service or visitation when there isn't a body present as the focal point?" You open a can of worms.

I recently sat down with a family to discuss the arrangements for the patriarch of their family. The conference consisted of his wife and two daughters. They knew that they wanted to have him cremated, but they wanted to have a visitation at the funeral home and a service at their church where they were active members at. I began to write down the basic information for what they wanted with the service when the daughters spoke up about something their father had designed and built for this very occasion. This gentleman was an avid fisherman. He was known to spend all his time on the water, in a boat, fishing. His passion for the catch went so deep that he built his own stand for his urn to sit on when the day finally came. Sitting on black piping was a wooden slab where the urn would sit. There were four holes created in the piping so that his four favorite fishing poles would stand up in full display. The daughters also wanted to include his favorite tackle box and some of his fishing lures with a wooden sign that read "Gone Fishin." The family knew that the fishing poles would be too tall to use for the funeral home, so they asked if we could put the urn on a table for visitation and then we'd use it for the service at the church. I asked permission to be able to decorate the area around for the visitation so that it wouldn't look bare since we weren't going to be using the platform at that time.

The next day, the daughters brought the homemade platform to the funeral home. It wasn't until I saw this unique piece that my mind instantly told me we just HAD to do something different. This man loved fishing so much that he made his own urn display. The family gave me permission to decorate the area around the urn, but there was no way that we were just going to set this gem to the side and not put it on full display. As a new funeral director, this is the moment you wait for in the industry. This is the moment that you get the full trust of a family to go outside the normal lines. It is here that you can give families something more than just the basic urn on a table. We needed something more than a table. We needed a boat! Luckily, in a small southern town on a lake, a boat is not that hard to come across. With some helping hands and quick maneuvering, we were able to get a boat inside the funeral home and positioned in the visitation room. Next, I began to put the display together. The homemade platform went directly in the middle of the boat, a place where this man would have normally been while enjoying the water. His favorite tackle box was seated beside him. I placed pictures on the other seat in the boat that proudly showed off this fisherman in his natural element.

The display started to come together easily once I began to remember the stories that the family had shared with me about him. The scene began to unravel right before my eyes. There had to be fishing lures, an oar, bait, fishing net, fireflies, lanterns, and fishing line. I began to add more natural and masculine touches like moss, greenery, and burlap. Battery operated candles gave the lanterns a nice glow while the fairy lights were added to mason jars to make it look like fireflies were dancing all around.

Several potted plants that were purchased by friends were placed around the front and back of the boat to surround and fill the empty space. It really looked like the boat was perfectly sat in the woods and water. The final touch was turning the cosmetic lights down so that it created the look of fishing at sunset. Words cannot describe the feeling of when the family saw everything for the first time. That is a feeling that can't be replaced or duplicated. They were anticipating a small display with an urn on the table because that's the way it has always been done. What they received was an entire scene straight from the movie of his life, and, sitting right in the middle of the boat, was their beloved fisherman. Creating this display gave more than just a quirky setup. The tension that is usually in the air during a visitation was instantly gone. The family got unspoken permission to laugh and experience excitement for the public to come and truly see who he was. I don't think that I realized how important he was to so many people in the community until visitation began. Talk of his boat display ran through the waiting line which created conversation. Once people made it to the front of the line, to be with the family, it was an icebreaker topic of discussion. Friends got to let the conditioned formalities wash away. It put an ease to those offering condolences to the family, and it gave the family a huge sense of pride to be able to laugh with others about it.

There are pros and cons of being in a small town. The biggest one is that word travels fast. It didn't take long for word to get around that Radney Funeral Home had brought a boat into the funeral home for a visitation. The community presented an overwhelming amount of positive feedback. The boat display was even mentioned and discussed on the local television station. Husbands were whispering to their wives, "I want that when I go." Siblings whispered to siblings, "We should do something like that for mom but with her sewing." A topic that people didn't even think was a possibility began to catch on. Suddenly, the community began to think more about the possibilities that were now openly available to them and their family members in the future.

This also opened a discussion amongst the funeral home staff about cremation. There were conversations about the impact that something like the boat display could have. It gives families the opportunity to have a service to remember their loved one even if there's no body present. It also brought the chance to send a refreshing breath into the same routine we had become accustomed to. This brought the realization to the team that we can do these for any family member that comes through the door. We are not restricted to what has always been done in the past. There is room for creativity amongst the staff as well. Radney Funeral Home is very fortunate and lucky to be owned by Randy Anderson. He provides the environment for us to experiment with as a staff. He encourages the staff to go above and beyond to help serve families however they need to be served. Randy is the type of boss that supports the staff with any and all ideas, no matter how wild they may seem, like bringing a whole boat into the funeral home.

The funeral service is changing. Personalization is the hidden key to success. People heal and feel better when they are given permission to talk about the person who died. Death feels so final to many people. They don't realize that a person only truly dies when people stop talking about them, remembering them, and thinking of them. People were conditioned for so long to believe that in order to pay respect to the dead they had to be solemn and sad. The times are changing to show that tears and laughter are healthy and encouraged in a funeral home. Laughter is not a sign of disrespect for the life that is gone, but rather it is a loving sign of a life well lived. We are honored and excited for what lies beyond the horizon.

Hopefully we will always cast our lines out in hopes of reeling in new ideas to make families feel more seen, heard, and honored. The greatest prize is celebrating the lives of those who make our community the hidden gem that it is.

Mercer-Adams Funeral Service Bethany, Oklahoma

On September 30, 2022, Mercer-Adams Funeral Service was called to assist with an Oklahoma City police officer, Sergeant Meagan Burke, who was killed in a traffic accident. She was the first female Oklahoma City police officer to die in the line of duty. She was also the first on-duty Oklahoma City Police Department officer to pass away since 1986.

Sergeant Burke moved to the Oklahoma City area in 2016. She was a field training officer and a freeway interdiction unit officer. Her family lives in the Colorado Springs, CO area, so her local "family" consisted of fellow police officers, soccer team members and pet rescue friends.

Upon receiving notification of her passing, we traveled across town to the Chief Medical Examiner's office to take her into our care. Four Oklahoma City police officers were on hand to honor her by placing an American flag on her body before we loaded her into our vehicle. As we drove in procession back toward the funeral home, the police department formed a 4-point escort around our vehicle and we were joined by a helicopter and a line of escorts.

Sgt. Burke's family requested that she be cremated, so the necessary documents were signed and a permit secured. Once she was ready to be transported to the crematory, the OKC police department again escorted us. Some of the officers were her friends and they were among those who helped us unload her from our vehicle. At that time, the officers respectfully removed the flag.

When Sgt. Burke's parents and siblings arrived in town from Colorado, it was decided that we would gather at her home instead of meeting at the funeral home to discuss arrangements. The comfortable, private environment was very conducive to the sharing of ideas and memories. In addition to Sgt. Burke's family, we were joined by some of her friends and fellow officers. Among the many ideas that were shared, we suggested that memorial donations be made to the Mutt Misfits Animal Rescue Society or any other animal rescue organization. Meagan had adopted and fostered many dogs from her local chapter of Mutt Misfits.

Mercer-Adams was asked to staff and direct Sgt. Burke's memorial service in the week to come. We were able to make some suggestions concerning a venue that might accommodate a large memorial service such as this. Our first inquiry was with a sizeable community college in our area, but their auditorium was not available. Ultimately, we were able to secure the sanctuary of large church in the area.

Shannon Myott and Tim Adams, Mercer-Adams funeral directors, worked with the church staff, police department honor detail units, firing party units and police chaplains to organize the myriad details required for Sgt. Burke's memorial service. This included several meetings and an extensive tour of the church. We gave leadership concerning the entrance of family members and guests, in anticipation of 600 to 900 attendees. Among the suggestions for a streamlined service was the elimination of register books. With Sgt. Burke's family not knowing anyone here locally, we realized the books were not necessary and would only serve to delay entrance into the church sanctuary. We also contacted the Fraternal Order of Police to assist with seating inside the sanctuary.

At the funeral home, we went about the task of creating a memorial focal point in our chapel. It consisted of a large picture of Sgt. Burke, her hat and boots, soccer balls, a photo of soccer teams she coached, favorite plush toys and other mementos.

In the five days leading up to Sgt. Burke's memorial service, we kept our doors open 24 hours a day. This allowed police officers from around the city and beyond to come before, during or after their shifts to pay their respects. A police officer was stationed outside our door at all times, and at least one officer was present inside the building. The funeral home provided coffee and snacks for the officers who came to stand guard, along with a comfortable room to sit and relax.

Sergeant Burke's memorial service was held at 4:00pm on October 5, 2022 at Southern Hills Baptist Church in Oklahoma City. In attendance were many dignitaries including mayors, state senators, and members of the House of Representatives. At the conclusion of the service, we led the family out to the front steps of the church where 9 canine units awaited. At that time, full police department honors were presented, including a flag fold and presentation, 21-gun salute by the firing party and a fly-over by the Oklahoma City Police Department helicopter, Air One.

We staffed this memorial event with two funeral directors and ten staff members. We have been thanked over and over again, and have received letters from the Oklahoma City Police Department, Oklahoma City Police chief, and family services chaplains. All our services were donated without cost to the family, which is consistent with our policy for those service members or local police officers who perish in the line of duty. It was truly our honor to be of service to Sgt. Burke's family and our community.

**Milward Funeral Directors
Lexington, Kentucky**

Milward Funeral Directors – Southland, Lexington, KY; Milward Funeral Directors – Man o’ War Chapel, Lexington, KY

Kentucky is known for many famous people...Abraham Lincoln, George and Rosemary Clooney, The Judd's, Bill Ray Cyrus, Jack Harlow, Loretta Lynn, Diane Sawyer to name just a few. It was also home to Governor John Y. Brown, Jr., probably best known and remembered as the man who turned Kentucky Fried Chicken to a global household name as it became the largest fast-food chain in the World.

John Y. Brown was born in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1933 and died on November 22, 2022. Milward Funeral Directors were honored to be entrusted with the planning and conducting of Governor Brown's funeral services on November 29 and 30, 2022.

John Y Brown was a very successful man who earned the respect of people across the globe. He paid his way through college and law school at the University of Kentucky as one of Encyclopedia Britannica's top salesmen, served in U.S Army Reserve, then co-purchased Kentucky Fried Chicken from Harlan Sanders in 1964. In 1971, Mr. Brown sold his shares in KFC and started investing in professional sports teams before he got involved in politics. He was Governor for the Commonwealth of Kentucky from 1979 to 1983.

The visitation took place on Tuesday, November 29, 2022 at the Kentucky Capitol Rotunda where Brown was laid in state. Visitation was open to the public from 10 a.m.-7 p.m., then he had a private service in the rotunda on Wednesday, November 30, 2022. The service was livestreamed on Kentucky Education TV Website. Governor Andy Beshear directed flags at all state office buildings to be lowered to half-staff in Brown's honor until sunset on the day of his interment.

Governor Browns service was lead by Pastor Mike Breaux, a well-known Lexington religious leader. The service included the singing of his favorite songs in the Capitol Rotunda which was filled by the people he loved and cherished; remarks by people he once influenced including the current Common of Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear, Jim Host a well renown sports and tourism communication, Kentucky Cabinet Member, Commissioner and candidate for Lieutenant Governor, his son John Y Brown, III, his daughter and CNN Anchor Pamela Brown Wright, his son and entrepreneur Lincoln Brown; and concluded with a video presentation of family photos; and the singing of My Old Kentucky Home.

During the funeral, Governor Brown's casket was draped with the Commonwealth of Kentucky flag, but was later switched to the American flag because of his military service. Some of the influential Kentuckians who attended his service were Linda Breathitt (daughter of former Governor Edward Thomas Breathitt) who served on John Y. Browns campaign, Department of Transportation Secretary and former Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government Mayor Jim Gray who also had worked for Governor Brown in the 1970s.

In lieu of flowers, friends and family were asked to make donations to the Sanders Brown Center on Aging, which Brown helped found.

Pixley Funeral Home
Rochester, Michigan

Pixley Funeral Home, Auburn Hills, MI; Pixley Funeral Home, Keego Harbor, MI

All of our Pixley Funeral Home locations are committed to celebrating the lives of all of those in our care in a way that is unique to the individual.

In February 2023, our team was called upon to serve the family of a young man who died suddenly. Timothy Webber (better known as T-MO) was a longtime resident of the Rochester area – he graduated from a local high school, was active in the surrounding theater community, and was also the older brother of a newly elected state senator. However, T-MO was best known as the founding member, drummer, and vocalist of the hugely popular regional band Killer Flamingos. With a rabid local fan base and the charismatic T-MO leading the charge, it was no secret that THIS was the band to call if you wanted to pack a venue and draw a crowd.

From the first call, we knew this would be no ordinary service – a true celebration of life. The family was clear in their wishes that the service needed to be as unique – and flamboyant – as T-MO's life, while also respectfully honoring his legacy. With our clear marching orders in place, it was time to begin planning.

We knew immediately the sky was the limit in what we could create for the service – and our team was up for the task. The family opted for a Memorial Service with T-MO's ashes present surrounded by the things that he loved. For starters – we opted out of the typical photo boards. It simply would not be authentic to who T-MO was. The funeral director took the task head on and recommended our team create oversized photos to resemble concert billboards to place at the entrance and throughout the funeral home.

The family came right alongside this idea with only one suggestion – we needed to find a creative way to incorporate the band's logo (a pink flamingo, of course!) into the decor. We knew this was a job for a highly regarded local floral designer. Much like T-MO, this designer was not typical in their approach to their creations and they willingly joined us in the mission to craft an arrangement that had never been created before – a nearly life-size pink flamingo made entirely of flowers.

In addition to the billboards and floral flamingo, our funeral director recommended that the urn was displayed on one of T-MO's custom drum pieces... with his sticks incorporated into the set up. Mission accomplished. The family also requested a photo montage tribute be displayed during the visitation but our team asked permission to take that one step further. We were able to obtain live band footage (thanks to the plethora of media available online) and incorporated the live concert elements into the video tribute.

Upon determining the order of the memorial service (including reflections, family members speaking, and surviving band members providing music), the funeral director inquired about some of T-MO's favorite songs to play with his band. After having a "listening session" with the family and Pixley staff, it was determined that there was no one better to close out T-MO's memorial service than the man himself. The family opted to play his soulful live version of "What A Wonderful World" to conclude the service.

On the day of the service – thanks to careful planning and true collaboration with the family – all went according to plan. The funeral home doors burst wide open filling the chapel with family, friends, and fans. During the time of reflection, guests spent over an hour laughing, crying, and finding inspiration in a life that was truly well-lived. T-MO's twin brother even burnt the midnight oil before the service to write a special song just for the day. As a subtle nod to T-MO, all funeral home staff incorporated elements of pink into their wardrobe that day.

Once the service came to an end and the director came forward to begin dismissal, a moment of inspiration struck. Of course a man who lived such a vibrant, full, enthusiastic life never left the stage without applause. Why should today be any different? The director shared this sentiment with guests at dismissal and the room erupted in clapping which quickly escalated to a standing ovation with a thunderous sound emerging from the room. Applause and shouts of "T-MO" filled the hallways as loved ones said goodbye to someone so dear to them.

Memories, laughter, tears, applause... a service that exceeded the expectation of the family and honored a truly larger than life individual.

**Posey Funeral Directors
North Augusta, South Carolina**

Back to the Basics of Funeral Service: Let's Have a Birthday Party

In an era of high-speed internet, fast food, and vehicles that will drive themselves, we, in funeral service feel like we need to keep up with the culture and integrate technology into all that we do. For most funeral directors we entered this sacred profession to help people at a time of great need, the death loss of a loved one. From the initial call, transfer of the deceased, meeting with the family, and conducting the service, all elements of a funeral or memorial service are highly personal and cannot replace the need for human care, compassion, guidance, and understanding. While technology has its place in our world and even in the world of funeral service, our world and our funeral service arena desperately need us to get back to basics.

On May 23, 2023 "Mad" would have been ten years old, instead, she was fighting for her life at the local children's hospital instead of being at her birthday party. Three days later "Mad" was in our (Posey Funeral Directors) care and one of our funeral directors was gathering with the family and friends around the dining room table to plan "Mad's" Celebration of Life. The small community, population just over 1500, where young "Mad's" family resides has a sign at the town limits that reads, "Welcome to Jackson: A Community That Cares", those words could not have rung more true than during the last week in May 2023. The community showed "Mad's" family how much they care. As a funeral home, we are honored and privileged to serve that little community and most of the residents at their darkest hours. When our funeral director arrived at the home to begin the conversation about arrangements, he was greeted with an outpouring of family and friends that had gathered to support the family. In addition to family and friends, two local pastors were present offering spiritual support. Within just a few moments "Mad's" parents may their wishes known, "we want to have a ten-year-old birthday party for her funeral", said her mom. The arranging funeral director learned who "Mad" was, a kind, witty little girl that never met a stranger; everyone who met her loved her. She loved rainbows and unicorns and all things crafty including making her own lip balm from crayons, slime and hair dye with markers.

The team of Posey Funeral Directors worked tirelessly to create and provide "Mad" the ten-year-old birthday party that her family wanted her to have. The family asked everyone to wear attire that they would wear to a ten-year-old girl's birthday party. Additionally, everyone was asked to bring a birthday balloon to be released at the conclusion of the celebration. The venue for the service was the local youth sports field because she loved spending time there, mostly at the concession stand. Her pure white casket laid in state at midfield with a table of paints, markers, stickers and other items for guests to decorate her casket. The concession stand was converted "Mad's Concession" and those in attendance were welcome to partake in some of her favorite drinks and snacks complimentary. Additionally, "Mad's Hair Color Bar" was established just outside the gates to the field, where girls and women alike could get a little hair dye or feathers in their hair in honor of Mad's creative spirit. The two pastors and many of the family wore t-shirts that read: "MAD STRONG". Approximately 800 family, friends, and community members packed the bleachers and stood on the sidelines as Mad's short life was honored and celebrated all because the Town of Jackson cares and Posey Funeral Directors cares.

In the end, we used some modern conveniences and technology to complete the arrangements and conduct services, but the real "innovation" was the compassionate hearts of the funeral directors and staff members of Posey Funeral Directors who made "Mad's 10th Birthday Party one the community will not soon forget and that is what funeral service has been, is, and will be for the team at Posey Funeral Directors.

Pray Funeral Home Charlotte, Michigan

Star Trek Memorial – Boldly Going Where No Funeral Has Gone Before

As we met with the family of Rob, a young man who had passed way before his time, they stated that they didn't want a "regular funeral." The traditional scripture based format wasn't exactly what they felt would be most appropriate. They had strong spiritual beliefs, but weren't sure exactly how to assemble their memories of Rob into the elements of a meaningful celebration of his life.

Throughout the arrangements they kept bringing up Star Trek, and shared that one of their family traditions was to end conversations with quotes from the movies and television episodes. As we continued talking, they repeated some of his favorite ones.

Joe E Pray, the funeral director, suggested developing Rob's memorial to include Star Trek elements. When the ideas started to flow, the family shifted from a mindset of making funeral arrangements – to one of imagining how they could showcase Rob's life and share the lessons they had learned from him that may be helpful to others. There was talk of including Rob's Star Trek collections. They started imagining how to incorporate the favorite Star Trek quotes. Their grief was beginning to transform into healing. This celebration of life was going to be a wonderful tribute built on thoughtful quotes, music, and other modern references to convey a meaningful message of hope.

The Enterprise Crew

As the conversation progressed, Joe E suggested, "Perhaps my staff should dress as members of the Starship Enterprise crew!" The family's response was a wide eyed "Would you!?" Mr. Pray's response echoed Captain Jean Luc Picard. "I will make it so."

Rob Loved the Outdoors

The family also recounted Rob's love of nature and the outdoors. They had considered placing Rob's urn somewhere on their property near their pond and asked if we could still secure an outdoor memorial boulder urn for Rob similar to one we had provided for Rob's grandfather several years earlier. Even though the supplier for stone and boulder memorial urns had ceased operations some time ago, Joe E suggested that he restore the one large sample boulder that was still present in Pray Funeral Home's garden display. The memorial boulder urn was removed from the garden display, surfaces cleaned and resealed and a new bronze plaque ordered with Rob's name and an epitaph that the family selected. Joe E then refitted a new cremation chamber to the hollow underside of the memorial boulder urn. In keeping with Rob's love of nature, it was decided to host the service under the large outdoor venue in the Pray Funeral Home Gardens behind the funeral home. Pray Funeral Home developed a large ceremonial garden behind the funeral home comprising over an acre of woods, grass, and gardens in the middle of the city block. In this Garden, Prays erected a 40 foot by 80 foot outdoor canopy that could be enclosed with clear curtain walls so families could enjoy the lush greenery surrounding the tent even on windy or inclement days. The tent is wired with several electrical circuits and outlets to support lighting, including cosmetic and mood lighting, sound system, webcast system, fans and heaters when necessary. The tent even has its own dedicated Wi-Fi to assist in streaming music and web casting services.

And Cookies!

While the family talked about gathering somewhere for a luncheon afterwards, Joe E suggested that they hold the luncheon under the same canopy following the service. The family was delighted with the option and our staff assisted with the catering arrangements.

There were two additional requests that came to mind in discussing the luncheon. One of the unique suggestions was made to have Star Trek and NASCAR themed cookies. The other request was to serve selections of wine, beer and drinks for the luncheon. While Pray funeral Home does not have a liquor

license to provide alcoholic beverages, the request was accommodated by our funeral home with the simple addition of an insurance rider from the family's policy covering the funeral home for liability.

The Set Up

The morning of the service the memorial boulder urn was placed in the center front of the large canopy area. The boulder rested on a stand topped by a custom black carpeted carrier platform that Joe E Pray had built to enable the urn bearers to carry the heavy memorial boulder urn during the sendoff at the conclusion of the service.

Rob was also a huge NASCAR fan and had traveled to a number of the NASCAR tracks around the country with his father to experience the thrill of Big Oval racing. The memorial boulder urn was flanked on one side by a display of Rob's NASCAR collection. The collection included jackets, model cars, posters and figurines. These were all artfully arranged in front of Pray Funeral Home's large NASCAR flag which is part of the collection of props that the funeral home has amassed to help tell life stories. The opposite side of the memorial boulder urn was flanked by Rob's Star Trek collection of Star Trek space ships and cruisers, Star Trek character figurines, and numerous posters, including a full schematic drawing of the original Star Ship Enterprise.

The luncheon catering was set up by the Pray staff on serving tables along the back of the tent with additional tables set up for beverages. A relative and close friend was placed in charge of overseeing and serving the beverages to make sure that no one left the service and luncheon intoxicated. Banquet tables and chairs were set up around the perimeter of the tent to accommodate the guests for the luncheon after the memorial. Chairs were set theatre style in the central part of the tent facing the urn memorial for the service itself. These would later be moved during the sendoff to make room for additional luncheon tables and seating.

When all was set three members of the funeral home staff each donned Star Trek uniforms as requested. Joe E Pray dressed in the uniform of Capt. Jean Luc Picard, while the service Gentleman John and Mark dressed in First Officer uniforms. Each looked forward to carrying out their duties their role "in character" for the event.

Shortly before the family arrived, the cookies arrived. They were beautifully shaped and decorated as NASCAR Flags, NASCAR autos with Rob's favorite driver's livery on them, and of course Star Trek Communicator Badges. They were placed on high top cocktail tables near the catering tables for guests to admire before the service and enjoy after the service.

The Stage Is Set

As the family arrived, the looks on their faces were not the usual solemn expression of guests arriving at an ordinary memorial service. The faces of the family grew into wide smiles as they were greeted by the "Star Trek Crew" and as they gazed over the vignettes of Rob's items arranged to tell parts of his life story.

Joe E Pray presented the immediate family members with their own Star Trek communicator pins as a gift from the Pray Funeral Home to designate them as the "Commanders of the Memorial". Joe E felt the communicator badges were an appropriate symbol because the main body of the service was conducted by these close members of the family as they brought forward family and friends as speakers, and eulogists. Mr. Pray presented Rob's father with the communicator badge with the question, "May I present you with your communicator badge Captain Picard?" His response was "Thank you, Number One" in reference to the Captain Picard's first officer, William Riker, from the Star Trek series.

The looks on the faces of the guests as they arrived mirrored the smiles of the family. Many of them commented, "This is SO Rob!" At that point we knew that we had successfully transformed a time of sadness into a time of tearful joy and remembrance that would surround the family with support to help them through their pain of loss.

Make It So Number One

As the service began, Joe E. Pray, now in the role of Number One, welcomed the guests and explained the background of the Star Trek theme and shared the plan for a sendoff following the service and invited the guests to remain after the sendoff for the luncheon. As he completed his welcome, Mr. Pray turned to the father and quoted a variation of an often used line from the Star Trek series as the Starship Enterprise would prepare to embark, "Ready to engage Captain Picard?" To which the father replied "Make it so Number One."

And so the memorial service began.

"No Goodbyes."

The eulogists included friends, siblings, and ended with a heartfelt message from his father recalling numerous memories including NASCAR trips, and long telephone conversations that usually ended with a Star Trek quote. Other individuals were called forward to fill in the stories from other parts of Rob's life. The stories were not only for entertainment and recall, but they were meant to show what others learned from and about Rob, and how those lessons had helped them to grow in their own lives. It was an uplifting memorial that focused on the deceased's life, and what he meant to others, while talking about the various struggles he had faced.

Midway through the memorial Rob's father commented on his favorite Star Trek quote from the character Tasha Yar, "So you will understand when I say, 'Death is that state in which one exists only in the memory of others...which is why it is not an end.' No goodbyes. Just good memories."

To conclude the service, Rob's father again stepped forward with two final Star Trek Quotes. The quotes seemed to speak to the exact sentiment that the guests and family needed. Each one of them could be adapted to guidance that may help avoid some of the pitfalls that Rob and endured during his lifetime. The quotes also encouraged the guests to appreciate things in our everyday lives, and do the things we need and wish to do, rather than look back and think "I should have..."

The first quote came from the character Garth, "To all mankind – may we never find space so vast, planets so cold, heart and mind so empty that we cannot fill them with love and warmth."

And from Captain Jean Luc Picard, "Live now; make now always the most precious time. Now will never come again."

Final Farewell Sendoff

As the final music ended the urn bearers stepped forward and lifted the custom made carrier with the large memorial boulder urn and carried it through the assembly out of the canopy, past the fountain and down the stone walk to the waiting funeral coach. The family and the guests gathered around the coach as the bearers placed the carrier on the extended casket table. Rob's father led the group in a final commendation, the table withdrew, the door closed and the coach pulled away in a solemn manner while the onlookers gazed through the large glass windows of the coach at the boulder containing Rob's remains. Rob had been cremated soon after his death, so many had no chance to say goodbye....until this day.

The family and friends then returned to the canopy which had been quickly transformed for the luncheon with additional tables in the central theater area, the food uncovered and ready to serve, and the family "libation officer" ready to responsibly serve drinks.

And the stories continued. Smiles replaced tears and hugs brought support to all. The Pray Funeral Home staff could see the Healing of this family. There were approximately 200 witnesses, both in person

and over our secure webcast, to the transformation that was beginning in the lives of those who had suffered this loss.

Taking Rob Home

Later that evening, after the family and guests had returned to their homes, the memorial boulder urn was delivered to the family's home in the country along with flowers and Rob's memorabilia. Family and guests again gathered around the glass funeral coach and helped as "Rob's rock" as they had started calling it was lifted from the table of the coach, carried to the spot that had been prepared by the pond, removed from the custom built carrier, and placed on the ground with a clear view of the pond.

Again, Joe E Pray noticed smiles all around and a relaxed calm among the family and friends. Rob was back home. The message from Tara Yar quoted in the service was on full display within this family. 'Death is that state in which one exists only in the memory of others...which is why it is not an end.' The Healing from this day was evident.

Final thoughts on a Final Frontier

Pray Funeral Home's approach to Rob's Star Trek memorial is the very essence of what we try to create for every experience we create for families. We witnessed many similarities between the lessons from many Star Trek episodes and Rob's memorial service. The most common one was that our Pray Funeral Home mission is to help others through difficult situations just as the crew of the Starship Enterprise saved the galaxies over and over.

In the beginning of each episode of the original Star Trek series Captain James T. Kirk speaks a monologue "Space, the Final Frontier...To explore strange new worlds....To boldly go where no man has gone before." Pray Funeral Home, and all funeral service providers have a parallel mission. As we go forward into the NEW FRONTIER OF FUNERAL SERVICE, we need to EXPLORE strange new ways to help celebrate lives, to BOLDLY use our imagination and creativity in ways no one has done before.

We must illustrate the deceased's stories in daring ways, not to mock or entertain, but to create smiles as family and guests recall fond memories. This creates the warmth and support that family's need in time of grief. The warmth invokes the public to embrace and engage with the families in grief rather than withdraw because of discomfort. That support brings about Healing. Our creativity can and will help to bring about Healing from loss. Our ability to transform the lives of the bereaved is one of the many ways we can help our families and our communities. It is a very large and important responsibility for us to do all we can to make a difference for everyone around us. That is why we are here.

A Challenge To Our Colleagues

We share this example of creativity in funerals and memorials as an educational example for our colleagues to learn from, copy so they can innovate, and preserve the ability to help families who need to be Healed of the emotions following loss. Creative services help counter the growing belief that grief is something to be ignored, and that bereaved survivors are better off left alone.

My hope is that my colleagues in funeral service "Boldly Go into the ' New Frontier' of Funeral Service"

**Thomas McAfee Funeral Home, Downtown
Greenville, South Carolina**

Thomas McAfee Funeral Home, Northwest, Greenville, SC; Thomas McAfee Funeral Home, Southeast, Simpsonville, SC

Like most funeral homes, each location of Thomas McAfee Funeral Homes has large screen televisions in all visitation rooms and chapels. Initially, these units were primarily used to play video tributes during visitations and services. However, if a video was not selected or there was a delay in completing the video, the TVs were not turned on, which failed to create a warm and welcoming environment for first viewing or urn receiving ceremonies.

For a while, we created 'generic' scenes with the name, dates, and photo of the deceased displayed with a sunset, beach, mountain, or rainbow background. While this was generally well received by families, we knew we could and should do a better job in creating what came to be called "Chapel Pictures." Since the funeral director was already asking about hobbies, passions, and interests of the deceased, why not use this information to create a "wow" moment for families?

With established parameters and protocols in place, our wonderfully creative administrative staff took this challenge to heart and began producing truly remarkable images. With a picture descriptive of the life of the deceased, families often begin telling stories and sharing memories when they see it for the first time displayed on the TV screen.

When families began asking for a copy, a decision was quickly made to include a fullpage version in the Memorial Register Book, whether specifically requested or not. We also bought a supply of 5x7 frames at a discount store in which to present a copy when requested by a widow or widower.

Since a picture is worth a thousand words, the following examples will describe how meaningful this simple creation has become to our client families.