

Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home Hammond, Louisiana

Louisiana is known for many things...the rich culture, swamps and bayous, Mardi Gras, but probably most notably, the cuisine. Food and socializing have always played an important role in southern funerals and memorial services. At Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home, food is welcome and is usually available during visitations. In addition, the funeral home provides coffee, cappuccino, lemonade, water, and fresh baked chocolate chip cookies. A full meal is often served at the family's church or home, following the service. With a growing number of families not affiliated with a church or understandably not wanting to take on the tremendous the burden of hosting a meal, while grieving, we have seen a need for an all-inclusive location for hosting receptions. That is why we added Events by Thompson Funeral Home to our offerings.

Our Magnolia Rooms were designed to be multipurpose and accommodating to crowds of all sizes. We worked with several caterers to create a menu that meets a variety of needs. Funeral Director and owner, Martha Thompson, received extensive training and earned the Ultimate Academy Event and Wedding Planner Certification, Louisiana Smart Serve Certification, and Louisiana Food Safety Certification to ensure competency and success in this new endeavor. Families can choose to rent the room and use their own caterer or have the funeral home handle all the catering. The funeral home supplies all linens, centerpieces and other décor, and eating utensils. Families love the fact that these options provide a way for them to be hospitable and accommodating to their guests, while not having the added pressure of hosting guests at their homes or another location. They also appreciate the fact that they can add the expense to their life insurance assignment, rather than having to cover the costs immediately, like they would have to do elsewhere.

Our Ponchatoula location was the prototype for the idea. We had a large area of unused space that we remodeled into a beautiful reception/event room. The room made its debut just prior to the Covid Pandemic, in September of 2019. Unfortunately, we were not able to gain as much experience as we would have liked when the pandemic hit. Our newest and largest facility opened in Denham Springs LA March 2020, featuring the Magnolia Room, which consumes approximately 2000 square feet of the 15,000 square foot total footprint. Despite limitations, due to the pandemic, the banquet room was an immediate success. With restrictions lessening, the room has been in even higher demand. In fact, the events have been so successful and well received, that we are planning a large addition to our original facility in Hammond, Louisiana which will include our most expansive banquet rooms yet.

**Brunswick Memorial Home
East Brunswick, New Jersey**

"The Pre-Planning Bingo Tour"

Brunswick Memorial Home wanted to educate the senior communities on the importance of preplanning a funeral, to uncover misconceptions individuals may have about the process or the cost, and provide a resource for anyone who needs help. However, they also wanted to entertain, to make the process of talking about death easier, and to get a chance to interact. People tend to push off making funeral arrangements for many reasons. Thus, the idea of combining a beloved past time, BINGO, with an interactive discussion was created.

The funeral home contacted all the local departments on aging to see if they were interested. An overwhelming interest throughout several communities was discovered. East Brunswick Department of Aging, Spotswood Department of Aging, Sayreville Office on Aging, Monroe Office of Senior Services, and Milltown Senior Center were all open to the idea of the care team presenting and entertaining. Flyers for the events were created, distributed at the senior centers, and posted on Facebook. The date of each event was spread out through the months of April-June. The event was open to anyone that signed up through the senior center.

The funeral home purchased all the necessary equipment: Bingo cage/balls, Bingo cards, decorations, gift cards from local restaurants, etc. They purchased a mint plant and cookies with their logo on them for each person who participated. In addition, they had promotional items such as hand sanitizer and pens available for everyone. Preplanning brochures and business cards were also available for those interested.

The day of the event two to three directors went to the facility to present. In addition to the items mentioned above they brought tables if needed, table cloths, and a speaker. Two tables were set up in front of the room, one with the Bingo items and the other with all the information and giveaways to take home. The tables for the seniors were decorated. Depending on the Senior Center, water was either provided or given out at the end by the Care Team. The speaker was set up to play music as the guests walked in, typically Frank Sinatra was the artist of choice. Each individual was greeted and given a bead necklace to wear. Bingo cards were given out after everyone was seated.

The presentation began with an introduction of the Funeral Home. For the smaller crowds those in attendance then introduced themselves. Each presentation ranged from 10 people to 40 people in attendance. The Care Team then spoke about what preplanning was, the importance of planning ahead of time, and the benefits for them and their families. They explained who has the right of disposition and how they could appoint a Funeral Agent, mentioned Trust Funds, and tied in Having the Talk of a Life Time. Each one of their stories is important and should be shared.

After about ten minutes of presenting the floor was open up to questions. After questions, instructions for Bingo were given. For the most part everyone knew the rules, however, it had one caveat. Whomever won had to pull a card from the Have the Talk of a Life Time card deck. He/she had to answer one of the questions, and then the floor was open to anyone else who wanted to share. The Care Team also got involved and shared. The preface of the rest of the event was on having the talk. All winners were given gift cards and those who shared a lot about themselves were given one too.

The seniors and the staff at these senior centers had a great time. They were thankful we visited and took the time to talk them. They enjoyed having the conversation, answering the questions on the cards. In addition, they got valuable information about preplanning. Many of them did call to preplan. The Care Team enjoyed spending time with community, outside of the office. After each presentation the department invited the funeral home to come back. The Bingo tour was a huge success. Starting the conversation is half the battle, but once the Talk of a Life time begins everyone benefits.

**Capillas Señoriales Casa de Homenajes
Merida, Yucatan, Mexico**

**CEMETERY OF THE SEA IN MEXICO
TRIBUTE OF LIFE THAT GIVES LIFE**

Mexico, a country widely recognized for its cultural and biological wealth, among its attractions are the beaches located on the Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico. Over the years, actions have been implemented to curb the negative environmental impact on marine life that day after day is threatened by the growth of the human population in its surroundings, adding to this that they are one of the greatest tourist attractions for its showiness.

Among the most important marine biodiversity are the reefs, formations that are reservoirs of life and enormous beauty, with them Mexico is part of the second largest barrier reef in the world according to SEMARNAT, which makes it of great importance for biodiversity. underwater, being linked to other ecosystems, change the direction and speed of sea currents. On the other hand, they help in the establishment of other coastal ecosystems such as mangroves and seagrasses.

Likewise, the reefs provide various ecosystem services such as: erosion prevention, decrease in wave force, protection against tropical storms and hurricanes. habitat and breeding places, feeding and reproduction of many species of invertebrates and vertebrates.

They can be found mainly in three areas: The Pacific coast, the coasts of Veracruz and Campeche, and finally the eastern coast of Yucatan.

Chapels and Cemeteries of the North, with the commercial name "Capillas Señoriales, house of tributes" finds in the reefs the ideal opportunity to collaborate in the preservation of its existence and at the same time pay a special tribute to the loved ones who have departed through the creation of the memorial "pearl" added to an artificial reef that after the process will be submerged on the beaches of our so-called "cemeteries of the sea" located in the states of Yucatan and Campeche.

The Cemetery of the Sea keeps the idea of creating a space of artificial reefs with which the cycle of life is continued, generating in them the opportunity for marine species to reproduce and grow in this space, increasing the number of species that benefit to its conservation.

The cemeteries of the sea are located a few kilometers from our headquarters located in the same cities, taking care to always be present throughout the process of the immersion ceremony, this project includes 1,200 commemorative Reef Ball structures of three different sizes, which will be placed at a depth of 6 meters, 3 km from the headquarters of Capillas Señoriales Campeche, located on Avenida Resurgimiento number 114 Colonia Miramar next to the San Luis Battery.

In the city of Mérida, located 3 km from the Club Silcer beach, on the Chicxulub-Telchac Puerto highway.

These spaces have been carefully selected taking into account the conditions of temperature, marine currents and relief, ideal conditions for the development of coral reefs in the Gulf of Mexico. The warm temperature of the waters in the region allows the growth of various species of corals, increasing the biodiversity of marine species. In addition to being an innovative way of creating life, this being a unique concept in Mexico.

The material used for the manufacture of the reefs has a pH similar to that of sea water and its unique design allows the ocean currents to settle half of the weight on the bottom and these resist without any movement in the face of strong tropical storms without the need for anchoring.

The development of the project contemplates the following service options:

MEMORIAL PEARL

Process in which the ashes of the loved one are transformed into a precious Memorial Pearl, which will later be deposited inside a reef.

CORAL PEARL

The Perla Coral service includes paperwork and corresponding legal procedures, transfers, cremation chest or urn, 24-hour vigil, the cremation process, Perla Memorial ceremony, food for family members throughout the service, Reef, cremation pendant and collective submersion of Pearl Memorial. In addition to the dignified treatment of your loved one, the tribute of love and farewell ceremony is held, celebrating the legacy left by the loved one, through a videography that compiles the most beautiful moments shared with family and friends.

Like all our services, they were designed to adapt to the desire and need of our families, the meaning given to the sea in relation to transition and purity is well known, which awakens in numerous families the desire to remain in it even after to leave this world, hence the initiative to create the ideal and sustainable space that allows families to fulfill the wish of their loved one in a peaceful environment, accompanied by the ceremony to celebrate their life.

Señoriales chapels is honored to be a pioneer of this initiative that opens new opportunities for our work team, encourages a new challenge and opens our minds to a world of possibilities for the benefit of our families and the conservation of our natural resources.

Carmon Community Funeral Homes Windsor, Connecticut

The Carmon Funeral Home Disaster/Emergency Plan

Eleven years ago, we had a rare October snowstorm that blanketed the state of Connecticut with up to twenty inches of wet heavy snow. This heavy snow weighed down tree branches which had yet to shed leaves. Hundreds of streets were lined with downed trees and branches, leaving nearly 750,000 people without power. Our main location was without power for over five days; our other locations were without power for three to five days. We were without the capability to serve 75% of our annual call volume during this period. We could not embalm in our care center where all our preparation work is done. We could not hold sanitized and unembalmed bodies under controlled temperatures. We could not operate our crematory. We could not process our payroll and have our staff paid in a timely fashion. We learned many of our colleagues in other firms were having the same issues. How could we provide to our families who were in need if we didn't have power? How could our staff perform their jobs without power for days? This was detrimental to our firm and community as the lack of power was devastating. Carmon Funeral Homes created and implemented a disaster plan to handle power emergencies for our funeral homes.

The relationship with our major energy supplier, Eversource, was tenuous. Our governor and state legislature were delayed in their responses over the timely restoration of power. At this point, we decided to plan for our own operation to support our families and our staff. We purchased and installed a 150 KW Generator which operates on diesel fuel with a backup supply and guaranteed access in an emergency. This backup generator comes on automatically within seconds of losing power. This generator operates everything in our funeral home seamlessly for us including computers, outside lighting, the crematory, and controlled temperature storage for over one hundred and twenty five unembalmed bodies.

Over the course of the next few years, the installation of this backup generator proved to be instrumental in the operation of our business especially during extreme weather and extended power outages. Due to the uncertainty of weather in the northeast and the fact that our local branches serve a very high percentage of our call volume, we felt it was imperative to our business that our other branches have the same back up system as our main location. This would ensure that we many serve our families to the best of our abilities no matter the weather or power incidents. We used our 529 Tax credits to install additional generators in our Avon, Granby, Suffield, and South Windsor branches. The generator for our Vernon location will be complete in the later part of 2022. This effectively covers 98% of our annual call volume. We now have the ability to be fully operational, caring for the deceased and running the crematory. It also makes us operational within seconds of a power outage if there are services, visitations, and arrangements happening.

Installation of these branch generators proved to be an extenuating task. It was determined that the difference in sizes of each facility requires different fuel needs to maintain a constant source of power. We also needed a constant source of fuel as the amount of energy needed to operate generators of various sizes could not be supplied by just the regular energy source available at that branch for daily operators. At our main Windsor location, a thousand gallon diesel tank was needed along with a supplier guarantee for the diesel fuel to keep us covered during a prolonged power outage. The power generator for the main branch in Windsor is rated at 150 KW which is necessary to operate a twenty four thousand square foot facility plus all outdoor lighting and a crematory with three retorts. Fortunately, the other locations had access to natural gas or propane so the energy source to operate these generators were readily available. Additionally, the power equipment we purchased from Cummins Power Generation is inspected quarterly and tested weekly to be sure of continuous operation.

Below are the basic specifications for the equipment.

AVON- Cummins Power Generator Model 60N6 rated at 60 KW 120/208 Volt, 3 Phase operated on Natural Gas with Automatic Transfer switch for seamless power if outage occurs from Electric Supplier.

GRANBY- Cummins Power Generator Model C40N6 Rated at 40 KW 120/208 Volt, 3 Phase operated on Natural Gas with Automatic Transfer switch for seamless power if outage occurs from Electric Supplier.

SOUTH WINDSOR- Cummins Power Generator Model C60N6 Rated at 60 KW 120/208 Volt, 3 Phase operated on Propane Gas with Automatic Transfer switch for seamless power if outage occurs from Electric Supplier.

SUFFIELD- Cummins Power Generator Model C40N6 Rated at 40 KW 120/208 Volt, 3 Phase operated on Natural Gas with Automatic Transfer Switch for seamless power if outage occurs from Electric Supplier.

VERNON- Installed in 2022 Cummins Power Generator Model C60N6 rated at 60 KW 120/208 Volts, 3 Phase.

This innovative disaster plan we have developed between all our branches benefits our families, communities, staff, and at times even our colleagues. Planned services with no cancellations or postponements are crucial to providing timely and exemplary service. The continued operation of the crematory is also a large benefit to our Hindu and Buddhist families and others whose religion requires no delay regarding cremation. Internal operations such as embalming can be done without interruption. Our computer, graphic work, accounting, payroll, preneed, and operational systems continue without delay. Additionally, the branches which have attached apartments allow those staff members to have the benefits of electricity. Staff can have a place to shower, sleep, and work under normal operational conditions even if that does not exist at their homes.

Since these generator installations, we have lost power from an hour to several hours at these locations and they have been able to operate seamlessly for the benefit of those we serve. This investment in quality operations and service for the families who call us is priceless. The investment we made helps us deal with crisis and disaster when we are called upon to perform, no matter what the circumstances. What we learned during the COVID Pandemic, is that we cannot rely on municipal or state government for help in some emergency situations like mass power outages. The importance of electricity in our industry is crucial in the performance of funeral service and what is expected of us in caring for both the living and the deceased.

**Gorsline Runciman Funeral Homes
Lansing, Michigan**

Staff education and training has been a great focus for the 2021-2022 calendar years. It is our belief that a well educated staff benefits the families we serve and the community at large when they know all the resources available to them... not in the moment but throughout the year so they can speak to our strengths all year long. During the past year the Gorsline Runciman Funeral Homes hosted a Community Relations Expo for the members of its staff to create an awareness for all staff members, full-time and part-time, new and old alike, of the many ways in which our service excellence extends beyond the walls of the funeral home through direct sponsorship of community events and educational programs within our community and beyond. Additionally, it depicted visual representation of opportunities that exist for volunteerism with non-profit groups, service organizations and local interests. It had been discussed and realized that too often, new staff is recruited, hired and trained to meet day-to-day operational needs eliminating the importance of any focus on community involvement and the need to maintain funeral home presence within our communities through staff participation and engagement. And the same could be said for staff that had been employed with our firm for ages... they had become stale in their enthusiasm for community activity and unaware of just what opportunities existed. Staff often times spoke of the number of times they weren't aware that certain programs even existed much less were sponsored by our funeral homes and were available to join and promote. The Community Relations Expo was developed to provide a hands on overview of a full year of activity by our local funeral homes. Each booth/display included photos of actual events, handouts and flyers that provided promotion, results and opportunities to volunteer/participate and sign up opportunities for the coming year.

RATIONALE: An informed staff is an engaged staff

DETAILED DESCRIPTION: Above

BENEFITS TO FUNERAL HOME/STAFF: educated, informed staff, engaged to deliver a full year of community minded programming with individuals that are already connected and interested and primed to provide service excellence. No need to gather support and educate staff at the time of the event-have them talk about it all year long and engage support and interest from the front end!

BENEFITS TO FAMILIES AT LARGE: Families receive information from staff all year long directing them to programs and services that are pertinent to their well-being which include pre-need, at-need and aftercare services and features relationship building ideas and practices for churches, veteran organizations, grief support, police and fire, holiday programming, unique services provided by the funeral homes, etc.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: Our community partners were the recipients of these well developed, staff supported programs.

Granby's Funeral Service, Inc.
Bronx, New York

As funeral professions we are dedicated to a service which aids families in celebrating their loved ones life. Commonly we see people express their gratitude and appreciation for someone when they can no longer hear it. We all worked together through our most difficult time of our funeral profession (COVID-19) and came out stronger and closer. With this new frame of mind we decided to celebrate one another before it's too late. In family style fashion we decided to honor our staff members. Granby's has a large demand when it comes to servicing our community. Commonly families know the Funeral Directors as they are the most seen and heard from, however daily operations in the funeral home are truly a family style effort . Our funeral home family consists of our Administration office(which includes our receptionist), Funeral Aides, Hearse Drivers, and Maintenance Workers. They truly add value to our funeral home allowing us to serve our families better. Our Veteran's Day recognition was truly special, we had the honor of being able to acknowledge members from several of our staff departments for their service to our country. These members of the staff ranged from hearse drivers, a receptionist and even a few of our funeral directors. They all served during the following time periods within the Korean War, Vietnam War and Desert Storm representing each branch of the military except Coast Guard and Space Force. Adhering to COVID protocols we couldn't provide a breakfast spread to have all the staff eat together. We gifted each veteran with a mug and gift card to have a meal out on behalf of their Granby Family. Regarding our community, we choose to use a company who trusted us with their loved one at a time of loss to create all the personalized items, giving support to other local businesses. Showing a little gratitude for people who have risked their life to better our country should never be a far fetch. We wanted to let them know we were appreciative of their service to our nation and continued service to Granby's. When we lifted them in praise and posted pictures of them on our Facebook, we had an overwhelming amount of love. Mr. Samuel Granby (owner of Granby's Funeral Service Inc.) is a proud veteran, his work in funeral service started when he was in the military. He is a role model to us all for his perseverance in his service to our nation as well as his 58 years of service to our community through funeral directing.

**Heath Funeral Chapel & Crematory
Lakeland, Florida**

Rationale

As COVID continued to affect our funerals, we started looking for other ways to help serve our families with family members who could not attend funerals. We had already been able to live-stream from the funeral home, but families were also requesting live streaming from cemeteries. We knew some funeral homes who used facebook live but we wanted the video on our website and to have a more professional appearance than what facebook live offers. After a few months of research during the beginning of 2021, we were able to figure out and gather the equipment we need to allow families to watch funerals live from cemeteries that had the audio and video quality to watch the service from our website.

Detailed Description

Our livestream set-up at cemeteries used our current streaming service Vimeo. Vimeo is a subscription-based service that allows us to upload, edit and host videos. Our set-up at the cemetery includes a video camera, tripod, wireless microphone system, and a Teradek video streamer with a modem node that contains a sim card. The modem is the key piece that allows us to stream at a location without a wireless signal. The nodes that contain the modem are supplied by Teradek and have a stronger, more reliable signal than traditional hotspots. Typically, the staff member who is in charge of live streaming will arrive at the cemetery an hour before the service is to begin. The camera is placed on the tripod and an HDMI cable is connected to the camera and the Teradek video streamer. The decedent's name is typed into the video streamer which will be the title of the video when the streaming begins. The wireless microphone is then set-up on the podium and the microphone receiver plugs into the audio in input of the camera. We always have a test run before the service starts to make sure that the video and audio streaming are running optimally. Once we have everything ready, we start the video stream, copy the link that is on our vimeo hosting service and copy that link on the decedent's tribute wall for family and friends to view. We also have two backups of the graveside service running along with the livestream, recording to the hard drive on the camera itself and recording to a USB drive in case we ever have an interruption in the livestream.

Benefits to Funeral Home and Staff

The benefits the funeral home have come in additional revenue and additional graveside services, especially with cremations. In the past, we have not been needed at cemeteries when an urn was being interred. We have had families that would not have need us present at graveside services for inurnments requesting our presence so that out-of-town guests can watch the urn placed at the cemetery. The local cemetery has also recommended families to call us if they ask about streaming a service. This has connected us to families who didn't use us for a cremation but were in need of assistance at their graveside.

Benefits to Families and/or Community at Large

Our ability to livestream from cemeteries give families the ability to grieve and still be a part of the graveside services when they are unable to attend. Individuals who cannot watch if they are isolating with COVID or unable to travel can now watch the graveside live. Families also can watch the service any time after it has been filmed if they were unable to watch it live or they can download a MP4 of the service to keep permanently.

Holman-Howe Funeral Homes Lebanon, Missouri

Holman-Howe Funeral Home has established an annual study group designed to appeal to the fellow funeral home owner/manager who is not satisfied with the status quo or operating only in the "also-ran" category of funeral service. This past year underscored the high level of professional participants and program attendees that have been characteristic of the group's success. Ken Howe and his entire team act as hosts. Each year the group has grown and presented new opportunities. The uniqueness comes from the wide variation in age and demographics of the participants. Sixteen states are represented with ages from those in their twenties to those in their 80s! The common denominator is a desire to excel within our chosen profession. The goal is to inspire those who are already setting the bar to even greater heights of service.

Given the national challenge of the Coronavirus pandemic and the challenges faced by the casket industry, four leaders of the nation's casket manufacturers accepted an invitation to tell their companies story of how they managed operations during the national disaster. The President of Batesville Casket Company, Mathews Casket Division, Wilbert Casket and Private Label Caskets were invited to attend. All accepted and three of the four attended and participated in a round table discussion that highlighted the many challenges of production and delivery during the Pandemic. The President of Batesville first accepted the invitation but was advised to decline due to possible legal implications with such a large representative of the entire industry in one group discussion. Regardless, the others gave an unprecedented presentation of the many wins and challenges of not only the Pandemic but production challenges that each face with international shortages of supply and labor. The round table was moderated by group member Walker Posey, who posed questions to each participant. Richard Hightower, longtime funeral director from Georgia, stated that he had never witnessed such a representation of the casket industry in one location in his entire career.

The goal of the group meeting is to not only provide information by the leaders of the profession nationally but to establish a personal relationship within the group that encourages networking with like-minded professionals year round. A great deal of planning goes into each two day meeting, which includes arranging for speakers and identifying presenters on various topics. Also practical arrangements have to be considered such as meals and lodging. Presenters have included former United States Attorney General John Ashcroft, Missouri Governor Mike Parson and former Colorado Attorney General Cynthia Coffman. This past year Christine Pepper, Executive Director of the National Funeral Directors' Association was a keynote presenter and attended the entire group meeting. She spoke on the advantages of being a member of the National Funeral Directors' Association and the many complexities of managing the many facets of the organization.

The group attended a "Cars and Cigars" event at the Holman-Howe warehouse where vintage funeral cars owned by Holman-Howe and other funeral associates were displayed. Many cigars were enjoyed as well as discussion of the past and future of the funeral car industry. A report was given by Ellis Galyon, President of Ambulance and Coach Sales, on the current status of the professional car industry given manufacturing shortages which have made new professional car production very limited.

Chris Krueger, President of the Foresight Group presented on future opportunities and prognostications for the profession based on a composite of pre-arrangement insurance written by various insurance providers. Statistical data presented to the group provided stimulating conversation. Also a new report was shared in regards to funeral home evaluations for both purchasing and selling purposes. Those attending the group received a great deal of developing information before many others in the profession. The information shared allows group members not only to be informed but to get the information in a very timely manner.

The premise of the group is to encourage members to operate with the highest knowledge thus giving each the advantage in their respective markets. Members also enjoy share times where challenges of their unique operations are made known and the experience of other group members are explored in order to discern possibly solutions to problems.

The study group has become a major focus of the Holman-Howe team. The membership is and is open to anyone who makes contact with either another member or the host, Ken Howe.

J. García López Casa Prim
Mexico City, Mexico

FIRST FUNERAL SANCTUARY FOR PETS
Bye Bye Friend

New business unit of J. García López, focused on saying goodbye to pets through the experience of the Last Goodbye.

With the support of J. García López Casa Prim, Bye Bye Friend opens its doors, the first Funeral Sanctuary for pets, which combines infrastructure, professionalism and the experience of the Last Goodbye to close the life cycle of pets; who will become part of the Tree of Guardians, from where they will cross the rainbow bridge to take care of the family they were part of.

"We launched this new business unit for companion animals, with the aim of efficiently and professionally serving this market niche, which in the last five years has grown exponentially in Mexico. Adapting to the new emotional context that pets have as one more member of the family; offering the transparency of a service that goes beyond cremation"; said Oscar Padilla, CEO of J. García López.

Bye Bye Friend integrates advice and personalized attention 24/7, collection and transfers 356 days a year, shelter for up to 72 hours, exclusive carriage, accompaniment room, farewell room, individual cremation of pets up to 50 kilos, delivery of ashes, basic urn, engraved plaque and cremation certificate. The company recognizes the importance of this sector, since according to official data in the country there are 24.4 million households with pets, of which 18 million are dogs and 5 million cats. Concentrating the city of Mexico and the metropolitan area 3 million 250 thousand pets.

"We want to become a benchmark in pet farewell services, which is why we have projected the placement of 2,500 future plans for the first year of operation"; he pointed out. Manuel Ramírez, Director of Bye Bye Friend.

Bye Bye Friend operates Immediate Services and Future Farewell Plans that are 100% transferable and without expiration. Carriage designed for a great farewell with a special compartment for transportation (up to 30 km), a symbolic garden and a screen to project memorable moments. Coupled with a special Matthews cremation equipment for pets with thermal efficiency.

The Last Goodbye experience was developed and implemented with the advice of thanatologists specialized in companion animals, in order to help close the life cycle of pets and their connection with families; Through the Card of the Heart that is deposited in the Tree of the Guardians, emotions are released and they are helped to leave, so that they find a place full of mountains to play.

The Tree of the Guardians is based on the legend of Innana and the Huluppu tree, from the epic of Gilgamesh, who lived in the forest and wanted to honor the life of his wolfdog when he departed. Fable that today is part of the Bye Bye Friend experience and captured in the mural on the façade, designed by the illustrator Grecia Zamora and painted by the graffiti artist Erick Sandoval Hoffman.

"Currently pets are an important part of families, which is why we have been concerned with offering an innovative concept of Funeral Sanctuary for pets, with suitable equipment, trained personnel and the support of a large company"; Ramirez commented.

Bye Bye friend has also developed innovative additional services, being the case of:

- Guardian Canvas: Turning your pet's special photo into a canvas, mounted on a wooden frame.
- Soul Gem: Transforming your ashes into a beautiful diamond.
- Memories of a guardian: Making any garment that has belonged to the pet, into a cushion or stuffed animal, to always have it close.
- Footprint of life: The footprint they leave is indelible, that's why it is reflected in a special format, along with an emotional phrase next to their name.

Kemp Funeral Home and Cremation Services, LLC
Southfield, Michigan

PUBLIC RELATIONS, NOT ADVERTISING

The innovative program that Kemp Funeral Home embarked upon is a new marketing strategy. When you think about how consumers decide on which funeral home to select in their time of need or to make end of life decisions in a preneed, there are few concrete factors that consumers list. They want a physically appealing facility; they want warm and professional service, and they want a reasonable price. Frankly, most funeral homes meet that criterion. So, what is it that sets a funeral home apart from its competitors? We believe that it is intangibles like trust and empathy that make the difference. These difference makers cannot earnestly be demonstrated in a traditional advertisement.

While we have traditional marketing materials for those who want the basic facts of who we are, what we provide and in which price range, our public relations efforts, tv and radio spots target the intangible reasons why people choose funeral homes.

TRUST

Kemp Funeral Home demonstrates that client families can trust us by offering free services that help families make end of life decisions in advance before grief enters the decision-making process. We offer preneed seminars that can be joined in person or virtually. The seminars include the funeral arrangements process, legal considerations from an estate attorney and financial considerations from a

Financial Advisor

Another way we demonstrate transparency and therefore trust is by sending out our General Price List when potential clients are gathering information to choose a funeral home. We find that a written document of our costs is better than them asking several questions about the cost of the services they “think” they want. With the General Price List, they can answer what if and compare the cost of their selections.

Finally potential customers gain a level of trust when they see the community service we provide. Our tv and radio advertising describe the many cultures we serve, international shipping and our public relations efforts strive to show our sponsorship and involvement in scholarship, public policy and the local community.

EMPATHY

Perhaps the greatest way we display empathy is by recognizing how the family needs to remember their loved one. One important factor in that process is to rejoin the family during this loss. Kemp Funeral Home does this by offering to livestream services for free. During the height of COVID deaths in Michigan, funerals were limited to 10 people—many immediate families exceed 10 people. Kemp Funeral Home, like many other funeral homes, quickly found a way to livestream services so that other family members could join. During this time we began to notice funeral services change, and not just because of the pandemic. There were services where the clergy brought the eulogy virtually to the family and others. There was one service where the Zoom participants represented 3 different continents. It was then that we recognized that there are lots of reasons for people not to be able to travel to a funeral service, and it doesn't mean that they don't want to attend.

Recognizing that funerals are for the living and that the best service that we can provide is to bring families together, we permanently mounted cameras in each chapel with the ability to livestream the services. When the family is broken from the loss of a loved one, livestreaming can be the glue that brings the family together.

Memorial Vera Cruz Passo Fundo, Brazil

1. IMPLEMENTATION OF ECOLOGICAL LOCULES

In 2012, Memorial Vera Cruz needed new spaces, but the traditional method (brickwork) was expensive, labor-intensive, was very messy and, in interviews with clients, it was discovered that memories related to the noise of the burials made with brickwork were capable of provoking the worst memories of the moment in family members.

So, we started looking for new alternatives and we didn't find, in the market, something that corresponded to our needs. Thus, the search for a method that was economically efficient and also represented an improvement in the provision of service to the final consumer, resulted, after many years of testing, in a new technology developed by our Director Felipe Badotti, later called "Paso Al Cielo" and currently sold and installed in other projects in the south and northeast regions of Brazil.

This new method is ecological, recyclable, reduces implementation costs by up to 60%, fully complies with environmental regulations and also provides the family with a more peaceful and welcoming farewell. Below, we will detail the product and its benefits.

2. DETAILING THE PRODUCT

The vast majority of the methods available on the market use porous materials, which do not meet the requirements of Brazilian environmental agencies to ensure there is no leakage of liquids and gases. Therefore, the material chosen by Memorial Vera Cruz was polyethylene, which 100% prevents the passage of gases and liquids resulting from the decomposition of the body, and the loculus is hermetically closed with the lid, sealed with a thermal blower or extruder.

About the exchange of gases, the Brazilian environmental agency called CONAMA (National Council for the Environment) also requires that it occurs in the internal space of the loculus, to promote proper decomposition of the body and the correct disposal and treatment of waste. For this purpose, the lid has an activated carbon filter connected to a plastic pipe where the gases are purified and returned to the atmosphere in a completely clean way.

The installation location of this filter was also an innovation, allowing better use of space and facilitating access by the operational team, if necessary, unlike the options available on the market, which positioned their mechanisms at the back of the locule or on the side.

This polyethylene loculus is fitted into a modular, metallic structure, designed according to the needs of the entrepreneur, which can be easily installed both in ready-made cemeteries, as well as composing new projects.

Finally, the fronts are fixed in the chosen material such as porcelain, ceramic, granite, marble, cement board, polyethylene, polystyrene, fiber, etc. This choice depends on the budget and the target audience of the cemetery: if it is for popular use or high standard, for example. For the installation of the fronts, only screws and spacers are needed so that they are fixed in place. To do the removal, simple tools are needed, such as a spanner or ratchet wrench, and a single person can do the job himself.

Finally, the polyethylene locules do not need to be purchased all at once and can be purchased on demand because, with the fronts properly affixed to the metal structure, the space is visually complete.

3. USE OF OSSUARIES OF THE SAME METHOD

For better use of space, Felipe Badotti also developed ossuaries with the same system, for integrated use with the locules of the Paso Al Cielo method. This also changed the business model of Memorial Vera Cruz, which previously promoted the sale of perpetual burial spaces. Thus, since 2019, the company's

marketing focus has been on perpetual ossuaries, which include the burial of the body in an ecological loculus for a period of three years and subsequent exhumation and transfer of the bones to the ossuary chosen by the purchaser.

The maintenance of burial sites for temporary assignment means that the company needs to maintain only a minimum number of burial galleries, calculated by the average annual rate of deaths in the municipality times 3 years, which is the legal time for proceeding with the exhumation. In the rest of the space, ossuaries are placed, and they are invested in selling them as perpetual.

5. THE IMPACT OF THE METHOD ON THE CONSUMER

Finally, with the Paso Al Cielo method, the moment of farewell became more dignified, efficient, without noise or dirt, with all attention focused on the farewell tributes and honor to those who passed away, excluding the traumatic memory reported by the mourners of the cement noise.

This is because, in the presence of the family members, the operational team of the cemetery will just fit the polyethylene lid to the loculus and install the forehead, which takes less than five minutes, and leave the family with privacy and time for mutual comfort with the tomb of the recently buried loved one. After the friends and family leave, the operational team returns with the necessary tools and installs the loculus to the filter piping and proceeds with sealing the lid with the aid of a thermal blower or plastic extruder.

The act, which was previously marked by the residues and noises that refer to a work, now represents peace, silence and tranquility to those who go through the difficult task of burying a loved one.

Also, with the reduction of costs of implementing the system and the ease of operation, it is possible to invest more in better finishes for the room where the burial takes place. At Memorial Vera Cruz, for example, we were able, for the first time, to use wood flooring, Persian carpet and linen armchairs in the burial rooms, since the process does not result in dirt and, financially, it is feasible to invest in these details.

In short, implementing the new method allowed us to offer a more qualified experience to our user. The loss of a loved one is still sad. But now, the family member can feel more comfort and privacy when going through this occasion, which is already so painful in itself.

4. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE FUNCTIONALITY OF THE METHOD

From our personal experience and also from customers experiences, we have seen a number of advantages in using the method compared to what we used before. Some of them are highlighted below.

1. The cemetery is able to fully comply with the environmental standard, without leakage of gases and liquids, as it is made of non-porous and hermetically sealed material.
2. The treatment of these gases, liquids and solid waste is efficient, low cost, easy to maintain and within environmental standards.
3. Possibility of exhuming the body in three years due to the gas exchange that takes place inside the loculus, due to the renewal of bacteria responsible for the decomposition of the body, with aerobic and anaerobic bacteria working, which accelerates the process. Unlike the traditional method, which contains only the air outlet and only anaerobic bacteria work.
4. This exhumation does not have to be done on site. It is possible to remove the closed loculus and take it to a reserved room for exhumation.
5. The loculus can be changed without violating the grave, as it is hermetically closed.
6. The method is antifungal, antibacterial and resistant to necrochorume abrasion.
7. Made of non-flammable material.
8. The system can be replaced and recycled if another more efficient method emerges in the future.
9. Implementation is faster, easier, cleaner and residue-free as all installation products are ready to assemble on site. There is no concrete, molds, noise, dust, etc.

10. Closing the loculus is practical, efficient and intuitive - with one click, and does not require specialized labor.
11. It does not require painting or any type of maintenance, both on the locules and on the lids.
12. Polyethylene locules can be of any color, and the idea of football club colors or Universities, etc. can also be used.
13. It also allows many possibilities in terms of finishing materials for the locules.
14. Less traumatic consumer experience, with quick, easy and clean burial.
15. Greater use of space and possibility of renewing the business model.
16. Reduction of the initial installation cost by at least 60% less, which provides an improvement in cash flow and allows you to invest in more expensive finishes.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Paso Al Cielo method, with a patent requested by Memorial Vera Cruz, proved to be the most efficient and cheapest system. Since its foundation, in 2005, Memorial Vera Cruz has always been a reference in what it does, whether for the physical space and its architecture, for the service offered, or for the services it provides. Knowing that the Memorial was able to advance even further on this level due to a burial method created, tested and analyzed right here is something very significant.

And in addition to our positive perception, we also received recognition from the market, not only by the interest and acquisition by other cemeteries, but also for the highest award that exists in our country, from SINCEP (Union of Private Cemeteries and Crematories of Brazil) and ACEMBRA (Association of Cemeteries and Crematories of Brazil), which is connected to NFDA at USA. From this important institutions, two awards were received, one for the excellence and quality of Memorial Vera Cruz and the other for the innovation of this Paso Al Cielo technology.

**Mercer-Adams Funeral Service
Bethany, Oklahoma**

It all started when we realized we wanted to be more present in our community. As we considered the trends of society and culture, we wondered where we fit in. Where do people search for information on every topic? The answer was obvious: their convenient, accessible cell phones. As we began to research this topic, we learned that more than 72 percent of searches are associated with apps downloaded on phones using Google, Safari, YouTube and the like.

We believe that people find it easier to look at a previously downloaded app as opposed to having to find a bookmarked website using Safari or another search engine. It would be much more convenient to simply tap the Mercer-Adams app to find the tabs for Staff, Obituaries, Funeral Planning or Planning Ahead.

As you download the app, you are given the opportunity to create an account. An account would allow you to receive several types of notifications. The app is a basic shadow of our website. All obituaries, service times and visitation information are automatically updated. Having an account will allow you to receive updates either immediately, daily, weekly or even monthly. You could also be notified of certain other things, such as events in the community, or receive greetings from the funeral home on sporting events, holidays or educational achievements. We are interested in impacting and informing our local community in any way that we can. The process is called geo-fencing. We can identify a geographic location and its parameters, then send the informational notification.

Another option we have chosen is called "Mobile Marketplace" where we will be able to make sales from the app 24/7. Additionally, we have identified the materials needed in the area of grief and loss, and have partnered with the Center for Loss and Life Transition. We are able to make resources available for adult, teen and adolescent loss as well as for caregivers and funeral professionals.

We are also interested in adding a "Donations" tab to the options on our app. Many funeral homes have racks of donation envelopes for nonprofits, hospice organizations, Veterans groups, etc. We believe the app could be a good way to move those racks out of sight and make the process easier for the giver. Still another option is to be able to incorporate custom forms with our app. Those could include death certificate information, claim forms, military paperwork, flag applications, etc. For our clients to be able to submit that type of paperwork through our app would be a win-win for them as well as our staff. The dreams we have for our app are exciting. We are looking forward to helping our community interact with us on a phone they already have in their hand. The future is bright for our new tool.

**Miller-Carlin Funeral Homes
Saint Cloud, Minnesota**

A Funeral Home who strives to be involved in their community by using Innovative Programs to Improve their Funeral Services through customizing memorial folders for families.

Communication is the cornerstone on any relationship or business. As a funeral director, it is very important to be able to work with people of various backgrounds in a very emotional setting to create a meaningful funeral or memorial service. After death, families and friends gather to mourn. There is often some type of ceremony or ritual that the family decides as well as final disposition. There are specific tasks that are commonly done while directing a funeral: arranging with families, connecting with officiants, finding and offering venues, ordering vaults, ordering flowers, and contacting various organizations amongst communities, as well as scheduling staff for services. Much of the time, these tasks are left to the funeral director to ensure they are taken care of. More often in the recent year services require a more personalized touch and therefore a high level of communication. A funeral service for someone who has passed away is a very crucial moment for people to get closure. To help families and friends get closure, Miller-Carlin Funeral Homes is one of the only funeral homes in central Minnesota who offers standard memorial folders and Custom Memorial Folder as well as Family Packs. These memorial folders are created carefully by our staff from scratch. These memorial folders are created and printed very custom and personalized to the deceased. These custom Memorial folders and family packs are themed to really express the fruits of one's life. These folders are themed to fit the deceased hobbies, religious beliefs, cherished memories and even what they loved most. These Memorial folders can be customized to the limits of one's imagination. For veterans we can have their branch, American flag, or an eagle in the background. For someone who loved fishing and hiking the memorial folder and family pack can have a fishing and hiking theme. These custom memorial folders can also be fitted to have a joined funeral or memorial service within: both spouses pictures, service date, poem/prayer or verse, service information, and obituary. These memorial folders are always making families happy because it really brings closure. Its something they can look back at and relive memories by seeing something that was unique and personal to the deceased. The primary goal of the program was to give families a chance to personalize the funeral/ memorial service to the deceased. The funeral home wanted to provide a service for families to make a funeral special and memorable instead of a grim and poignant time, we wanted the funeral to bring light, closure and allow family and friends to mourn and share memories. There are a few examples of custom memorial folders that we have done, for some families instead of a poem or verse, they ask for crosswords or sudoku puzzles. Families love that they can have memorial folders that truly embellish their loved one and what made them who they are. These memorial folders benefit the the funeral home and their staff, because the community see the effort and hard work they put into it showing that we truly care about them and their loved one who passed away.

Milward Funeral Directors Lexington, Kentucky

The services that are provided by Milward Funeral Directors comes in various packages and at different times during a person's life. In other words, Milward is devoted to assisting others all the time and is willing to go to whatever lengths to find solutions to any obstacle or challenge they might come across their desk. Ultimately, Milward is always striving to provide services that help families in their community even if it is not specifically related to funeral service.

When Rob Milward received a phone call from Dr. Nash Laungani in August of 2021 inquiring about needing a carriage to use for his September 2021 wedding, Rob Milward was ready to help. Dr. Laungani explained that he had promised his fiancé that he would find a carriage to transport the happy couple from the wedding to the reception. Unfortunately, after much research he had not yet found a carriage anywhere in the Commonwealth of Kentucky after many phone calls.

Milward Funeral Directors has been in business since 1825 during the days of carriages and horse-drawn hearses. For many years, the Milward Family carriage had been displayed in the Kentucky Horse Park Museum, but in recent years been taken out of the museum. The carriage had even been recently repaired so it could be operable. Rob informed Dr. Laungani that he would be more than happy to loan him the carriage at no charge; however, before he could commit to helping Dr. Lanugani fulfill his promise, Rob needed to find horses and a driver. With multiple sources, Rob made a number of phone calls and was able to secure horses and a driver.

The effort to provide Dr. Laungani with a fairytail wedding for his bride was very important to Rob Milward. His history with the family goes back to the when Dr. Laungani was just a young boy. Dr. Laungani's father, Andy, owned a suit store where Rob ordered custom suits. After getting to know him, he was regularly invited over to enjoy an Indian meal with the family. Their friendship grew over the years. Sadly, one year prior to the Dr. Laungani's wedding, his father died. Rob was glad he had had some time to be with Andy prior to his death and during that time he had made a promise to make sure his funeral was memorable for the family. He also promised to make sure Andy's family would be alright. Rob did just that, but in a way he had not foreseen during his conversation with Dr. Laungani's father.

Making sure families receive a dignified funeral service is Milward Funeral Directors primary focus. However, caring for friends, family and the community as a whole goes beyond providing funeral services. Milward is committed to whatever it takes to support its community.

Morada da Paz
Parnamirim, Brazil

Morada da Paz launches 360° funeral webcasting with 4K quality

Operating in the northeast of Brazil, in the states of Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba and Pernambuco, the Morada da Paz cemetery, crematorium and funeral home was a pioneer in the country by implementing, in 2001, the funeral webcasting service.

With the covid-19 pandemic, drastic changes were imposed, such as social distancing, and the funeral business was one of those that had to adapt to the serious health crisis. In addition to the high demand for funeral services, it became mandatory to reinvent ways that would allow family and friends to pay their respects and make themselves present, even if at a distance.

In this new scenario, we observed an increasing adherence of bereaved families with technology already available for broadcasting of wakes. From March 2020 to February 2021, 1890 funerals were streamed, while in the period from March 2021 to February 2022, this number grew to 2388 transmissions, resulting in an increase of over 26% compared to the previous period.

We pushed forward and asked ourselves: "if webcasting is now the only option for many people, how can we make it better?" We sought new angles, enabled online visitors to leave messages which were displayed on a screen for those who were present, but we knew it was not enough. The solution finally came through a special camera that makes it possible to broadcast, live, 360° videos, with 4K quality.

Until then, we used a static camera, with a fixed focus, in which the user was not able to navigate through the space, which ended up limiting the experience of friends and family who could not be present. Now, with the new technology, the service evolves considerably, since, in addition to the significant improvement of the resolution of the video, the users will be able to observe all the details of the ceremony.

The main goal is to provide a total immersion in the wakes for those who are physically far away. Friends and family will be able to walk through the space of the funeral room, having the option of navigating the video that will be transmitted using their fingers, on touch-sensitive screens such as cell phones and tablets, a mouse on the desktop or using a virtual reality glasses to have an even more immersive experience in the foreground.

It is possible to follow who is present at the ceremony, see details of the space, such as the messages attached to the wreaths, watch the religious celebration and follow in great detail all the tributes that will be carried out during the wake.

**Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre
Madison, Indiana**

Around midnight June 18, 2021, torrential rainfall - four inches in 90 minutes, gushing water from towering hillsides and raging currents from a nearby creek out of banks maimed the serenity of St. Joseph's Cemetery. In the darkness of chaos, emergency crews had to evacuate nearby residents by boat and shut down streets and bridges. Sizeable trees and vehicle remnants floated down Crooked Creek to block drain arteries. Over 1,000 homes lost electrical power. When dawn broke and the muddy water of tributaries had already ebbed into the Ohio River which flanks our small town, widespread destruction quelled the morning sun. Historic St. Joseph's Cemetery too had fallen victim to the tempest. Upon hearing the news, Rodney Nay, president/owner of Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre, immediately went to the site. The Centre had served many families whose members rest there, plus as a funeral director and life-long resident of Jefferson County he felt a personal stewardship to lend assistance if possible. In time, more rain would dissolve and wash away the inches of caked mud and people could remove the debris. But 25 stones, both fairly new and historic old, needed much more. The aquatic force had knocked off tops/dies as well as numerous floral vases. For some of the stones, the deceased no longer had surviving family in the area. For all, hardly any family had the mechanical means to lift 250-pound dies nor the expertise to do the repairs. And for every stone, the cost to fix could be fairly sizeable, \$150 or more. With the company's side monument business and professional connection with a local excavating firm, Nay immediately sensed a solution with pocket expense to remedy the issue. A day's labor entailing a few employees from Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre and Ohio Valley Excavating Service, a couple of buckets of compound to reseal stones and a few gallons of diesel fuel to power the excavator could rectify the devastation. As the ground dried out and debris got removed, Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre planned a day of action with the approval of the St. Joseph's Board of Directors. By sunset on July 3, 2021, Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre and Ohio Valley Excavating had returned the landscape to its June 17 status. Twenty-four damaged stones had been reset, repaired and cleaned. Only one stone required additional attention, a new base. Besides the structural transformation, names and graphic etchings that earlier had been marred with thick mud glistened once again. In less than eight hours, St. Joseph's Cemetery, established in 1867, had regained its tranquility and aura of dignity. Whether personal monuments had been damaged or not, the cemetery families felt inner peace. The beauty and spirit of a cemetery stretches corner to corner, not just the perimeter of a few plots. And Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre holds the same sentiment. All it took to restore the sacred ground were a few hours of labor, two buckets of compound and some diesel fuel, along with the more important influences of commitment to community, pride in profession, respect for the deceased and compassion for the families we serve.

Morrissett Funeral & Cremation Service
North Chesterfield, Virginia

Changing of the Guard

Our profession has seen so many changes over the last 47 years that I have been working in this field. I have watched corporations come thru and devour firms for their market share and I have seen independent funeral homes try to pass down their business to the "next generation" only to realize their heart wasn't into the profession like previous generations were. I have had friends die unexpectedly with now transition plan in place at all. You would think that someone working around death everyday would have their affairs in order.

So about 5 years ago I started my transition into retirement. I knew that I did not want to sell my funeral home to a corporation or consolidator, so I started to weigh my options. I did have a couple other independent funeral homes in my market that were interested in our firm. So, that became a backup plan. Because I was a first-generation funeral director that was given a chance to own a well-established business, I always felt that it was only right that I passed that opportunity on to someone else. I looked within my own staff and around the state for individuals that I felt had the same passion and vision for the future of the funeral profession. I was lucky enough to find a young lady that met all my expectations and more. After recruiting her down to central Virginia and working alongside of her, I quickly realized that I found the right person.

During 2021, we began negotiating the terms of the sale and came to an agreement that fit us both. So as of December 31, 2021, Margaret Edie became the sole owner Morrissett Funeral & Cremation Service and I became a trusted advisor, with NO stress.

In closing I would just say to my fellow owners, pre-plan. (pun intended). Don't wait until you are too old to enjoy your freedom and don't feel that there is not someone that will continue your vision.

Respectfully Yours,
Laurence F. "Larry" Spiaggi, CFSP, CCO, CPC

Over this last year, Morrissett has had a big change. This year, I am writing the essay, when in the past years of winning the Pursuit of Excellence that job belonged to Larry Spiaggi. January 1, 2022, the ownership transitioned from Larry Spiaggi to me, Margaret Edie. Larry and his wife Sue have dedicated their life to creating this unique and amazing funeral home and now it is my responsibility to continue their vision.

In reviewing the requirements for this essay, "describe an innovative program, service or activity executed by your funeral home". I feel that this change in ownership is that new program. This firm was established in 1870 and has always been independently owned and operated by a man. I am a woman, under the age of 40. I have a different view on life and how things can come together for the future generations that come through our doors, either as a rising mortuary student or a family member that has never experienced a death.

Every year since 2013, Larry and Sue have worked hard to win the Pursuit of Excellence and are proud to apply for the 10th straight year. Those 10 years have been full of community events and outreach, unique funeral services, embracing the Life Celebration brand, comfort therapy dogs, becoming Certified Celebrants, an Aftercare Program, being involved in state and national associations, and so much more. Easy to say, BIG shoes to fill. Since January, I have stepped in and embraced that responsibility. I have continued with the community events and sponsorships of the past. Our intern, Gabby and one of our new part-time employees completed the Certified Celebrant program and have already contributed to many services for our community. After 6 years, the funeral home became reinvolved with Relay for Life and the staff raised \$1,835 for the American Red Cross. Then in April of this year, we introduced Grace, our newest future Comfort Therapy Dog, and she leaves July 5 for a 4-week training program.

In addition to the programs of the past, we have implemented a few new activities to help the staff to focus on their wellbeing. The last two years have been hard on myself and the staff, as selfcare has not been our focus. Larry attended the NFDA International Conference & Expo in October 2021, and he returned with the self-care handbook, Caring for Families & Caring for Yourself. He made sure each of our directors had a copy. As a group, we took the time to go over the handbook and implemented different self-care fundamentals into our everyday lives. Over time, I noticed that some of us were falling back into the same routine, so I decided to implement a new program to help keep us going in the right direction for making a better us. Once a week, we plan for an afternoon when there isn't a service in our chapel to have a team workout. Utilizing our projectors, we have an hour of trainer led workouts that I create using one of my workout apps. In addition to those workouts, we will also meet at the local county trail by our health department and take a walk. During those walks, we discuss anything and everything that is NOT work related. We find it is a great way to get to know each other on a different level. Sharon Pittman states "Our team workouts have brought me so much joy. Margaret has created and led many fun and energetic workouts that are appropriate for any person of any skill and abilities. The workouts personally provide me with some much-needed energy and socialization with my fellow work peers. I enjoy getting to exercise at a place, and with people, I am comfortable with. It just makes staying healthy so much easier and convenient when it is right there at your fingertips "

Evelyn Contreras states "Personal I enjoy that where I work, we have built a team that encourage each to workout. Editing and creating print stationary, I'm most of the time sitting at my desk so the days that we have our workouts I look forward to moving and getting "pumped up" as Arnold Schwarzenegger would say. I just appreciate that where I work at, we have created and made time to encourage movement and physical activity to help with health and positive habits. Most places would not care enough to do something like this."

I am extremely proud of my staff and the work they HAVE and WILL accomplish in the year ahead. We will continue to set goals and support each other to become that better version of ourselves.

Being part of the Pursuit of Excellence has brought so much to this funeral home by helping the staff and the community we serve. Even though we only must meet 4 criteria in each category, we strive to get as many as we can because we know all those criteria make for a better funeral home. Being involved with different areas in the community helps the staff find their own special spot to help and allows them the opportunity to pursuit new ideas for the funeral home and community.

Kind Regards,
Margaret Edie

Nie Family Funeral Home & Cremation Service, Inc. Ann Arbor, Michigan

As many of us already know, there is a national shortage of licensed funeral directors. This deficit is not going away anytime soon as many licensees across the country plan to retire in the next few years. In addition to this shortage, our profession is having difficulty in finding quality workforce and retaining them long term. This affected our funeral home as we were among many firms that had been dealing with staffing shortages. As we began to recognize this challenge, our funeral home team came up with some ideas that went beyond the typical funeral home and helped to change the culture of our workspace.

Our management team decided that it was time to open the conversation to the employees since they're the ones largely affected by the staffing shortage and retention issues. As we began to have these conversations, we realized that it was best done in a neutral, comfortable environment as not everyone was accustomed to business conversations. So, we'd get together in one of the funeral home chapels and sprawl out on the sofas to begin conversations as a work team versus management/employees.

During these conversations, we were able to be honest, explore options and ideas, and get creative with potential solutions on creating a workforce that is desirable to quality funeral directors and engaging enough to maintain longevity in employment. Together we brainstormed different ideas on why funeral home burnout rates were so high and came to the conclusion that there is no focus on self care. So we began to look more into health and wellness benefit packages that are more than providing good health insurance. We looked at other larger corporations like Google and Quicken Loans that put a lot of attention into wellness and used them to draw inspiration. We also realized that while it would be easier to fill the position with the first person that applied, we should consider each applicant thoughtfully and introduce them to the whole staff to help make the decision if they'd be a good fit.

The Nie Wellness Plan included:

We adjusted our PTO plan for employees. Previously there was no paid sick time and only ten PTO days each year until you were with the company for ten years. We now offer three sick PTO days and give five additional PTO days to employees once they have been with the company for five years. This was a very easy idea to put into place that meant a lot to the team. You don't have to use the precious PTO that you earn for sick leave.

We celebrate yearly work anniversaries with a company provided lunch and have a small birthday celebration for team members with lunch and a small gift. This helps team members know that their presence is valued and appreciated.

In addition to the health, vision, and dental plan we already provide we felt it was necessary to focus on self care, not just health care. We now provide our employees with a monthly massage at a local masseuse. Full-time team members are eligible to schedule and enjoy a one-hour massage so that they can care for their mind and body. We recognize that our profession is already very grueling both mentally and physically so we want to ensure our team knows that we understand and appreciate what they do for the community we serve.

And, finally, we honestly believe in the idea of a "work family" as we often spend more hours in a day with one another than at home with family. We have created special Nie Evenings that focus on coming together as a team. The funeral home owner, Dutch Nie, will often cook for everyone at the funeral home and then host a karaoke or movie night in one of the funeral home chapels for staff, their spouses and/or partners, and family. It is always a special evening full of laughter, silliness, and connection.

All of these out of the box ideas helped reshape a staff of coworkers that often felt overlooked and stressed into a support team that will do anything to look out for one another. We were shocked at how this translated into our business. We immediately saw that funeral services were running more smoothly with less errors, staff was more connected and committed to the community, and Client Family Survey results soared. Since these changes have been established, we now have other industry professionals seeking employment with our team as they have heard of our positive work environment.

It's truly incredible how much change you can evoke within a team of passionate individuals when you listen to their needs, look for solutions, and think outside of the box.

Olson Funeral Home & Cremation Service Sheboygan, Wisconsin

The Olson Funeral Home & Cremation Service is always looking for new technology to assist the families we serve during their time of need. We have always prided ourselves on being on the cutting edge of technology and services. For the past 8 years, we have implemented and use the Electronic Guest Registry. This has worked out beautifully for the funeral home and the families we serve. Not only does it give clear, precise information, but that information is then printed out legibly for the families in the register book. We also print out mailing address labels for the family as well as photograph the flowers and who they were from. This all gets printed in the register book.

This has worked not only for the families, but for our funeral home staff as well. Our staff man the tablets at the visitations and are actively engaging with the guests to enter them into the register. As we know, this does not always happen with a book and pen on a register stand. We encourage them to give us their complete addresses so that we may print address labels for the families to send out thank you notes. Because of this, we have seen an increase in the number of entries in the register books.

This year, we have implemented a virtual sign in utilizing a QR code. During COVID-19 restrictions, it became very difficult for people to engage. Many were afraid to pick up a pen that someone else had used or were afraid to get too close to our staff for us to enter their information. We now have signs and tent cards placed around the funeral home which invite people to enter their own information into the register book using only their cell phones. This can also be places on service folders and online so that people can sign in virtually even if they were not able to attend in person which again gives more people an opportunity to express their condolences.

Since we starting using the QR codes, we have gotten so many compliments on just how easy it is to use. Our staff of course is still manning the tablets to assist those who do not wish to use the codes or perhaps aren't comfortable using new technology.

Our families absolutely love the end result which gives them a clearly printed guest list, mailing address labels and pictures of all of their flowers readily available so they know who to thank for sending arrangements. This has been nothing but a win win situation for our funeral home and the families that we serve.

**Paradise Memorial
Milwaukee, Wisconsin**

For many years, burnout has been recognized as an occupational hazard for various people-oriented professions, such as human services, education, and health care. The therapeutic or service relationships that such providers develop with recipients require an ongoing and intense level of personal, emotional contact. Although such relationships can be rewarding and engaging, they can also be quite stressful.

As funeral professionals, we experience burnout on a regular basis. While we continue to navigate and advance through life post pandemic (sort of), we continue to see funeral service professionals experience high levels of stress. The results of this pandemic could sometimes mean working countless hours each day. The reality is that we are constantly taking a physical and emotional toll on our bodies and minds daily. In December of 2021, we had a colleague at another local funeral home take her own life. It makes me wonder, are we valuing our employees? Is the death care industry vulnerable?

This experience has made the owners of Paradise Memorial Funeral and Cremation Services address a serious matter in our industry, burnout, and stress. At a summit last year, I witnessed a keynote speaker ask the funeral directors in the room, who do we talk to? The reality is that many professionals have an outlet to discuss the perils of the job. For example, police officers have therapist to talk to when they experience post-traumatic stress. The same applies to doctors, nurses, teachers and even clergy, however; there is nothing in place for funeral professionals.

After dealing with that mother who lost her six-year-old son to cancer, who do we talk to? After consoling a sister who lost her twin brother, who do we talk to? As we think about our profession, the reality is that we have no one to talk to. It is simply expected that we can handle it.

As a result of this experience, our firm decided to provide regular counseling to our entire staff. Although, some firms already provide this service, we offer it each month at no cost to the staff. We have a licensed therapist who talks to the staff on Tuesday mornings once per month. The sessions are on an individual basis and the staff is allowed to let it all out.

This action has not only provided a much-needed outlet for our staff but has also allowed the staff to be renewed to properly service the next set of families. It's almost like a battery recharge. We have found that our employees are less stressed and more patient with families because of these sessions.

The additional benefits of these actions are fewer sick days being taken, fewer call ins, less error and most importantly, happier families. After all, our purpose is to service families. Our plan is to continue to provide this free service to our staff and any new staff as they become part of the team. We have learned that it is ok to not be ok. Hopefully the NFDA and other Funeral Associations will encourage the same approach to strengthen our industry. After all, if our own associations don't value us, who will?

**Señoriales Corporación de Servicio
Guatemala, Guatemala**

A FRIEND WHO LEAVES A MARK

Florence Nightingale, pioneer of modern nursing, wrote: That a domestic animal is often an excellent companion for the sick.

In Señoriales Service Corporation, we are always working on how to support our families and innovate in the provision of the service and thus be able to cover their emotional needs, that is why the accompaniment of Assistance Dogs is incorporated into the Grief Management process emotional. Being pioneers in the management of this technique in Guatemala, which allows people who are experiencing the process of losing a loved one, to receive the love and company of our dogs, who calm and distract them with their presence, helping them channel your emotions in a better way.

This project begins with the selection of 5 Golden Retriever dogs, which were chosen taking into consideration these characteristics:

- Character and temperament
- Sensitivity levels
- Motivation
- Physical appearance
- Ability to develop tasks

These dogs were trained to be part of a therapeutic team, whose goal is to achieve specific goals, help cope with or control any emotional disorder. It has been proven that the participation of a dog in this type of therapy helps people improve their physical, mental and emotional level.

Historically we can cite the Father of Psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, who also carried out activities helped by dogs and who considered that they possess a special sense, to accurately judge the character of a person; stating that the presence of the dog seemed to have a calming influence on the patients.

Animal Assisted Therapy has gained wide acceptance, as dozens of studies have been carried out, which have confirmed the amazing impact of animal-human relationships.

People who live with pets have been found to lower their blood pressure; relieve feelings of sadness and depression; adding that they also manage to reduce the feeling of loneliness

Children who live with pets adjust better to the reality of a serious illness and/or the death of a parent.

Our first team of assistance dogs, in addition to being cheerful, positive and obedient, have a characteristic that makes them shine and that contributes to making their work in support of families unique.

The first team of assistance dogs choose their host, not the other way around; this was developed in a special way, in a group activity; in which each of them individually chose who would accompany them in their training and development process; thus creating a genuine bond of trust and affection

Our first team of emotional support dogs is made up of:

Maggie: She is distinguished by her tenderness and patience.

Max: He is sensitive and flirtatious.

Milo: He is intelligent and noble.

Molly: She likes to support people and is playful,

Moca: She is spontaneous and friendly

They have been carefully trained and with specific techniques, always taking care of their physical and mental health.

Well, during the accompaniment process they visit the chapels and/or locations in the cemetery, sharing with the attendees, individually selecting the person who needs their support and thus allowing them to release part of the emotions that invade them in that moment and channel them in a better way.

These dogs have created unique experiences in this time, in which they have lived with families when they see them arrive, change their posture, create emotional moments and allow them to exteriorize with a hug, caresses or just stay by their side, everything that they have not could say or express by the loss.

Aware of the need to be able to support more families, there is already a Second Team of Dogs, these are "Golden Whites", with similar characteristics, with great qualities and who are in the process of training and learning, in order to work with the families.

This new team is made up of:

Otto, Olinka, Olivia, Nova and Olafo.

Our assistance dogs have supported many people and entire families in their loss process, generating feelings of calm and love towards them, which distracts and reassures

There are many experiences and moments of satisfaction that the team has left in them and every day they are requested in our facilities during the service process, as families feel calm and relax; allowing them to experience that feeling of loss in another way through the company of these 4-legged angels.

Each one of them has managed to touch families in a different way, they have created unique links with them, who when they arrive at the cemetery for a special date or just to flower their loved one, ask for that 4-legged angel, since they left their mark on those hearts during the service.

It is incredible to see how the atmosphere and attitude of families change when we take them to the chapel or to the location where their Loved One is, many times there are children accompanying the service, so we plan a unique experience for them, bringing them a detail to entertain them, a book to paint with crayons, which is delivered by our 4-legged Coordinator, this immediately has a positive effect on the whole family, as everyone turns to touch the dog, who always immediately identifies who is most emotionally in need is in that moment of a hug or a caress.

Then begins a family moment in which everyone relaxes, adopting a more comfortable position not only on the sofas but even on the floor, at the dog's level, in which they hug and caress it, crying or laughing, often remembering being loved, expressing through caresses everything they couldn't tell him.

We had a service of a young grandmother, very dear, who was always accompanied by her children and grandchildren, there were several children in the chapel, to whom around noon we brought boxes of McDonald's hamburgers and some coloring books, which were given to them for Molly and Max, the children and parents could not believe that 2 dogs had arrived at the chapel, they were happy with them, because it was a joy in a moment of so much pain.

There are many anecdotes that we have of families, who have been grateful for the accompaniment of our 4-legged love coordinators

Well, there have been very serious and reserved family members, with whom it has been difficult to find out more about who their loved one was, but when our 4-legged coordinators arrive, they immediately lower their guard and open up, showing that human side that they were not allowed to show.

This is the case of one of the brothers of our loved one, who remained very serious during the first hours of the service and who did not show his feelings, but when Max arrived at the chapel, he immediately threw himself on the ground and began to cry, telling the dog that his brother would have liked very much

to meet him because he was a very handsome dog and they had had 2 Golden dogs when they were children whom they had loved very much. Max hugged him and kissed the top of his head, in response to his caresses.

On another occasion during a service in Capillas Señoriales we were told that our beloved one liked dogs, but that was all they told us; We took Molly to accompany them and when we arrived at the chapels all the attendees were surprised, because when they were told that she was Molly, the mother of the loved one could not hold back her tears and between sighs she commented that the dog was a gift, because his son wanted it that way, he told us that they had given him a Golden dog and very similar for many years that was also called Molly, it was a unique and special moment.

In one of our services at Los Parques Cemetery, one of the daughters of our loved one, remained very quiet and aloof, but always very aware of Maggie who was present, at the end of the service the coordinator said goodbye and began to walk with Maggie to the offices; when all of a sudden she (the daughter of our loved one) told her if she could pet Maggie, so she bent down and hugged Maggie very hard crying and told her thank you mom for everything you did for me, staying like that for a long time weather.

She comes every week to flower her mom and always asks for Maggie or one of our 4-legged coordinators, as she likes to be accompanied during her visit.

There are many experiences that our 4-legged coordinators have had and every day they work very hard to change the lives of these families, with a caress and a hug.

And not only do they change the lives of the families we support, they have also changed the lives of their hosts, as when they come home, they take off their work uniforms and become loving companions of the family.