



Pursuit of Excellence

2026 Innovative Ideas Essays

Community Outreach: Whole Community Outreach

Chapel Lawn Funeral Home and Memorial Gardens, Crown Point, Indiana

Kuiper Funeral Home, Highland, Indiana

To our way of thinking, there isn't much that compares with a warm hug from a cuddly Teddy Bear. Especially when it includes the opportunity to say "thank you" on 9/11's National Day of Service and Remembrance to first responders and armed services personnel. That's why, when the team at Chapel Lawn and Kuiper Funeral Homes was asked if we wanted to participate in Operation Gratitude's National Day of Service, we had a group of eager volunteers ready to jump at the chance.

Preparations began on August 20, 2025, with Team Leader, AJ Nuest, attending the Team Leader Webinar hosted by Brennan Avants, Operation Gratitude Manager of Corporate Events. He guided the attendees through step-by-step instructions on how to motivate our teams and run a successful event, as well as emphasizing the various deadlines it would be important for us to remember. An event resource guide, tip sheet and even several tutorials were included in the presentation, along with helpful hints to coordinate snacks, create excitement and recruit additional volunteers.

Once completed, we sent out our Event Approval Notification and waited on pins and needles for our Operation Gratitude goodies to arrive.

That first week of September, our wish was granted, and we received a very large box filled with pre-assembled Battalion Buddies - the Teddy Bears given to children of deployed service members – along with craft paracord lanyards, and even special postcards we could use to write letters to soldiers overseas.

With the company-wide event only a few days away, AJ spent any spare time she had going over the assembly instructions, as well as weaving and re-weaving one of the paracord lanyards in preparation to teach everyone else the zipper stitch technique. And that practice proved useful the morning our volunteers assembled, with a full table of funeral directors ready to take on the challenge.

But we didn't stop there. Snacks were served as we opened our delivery of Battalion Buddies and got busy stuffing and dressing them in their special camouflage jackets. It was such a fun project, made even more so by knowing each bear would warm the heart of a child whose parent was away from home on duty. Before giving them our own parting hug, we made sure each bear received a tag that read, "I'm your Battalion Buddy and I'm here to keep you company while your mom or dad is away. I'm so excited to join your family!"

Lastly, the group moved to the table filled with paper, pens, postcards and markers, as well as Operation Gratitude's Letters of Gratitude Guide. Our volunteers got to work writing notes to service members, some of whom pulled from personal experience after retiring from the armed forces themselves.

But the best part was knowing each message would eventually land in the hands of someone as a gesture of our gratitude. A symbol that we hadn't forgotten the sacrifices they made and were hoping to be their reminder of home.

Operation Gratitude makes this possible. Every year, they transform the tragedy of 9/11 into a day when we all work together in remembrance to perform a powerful act of unity and service. Over the past twenty years, this organization has sent out more than four million care packages meant to boost the morale and resilience of our service members. Participation is easy for such a far-reaching impact, and we could not recommend partnering with them more.

Copeland Funeral Service, Beauford, South Carolina

In 2011, we sponsored our first annual Fire Service Bar-B-Q for ALL career and volunteer fire service personnel in Beaufort County. The annual Bar-B-Q is held during Fire Prevention Week in October. The event is held at Lady's Island Fire Department Headquarters, Lady's Island, South Carolina. There are twenty fire departments in Beaufort County. A few weeks before the Bar-B-Q, we send an invitation to all the Fire Chiefs in the county to let them know of the date of the event and ask them to provide us with a count of the personnel who will be eating.

Prior to the event, the funeral home will order and pay for all food and supplies. Our menu consist of half of a bar-b-q chicken, potato salad baked beans, bread, ice tea and cake for desert. The day before the event we will deliver our supplies to the fire station. We will send someone to go, about an hour away, to pick up the chicken and ice them down. The day of the event we arrive around 05:30 and by 06:00 our first cooking of the chicken is on the grills. We use two grills and cook approximately 70-75 half chickens per cooking. Chief Bruce Kline, Chief Lady's Island Fire Department, and Chief Josh Horton, Fripp Island Fire Chief, and I do the grilling. While we are grilling, others are setting up tables and chairs, cutting the cake and placing in containers. Most of these dinners will be take out, so we plate all the food as well. Copeland Funeral Service logo was added to the carry-out containers.

In 2013, (our third year), we included all communications, Fire Commissioners, and Emergency Medical Services staff persons. We now include personnel with the Beaufort County Sheriff's Department- on duty and in the vicinity, Coroner's Office, and Emergency Management. Our first year, there were approximately 150 dinners served. This past year we served 270 take out and have been as high as over 350 take out plates.

This is a service provided by our funeral home and is done without any cost to our friends in public service. This has been a very positive outreach for our funeral home. We have received a large number of "thank you" from the departments and individuals. In March 2012, Copeland Funeral Service received a plaque from the Beaufort County Fire Chiefs Association.

We are committed to continuing with this appreciation dinner.

Flanders Powell Funeral Home, Pembroke, Georgia

Funeral homes serve the communities that they are a part of in many different ways. Not only do we take care of the deceased and their families, but we provide support throughout the area on a daily basis through contributions to area schools and sports teams and relationships with local law enforcement.

One of the ways that we can help support the local community is to form relationships with our police officers, firefighters and other county officials. These relationships foster support for the funeral home and staff within the community and aid in flawless communications throughout all agencies.

At Flanders Powell Funeral Home, one of the ways we accomplish this is to have a barbecue yearly on September 11th to honor the local sheriff's deputies, police officers, bailiffs, firefighters, paramedics and EMTs. A hot meal is provided complete with cookies and cakes as choices for dessert. We have numerous picnic tables set up so that everyone may be seated in a nice shaded area, enjoy their lunch and have conversation among themselves.

For those that may not be able to attend the event at the funeral home because of work or being called away to an emergency, we offer a plate to take with them so that they may enjoy the meal at their leisure.

At the end of the day, any food that is left over is packed up along with plates, utensils and drinks. We deliver all of this to the local fire department so that they will have a good dinner in the overnight hours at the station.

Our cookouts assist us in forming lasting relationships with, not only law enforcement but other first responders and the community as a whole. These bonds allow us to have a personal relationship with those that we work side by side with every day within our city. We are united in brotherhood through these bonds and a trust is built within the community that solidifies our willingness to serve the area along with our local first responders as pillars of the community, offering our unwavering support at times of need.

We are honored to continue to be a part of the Pembroke area and privileged to be called upon to serve our community with dignity, honor and personalized services. We strive to memorialize every individual that is entrusted to our care to the highest standard and utmost attention to detail. Documentation Required: In addition to your essay, you must submit supporting documentation (e.g., photographs, advertisements, newspaper clippings, flyers, etc.).

Heath Funeral Chapel & Crematory, Lakeland, Florida

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Palmetto Funeral Group, Fort Mill, South Carolina

**Palmetto Funeral Group (Bass-Cauthen Funeral Home and Cremation Center),
Rock Hill South Carolina**

Palmetto Funeral Group (Whitesell Funeral Home), Rock Hill, South Carolina

Palmetto Funeral Group, Indian Land, South Carolina

The Fort Mill 10-13 Club is a civic organization based in Fort Mill, dedicated to supporting the law enforcement community and fostering a strong sense of unity among those who serve. Comprised primarily of retired police officers and firefighters from New York City, the organization brings together individuals who share a lifelong commitment to public safety and service. In addition to its retired members, the club also unites retired military personnel and active law enforcement officers, all of whom are bound by a common mission: to support and uplift members of the law enforcement community and their families.

The Fort Mill 10-13 Club works diligently to fulfill its mission through a variety of efforts, including membership dues, merchandise sales, fundraising events, and charitable donations. These initiatives provide critical resources that directly benefit law enforcement officers and their families within York County communities. Whether offering financial assistance during times of hardship or simply reinforcing a network of support, the organization ensures that those who protect and serve are not forgotten.

A central component of the club's outreach is its annual Support Our Heroes 5K, which serves as its signature fundraising event. This event not only promotes health and community involvement but also transforms participation into meaningful, life-impacting support for families in need. Through events like this, the organization strengthens the bond between the community and its law enforcement members, fostering mutual respect and appreciation.

At the heart of the Fort Mill 10-13 Police Association is a deeply rooted mission: to honor and support law enforcement officers, first responders, and their families—particularly those who have lost a loved one in the line of duty. By delivering compassionate assistance, encouraging fellowship, and engaging the public through charitable and educational initiatives, the organization plays a vital role in preserving the legacy of fallen heroes while supporting those who continue to serve.

Looking ahead, the vision of the Fort Mill 10-13 Police Association is to expand its reach beyond York County and become a nationally recognized organization. With a continued focus on compassion, service, and community engagement, the association aims to stand as a trusted source of support for law enforcement officers across the United States, strengthening communities where respect and mutual support remain core values.

Support from local partners has been instrumental in advancing the organization's mission. Palmetto Funeral Group has played a key role as a sponsor of the annual 5K run and golf tournament, and has also contributed by speaking at one of the organization's dinners. Such partnerships highlight the importance of community collaboration in ensuring the success and sustainability of initiatives that honor and support those who dedicate their lives to public service.

Tetrick Funeral Services, Blountville, Tennessee

Oakley-Cook Funeral Home & Crematory, Bristol, Tennessee

As has been the tradition of Tetrick Funeral Services, for over 15 years the funeral home has had a hot dog lunch in honor of first responders. This included the Johnson City Police Department, Johnson City Fire Department, EMS and 911 dispatch. In addition to the lunch, Tetrick Funeral Services has always given a \$500 check to the police department with them designating to us what they choose to be the donation to go to. The Junior Police Academy has always been the choice because this is not a program with a line item in the City budget but is totally run by donation. The Junior Police Academy is geared toward area youth between the ages of 14 - 18. The program focuses on youth and young adults who have an interest in the law enforcement profession. It is designed to take the mystery out of police procedures and policies while informing and educating cadets (participants) with police officers and their role in society. Cadets will experience what it is like to go through the police academy and, although not as comprehensive or demanding, learn the same skills. An investigator with the police department oversees this program.

The funeral home has also always given the Johnson City Fire Department a \$500 donation, given through the Firefighters Association, so the firemen are directly involved in having the donation go to their choice of need. Money has been given to a firefighter's fund to help with his cancer treatment and another year the funeral home paid for the black bunting the fire department wanted to wrap a fire truck used in a firefighter's funeral/burial service but the majority of the money was designated to start a fund to go towards funding for the official uniforms for the Honor Guard to wear when conducting burials or participating in events where first responders participate. The City of Johnson City had nothing designated to provide for this needed expense until our latest City Manager came on board. Upon learning that the firemen did not have Honor Guard uniforms, she immediately line itemed the amount to finish paying for the uniforms.

Due to the nature of the donations, WJHL-TV always covered the presentation of the donations and told about this on the 6 o'clock and 11 o'clock news.

Not wanting anyone left out who was eligible for the meal, the funeral home packed and delivered meals to EMS and 911 dispatch because EMS was constantly on the road and 911 dispatch staff could not leave their post.

In 2025, Tetrick Funeral Services wanted to change things a little and bring the appreciation lunch to another level. Laura Graham contacted Kick Back Jack's restaurant's manager and asked if the restaurant would like to co-partner with us to bring the level of food served above what has been done in the past. The restaurant manager was in 100% but said he would have to send a request to the corporate office to get their permission to participate in the event. Within a few days, the corporate level responded a resounding YES and Kick Back Jack's donated 100 orders of a combination of grilled and boneless wings along with several sauces for dipping. The invitation was emailed to all of the entities involved along with news of Kick Back Jack's involvement to all entities. The feedback we received through several first responders was they were really looking forward to the lunch with Kick Back Jack's donation of so many wings.

On the morning of the event, everything went haywire. One fireman came to the funeral home to tell Laura Graham that a huge fire had broken out and all stations were called out to help. He said he didn't know how many firemen would be able to attend. He was told not to worry. If he would see how many meals would need to be delivered to the firefighters, we would take care of getting them where they needed to go. Then a phone call came from the Manager at Kickback Jack's and he said that due to the bad weather that day, he was experiencing a good number of his employees calling in that they couldn't get to work so he was going to be working the floor during the lunch hour rush. Someone was sent to the restaurant to pick up their food to serve with ours. We were very disappointed that he wasn't going to be able to attend to help serve the food and see the appreciation of the first responders who were able to attend.

Carryout lunches were packed and delivered (about 150 lunches) so our first responders could enjoy a lunch and the food was put out to serve whoever was able to attend in person with hopefully several be there to view the monetary donations. We estimate that with all of the drama that day, that we had over 75

first responders able to attend in person. The wings were a great hit with everyone and we were so appreciative to Kick Back Jack's coming along side of Tetrick Funeral Services to make this a more memorable appreciation lunch for our hardworking, serving first responders.

The checks were distributed at the service. Firefighter's Association and Police Department both had representative from their respective divisions to receive the checks and once again Tetrick Funeral Services was better able to acknowledge our appreciation to the area first responders due to the generous donation of food from Kick Back Jack's restaurant.

The entire staff rallied and came together to make it a memorable day for the first responders by delivering food to each fire station, EMS, and 911 along with having food to be served from the funeral home i **Brunswick Memorial Home, East Brunswick, New Jersey**

Mount Sinai Memorial Chapels, East Brunswick, New Jersey

Brunswick Memorial Funeral Home teamed up with the East Brunswick Regional Chamber of Commerce (EBRCC) to host the inaugural EBRCC Golf Outing: Executive Charity Cup. Randy Gagnon and John McCaig are members of the chamber and frequently attend networking events and help other small businesses. The idea of a charity golf outing came up in one of the fall meetings. A board was put together to make sure the outing became a reality. Randy Gagnon volunteered to be on the board and spent many hours each week doing his part to make the outing possible. The event took place on April 27th at Forsgate Country Club with check in at 8:00am, a shotgun start at 9:00am, and lunch at 2:00am.

The chamber was chartered in September 2017 with the intention of promoting business and community growth. This particular event had the goal of raising money to give to graduating seniors at East Brunswick High School to put towards their college tuition. The board went out in the community looking for sponsors; cart sponsors, hole sponsors, lunch sponsors, etc. The sponsorships ranged from \$250 - \$5000 with corresponding level of exposure and acknowledgement digitally and at the event. This was separate from the ticket cost per golfer. Golfers and sponsors were solicited at meetings, in emails, and social media. Eighty-four golfers came out to support the cause. In addition, other avenues for donations were 50/50 raffles and gift basket raffles during the day of the event.

The day of the event the weather was beautiful and everything went off with out a hitch. All the EBRCC members, their guests, and community members had a great time. There was plenty of time for networking before and after golfing, and even some during golf. The event raised enough money to cover all expenses and provide sizable donations to a few graduating young adults. The winners of the scholarships were to be named at a later date by a separate EBRCC board.

Brunswick Memorial Funeral Home and its members were honored to take part in the inaugural golf outing. They were hole sponsors and golf participants in the event. Although they did not win any golf awards, furthest drive or closest to the pin, they had a great time networking and raising funds for future scholarships. The funeral home looks forward to the second annual golf outing and to helping in anyway needed.

C.R. Lyons & Sons Funeral Directors, Danvers, Massachusetts

For the past thirteen years, C.R. Lyons & Sons Funeral Directors has proudly presented the Sounds of the Holidays concert, a beloved community tradition that embodies the funeral home's commitment to serving families beyond the moments when they experience loss. Presented in partnership with the Spada Law Group, the free concert was held on Sunday, December 21, 2025, at 4:00 p.m. at St. Richard's Church in Danvers, the largest church in the area. What began as an opportunity to bring neighbors together through music has evolved into one of the community's most anticipated holiday traditions, consistently drawing standing-room-only crowds while providing meaningful support to local families in need.

Admission to the concert is free, with each attendee encouraged to bring a donation of non-perishable food to benefit the Danvers People to People Food Pantry. The generosity inspired by this event is remarkable. Each year, literally thousands of pounds of food are collected, providing vital assistance to individuals and families throughout the holiday season. These donations help stock the pantry at a time when demand is especially high, ensuring that local residents facing food insecurity receive the support they need. The tangible impact of the event extends well beyond a single afternoon, as the collected food nourishes countless families throughout the winter months.

Equally important, however, is the emotional and spiritual impact of the concert. The Sounds of the Holidays has become much more than a fundraiser. It is a celebration of community, hope, and togetherness during a season that can be both joyful and difficult. For many in attendance, especially those who have experienced the loss of a loved one, the afternoon provides a welcome opportunity to reconnect with neighbors, enjoy inspiring music, and rediscover the warmth of the holiday season. The overwhelming response from attendees year after year is that the concert truly helps usher them into the Christmas spirit. Many describe it as the moment when the holidays begin for their family—a cherished tradition that fills the church with warmth, reflection, and joy.

The 2025 concert introduced several exciting enhancements designed to deepen that experience. A gifted soloist joined the program, adding a beautiful new dimension to the afternoon's musical selections. In addition, organizers introduced a community sing-along, inviting the audience to become active participants rather than simply spectators. The shared voices of hundreds gathered together created an atmosphere of unity and celebration that reflected the very spirit of the season. These additions were enthusiastically received and strengthened an event that has already become an enduring local tradition.

Throughout the afternoon, the staff of C.R. Lyons & Sons Funeral Directors played an active role in ensuring the program's success. Team members welcomed guests as they arrived, greeted longtime friends and first-time attendees alike, and helped create an atmosphere of hospitality from the moment people entered the church. Staff members also coordinated the collection of food donations, carefully organizing and transporting the generous contributions to the Danvers People to People Food Pantry following the concert. Their involvement reflects the funeral home's philosophy that serving a community extends far beyond providing funeral services; it includes supporting neighbors through acts of compassion, generosity, and fellowship throughout the year.

The partnership with the Spada Law Group further demonstrates how local organizations can work together to strengthen their community. By combining resources and a shared commitment to service, the two organizations have created an event that addresses both practical and emotional needs. Families benefit from food assistance during the holidays, while concertgoers leave feeling uplifted, inspired, and connected to one another.

The Sounds of the Holidays exemplifies the mission of C.R. Lyons & Sons Funeral Directors to care for the community in meaningful ways. Through beautiful music, charitable giving, volunteer service, and a spirit of welcome, the annual concert has become a treasured holiday tradition that nourishes both body and soul. Its continued success after thirteen years is a testament to the generosity of the Danvers

community and the enduring belief that the holidays are best celebrated when neighbors come together to care for one another.

Christensen Family Funeral Home, Seymour, Indiana

Christensen Family Funeral Home - Winklepleck Chapel, Brownstown, Indiana

Christensen - Hoagland Family Funeral Home, Scottsburg, Indiana

No matter you political position, the tragic death of Charlie Kirk prompted many people including myself to simply pause and conduct a personal evaluation of myself. As a funeral home owner, I find loving people through their darkest hour extremely humbling. This was something different, this caused me to really ask myself, "am I truly loving people the way that I should be"? without the show or the stage of the credit, am I loving people that are different than me? Am I truly loving people that might think differently than me or worship different like me, or love different than me? Am i truly loving people beyond this amazing calling that I have as a funeral director.

When I saw the actual footage of the assassination, I felt helpless, I felt sadness and I simply began to weep. Have we really come to the place as a Country that we would take a man's life because we disagreed? Have we really reached a place where hatred was more powerful than love?

I knew I had to do something, I knew I wanted to bring our community together and I knew the Lord was dealing with me about truly LOVING PEOPLE.

I prayed and asked the Lord for direction, I asked him to please keep my motives pure and to please "Heal our land".

I remembered in II Chronicles 7:14 that say's "If my people which are called by his name with humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked was, then will I hear from heaven and forgive their sins and heal their Land". The Word tells that if two or three agree on any thing it shall be done. At the same time I was feeling what I needed to do, I was reached out to by Amanda Lowery, Indiana's 9th Congressional District Chairman and she was feeling the same thing.

This is what my heart was begging for and the words "a healing, a healing, a healing" kept ringing in my heart and mind. I began to place some calls to our political leaders, city, county, state and national leaders. I shared my heart and was so pleased with the response. They would all tell me "put it together Dan, were in!"

I called local pastors from all faiths and shared by heart that he needed to come together as one and show unity and healing in a time like this. I must confess, the response was overwhelming. One by one, pastors began to grab my heartbeat and let me know that "they were honored to be a part".

My sweet wife is a licensed minister and has been a worship leader for over 17 years. She caught on to what I felt and put together the order of service including worship songs and songs of unity. The location was chosen, the steps of the courthouse in Brownstown, Indiana, our county seat. I was asked and it was unanimous that I be the keynote speaker.

I had no idea how many would show up, but I knew I was following what God was telling me, "Dan, I am going to teach people to love again and stand in unity again and fight the hate around us.

Over 900 people showed up, flags flying, tears, hugs, unity, my heart was full.

I learned something through that and it changed my life. Loving people goes way beyond loving them when it involved financial gain, loving people is about simply that, people, created in the image of almighty God.

Clement L. Pantalone Funeral Home, Inc., Greensburg, Pennsylvania

This year, the Pantalone Funeral Home introduced a new volunteer initiative designed to strengthen our connection with the community and extend our commitment to service beyond the walls of the funeral home. For many years, we have built our reputation on providing exceptional care, compassion, and hospitality to the families we serve during some of the most difficult moments in their lives. That culture of service has created a workplace environment where employees genuinely care about helping others. Because of this, we felt it was important to create opportunities for our staff to bring those same values of kindness, support, and generosity into the broader community.

Our newly developed volunteer program allows employees to take the principles that guide our work every day and apply them in meaningful ways outside of the funeral home. Through this initiative, our team members participate in volunteer opportunities throughout Greensburg and the surrounding communities. At least once a month, employees gather to support local churches, nonprofit organizations, and community events where an extra helping hand can make a difference. Whether the need is large or small, our goal is simply to show up, help where we can, and spread positivity throughout the area we proudly serve.

So far, our volunteer efforts have included assisting with group activities, serving meals at community gatherings, helping with cleanup projects, and distributing daily necessities and supplies to individuals and families in need. These activities not only provide practical assistance but also create opportunities to connect with people in our community on a personal level. As the program continues to grow, our goal is to expand these efforts and develop a consistent presence so community members know they can rely on us for support and compassion.

An important part of this program is also the relationships that naturally develop through volunteer service. By working alongside local organizations and engaging with residents, our employees are able to build trust and familiarity within the community. In turn, families who may one day require our services can feel a greater sense of comfort knowing the people caring for their loved ones are the same individuals who have been actively serving and supporting their community.

To encourage participation and recognize our employees' dedication, we also created a small incentive program. Team members who volunteer three times receive a gift certificate to a local restaurant as a token of appreciation for their commitment. While the reward is simple, it reflects our gratitude for employees who embrace our mission of making a positive difference both inside and outside the funeral home. Overall, this program reflects our belief that serving families goes beyond the services we provide during times of loss. By giving back and staying actively involved in the community, we at the Pantalone Funeral Home hope to continue building meaningful relationships and making a positive impact for many years to come.

Cozean Memorial Chapel and Crematory, Farmington, Missouri

At Cozean Memorial Chapel & Crematory, we believe a funeral home should be more than a place families turn to during a time of loss—it should also be a place where the community gathers to celebrate life, preserve tradition, and create meaningful connections. With that philosophy in mind, we developed our Piano Dedication Concert, a free community event designed to dedicate the installation of a beautiful grand piano while introducing our chapel as a welcoming space for music, remembrance, and fellowship.

Music has long been recognized as one of the most powerful forms of comfort and emotional expression. It has the ability to bring people together, evoke cherished memories, and provide healing in ways words often cannot. While music is a meaningful part of many funeral and memorial services, we wanted to create an event where the community could experience the comforting power of music outside of the context of loss.

The installation of our grand piano presented the perfect opportunity. Rather than simply placing the instrument in our chapel, we envisioned a celebration that honored its purpose and invited the public to experience our facility in a completely different way. By opening our doors for an evening centered on music and community, we hoped to reduce the stigma many people associate with funeral homes and demonstrate that our building is also a place of beauty, reflection, and connection.

The Piano Dedication Concert was held at Cozean Memorial Chapel & Crematory and was offered free of charge to the entire community. Families, neighbors, local leaders, musicians, and music enthusiasts were invited to attend without reservations or admission fees.

The evening featured nationally recognized pianist Cameron Cody as the special guest performer. In addition to Cameron's inspiring performance, the program showcased talented local pianists, including an accomplished student musician, allowing members of our own community to share the stage. This combination of professional artistry and local talent created an atmosphere that celebrated both musical excellence and hometown pride.

Guests enjoyed a diverse musical program featuring classical, inspirational, and patriotic selections that highlighted the versatility and beauty of the newly dedicated piano. Throughout the evening, attendees were encouraged to gather, visit with one another, and simply enjoy an uplifting experience in a setting many had never before visited except during times of grief.

To further enhance the evening, Overboard Charcuterie, a local small business, partnered with us by providing an elegant grazing table. The refreshments encouraged conversation and fellowship before and after the concert, creating an inviting and welcoming atmosphere that reflected our commitment to hospitality.

This event was successful because of the collaboration between Cozean Memorial Chapel & Crematory and several valued community partners.

Cozean Memorial Chapel coordinated and funded the event, promoted it through social media, print materials, and community outreach, prepared the chapel for the performance, and hosted guests throughout the evening.

Local musicians volunteered their time and talents, demonstrating the remarkable artistic abilities within our own community while inspiring younger performers.

Special guest pianist Cameron Cody provided the featured concert performance, elevating the event with professional musicianship and creating a memorable experience for attendees of all ages.

Overboard Charcuterie partnered with our funeral home by creating and providing a beautifully arranged grazing table that encouraged fellowship and allowed guests to linger, connect, and enjoy the evening together.

The Piano Dedication Concert strengthened relationships between our staff and the community in ways that traditional funeral service alone cannot accomplish. Many guests visited our funeral home for the first time under joyful circumstances, allowing them to experience our facilities in a relaxed and welcoming environment.

The event also highlighted the versatility of our chapel as a community gathering space and demonstrated our commitment to serving families beyond the funeral itself. Staff members enjoyed interacting with guests in a positive setting, building relationships that foster trust long before funeral services are ever needed.

Additionally, the event generated significant community engagement through social media promotion and word-of-mouth, expanding awareness of our funeral home's commitment to community involvement.

Perhaps the greatest benefit was the opportunity to bring people together through music. The concert created an evening where generations gathered to enjoy exceptional performances while supporting local talent.

D.S. Temrowski and Sons Funeral Home, Warren, Michigan

A.H. Peters Funeral Homes, Grosse Pointe Woods, Michigan

A.H. Peters Funeral Homes, Warren, Michigan

In January 2025, what began as a simple, casual conversation between our funeral home and another local family-owned business quickly grew into something far more meaningful. As we talked, it became very clear that we shared a common desire to give back to our community in a tangible way. During the colder winter months, we recognized that many individuals experiencing homelessness face even greater challenges, and we saw an opportunity to come together and make a real difference. From that moment, the idea of organizing an effort to assemble care bags was born.

With a clear goal in mind, we began reaching out to other local businesses in the area to see if they would be interested in participating. The response was overwhelmingly positive and encouraging. Business owners and employees alike were eager to contribute, demonstrating a strong sense of community and compassion. Several businesses generously donated essential items such as gloves, hats, hand warmers, and non-perishable food items. These contributions formed the foundation of what would become thoughtfully assembled care packages. Our funeral home proudly provided the bags themselves, along with bottled water and additional snacks to help ensure that each package was both practical and comforting.

On New Year's Day, a dedicated group of volunteers including some of our eager funeral home staff members gathered to bring the project to life. Working together, they carefully assembled each care bag, making sure that every item was included and organized with care. The atmosphere was one of teamwork, kindness, and shared purpose, as everyone involved understood the importance of what they were doing. By the end of the day, we had successfully created over 150 care bags, each one representing a collective effort to support those in need.

Throughout the following week, these care bags were distributed to local shelters and police departments. By partnering with these organizations, we were able to ensure that the bags reached individuals who could benefit from them the most. This approach allowed for thoughtful and direct distribution within our community.

This collaborative initiative truly highlighted the powerful impact that can be achieved when local businesses unite around a shared mission. It was both humbling and inspiring to witness the generosity of so many contributors and the positive reactions of those who received the bags. Small acts of kindness, when multiplied, can create meaningful change, and this experience served as a reminder of the strength and compassion that exists within our community.

In January 2025, what began as a simple, casual conversation between our funeral home and another local family-owned business quickly grew into something far more meaningful. As we talked, it became very clear that we shared a common desire to give back to our community in a tangible way. During the colder winter months, we recognized that many individuals experiencing homelessness face even greater challenges, and we saw an opportunity to come together and make a real difference. From that moment, the idea of organizing an effort to assemble care bags was born.

With a clear goal in mind, we began reaching out to other local businesses in the area to see if they would be interested in participating. The response was overwhelmingly positive and encouraging. Business owners and employees alike were eager to contribute, demonstrating a strong sense of community and compassion. Several businesses generously donated essential items such as gloves, hats, hand warmers, and non-perishable food items. These contributions formed the foundation of what would become thoughtfully assembled care packages. Our funeral home proudly provided the bags themselves, along with bottled water and additional snacks to help ensure that each package was both practical and comforting.

On New Year's Day, a dedicated group of volunteers including some of our eager funeral home staff members gathered to bring the project to life. Working together, they carefully assembled each care bag, making sure that every item was included and organized with care. The atmosphere was one of teamwork, kindness, and shared purpose, as everyone involved understood the importance of what they were doing. By the end of the day, we had successfully created over 150 care bags, each one representing a collective effort to support those in need.

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Gorsline Runciman Funeral Homes, Lansing, Michigan

Gorsline-Runciman Tiffany Chapel, Lansing Michigan

Gorsline Runciman Funeral Homes, Mason, Michigan

Gorsline Runciman Funeral Homes, Williamston, Michigan

Gorsline Runciman Funeral Homes, East Lansing, Michigan

Gorsline Runciman Funeral Homes, Dewitt, Michigan

Funeral homes are often viewed as places people only visit during life's most difficult moments. This year we wanted to challenge that perception by creating an opportunity for families to experience our funeral home in a completely different way. During DeWitt's annual Christmas Market, holiday parade, and community festivities, we introduced a Holiday Warming Station designed to provide comfort, hospitality, and connection for residents enjoying the celebration.

Our funeral home is located just two blocks from the downtown festivities, making us uniquely positioned to serve the hundreds of people attending the evening's events. Rather than simply observing from the sidelines, we asked our staff how we could contribute something meaningful to the community while remaining true to our mission of caring for people. The answer was simple: open our doors and offer a warm, welcoming place for everyone.

Leading up to the event, we promoted the Holiday Warming Station through Facebook, the local community newsletter, and outdoor signage placed the day of the event. Community members were invited to park in our parking lot free of charge and stop in before, during, or after their holiday activities.

Inside, guests found much more than a place to escape the cold. Families enjoyed a complimentary hot cocoa bar complete with festive toppings, holiday cookies, a photo booth where they could capture memories together, complimentary hand warmers, and a phone charging station so they could stay connected throughout the evening. Recognizing that the holidays can also be a difficult time for those grieving a loss, we opened our chapel as a quiet space where visitors could write and leave memorial notes honoring loved ones. This simple activity allowed families to pause for reflection while remaining part of the joyful spirit of the season.

The response exceeded our expectations. Throughout the evening, more than 200 community members visited the Holiday Warming Station. Our staff served over 120 cups of hot chocolate and distributed more than 300 hand warmers, providing simple comforts that allowed guests to continue enjoying the outdoor festivities despite the winter weather. Local police officers and the mayor stopped by, participated in the festivities, and shared photos of the event on community social media pages, extending awareness well beyond those who attended. Following the event, the DeWitt Chamber of Commerce recognized our funeral home during its first meeting of the new year, expressing appreciation for providing such a valuable resource during one of the community's busiest events.

The Holiday Warming Station created meaningful benefits for our funeral home and our staff. Employees enjoyed interacting with families in a relaxed, joyful environment rather than exclusively during times of loss. Staff members served hot cocoa, visited with children, helped families take photos, and simply welcomed neighbors into our building. These conversations strengthened relationships and reminded our team that our role in the community extends beyond funeral service. Hosting the event also fostered pride among employees, who appreciated contributing to a project focused entirely on hospitality and service.

Perhaps the greatest benefit was the opportunity to reshape how people experience a funeral home. Many parents shared that this was their children's first visit to a funeral home and expressed gratitude that the experience was positive, warm, and welcoming instead of being associated with sadness. Visitors commented on how beautifully decorated the building was for the holidays and appreciated having a comfortable place to rest, recharge both themselves and their electronic devices, and spend

time together before returning to the festivities. Others quietly visited the chapel to remember loved ones before joining family members for hot chocolate and conversation, demonstrating that celebration and remembrance can exist side by side.

The Holiday Warming Station also strengthened our relationship with the broader community. By offering parking, refreshments, a warm place to gather, and thoughtful amenities at no cost, we demonstrated that

a funeral home can be an active and caring community partner outside of times of need. There was no expectation that visitors become future clients; our only goal was to serve our neighbors well.

Because of the overwhelming positive response from attendees, community leaders, and our own staff, the Holiday Warming Station has become a program we intend to continue and expand in future years.

Jones and Son Funeral Home, Richton, Mississippi

Jones and Son Funeral Home, Beaumont, Mississippi

Jones and Son Funeral Home, Hattiesburg, Mississippi

Jones and Son Funeral Home, Moselle, Mississippi

Sigler Funeral Home, Lucedale, Mississippi

Serving Our Community Beyond the Funeral Home

At Jones and Son Funeral Home, serving others has always meant more than simply providing funeral services. It means being a part of the community, recognizing the needs of our neighbors, and helping whenever an opportunity arises. Recently, our funeral home was blessed with the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the life of a very deserving member of the Greene County community.

For many years, Jones and Son Funeral Home owned a small, older Toyota Camry that was primarily used by funeral home staff to travel between our locations. While the car was not new or elaborate, it remained dependable and still had many miles of service left to give. When the funeral home learned of a local individual facing a transportation hardship, the owners realized the vehicle could serve a much greater purpose.

Known affectionately by students and faculty as “Mr. Bubba,” the longtime custodian at Greene County High School has become much more than an employee of the school. Throughout his many years of service, he has built countless relationships with students, teachers, administrators, and staff members. His friendly personality, willingness to help, and daily presence have made him a familiar and valued part of the Greene County High School family. Like so many dedicated school employees, his impact cannot be measured solely by the duties listed in his job description. The relationships he has formed and the lives he has touched are a true reflection of his dedication to others.

Recently, Mr. Bubba lost his vehicle in an automobile accident. Without reliable transportation, he found himself unable to travel back and forth to work. The loss of his car placed his employment and daily routine in jeopardy and created a difficult situation for someone who had spent so many years faithfully serving others.

Mrs. Jennifer Pulliam, co-owner of Jones and Son Funeral Home, also serves as assistant principal at Greene County High School. Because of her role at the school, she had personally witnessed Mr. Bubba’s dedication and understood the importance of his presence to both students and faculty. After learning of his transportation difficulties, Mrs. Pulliam recognized an opportunity to help. The decision was made to donate the funeral home’s Toyota Camry to Mr. Bubba, providing him with reliable transportation and allowing him to continue traveling to work each day.

Although the vehicle may have been considered a small and older car, to Mr. Bubba it represented something much greater. It provided independence, security, and the ability to continue doing the job he has faithfully performed for many years. More importantly, the donation was a reminder that even a simple act of kindness can have a lasting impact on someone’s life.

This act of service reflects the values and mission of Jones and Son Funeral Home. Our dedication to the community does not end at the doors of the funeral home. We believe that being a community business means standing beside our neighbors during difficult times, recognizing genuine needs, and doing what we can to make a difference. Whether we are caring for a family following the loss of a loved one or helping a valued community member find a way to continue serving others, our purpose remains the same: to serve with compassion, dignity, and a genuine concern for the people we are honored to call our neighbors.

The donation of this vehicle to Mr. Bubba is just one example of how Jones and Son Funeral Home strives to give back to the communities we serve. It is our hope that acts of kindness such as this will not only help those in need but will also encourage others to look for opportunities to lend a helping hand.

After all, a strong community is built when neighbors care for neighbors and when service extends far beyond the walls of a business.

Lakeshore Memorial Services, Holland Michigan

Ever Rest Funeral Home and Chapel, Muskegon, Michigan

Pastries for Pastors: Showing Appreciation to Those Who Serve 2026

At Lakeshore Memorial Services, we believe that strong communities are built through compassion, service, and meaningful relationships. That belief inspired a new outreach initiative called Pastries for Pastors, a simple but heartfelt program designed to recognize and thank local pastors for the important work they do every day.

Pastors serve as a source of comfort, guidance, and support for individuals and families during both joyful and difficult times. They celebrate life's milestones, offer encouragement during challenges, and provide spiritual care to those in need. As a funeral home, we have the privilege of working alongside many pastors as they minister to families who are grieving the loss of a loved one. Their dedication, compassion, and willingness to serve often make a lasting impact during some of life's most difficult moments.

Through the Pastries for Pastors program, our team visited local churches and delivered fresh pastries and gave them a grief book for their church libraries. This was a simple small token of appreciation. While the gesture itself was simple, the message behind it was significant: thank you for your service, your leadership, and your commitment to the people in our community.

The response from pastors and church staff was overwhelmingly positive. Many expressed gratitude not only for the fresh pastries but also for being recognized and appreciated. The visits provided an opportunity to strengthen existing relationships and create new connections with faith leaders who share our commitment to caring for others. The smiles, conversations, and warm welcomes we received reinforced the importance of taking time to acknowledge those who devote themselves to serving others. Because these were unannounced visits because we understand t the staff member on duty was happy to receive and share the effort with our new outreach program. We have included a thank you sign by most of our staff to give each gift a personalized touch.

Pastries for Pastors reflect our desire to give back and express gratitude to those who often work quietly behind the scenes. We are grateful for the opportunity to recognize their contributions and look forward to continuing this program in the future.

Sometimes the smallest gestures can have the greatest impact. By delivering pastries and sharing words of appreciation, we were able to honor the pastors who faithfully serve our community. Lakeshore Memorial Services is proud to support and celebrate these dedicated leaders, and we thank them for the care and compassion they show to the families we are honored to serve.

We are planning this to be an annual outreach event!

Memorial Funeral Home, Edinburg, Texas

Throughout the year, Memorial Funeral Home participated in several community parades. We believe in being visible in our community and parades are a great way to advertise our business without spending a lot of money.

The first parade we participate in is the Homecoming Parade. During homecoming week, our local high school has a homecoming parade where most of the feeder schools to that campus participate. From cheer teams, band, and dance groups, to the different classes celebrating their homecoming, there are many participants.

In November, we have the Veterans Day parade. This parade honors those who have served in our United States military and it is one of our favorites. People line the streets to see the parade floats driving by and proudly wave. During this parade, we see many families we have served whose loved ones were veterans. And although for some seeing us may be a difficult reminder of the loss of their loved one, they are still happy to see us participating in events outside of the funeral home and still supporting veterans. December is a busy month for parades as most cities have one. The Edinburg Night of Lights Parade is held on a Friday evening and is very well attended. The parade always ends with Santa Claus on the firetruck. Alamo's parade is on a smaller scale but still has a good turnout. At the ending point of the parade, there is a festival where school groups perform and the event concludes with the lighting of the tree.

In the spring we conclude our parade participation for the year with the Texas Independence Parade. This parade, held in Alamo, has many entries. The city has many mobile home parks which those who we affectionately call Winter Texans or Snowbirds. Groups from each park participate in the parade. They dress to fit the theme and many of them perform throughout the parade and at its conclusion. Although the school groups always go above and beyond to prepare award winning entries, the mobile home parks usually go home with the biggest awards.

The staff of Memorial Funeral Home looks forward to parade participation. From decorating the vehicle, to planning our attire and driving down the parade route in our limousine, parades also give us time outside of work to be together and be visible in our community. Having grown up in these smaller towns, we see people who we've known all our lives, families we've served sometimes.

Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre, Madison, Indiana

In a world driven by satellites, clouds and ethernet cables, technology affords immediate accessibility, efficiency and convenience, but it doesn't smile, arm hug, handshake nor engage in personal chats. The human connection that generates inner sunshine and forges friendships and customer business too often plays a secondary role in today's market. Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre definitely relies on technology and certainly experiences frustration and backlog when a digital component goes down but also realizes the equal value of bonding face-to-face with past, present and potential clients, friends, neighbors and new acquaintances. Most aware of the societal disconnection created by technology, Morgan & Nay President/Owner Rodney L. Nay in 2025-26 re-confirmed as well as expanded the company commitment to human connection, one of the firm's founding principles 29 years ago. With younger generations overwhelming preferring digital, non-verbal communication via their computers and smart/cell phones, renewed emphasis on face-to-face interaction has become more needed than ever. Mr. Nay totally agrees with the assessment of Gary Edwards, CEO of Primeast Global, who penned, "We are more connected than ever, yet people feel disconnected. As we navigate the digital world, it is crucial to find a balance between digital and face-to-face communication, an essential key to business."

New and Established Ways of the Morgan & Nay "Human Connect/Face-to-Face" Quest

- When the phone rings, a human voice answers. No 10 menu prompts nor 15 minute waits hearing "Your call is important to us; we will be with you shortly." or "We currently are experiencing heavy volume. Your call will be answered in the order that it was received."
- For every visitation and funeral, employees personally open the two entrance doors and extend a warm welcome, as well as a hospitality comment upon their exit. On occasion, Morgan & Nay runs two visitations at once in its two chapels, thus the additional need for location clarification at times.
- Employees also man the memorial and registration desks and extend a brief greeting and smile to each visitor.
- Mr. Nay and/or the director or pre-planning personally meet each pre-planning appointee at the entrance door. Ten minutes or so before appointment time, they purposely station themselves at the door to watch the parking lot for any car arrival. And if an age or handicap issue is obvious or known, they go to the vehicle to help with either personal manpower or a wheelchair in tow. And this same routine applies to all at-need and arrangement appointments as well.
- Approximately one week after the funeral, an employee handwrites a thank-you note to every family served for selecting Morgan & Nay as its provider, plus tries to incorporate a customized point as well. A sample note might read ... "Thank you for entrusting Morgan & Nay to handle Jim's arrangements and help you commemorate his life. It was a privilege to serve your family. May you be blessed with precious memories of his signature ways, love for golf and your 47 years together as husband and wife. Sincerely, Rodney"
- And for the feedback/evaluation survey approximately three to four weeks later, the envelope sports a handwritten address, not a label although such would be simpler and quicker. Clients may do pre-arrangements online, but Morgan & Nay strongly encourages in a friendly, professional manner that the meeting be in person. No digital app can bring out all the interesting details of the deceased, make suggestions to better personalize the service or offer a calming solution to a family issue. The funeral directors' experience and knowledge often offer a touch or amenity that the family had not considered and maybe oblivious to. A couple of years ago, our company elected the electronic feedback route which did not equate to the U.S. mail route that we quickly reverted to. The return response to the digital format was mediocre or less, whereas the personal mail version approaches approximately 80 percent return.

- Morgan & Nay personally delivers family bags, along with the memorabilia brought in for visitation display, to the home. This provides another excellent opportunity to bond with family members 1:1 in their own comfort zone. There is always something to lead the family member into conversation, whether it be a Morgan & Nay compliment for a beautiful yard, an unique furniture item or picture in the home or acquaintance with a neighbor down the road. And of course during this gathering, it is our 1:1, “human connect” policy to see if the client needs anything and to share information about our grief program, AfterCare events and monthly Day Trip Series.
- After the funeral service, we also personally deliver flowers to the home or a location that the family specifies at a time convenient to them. Like with family bags, this gesture creates another productive opportunity to bond with clients face-to-face.
- When possible, on the way to the burial site, Morgan & Nay tries to incorporate a personal touch to the procession ride. The gesture might entail driving by and pausing at the deceased’s farm or business, his favorite golf course or a scenic landscape spot that he/she loved such as the beautiful, winding Ohio River that flanks our small town.
- Morgan & Nay provides personalized thank you cards to families with the deceased’s photo and maybe a favorite poem or signature message. These are all printed in-house, not an expensive, out-sourcing endeavor. The selections and designs are made at arrangement time when the Morgan & Nay directors are working in person with the family.
- Funeral directors Mr. Nay and M&N Vice-President Josh Webb always meet and join family members when they first arrive for private family time before the public visitation begins.
- Coverage of customized processions are posted on Morgan & Nay Facebook page, approximately two-three hours after the interment itself. This helps families feel a brighter side of the day as the procession reflects the persona of the deceased in a happier way and the posts generally merit dozens and sometimes hundreds of responses from friends and neighbors. Morgan & Nay certainly cannot take credit for the responses, but our posting allows for human connection.
- On occasion when certain conditions prevail, Morgan & Nay picks up family members at their homes to transport them to the funeral in company limousine or vehicles.
- Within 1-5 months of a funeral, a personal, hand-addressed invitation is sent to recent widows/widowers to a social outing. It is not a grief session but rather a social, fellowship event to let our guests also enjoy the positive impact of human connection. Activities range from early summer and mid-fall luncheons at a savory, picturesque bistro in the country to Christmas and Valentine luncheons. Smiles and conversation always earmark the day. Besides organizing and overseeing the events, five or six part-time Morgan & Nay associates are always there to interact with the guests 1:1.
- For the annual Morgan & Nay Community Christmas Show, now in its 12th year, we purposely do not sell tickets online although that process meets all the benefits of technology. To buy tickets, people must come into the funeral home itself or call. Each mode promotes face-to-face or 1:1 connection. Employees can chat with the buyer and there is always something to talk about. The key is to engage the buyer in conversation that primarily centers around him. As the buyer enters the funeral home, he/she receives a friendly greeting from the head receptionist who then directs the individual to the associate who coordinates sales. Thus more pleasant talk, initiated by the Morgan & Nay associate, to make the person feel valued and connected. On the way out, the buyer receives a pleasant exit greeting from the ticket coordinator to the head receptionist again and perhaps Mr. Nay and/or Mr. Webb if they are in the area. Both funeral directors are most friendly and conversationalist, having the knack to make others feel valued. Thus, we not only sell tickets but amicably connect with 400-450 people by conducting in-person sales. At the Christmas show itself, 90 percent of all full-time and part-time employees share their ambassadorship and hospitality skills to welcome and circulate about the audience. Besides the face-to-face bonding benefit, having ticket buyers come directly into the funeral home allows them to see our facilities and perhaps feel more comfortable when they might return for a personal family need later.

- When a visitor enters our premises for a funeral, a Morgan & Nay attendant is always at the entrance to extend a personal welcome along with directions on where to park, depending on the visitor's procession or non-procession involvement.

- Morgan & Nay emphasizes that employees, whether they be working visitation and funerals or tending to daily operation, to reach out and "connect" with anyone entering and/or exiting company doors. Offer of

water, coffee or soft drink. A warm entrance greeting as well as an exit one. Small chit-chat. etc. The demeanor of employees makes a significant impact on how the public views and perceives company image.

Morgan & Nay wants to be the reason that someone smiles and finds the staff friendly and approachable, in addition to being a trustworthy, progressive business. We truly feel our newly re-charged "human connect/face to face" emphasis creates the catalyst for an effective relationship between technology and human interaction. More meaningful the bond ... better the image and bigger the business.

Myers Mortuaries and Cremation Services, Ogden, Utah

Myers Mortuaries and Cremation Services, Roy, Utah

Myers Mortuaries and Cremation Services, Layton, Utah

Myers Mortuaries and Cremation Services, Brigham City, Utah

****Día de los Muertos Community Celebration****

As part of Myers Mortuary's commitment to serving the diverse communities of Northern Utah, **Christina Myers, Outreach Coordinator**, has developed and led one of the area's largest **Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)** celebrations for the Hispanic community. The event was created to honor an important cultural tradition while providing a welcoming environment where families can celebrate the lives and memories of loved ones together.

Recognizing the importance of culturally relevant outreach, Myers Mortuary promotes the event extensively through Spanish-language social media campaigns, community organizations, local businesses, and partnerships with Hispanic community leaders. These marketing efforts are designed to ensure that families throughout the region are aware of the celebration and understand that Myers Mortuary is committed to serving people of all cultures with compassion, respect, and understanding.

The **2025 celebration marked the third consecutive year** of the event and represented significant growth in both attendance and community participation. Attendance increased by **50 percent** over the previous year, demonstrating the growing popularity of the program and its value to the Hispanic community.

Under Christina Myers' leadership, the celebration has expanded into a vibrant community festival featuring authentic cultural experiences for all ages. Activities included traditional folklórico dance performances, live musical entertainment, cultural singing presentations, a **Catrina costume competition** celebrating the iconic symbols of Día de los Muertos, educational community booths, local vendors, and a variety of popular food trucks offering traditional Latin cuisine. The event also welcomed a special guest, **Mrs. Mexico**, whose appearance added excitement and recognition to the celebration and further strengthened community engagement.

The program was hosted by **Paloma**, a well-known local Spanish-language television personality whose involvement helped generate enthusiasm and broaden awareness throughout the region. Her participation, combined with Myers Mortuary's comprehensive social media marketing campaign, significantly increased the event's visibility and encouraged participation from families across Northern Utah.

Held on **November 1, 2026**, the celebration attracted **more than 3,000 attendees**, making it one of the largest community outreach events organized by Myers Mortuary. Beyond attendance numbers, the event has become an opportunity to build meaningful relationships with Hispanic families, celebrate cultural traditions surrounding remembrance, and educate the community about Myers Mortuary's commitment to compassionate service for families of every background.

The continued success of the Día de los Muertos celebration reflects Myers Mortuary's dedication to inclusive community outreach and cultural engagement. Through Christina Myers' vision and leadership, the event has become an anticipated annual tradition that strengthens relationships, honors cherished customs, and demonstrates Myers Mortuary's belief that caring for families means embracing and celebrating the unique traditions that make every community special.

Improvements/Changes made this year were the following:

* We decided to start earlier to have more daylight and to not end as late as past years. This was a suggestion that came from attendees, vendors and participants.

*We partnered with Oaxaca en Utah, a local organization dedicated to building community, preserving

cultural traditions, and creating a lasting legacy for Oaxacans across the state of Utah. Oaxaca en Utah has grown into a major cultural organization that connects communities across Utah and beyond.

*We added twice the amount of food trucks and booths from the previous year.

*Because of the increased attendance and participation, we increased the footprint of the event and the centerstage tent to accommodate more covered seating at the entertainment area. *We rented a much larger sound system to accommodate the increased size of the footprint. *We provided portable area heaters to provide comfort to attendees. *We tripled the amount of lighting for this event with spotlights and floodlights. *As stated above, we invited Paloma to emcee our event. Paloma is a well-known local Spanish language television personality. This is the first time we have had an outside personality emcee our event. *We invited Mrs. Mexico as a special guest to join us which added excitement and recognition to the celebration.

Popp Funeral and Cremation Services, Viroqua, Wisconsin

“Viroqua Soup” has been a project of the Viroqua Chamber of Commerce the last few years as a micro-crowdfunding event to support community projects. The concept is for members of the community to come together, pay a five-dollar entry fee, and enjoy a soup supper while listening to presentations from innovative not-for-profit projects underway in the community. Attendants then vote for their preferred project and the winning not-for-profit is awarded the entry proceeds to help fund their idea. In the current economic climate, the Chamber’s budget simply did not allow for the beloved community event to continue. Although the need was there for a number of local endeavors with strong community backing, Viroqua Soup was unable to continue as it was in 2026. That’s when Popp Funeral and Cremation Services stepped in to take the lead in keeping “Soup” going. The project went from being a Viroqua Chamber event to an event organized and funded by Popp Funeral and Cremation Services with some limited input from the chamber. We arranged to plan and host things at our facility and reached out to volunteer contacts that had helped in the past. Our team worked with two local restaurants to provide the soup at no cost and the Viroqua Food Co-op donated bread and other items. Volunteers from the Youth Initiative High School in town and the Viroqua Plastic Free community group got involved to serve the meal and perform clean up, ensuring that our gathering as a community was a zero-waste event. The Viroqua Chamber of Commerce handled marketing on their website and social media platforms and solicited groups to present. We held Viroqua Soup on April 14, where our staff greeted visitors and helped man admissions and registration. There were five community projects to be promoted, which included: establishing a community kiln, funding public pool safety training (as budget cuts have forced the pool to be self-funded), a youth comic book group, a community bulletin board app, and enhancing our town’s fourth of July event. Nathan Popp acted as Master of Ceremonies, welcoming visitors and introducing each presentation. Between presentations various staff spoke of the importance of community spaces and the comfort in gathering in support of others to emphasize how our facility functions as just such a local resource. When the votes were tallied, the Friends of the Bigley Pool was the winner of funds to support life-guard training and swim lessons the upcoming summer. Thor Thorson, former owner of Popp Funeral and Cremation Services and friend of community benefactor Phil Bigley, presented the check. He shared how Bigley built the pool in response to two teenage boys drowning while swimming in a local creek – they had no public facility and were never taught to swim. Thorson pointed out those funerals occurred right in our building and Bigley stood “in this very room” when he pledged to do whatever he could to prevent a repeat of such a tragedy. It was a fitting climax to the evening and affirmed how great things come about when we gather as friends and neighbors.

Reeves Fruland & Baskerville Funeral Homes and Crematory, Coal City, Illinois

Reeves Fruland & Baskerville Funeral Homes and Crematory, Gardner, Illinois

Reeves Fruland & Baskerville Funeral Homes and Crematory, Morris, Illinois

Reeves Fruland & Baskerville Funeral Homes and Crematory, Wilmington, Illinois

Restoring the Sound of a Community: Bringing the Bells of St. Rose Back to Life

For generations, the ringing of church bells has marked many of life's most significant moments. They celebrate weddings, call the faithful to worship, announce times of prayer, and accompany families as they gather to honor loved ones through funeral rites. In Wilmington, Illinois, a rural community of approximately 8,000 residents located sixty-five miles southwest of Chicago, the bells of St. Rose Catholic Church had served as the community's soundtrack for nearly 170 years.

As a lifelong Wilmington resident and funeral director, those bells hold special meaning for me. As a student at St. Rose School, our classrooms would pause in prayer whenever the funeral bells began to toll as a funeral procession arrived at the church. In sixth grade, I began serving as the parish organist, and one of my responsibilities was operating the bell system. The familiar morning call to Mass, the carillon concerts at 9:00 a.m., noon, 3:00 p.m., and 6:00 p.m., the solemn tolling for funerals, and the joyful swing bell for weddings became woven into the fabric of daily life for our entire community.

Around 2020, however, the aging bell system became inoperable. For more than a decade, the bell tower remained silent, and an important tradition quietly disappeared.

In 2025, as St. Rose Parish prepared to celebrate its 170th anniversary, the pastor approached our funeral home seeking assistance in raising approximately \$18,000 needed to restore the historic bells. Because Reeves, Fruland & Baskerville Funeral Homes has long believed that funeral service extends beyond the walls of our facilities, we viewed this not simply as a fundraising opportunity, but as a chance to restore an important symbol of community identity.

Rather than conduct a traditional fundraising campaign, we developed an innovative project utilizing equipment already employed in serving our families. Our funeral home regularly uses laser engraving technology to personalize urn nameplates, memorial keepsakes, plaques, and other commemorative items. We designed custom bell-shaped Christmas ornaments featuring a laser-engraved image of St. Rose Catholic Church and offered 180 limited-edition ornaments in exchange for a suggested \$100 donation toward the bell restoration project.

The response exceeded every expectation.

Within a remarkably short time, every ornament had been spoken for, fully funding the restoration of the St. Rose bell system. As donations continued, the project expanded beyond its original goal, allowing the parish to restore the historic bells at Immaculate Conception Church, the second worship site within St. Rose Parish.

Our funeral home continued its involvement by designing and producing the permanent dedication plaques recognizing those whose generosity made the restoration possible. On June 27, 2026, the restored bells were formally dedicated, although they had already begun ringing across the community several months earlier following completion of the restoration.

The impact has been extraordinary.

Today, the restored bells once again announce the hours, accompany funeral liturgies, celebrate weddings, and provide the familiar sounds that generations of residents remember so fondly. Our funeral home is located only eight blocks from St. Rose Church, and hearing the bells ring at 9:00 each morning, often as our staff is preparing a funeral procession, serves as a meaningful reminder of the sacred work we are privileged to perform.

The benefits extended well beyond the successful fundraising effort. Our staff found great pride in contributing their talents to a project that enriched the entire community rather than simply supporting funeral service. The project showcased how resources developed within funeral service, such as personalization, craftsmanship, and memorialization can creatively serve broader community needs. It also strengthened relationships between our funeral home, the parish, and residents throughout Wilmington, regardless of religious affiliation.

The parish provided leadership by identifying the restoration need, overseeing the repair project, and coordinating installation and dedication activities. Reeves, Fruland & Baskerville Funeral Homes conceived the fundraising concept, designed and laser-produced each commemorative ornament, managed promotion and distribution of the ornaments, created the dedication plaques, and helped bring the vision to completion.

Perhaps the greatest measure of success is one that cannot be quantified. After more than fifteen years of silence, Wilmington once again hears the bells that have marked life's celebrations, sorrows, and moments of reflection for generations. Families attending funerals hear the familiar tolling that once again accompanies their final farewell. Residents pause when the carillon plays across town. Children are growing up hearing the same sounds that their parents and grandparents remember. Sometimes innovation is not about creating something entirely new. Sometimes it is about using the talents, technology, and compassionate spirit of funeral service to restore something priceless that a community thought it had lost forever.

Wright Funeral Home, Philippi, West Virginia

In November 2025, our firm recognized an opportunity to give back to our community during the holiday season. We understand that, in the community where we live and serve, many individuals and families face financial hardships, particularly during the holidays. We wanted to do our part to help make Thanksgiving a little easier for those in need.

Our firm launched a Thanksgiving Food Bag Program to provide families with the essentials for a holiday meal. Each bag included a canned ham, scalloped potatoes, green beans, stuffing, gravy, cake mix, and icing. While it was a simple gesture, we hoped these items would help relieve some of the financial burden many families experience during the holiday season.

To identify families in need, we partnered with our local Heart and Hand office, which provided an estimate of the number of households seeking holiday assistance. Based on their recommendations, we prepared 50 Thanksgiving food bags.

As word of the project spread, County Commissioner Jedd Schola and his wife, Misty, generously offered to support the effort through donations and assistance. Their willingness to become involved helped strengthen the program and demonstrated the community spirit behind this initiative.

We also invited a local Girl Scout troop to help assemble the food bags. The troop enthusiastically accepted the opportunity, and on a Saturday morning the scouts gathered at our funeral home, where we had transformed part of our garage into an assembly area with tables organized for each food item. The project not only helped us efficiently prepare the bags but also allowed the girls to earn community service credit while learning the value of serving others.

Once completed, the food bags were made available for pickup either at our funeral home or at the Heart and Hand office. Offering two pickup locations was important to us because we recognized that some families might feel uncomfortable visiting a funeral home. Providing an alternative location helped make the program more accessible and welcoming.

We shared information about the Thanksgiving Food Bag Program on our funeral home's Facebook page and received an overwhelming amount of positive feedback from the community. Many people expressed appreciation for the effort, and several of the families who received the bags shared how meaningful the assistance was. Some told us they would not have been able to prepare a complete Thanksgiving meal without the support they received.

The success of this impactful program has inspired us to continue and expand the initiative. Our goal is to include assistance during the Christmas season and to serve more than 50 families in future years. Commissioner Schola and his wife have also expressed their commitment to continuing their support as the program grows.

Through this initiative, we hoped to demonstrate our firm's commitment to serving our community beyond the services we provide as a funeral home. Caring for families extends beyond the time of loss, and this program allowed us to show compassion, strengthen community relationships, and provide meaningful support to those in need. We believe this effort reflects our dedication to serving not only the families who entrust us with their loved ones but our entire community with dignity, kindness, and care.