



Pursuit of Excellence

2026 Innovative Ideas Essays

**Funeral Home Facilities Programs and Services:
Education and Outreach**

Ang Chin Moh Funeral Directors PTE Ltd, Singapore

Cultivating Community Engagement and Elevating the Funeral Profession Through Heritage

Since January 2024, Ang Chin Moh Funeral Directors has actively collaborated with My Community, a distinguished non-profit organization renowned for its significant contributions to arts, culture, and heritage since its founding in 2010. This impactful collaboration, which stemmed from discussions initiated in October 2023, leverages the combined strengths of both entities to present the "My Boon Keng Heritage Tour." This monthly program stands as a clear example of how strategic community engagement can foster a deeper appreciation for local history, cultural understanding, and critical life conversations.

The "My Boon Keng Heritage Tour" is a thoughtfully organized community event, conducted on the fourth Saturday and Sunday of each month. To ensure an optimal and personalized learning experience, each tour accommodates a maximum of 25 participants. During these tours, attendees immerse themselves in the compelling stories of the Kallang-Boon Keng area, uncovering historical narratives and exploring the diverse communities that have shaped this vibrant locale. A key highlight includes a passage through the Geylang Bahru Industrial Estate, home to the 113-year-old Ang Chin Moh Funeral Directors funeral home, seamlessly connecting the company's long-standing legacy with the area's rich past and present.

Ang Chin Moh Funeral Directors generously hosts tour participants for approximately an hour at no cost. This segment serves as a crucial platform to enhance public brand awareness and provide essential education on the sensitive yet inevitable topics of dying, death, and funerals. Participants gain invaluable insights into the company's extensive heritage and the multifaceted role of funeral directors, including the critical importance of funeral pre-planning. To foster lasting remembrance of their visit, attendees receive thoughtfully provided souvenirs and photographs.

Feedback from post-tour surveys has been overwhelmingly positive and highly encouraging. Results consistently demonstrate that these tours significantly enhance public knowledge, actively dispel inaccurate myths about death, and, most importantly, empower individuals to initiate vital end-of-life conversations with their loved ones. This initiative fosters a more informed and open dialogue within the community, reducing apprehension around these sensitive subjects.

In Singapore, the funeral profession has historically contended with a societal stigma, often perceived as a "dirty" profession. By proactively engaging in community initiatives like the "My Boon Keng Heritage Tour," Ang Chin Moh Funeral Directors not only educates the public but also plays a pivotal role in uplifting the profession's image. This initiative clearly demonstrates a tangible commitment to community well-being, showcasing how a funeral company can actively contribute to social good, foster a more compassionate society, and effectively redefine its public perception. This tour is a powerful example of how community-centric marketing can achieve both business objectives and significant social impact.

B.C. Bailey Funeral Home, Wallingford, Connecticut

Bailey Funeral Home, Plainville, Connecticut

Carpino & Bailey Funeral Home, Southbury, Connecticut

Plan With Trust: A Rapid Consumer-Protection Campaign for Connecticut Families

When news broke that a Connecticut funeral director had allegedly misappropriated funds entrusted to the funeral home for prepaid funeral arrangements, the story understandably caused fear, anger, and confusion. Families who had already made advance arrangements began questioning whether their own money was safe. Others became uncertain about whether preplanning could still be trusted at all. Bailey Family Funeral Homes recognized that the funeral profession could not respond to the scandal with silence.

Almost immediately after the story became public, our funeral home developed and launched Plan With Trust, a consumer-education campaign designed to help Connecticut residents understand how prepaid funeral arrangements should work and how they could protect themselves. Rather than focusing on the individual accused of wrongdoing or attempting to capitalize on another firm's failure, we concentrated on restoring public confidence through accurate, practical, and transparent information.

The centerpiece of the campaign was an educational video that explained the safeguards consumers should expect when prefunding funeral arrangements. The video encouraged families to ask where their money would be placed, what documentation they would receive, how the funds would be protected, and how they could verify that the appropriate trust or insurance arrangements had been established. It also emphasized that consumers should receive clear written records and should never be made to feel uncomfortable asking questions about the security of their funds.

The campaign was executed with unusual speed because we believed the public needed reliable information while the scandal was still developing. Confusion spreads quickly, particularly through social media, and families were already questioning whether all prepaid funeral funds were vulnerable. Our staff worked to prepare clear messaging, produce the video, and distribute it through the funeral home's social media platforms. A shortened version was also placed on television, allowing the information to reach people who might not follow the funeral home online or regularly seek out funeral-planning resources.

This use of both social media and television made Plan With Trust more than a traditional advertisement. It became a broad public-information campaign delivered through the same channels where many families were first hearing about the scandal. The campaign did not simply tell consumers to trust our funeral home. Instead, it gave them tools that could be used when speaking with any funeral provider. A family could take the questions and guidance presented in the video and use them to evaluate an existing arrangement or consider a new one, regardless of which funeral home they selected.

Plan With Trust also demonstrated our belief that funeral homes have an obligation to educate the public before a death occurs. Advance funeral planning can reduce uncertainty, preserve personal wishes, and ease the burden placed on surviving family members. However, those benefits depend upon trust, transparency, and responsible stewardship. When one provider violates that trust, the damage extends beyond the affected families and can undermine confidence in the entire profession. We believed it was our responsibility to address that harm directly.

The program was innovative because it combined rapid response, consumer advocacy, professional education, and mass-media outreach. Funeral homes often use television and social media to promote services. In this case, we used those platforms primarily to explain consumer rights and encourage greater accountability throughout the profession. The campaign, in the shadow of a serious failure within funeral service, showed the public that ethical funeral professionals were prepared to respond openly and constructively.

Plan With Trust reflects the values that guide Bailey Family Funeral Homes. We believe families deserve complete and understandable information, especially when they are making financial decisions

connected to death and bereavement. We also believe public confidence must be earned through consistent transparency rather than requested through advertising alone.

By acting quickly after the scandal broke, our funeral home helped replace uncertainty with practical guidance. The campaign encouraged families to ask informed questions, review their documents, and expect accountability from any funeral provider entrusted with their funds. Plan With Trust was not created merely to distinguish our funeral home from another. It was created to strengthen consumer protection, defend the integrity of ethical funeral service, and remind the community that advance planning can still be a safe and valuable act when it is completed with transparency, proper safeguards, and trust.

Cook Funeral and Cremation Services, Grandville, Michigan

Cook Funeral and Cremation Services, Byron Center, Michigan

Reyers North Valley Chapel, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Kubiak-Cook Funeral Homes, Koops Funeral Chapel, Wayland, MI

Kubiak-Cook Funeral Homes, Koops Funeral Chapel, Dorr, MI

Koops Funeral Chapel, Lake Odessa, MI

The Cook Connection originated many years ago as an internal company newsletter designed to share information, updates, and achievements among staff members. As our organization expanded its community involvement and gained access to more advanced publishing technology, the publication evolved into magazine distributed throughout the communities we serve. This transformation enabled us to extend our communication efforts beyond the organization and create a meaningful resource that highlights our commitment to service, education, and community engagement.

Today, the Cook Connection is produced entirely in-house. Our staff graphic designer oversees the layout and design process, while our professional-grade printing capabilities allow us to produce high-quality publications without relying on outside vendors. This approach provides flexibility in content development, ensures consistency with our organizational branding, and allows us to efficiently manage production timelines.

One of the most significant recent developments has been the introduction of themed editions focused on specific areas of service and community interest. An example of this initiative was the Ministry Edition released in the fall of 2025 in conjunction with Veterans Day. This publication highlighted one of our most meaningful ministries: serving veterans and their families. The edition showcased our commitment to honoring deceased veterans, supporting grieving families, and addressing the unique needs of children coping with the loss of a veteran family member. It also featured our partnerships with local veterans' organizations and support of veteran-focused programs.

Each edition of the Cook Connection contains a blend of original and curated content. Articles and photographs created by our staff are complemented by reproduced articles from contributing authors and information about community events and programs that we actively support through participation, sponsorship, or volunteer efforts. This combination of content allows the publication to serve as both an educational resource and a reflection of our ongoing community involvement.

Distribution of the publication is intentionally community-focused. Copies are provided to organizations featured within each edition and are distributed through local community partners. The magazines are also available in our funeral home lobbies and are shared during our educational and community outreach programs.

Over time, the Cook Connection has grown in popularity and influence. We regularly get requests for future topics showing and increased engagement with the publication. Our preneed staff has found the magazine to be an effective conversation starter, helping introduce individuals to our locations, services, and community involvement. Additionally, the publication has generated direct business opportunities. In several instances, families in need of funeral services discovered copies of the magazine in a loved one's home and subsequently contacted our organization. Most importantly, the Cook Connection has strengthened our reputation as a trusted community partner and reinforced our commitment to serving those who live in the communities we call home.

Through experience, we have also gained valuable insight into the production requirements necessary to maintain a quality publication. While quarterly editions were initially produced, the time required to develop relevant content, manage production, and maintain quality standards proved difficult to sustain with existing staff resources. As a result, we transitioned to producing one or two editions annually.

Production costs vary based on the length and scope of each edition, but the current publication schedule allows us to maximize community impact while ensuring long-term sustainability.

The Cook Connection continues to serve as an important communication tool, strengthening relationships within the community while showcasing the values, ministries, and services that define our organization.

Its growth from an internal newsletter to a widely distributed community publication reflects our ongoing commitment to meaningful engagement, education, and service.

Hantge-McBride-Hughes Funeral Chapel, Hutchinson, Minnesota

One of the most innovative activities executed by our funeral home is the development and presentation of comprehensive preplanning seminars designed to educate and empower members of our community. Rather than simply offering funeral preplanning services during individual appointments, we have created a collaborative educational experience that brings together professionals from several fields to address the many important decisions individuals and families face when planning for the future.

Our Preplanning Counselor, Ali Willard, serves as the host and primary facilitator of these seminars. Ali provides attendees with valuable information about the benefits of advance funeral planning, including documenting personal wishes, easing the emotional burden on loved ones, reducing stress during times of grief, and understanding available funding options. Through a compassionate and informative approach, Ali helps participants recognize that preplanning is not solely about arranging a funeral but about providing peace of mind for themselves and those they love.

What makes these seminars particularly innovative is the partnership our funeral home has established with other trusted professionals within the community. A local law office participates by discussing essential estate planning topics such as wills, trusts, powers of attorney, health care directives, and probate considerations. This allows attendees to better understand how funeral planning fits into an overall estate plan and encourages them to take a comprehensive approach to preparing for the future.

In addition, a local financial planner provides guidance on financial preparedness, long-term planning, insurance considerations, and strategies for protecting assets while ensuring funeral expenses are addressed responsibly. By incorporating financial education into the seminar, attendees gain confidence in making informed decisions that align with their personal and family goals.

When appropriate, the seminars may also include presentations from the county Veteran Service Officer. Veterans and their families often have questions regarding military funeral honors, burial benefits, cemetery eligibility, and government assistance. Having a knowledgeable Veteran Service Officer available allows eligible veterans to receive accurate information directly from an expert and ensures they understand the benefits they have earned through their service.

Based off of audience and community interest, we have recently been holding these seminars at local churches. The associated pastor or clergy member may also participate if willing. The pastor offers insight into the emotional and spiritual aspects of end-of-life planning, discusses the importance of communicating final wishes with family members, and addresses questions regarding funeral ceremonies and faith traditions. Their presence reinforces the seminar's focus on caring for the whole person—emotionally, spiritually, and practically.

This collaborative model distinguishes our funeral home from traditional approaches to funeral education. Instead of focusing solely on funeral arrangements, our seminars provide a well-rounded educational experience that addresses legal, financial, spiritual, and personal planning needs in one convenient setting. Attendees appreciate having access to multiple trusted professionals who can answer questions and provide reliable information without the pressure of making immediate decisions.

These seminars also strengthen relationships between our funeral home and other respected community organizations while demonstrating our commitment to serving families beyond the time of death. By proactively educating individuals before a crisis occurs, we foster trust, encourage informed decision-making, and position our funeral home as a valuable community resource.

Ultimately, our preplanning seminars represent an innovative outreach initiative that reflects our dedication to exceptional service and community engagement. Through the leadership of Preplanning Counselor Ali Willard and the collaboration of local attorneys, financial planners, Veteran Service Officers, and pastors, we provide meaningful education that helps families prepare confidently for the future while reinforcing our funeral home's mission of compassionate care, professional guidance, and lifelong community support.

Heath Funeral Chapel & Crematory, Lakeland, Florida

Heath Funeral Chapel has introduced an innovative and welcoming program called “Mornings with Meaning,” an informal gathering designed to make preneed funeral planning more approachable, comfortable, and accessible for everyone in the community.

For many people, discussing funeral planning can feel intimidating or overwhelming. Questions about costs, personal wishes, and future arrangements are often delayed because individuals simply do not know where to begin. Heath Funeral Chapel recognized this challenge and created a unique environment where people could learn at their own pace without feeling pressured or obligated to make decisions immediately.

Mornings with Meaning was built around a simple concept: coffee, conversation, and education. Guests were invited to enjoy a relaxed morning atmosphere with freshly brewed coffee, light refreshments, and friendly discussion while members of the Heath Funeral Chapel team answered questions about preneed planning.

Unlike traditional presentations or formal seminars, these gatherings focused on creating genuine conversations. There were no sales pitches, no uncomfortable pressure, and no expectations beyond providing valuable information. Attendees were encouraged to ask anything that was on their minds, whether they were planning for themselves, a spouse, aging parents, or simply gathering information for the future.

Topics discussed during Mornings with Meaning included the benefits of preplanning funeral services, options for burial and cremation, personalizing ceremonies, financial considerations, and documenting final wishes. Participants also learned how planning ahead could relieve emotional and financial burdens on loved ones during difficult times.

The relaxed setting helped remove much of the fear associated with discussing end-of-life planning. Sharing a cup of coffee created an atmosphere that felt more like visiting with neighbors than attending an informational event. People discovered that preplanning was not about dwelling on mortality, but rather about creating peace of mind and ensuring their values and preferences would be honored.

The program also strengthened Heath Funeral Chapel's relationship with the community. By opening its doors in an informal and welcoming way, the funeral home demonstrated its commitment to education, compassion, and service beyond times of immediate need. The staff members became trusted guides rather than unfamiliar faces encountered only during moments of grief.

Mornings with Meaning represented a modern approach to funeral planning by meeting people where they were emotionally and making difficult conversations easier to begin. The program reminded everyone that planning ahead was ultimately an act of love and consideration for family members.

Through coffee, kindness, and meaningful conversation, Heath Funeral Chapel created a space where uncertainty could be replaced with understanding and anxiety could be replaced with confidence. Mornings with Meaning transformed preneed planning from a daunting subject into an opportunity for connection, preparation, and peace of mind.

Holman-Howe Funeral Homes, Lebanon, Missouri

Allee-Holman-Howe Funeral Home, Camdenton, Missouri

At Holman-Howe Funeral Home we are developing a culture of ever present self- improvement and development of better ways to tell our story. We also are committed to connecting to our market with the latest technology with media that is innovative and current. As traditional sources such as newspaper and radio decline, we have sought out opportunities to share our story and promote our brand digitally.

Our community has moved forward with an aggressive digital provider called Lebanon Now. They not only provide content for social media but they have expanded to do live news and special interest production. The response has been impressive and it has been well received by the community.

We were approached by Lebanon Now to create a production featuring our business. Since our firm is one of the oldest continually operated businesses in the area it seemed a natural to explore the history of our business. After much thought, the title of the documentary was selected as "THE HOME". This seemed appropriate as it reflected warmth and stability and followed the history of the funeral home starting in a residential "home".

Much care and detail was given by funeral home staff who researched archives, files and photos beginning before the funeral home opened and included the history of the original builder and significant owners pre-funeral home. We used the internet and other sources to delve into interesting side stories that would make the production more than just a narrative about a funeral home. Much care was given to develop a script that was creative and clever and yet told our story including photos and graphics. We included stories that had been passed down through the generations and it was rewarding to verify the accuracy of what we had been told through research.

Holman-Howe is unique in that we have several historical items that reflect our history. In our production, we featured our collection of antique model funeral cars and ambulances, our fleet of antique funeral cars which are used regularly on request as well as numerous funeral memorabilia reflecting the profession as a whole. Many of these items were presented and discussed and the response was overwhelming.

We also featured many of the new and innovative services that go into the production of a "personalized" service. Focus was given to the background of everything we do from the preparation room to production of digital video and custom service programs which are personalized for each service.

The actual production of the broadcast was always interesting given the practical facts of working around services, weather and making sure every line was accurate and well presented. Ken Howe and his son, Taylor tag teamed topics which were edited and then through production general narration was added to make the production flow. Great care was given to set the stage and create a level of drama to keep it interesting. The Lebanon Now team edited and tweaked the narrative and put together a production in which we all could be proud! We were astonished that our community was so interested and the view numbers were phenomenal!

Although it was a time consuming project, we feel it was landmark accomplishment for our team to put together. We were flattered that Lebanon Now viewed our company worthy of the time and effort and they were very impressed with the community response to the final production.

Hughes Family Tribute Center, Dallas, Texas

Hughes Family Tribute Center strives to think outside of the box when it comes to our services, but we also want to give our community something special as well. For years we have been struggling to implement an effective pre-need program in our area to gather people at one location for us to discuss the benefits of pre-planning and our pre-planning options. That changed when one of our staff members came up with our new program: Paint & Plan.

The concept of Paint & Plan is to host a step-by-step, instructor-led painting class for people to attend for free at our funeral home. While there, not only do people from the community get to see our building, but they also get to meet with our staff members who attend either to paint or who are leading the painting class. In the middle of the Paint & Plan, one of our funeral directors gets up to give a very informal explanation of pre-planning, its benefits, and how our funeral home can help them develop a pre-planned arrangement.

So far we have conducted five Paint & Plans over the course of 10 months. We have found that Paint & Plan benefits our staff by getting them in front of community members and present information on pre-needs in very informal and personable ways that establishes more rooted connections. Our staff members also receive commissions on pre-planned arrangements, so their participation in Paint & Plan increases the likelihood of earning an extra commission. Our community benefits from Paint & Plan by receiving a free, entertaining painting lesson while avoiding the awkward situation of sitting at a formal presentation or Lunch & Learn at a restaurant. At Paint & Plan, people are encouraged to get to know the people at their table, make connections, and just have fun.

Although we are currently not partnered with any organization, that is an idea that is currently in the works as we develop our Paint & Plan program. As we have developed and grown our Paint & Plan event, we have made many improvements. One improvement was making Paint & Plan less of a painting class and more like a party with painting involved. We have also brought food into Paint & Plan because more people are willing to listen to what you have to say when they have a full stomach.

We are excited to see how Paint & Plan will continue to grow.

Memorial Vera Cruz, Paso Fundo, RS, Brazil

“What Nobody Told You” Podcast

The podcast “What Nobody Told You” was created with the purpose of opening up space for in-depth conversations about topics that are part of everyone's lives, but that are often little discussed in an open and welcoming way. The project's proposal is to bring together different perspectives to reflect on issues related to memory, mourning, relationships, spirituality and the meaning of life, promoting dialogues that invite reflection and personal growth.

The first season featured guests who have distinguished careers in their fields. In the first episode, the director of Memorial Vera Cruz, Felipe Badotti, shares his experience of more than two decades in the memorial services sector, addressing topics such as purpose, innovation, welcoming families and the importance of seeing farewell as part of the human journey.

The second episode welcomed communicator Rochele Conrad, who brought a light and at the same time deep conversation about communication, human relationships, emotions and the way in which the stories we live influence our way of seeing the world. Her participation contributed to expanding the dialogue about connections, listening and empathy.

The third episode was attended by the Parish Priest of Our Lady of Fátima Parish, Father Érico Martins. In a chat marked by reflections on faith, hope and spirituality, the priest shared his vision on life's challenges, the role of the community and the importance of finding meaning even in the most difficult times. And Father Érico is very connected with the community in which the Memorial Vera Cruz is located, and he is the one who usually comes to pay tribute and say goodbye at wakes, in addition to praying at the monthly masses that take place in our cemetery.

Each episode lasts an average of one hour, allowing the themes to be developed in depth, without rushing and with space for genuine reflections. The complete content was made available on Memorial Vera Cruz's YouTube channel, offering the public the opportunity to follow the conversations in full. Furthermore, several cuts were produced and published on social media, making the main insights more accessible and expanding the scope of discussions.

More than a podcast, “What Nobody Said” is an invitation to listen to stories, share experiences and reflect on topics that are part of human existence, but that do not always find space in everyday conversations.

New episodes are already scheduled for the next semester, as there was a lot of interaction and engagement from the community and families.

Below, links to the first three episodes and screenshots of the videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jJAbIUmb1c&t=547s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3euvjmmPZg&t=66s> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3B-Kpv7JVE&t=2819s>

Morris-Baker Funeral Home and Cremation Services, Johnson City, Tennessee

Crucial Conversations: Building Stronger Communities Through Better Dialogue

For many years, Morris-Baker Funeral Home has emphasized the importance of communication—not only within our organization, but throughout the community we serve. The rationale for our Crucial Conversations initiative originated from a simple observation: many workplace conflicts, family disagreements, and community challenges are not caused by bad intentions, but by an inability to discuss difficult topics effectively when emotions are high and opinions differ. After experiencing the positive impact of Crucial Conversations training within our own funeral home, we recognized an opportunity to make these skills available to others in our region.

To accomplish this goal, Morris-Baker partnered with Summit Leadership, a local nonprofit organization dedicated to professional and personal development. Morris-Baker served as the program sponsor and organizer, providing financial underwriting, planning support, promotion, and logistical coordination. Summit Leadership assisted with community outreach and event administration, helping extend the program's reach across Northeast Tennessee.

On April 14–15, 2026, the partnership hosted a public two-day Crucial Conversations course. The training teaches nine practical skills designed to help individuals navigate difficult conversations, reduce conflict, improve accountability, and strengthen relationships. Participants included business leaders, nonprofit staff, healthcare professionals, educators, funeral service professionals, and community members.

The 2026 program represented a significant advancement over previous years. Most notably, the course received approval from the State of Tennessee for continuing education credit, making the training more valuable to licensed professionals. In addition, Morris-Baker owner and funeral director Preston McKee became a certified Crucial Learning trainer and served as the volunteer instructor. This achievement allows the organization to offer training more affordably and more frequently while ensuring long-term sustainability of the program. It also provides the funeral profession with a 30-year licensed funeral director capable of teaching these communication principles to colleagues in the industry.

The benefits to Morris-Baker and its staff have been substantial. The training reinforces the communication skills that are essential in funeral service, where employees routinely interact with grieving families, coordinate complex arrangements, and collaborate closely as a team. During the April 14–15, 2026 session, two Morris-Baker full-time employees completed the training, bringing the organization even closer to its long-standing goal of training every full-time employee in Crucial Conversations. As a result, only one full-time employee remained who had not yet completed the course. Having a certified trainer within the organization also creates ongoing opportunities for staff development, leadership growth, and future training opportunities for both employees and funeral service professionals throughout the region.

The benefits to families and the broader community are equally significant. Participants gain tools that help them address conflict respectfully, communicate more effectively, and preserve important relationships during difficult circumstances. These skills can improve workplace culture, strengthen nonprofit organizations, enhance customer service, and foster healthier interactions throughout the community.

By expanding access to high-quality communication training, securing continuing education approval, developing internal training capacity, and moving closer to the goal of training every full-time employee in these skills, Morris-Baker has transformed a successful professional development program into a sustainable community resource. The initiative reflects our belief that stronger conversations create stronger organizations, stronger relationships, and ultimately a stronger community.

Pray Funeral Home, Charlotte, Michigan

Increasingly we are approached with questions and ideas about death traditions in other cultures. Last year, we hosted a Russian Tea party, hosted by a member of our community, Inna Phelps. This year, Inna approached Joe Pray with a follow up to the Russian Tea, to make it bigger and better. Originally from Eastern Europe and with deep personal experience traveling in North Africa, Inna immigrated to the United States in 2000 and settled in the Charlotte area. Many recognize her as a talented hairdresser, a dedicated paraprofessional in local schools, and a passionate storyteller and performer. She has previously curated culturally themed rooms at the Courthouse Square Museum, hosted tea gatherings, and performed at various local venues. Inna was now eager to team up with our staff to host a Moroccan Tea Party at the funeral home, centered on Moroccan traditions and funeral customs from the broader Middle Eastern region.

Food and hospitality are at the heart of Moroccan culture, and nowhere is this more evident than in the traditional Moroccan mint tea ritual and family gatherings. Joe E. Pray used his creative approach to transform our visitation room into an intimate Moroccan tea salon, complete with ornate brass and silver tea trays, patterned textiles, lanterns, and a beautifully designed tea service that evoked the feeling of stepping into a riad courtyard. Guests enjoyed the classic Moroccan mint tea—green tea infused with fresh mint and sugar—served in small glasses from a height, following the custom that aerates the tea and creates the characteristic “turban” of foam. Alongside the tea, Inna and our staff presented an array of authentic hors d’oeuvres and sweets inspired by Moroccan cuisine, including nut-filled pastries and spiced treats that highlighted the region’s rich flavors. Inna also prepared a vibrant cultural display featuring traditional textiles, decorative tea sets, and keepsakes from her travels, offering guests a window into everyday life, rituals, and mourning practices in Morocco and neighboring countries.

Nearly 100 people attended from up to 30 miles away, far exceeding expectations and mirroring the strong response we saw with our earlier cultural programs. Once guests arrived, they had the chance to experience the warmth and camaraderie of the tearoom, the specialty food and artistic displays, and an atmosphere designed to encourage conversation. The evening featured an engaging presentation and discussion led by Inna about her encounters with Moroccan and Middle Eastern funeral traditions, and how many immigrant families experience differences between ceremonies “back home” and services in the United States. Guests and funeral home staff alike were surprised by both the distinctions and the similarities—such as the importance of hospitality, gathering the community, and honoring the stories of the deceased—that connect Moroccan customs with our own practices. The event offered meaningful benefits for the funeral home team and the community at large, fostering open dialogue on death, memorialization, and cultural heritage, while deepening appreciation for the many ways families around the world remember and celebrate their loved ones.

The success of the Moroccan Tea Party has helped it become another cornerstone in a planned series at Pray Funeral Home showcasing funeral traditions from around the world. By welcoming our neighbors into the funeral home for a free educational and cultural experience, complete with tea, food, and storytelling, we continue to demonstrate our commitment to community engagement and to serving families with understanding and respect for their unique cultural backgrounds. This program reinforced our belief that when people learn about diverse rituals surrounding death and remembrance, they gain new language, images, and ideas for creating healing, personalized services of their own.

Spann Funeral Home & Cremation Services, Dickson, Tennessee

Humphreys County Funeral Home, Waverly, Tennessee

Before the Call Comes: The Journey: Resources, Relationships, and the Road Ahead.

There is a conversation that funeral directors across the country have quietly been having for decades, usually with each other and rarely out loud: the families we serve arrive at the worst moment of their lives almost entirely unprepared. Not because they are irresponsible, but because no one has given them an accessible, low-pressure way to prepare. Legal documents are not in order. Financial plans are incomplete. End-of-life wishes have never been discussed. Hospice is misunderstood or unknown. Grief resources are invisible until grief arrives. And the funeral home, the one institution that knows more than any other about what families face when a death occurs, sits largely silent until the phone rings.

At Spann Funeral Home and Cremation Services in Dickson, Tennessee, we decided to change that. On Saturday, June 7, 2025, we hosted The Journey: Resources, Relationships, and the Road Ahead; a free, five-hour community resource event that brought together eight professional organizations from across the region under one roof, with the explicit purpose of reaching families before the call comes.

Rationale: Why This Program Was Needed

Dickson County is a rural Middle Tennessee community of approximately 55,000 residents. Like most rural communities, it has a high concentration of families who lack convenient, accessible pathways to professional guidance on end-of-life planning, legal preparation, and grief support. A 2023 report by the National Funeral Directors Association noted that fewer than 22 percent of Americans have made any funeral prearrangements, and research by Caring.com has consistently found that fewer than one-third of American adults have a will or estate plan in place. In communities like ours, where professional resources are geographically dispersed and where cultural norms often discourage open conversation about death and planning, these numbers skew even lower.

The consequences of this unpreparedness are visible to every funeral professional. Families making arrangement decisions in acute grief, without prior knowledge of their options. Estates left without legal documentation, creating confusion and conflict among surviving family members. Hospice services enrolled too late, or not at all, because families did not understand what hospice offers and when to ask for it. Grief that goes unsupported because families do not know where to turn.

Spann Funeral Home sees the results of this gap with every family we serve. The Journey was our answer to it; a proactive, community-centered effort to put the right information in front of families before they need it urgently.

Detailed Description of the Program

The Journey was held on Saturday, June 7, 2025, at Spann Funeral Home and Cremation Services, 1961 Highway 48 North, Dickson, Tennessee, from 9:00 AM to 2:00 PM. The event was free and open to the entire public with no registration required.

Planning for The Journey began approximately two to three months in advance, with Managing Director Jacob Beard and the Spann Funeral Home team identifying and recruiting partner organizations, developing the event layout, coordinating logistics, and building a promotional strategy centered on Facebook and digital outreach. Almost the entire Spann staff participated on the day of the event: directing attendees, staffing information areas, preparing and serving food and refreshments, and ensuring that every person who walked through the door felt genuinely welcomed.

The format was a come-and-go community resource fair. There were no required sessions, no scheduled presentations, and no time pressure. Attendees moved through at their own pace, engaged with the organizations and resources most relevant to their situation, and left when they were ready. This format

was intentional; it communicates immediately that The Journey exists to serve attendees, not to sell them anything.

Eight professional organizations participated as resource partners, each staffing a dedicated area and providing information, materials, and direct consultation to attendees:

Caris Hospice provided information about hospice and palliative care services, what hospice is, when families should consider it, how to initiate a referral, and what families can expect from the hospice journey. For many Dickson County residents, this was their first opportunity to ask questions about hospice in a calm, unhurried environment. NHC Home Health provided information about home health and skilled nursing services, helping families understand the continuum of care available to aging or ill loved ones and how to navigate transitions between care settings.

Matthews Aurora Funeral Products and Wilbert Vault Company provided funeral and cremation product information, helping families understand their merchandise options; from traditional caskets and burial vaults to alternative and personalized selections, without the time pressure of an active arrangement conference.

Larkspur Conservation, a nationally recognized conservation burial ground, provided information about green burial and conservation burial options. This partnership was particularly meaningful given Spann's February 2026 Green Burial Council certification as only the second funeral home in Tennessee to earn this distinction, and gave Dickson County families direct access to one of the leading conservation burial providers in the region.

A licensed grief counselor provided attendees with grief support information, resources, and informal consultation, bringing professional grief care into a community setting where it is rarely available outside of a clinical context.

Edward Jones Financial Services provided information about financial planning, estate planning strategies, and the financial considerations families face when a death occurs without adequate preparation.

A local estate planning attorney provided information about wills, powers of attorney, healthcare directives, beneficiary designations, and other legal documents that families consistently arrive at funeral arrangements without having completed.

Spann Funeral Home staff provided information about the full range of Spann's services: traditional burial, cremation, green burial, pre-planning, and aftercare. As well as guided attendees through the Journey Selections Catalog, Spann's newly developed magazine-style service guide.

Guided facility tours were offered throughout the day, and they became one of the most meaningful and talked-about elements of The Journey. Spann staff walked community members through the entire facility, including the embalming room and the on-site crematory, both of which are rarely if ever seen by the families and community members who entrust us with their loved ones. Staff answered questions openly and honestly at every stop, without script and without limitation. For many attendees, seeing the preparation room and crematory demystified a process that had previously existed only in imagination, and replaced anxiety with understanding. Several attendees described the tour as the most impactful part of their day. For a community that places deep trust in Spann Funeral Home, being invited behind the scenes was not just informative, it was an act of respect.

Food and refreshments were prepared and served by Spann staff throughout the event, reinforcing the welcoming, unhurried atmosphere the team had worked to create.

Benefits to Spann Funeral Home and Staff

The Journey had significant and lasting benefits for Spann Funeral Home and its team. For staff, hosting the event was a source of genuine professional pride, a day defined by helpfulness, warmth, and community connection rather than by grief and crisis.

From a strategic perspective, The Journey introduced Spann Funeral Home to community members who had never walked through our doors, deepened relationships with professional partners whose referrals benefit the families we serve, and established Spann's identity as a proactive community resource rather than a reactive service provider. The event was the public debut of the Journey brand; the name, the catalog, and the positioning, and gave the entire community a first look at a Spann Funeral Home that defines itself by the full arc of a family's journey, not only by the hours of a single service.

The event also generated exceptional digital reach. The Facebook promotion for The Journey achieved approximately 26,000 views, a remarkable number for an independent funeral home in a county of 55,000 residents, and a demonstration of the depth of community interest in the kind of accessible, practical end-of-life resource event The Journey provided. This digital reach extended Spann's visibility well beyond our existing audience and into households that had never previously engaged with our brand.

Benefits to Families and the Community

The most direct benefit of The Journey was straightforward: families in Dickson County had access, for one morning and afternoon, to eight professional organizations covering the full landscape of end-of-life planning and support, legal, financial, medical, hospice, grief, funeral, and conservation burial, in one accessible, free, welcoming location.

For a rural community where these resources are geographically dispersed and where cultural norms often make proactive end-of-life planning conversations difficult to initiate, The Journey addressed a genuine structural gap. Families who attended left with legal resources they had been meaning to pursue. Families who had never considered hospice understood it for the first time. Families who had never heard of green burial left with information about a growing option that Spann is now uniquely positioned to provide. Families who had anxiously avoided thinking about funeral planning had walked through a funeral home on their own terms, in daylight, with refreshments, surrounded by neighbors, and found it far less intimidating than they had imagined.

The facility tours were a community benefit that is difficult to quantify but easy to describe. Many people attend a funeral home for the first time in acute grief, under time pressure, with almost no prior context. The Journey gave community members the opportunity to see Spann's facility on their own terms, ask the questions they had always wondered about, and leave with a fundamentally different relationship to a place that many people find anxiety-inducing. That shift in familiarity has real and lasting value for families when the time comes that they need us most.

Partner Organization Roles Spann Funeral Home served as the sole organizing host of The Journey; conceiving the event, recruiting partner organizations, providing the venue, managing all logistics, developing and executing the promotional strategy, and staffing the event with nearly our entire team. All food, refreshments, and hospitality were provided by Spann.

Partner organizations: Caris Hospice, NHC Home Health, Matthews Aurora Funeral Products, Wilbert Vault Company, Larkspur Conservation, a licensed grief counselor, Edward Jones Financial Services, and a local estate planning attorney, served as resource providers. Each organization was responsible for staffing their own information area, bringing their own materials and literature, and engaging directly with attendees who sought their specific expertise.

No partner paid to participate. No attendee paid to attend. No sales activity was conducted at the event. The only exchange that took place at The Journey was the exchange of information, and the building of relationships, between community members and the professionals who can serve them, and between the Dickson County community and Spann Funeral Home.

The Journey as an Annual Commitment

The Journey is not a one-time event. It is a commitment. The community response, and particularly the 26,000-view Facebook reach, which demonstrated that the appetite for this kind of accessible resource

event extends well beyond the families who were able to attend in person, confirmed that The Journey meets a genuine and ongoing need in Dickson County and the surrounding region.

Spann Funeral Home intends to host The Journey as an annual event, growing its partner network, expanding its promotional reach, and continuing to refine the experience based on what we learn each year. The name, the brand, the catalog, and the event are all part of a single, coherent vision: a funeral home that walks with the community through the full arc of life's most important decisions, not only through the hours of a single service, but through every step of The Journey.

Thomas McAfee Funeral Home - Downtown, Greenville, South Carolina

Thomas McAfee Funeral Home - Northwest, Greenville, South Carolina

Thomas McAfee Funeral Home - Southeast, Simpsonville, South Carolina

Gray Mortuary, Pelzer, South Carolina

On Monday, March 2, 2026, at Brookland Baptist Church in West Columbia, South Carolina, the Reverend Dr. Charles B. Jackson, Sr. explained to a congregation of mourners why many African traditions avoid saying that someone has "departed." He quoted Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:8: to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. But he did not stop there.

Pastor Jackson reminded those gathered that they had not come together to mourn a departure. They had come to praise, sing, shout, and celebrate their loved one's arrival.

That single word stayed with me.

As Director of Community Outreach at Thomas McAfee Funeral Homes, I spend much of my day thinking about how to reach people who don't know who we are or what we do. It still surprises me when someone notices my name badge in a grocery store and asks where we are located or what I do at a funeral home. Those brief conversations become golden opportunities to introduce our mission, explain our services, and hopefully leave a lasting impression.

In June 2025, I emailed an idea to Jay McAfee, CFO and fifth-generation owner of Thomas McAfee Funeral Homes. I proposed creating a professional development presentation for our funeral directors that explored the cultural differences surrounding funeral traditions in our growing community, with particular emphasis on the rich and vibrant African American homegoing experience.

When examining a ritual shaped by generations of history, faith, geography, and culture, I wanted to understand not only what happens during the ceremony, but why it happens. What purpose do these traditions serve? How do they help a community grieve?

People often tell me they dislike attending funerals and do so only out of obligation. My observations within the African American community have often been different. The homegoing creates a sacred space where mourners gather not only to comfort one another but to confront mortality honestly while celebrating a life fully lived. It acknowledges grief without allowing grief to have the final word.

The response to my proposal was encouraging. Thomas McAfee Funeral Homes, founded in 1913, has faithfully served families for more than a century. While its history began by serving a much narrower population, the communities we serve today continue to grow in diversity. My motivation was to help my colleagues better understand funeral traditions that may differ from their own and, in doing so, strengthen our ability to care for every family with greater cultural awareness and compassion.

The original presentation date was during African American History Month on the first Wednesday in February 2026. Then life intervened. Summer gave way to an exceptionally busy fall, followed by an even busier holiday season. I realized this project deserved more thoughtful preparation than my schedule allowed. Rather than rush it, I gave myself permission to postpone the presentation until March.

While researching and organizing my material, I was privileged to serve two African American families from the same church whose homegoing celebrations were held just three days apart—one on Monday, February 16, and another on Thursday, February 19. During the first service, I spent time studying an African American History Month display that highlighted influential local leaders who had shaped the Upstate. There I noticed the name of Reverend Jesse Jackson and learned that he was a native son of Greenville, South Carolina.

Between those two services, something unexpected happened.

On Tuesday, February 17—my birthday—the Reverend Jesse Jackson completed his earthly journey.

The timing felt remarkable.

Birthdays naturally invite reflection on one's life, but because of Reverend Jackson's death and my research assignment, I found myself taking a much deeper look into his extraordinary life. I knew only fragments of his story from history books. Now, through the lens of his hometown, I began to appreciate a lifetime marked by racial injustice, personal challenges, unwavering faith, and courageous leadership during the Civil Rights Movement. I discovered not only the public figure but the devoted son whose mother encouraged his calling while remaining in South Carolina as he carried his ministry to Illinois and beyond.

While hard at work tweaking my presentation, the plans for the highly anticipated homegoing events and ceremonies for the revered activist were discussed in the media. I was curious where his funeral would be held and most importantly, would it be livestreamed for the world to view.

I knew from the moment I started that the conclusion of my presentation would feature, in my opinion, the most inspired and moving element of the homegoing celebration: music.

The carefully chosen hymns, gifted soloists, responsive congregation, Hammond organ, and spontaneous expressions of praise are not simply artistic additions to the service. They are central to the emotional and spiritual journey of the community. The congregation singing energizes the mourners and communicates messages of hope and salvation.

I realized the best way to inform my colleagues about this tradition was not merely to describe it but to let them experience it. Although I didn't share the following event in my presentation, I feel it is important to explain it in this essay. It was during an African American homegoing in a Baptist Church in New England where, for the first time in my career, I cried for someone I had never met.

The soloist sang "His Eye Is on the Sparrow."

I still remember the way he floated through the opening verse, stretching each word so each syllable settled into the hearts of those listening. Gradually, his voice grew stronger. The tempo changed. The congregation responded. The Hammond organ seemed to vibrate through the sanctuary floor, up the pews, and into every person present. The music became physical before it became emotional.

I felt profound sorrow for the family grieving the loss of a young man.

Then, almost without realizing it, that sorrow transformed into joy.

Tears streamed down my face—not only because of death, but because of hope. That experience forever changed my understanding of what a funeral could be.

I wanted my colleagues at Thomas McAfee to experience something similar. The rituals of the African American homegoing are neither right nor wrong, better nor worse than other funeral traditions. They exist because generations of people found ways to persevere through unimaginable suffering, loss, injustice, and separation. Like every meaningful ritual, they continue to evolve, yet the essence remains unchanged.

The homegoing celebrates freedom.

It honors legacy.

It acknowledges grief while proclaiming victory.

It recognizes the painful separation from loved ones while rejoicing in their arrival into eternal life.

As I searched for the perfect conclusion to my presentation, I found exactly what I had been looking for.

Jennifer Hudson's unforgettable performance of "Amazing Grace" during Aretha Franklin's homegoing.

As Hudson's powerful voice filled the sanctuary, my attention shifted beyond the music.

Slowly making his way across the platform was the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

He took his seat in a place of honor while the faces around him reflected decades of shared memories, admiration, grief, and gratitude.

Watching that moment, | felt my the same familiar surge of emotion | had experienced years earlier.

| did not know Aretha Franklin personally, but | understood why those gathered celebrated her life so passionately.

The music gave people permission to grieve openly, remember joyfully, and proclaim hope all at once.

That is the remarkable gift of the African American homegoing.

It compels mourners to embrace pain without surrendering to despair. Through praise, testimony, music, and community, sorrow gradually gives way to peace. It is beautiful because it is honest. It refuses to deny death, but it also refuses to let death define the final chapter.

On that Monday afternoon at Brookland Baptist Church, Reverend Dr. Charles B. Jackson, Sr. reminded us that our language matters.

We need not speak only of departure. Perhaps, instead, we should celebrate arrival.

| presented to my colleagues on Wednesday, March 4, 2026, and felt great peace afterwards. In sharing my personal and professional growth with others, | allowed myself to reflect and revisit some of my best memories, my defining moments. Several colleagues praised the presentation and remarked on the enjoyment of learning something new after so many years of serving families...that was the highest Compliment I could have ever received!

Many kind words and follow up questions came to me over the weeks following, and | welcomed a larger conversation about funeral service in the Upstate and how Thomas McAfee will develop future generations of directors and associates to be culturally responsive professionals.

| have been richly blessed by the generosity of the McAfee Family for encouraging education and growth within our profession, by the countless professionals in my past who shared their wisdom and experience, and most of all by the many families who have welcomed me into their hearts on their hardest days...I thank you all.

When my own earthly journey is complete, | hope those | love gather not merely to mourn my absence, but to celebrate my arrival—with tears of gratitude, songs of praise, and joyful appreciation for a life that, however imperfectly, sought to love and serve others.