



Pursuit of Excellence

2026 Innovative Ideas Essays

**Funeral Home Facilities Programs and Services:
Grief Support and Aftercare**

Arlington Memorial Chapels, Inc., Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines

The Day After

Redefining Funeral Aftercare Through Compassion, Community, and Continuing Care At Arlington Memorial Chapels and Crematory, we have always believed that our responsibility to families extends far beyond arranging a funeral. While we are entrusted with helping families celebrate a life well lived and say goodbye with dignity, we have also witnessed a quieter reality that unfolds after the services conclude.

The flowers begin to wilt. Visitors return to their own lives. Phone calls become less frequent. The routines of the world slowly resume.

But for the family left behind, grief is only beginning.

For more than four decades, Arlington has stood beside families during one of the most difficult days of their lives. Yet through thousands of conversations, one truth became increasingly evident: the day after the funeral is often when people feel the most alone.

As funeral professionals, we asked ourselves a simple but profound question: How can Arlington continue walking beside families long after the funeral has ended? How do we extend our support beyond the halls of Arlington?

That question became the inspiration behind The Day After—an original aftercare initiative designed to support grieving individuals not only through resources, but through connection, conversation, and community.

Rather than producing another grief booklet or informational brochure, Arlington envisioned something far more personal: a companion that could be returned to whenever it was needed, without expectation or pressure. Something that acknowledged that grief is deeply personal, rarely linear, and different for every individual.

The result is The Day After Kit.

Unlike traditional grief resources organized around "stages of grief," the kit embraces modern grief research by recognizing that grief does not unfold in predictable steps. Individuals may experience multiple emotions within the same day, revisit emotions months later, or never encounter certain experiences at all. There is no checklist to complete and no timeline to follow.

Instead, the kit was intentionally organized around nine common emotional experiences that many people encounter throughout their grief journey, allowing readers to simply choose the envelope that reflects what they are feeling in that moment.

Each envelope contains a compassionate letter that gently helps readers feel understood, three practical action cards that offer small evidence-informed ways to navigate the emotion, a grounding affirmation, and a journal prompt encouraging quiet reflection.

The nine emotional experiences include:

- When Everything Feels Unreal — exploring the disbelief, numbness, and disorientation that often accompany the earliest days after loss.
- When the House Gets Quiet — acknowledging the loneliness that emerges when the visitors leave and everyday routines suddenly feel unfamiliar.
- When It Suddenly Hits You — helping readers understand the unexpected waves of grief that may arise from memories, places, sounds, or seemingly ordinary moments.
- When There's Too Much To Handle — supporting those overwhelmed by the emotional and practical responsibilities that continue despite their grief.
- When You Miss Them — creating space for longing, remembrance, and the ordinary moments that reveal how deeply someone was woven into everyday life.

- When You Don't Know What To Do With Their Things — offering permission to make decisions about belongings in one's own time, free from guilt or outside expectations.
- When You Feel Okay (And Then Feel Guilty) — reassuring readers that moments of joy do not diminish the love they continue to carry.
- Moving Forward — reframing healing not as leaving someone behind, but as learning to carry their love into the future.
- The Anniversary — helping families navigate birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, and significant dates with intention, remembrance, and self-compassion.

Each envelope was intentionally designed to answer four quiet questions: What am I feeling? Why might I be feeling this? What might help today? What can I carry with me after I close this envelope?

By focusing on emotional experiences rather than prescribed stages, the kit provides something many grieving people are quietly searching for: permission to grieve in their own way.

As development continued, the Arlington team recognized another challenge experienced by grieving families.

Often, people genuinely want to help—but simply do not know what to say.

Friends fear saying the wrong thing. Family members grieving the same loss struggle to begin difficult conversations. Even those grieving often find it difficult to express what they need.

This insight inspired the creation of The Day After Conversation Cards.

Rather than functioning as a game or workbook, the cards were designed as gentle conversation starters that create opportunities for connection during moments when words are hardest to find. The deck is organized into four thoughtfully designed collections.

Conversations With Someone You Trust encourages meaningful dialogue between grieving individuals and the people supporting them, helping both sides better understand each other's experiences.

Conversations With Those Who Are Also Grieving invites families and friends to remember together through stories, reflections, and shared memories, strengthening connection while honoring the life of the person they have lost.

Gentle Things to Try Today offers practical, evidence-informed actions that help individuals care for themselves through simple, manageable steps during difficult days.

Finally, Moments to Reflect provides thoughtful journal prompts that encourage personal reflection, emotional processing, and self-compassion.

Every conversation card was intentionally written to allow anyone in the group to draw a card, answer, listen, or simply pass. In doing so, the cards reinforce one of the guiding philosophies of the initiative:

There is no right way to grieve, and there is no right way to participate.

What makes The Day After especially meaningful is that it is entirely an Arlington initiative. Every concept, letter, affirmation, journal prompt, conversation card, and activity was conceptualized, researched, written, edited, designed, and produced internally by the Arlington team. The content was developed by Arlington executives and team members whose collective decades of experience serving thousands of grieving families provided the insight that shaped every page of the kit.

While grounded in lived experience, Arlington also recognized the importance of ensuring that every message reflected current grief psychology. Contemporary grief research informed the development of each envelope, while psychiatrists and mental health professionals reviewed the completed materials to ensure they were psychologically sound, compassionate, and appropriate for families navigating bereavement.

The result is an original body of work that combines professional funeral experience with evidence-based psychological understanding—created not by outside publishers, but by the very people who have spent

years caring for families during life's most difficult moments. Yet even the most thoughtfully written resource cannot replace the healing power of human connection.

Recognizing this, Arlington expanded The Day After beyond the kit itself.

Throughout Metro Manila, Arlington is launching The Day After Community Gatherings—free pop-up grief support sessions facilitated by trained grief counselors. While invitations are extended to Arlington client families, every gathering remains open to the public, reflecting Arlington's belief that compassionate grief support should never be limited by whether someone has previously engaged our services.

Held in different communities throughout Metro Manila, these gatherings provide safe, welcoming spaces where individuals can share stories, listen without judgment, and discover that they are not alone in their journey.

Using The Day After Kit as the foundation for each session, participants engage with the envelopes, conversation cards, reflections, and guided activities in a supportive environment where healing is nurtured not only through professional facilitation, but through community itself. Strangers become companions.

Stories become bridges. Silence becomes shared understanding. In a society where grief is often experienced privately, these gatherings seek to rebuild something increasingly rare: the opportunity to grieve together.

While The Day After represents a significant step in Arlington's continuing commitment to aftercare, we believe it is only the beginning.

To ensure that this work continues long into the future, Arlington is committed to establishing The Day After Foundation—a dedicated charitable foundation that will oversee the expansion and sustainability of grief support initiatives throughout the Philippines.

A portion of Arlington's annual profits will be allocated to support the Foundation, enabling the continued production and distribution of The Day After Kit, the expansion of community grief support gatherings across Metro Manila and beyond, the training of grief facilitators, and the ongoing development of educational resources for individuals and families navigating loss. This commitment reflects Arlington's belief that grief care should not end with a funeral service, nor should it be available only to those who can access professional counseling.

Today, the Philippines has relatively few formalized organizations devoted exclusively to grief support. Many individuals navigate bereavement in isolation, often unsure where to turn once funeral services have concluded.

Through The Day After Foundation, Arlington hopes to help bridge that gap by creating a sustainable, community-based model of grief support that is compassionate, evidence-informed, and accessible to all.

Ultimately, The Day After is more than a grief kit. It is more than a support group. It is more than a corporate initiative.

It is Arlington's promise that our care does not end when the chapel doors close.

It is a commitment to continue walking beside families not only on one of the hardest days of their lives—but in the many days that follow.

Because while we cannot take away someone's grief, we can help ensure that no one has to carry it alone.

Sometimes, the most meaningful care begins the day after.

Cardaras Funeral Homes, Logan, Ohio

Cardaras Funeral Homes, McArthur, Ohio

Cardaras Funeral Homes, Nelsonville, Ohio

Cardaras Funeral Home has developed an innovative and impactful grief support program that extends far beyond the traditional role of a funeral provider. This initiative was created in response to a clear and growing need within the community for accessible, ongoing grief education and support—particularly for children and families navigating loss.

The rationale behind this program is rooted in both lived experience and compelling data. Through collaboration with Ohio Bereavement Collaborative (OBC), our team recognized a critical gap in grief resources, especially for younger individuals. According to OBC, 1 in 10 children in Ohio will experience the death of a parent or significant loved one before the age of eighteen. This statistic underscores the urgency of providing structured, age-appropriate grief support. Children process loss differently than adults, and without proper guidance, unresolved grief can have long-term emotional and developmental impacts. This understanding drove our commitment to creating a program that not only serves families immediately following a loss but continues to support them in the months and years that follow.

The program itself consists of monthly grief support sessions held at each of our funeral home locations. These sessions are thoughtfully designed to address a wide range of topics, including understanding grief, coping strategies, supporting grieving children, and navigating significant dates such as holidays and anniversaries. The content is tailored to meet the evolving needs of the community, ensuring relevance and accessibility. These sessions are open to the public, not limited to families we have served, which broadens our reach and impact.

A key component of this initiative is our partnership with OBC and grief specialist Nancy Baur. Cardaras Funeral Home provides the facilities, coordination, and community outreach, while OBC contributes professional expertise, program development, and educational resources. This collaboration ensures that participants receive high-quality, evidence-based support in a welcoming and familiar environment. Together, we have also supported additional efforts such as school-based grief groups, professional training opportunities, and community education initiatives.

The benefits to our funeral home and staff have been significant. This program has strengthened our role as a trusted community resource, deepened relationships with families, and enhanced staff fulfillment by allowing our team to make a meaningful difference beyond traditional services. It has also elevated our visibility and reputation, as evidenced by recent front-page recognition in the Logan-Hocking Times, highlighting our grief support efforts.

For families and the broader community, the benefits are even more profound. Participants gain access to ongoing emotional support, practical tools for coping, and a sense of connection with others who are experiencing similar losses. For children especially, these programs provide a safe space to express emotions and begin to understand their grief in a healthy way. Families are better equipped to support one another, fostering stronger, more resilient communities.

Over the past year, the program has evolved from an initial concept into a structured, recurring offering with expanding participation. The addition of monthly sessions at multiple locations represents a significant enhancement, allowing us to reach more individuals and respond more effectively to community needs.

Ultimately, this program reflects our belief that our responsibility does not end with the funeral service. By investing in grief education and ongoing support, Cardaras Funeral Home continues to lead with compassion, innovation, and a deep commitment to the well-being of the families we serve.

Cemitério Parque Memorial de Goiânia, Goiânia, Goiás, Brazil

Memorial of Care: Innovation in Grief Support

Grief is a complex human journey, often overlooked by traditional funeral practices, which frequently limit their role to the farewell ritual itself. Recognizing this latent gap in the Brazilian funeral market, The Parque Memorial de Goiânia Cemetery identified the vital need to offer support that goes beyond logistics, extending care into the post-loss period.

We created the “Memorial of Care” (“Memorial do Acolhimento”) as a support ecosystem that validates the experience of loss, offering structured, accessible, and humanized emotional support.

Our approach is grounded in the premise that excellence in contemporary funeral service should be measured by the value we add to the mental health and well-being of grieving families.

The program operates as a hybrid support system, built on two fundamental pillars that ensure continuity of care:

The Care Box: A tactile element that gives physical form to empathy. During the farewell, we provide a physical kit containing a thoughtfully written letter of condolence, writing materials (a notepad and pen to encourage therapeutic journaling), and a QR code providing direct access to our digital platform, ensuring that support follows the family beyond the cemetery gates.

Digital Support Platform: A dedicated hub of professionally curated resources (articles, videos by psychologists, podcasts, and practical guides). The interface was designed to be minimalist and intuitive, built specifically to account for the cognitive fatigue and emotional numbness common in the early stages of grief, making content easier to take in during moments of vulnerability.

The project acted as a catalyst for cultural transformation at The Parque Memorial de Goiânia Cemetery. By bringing the marketing, customer service, and sales departments together under the shared mission of care, we were able to elevate our employees' sense of purpose. They stopped being seen — and seeing themselves — as mere providers of posthumous services, and became active agents of comfort instead.

This shift in mindset significantly increased our team's engagement and satisfaction, establishing the brand as an ethical, humanized, and technologically innovative reference in the funeral services sector.

For families, the program functions as a “safe harbor” available around the clock. We demystify grief as a natural process, providing scientifically validated resources to help reframe pain and rebuild daily life after loss.

The community, in turn, benefits from the democratization of psychological guidance, which directly helps reduce social isolation and promote mental health during one of the most critical moments in a person's life.

Technical rigor is the foundation of our work. The program benefits from the ongoing consultancy of a psychologist specializing in grief. While The Parque Memorial de Goiânia Cemetery provides the technological and operational infrastructure, this partnership ensures the scientific curation of the content.

This alignment ensures that every intervention, from the tone of our messages to the depth of our videos, is grounded in sound ethical and therapeutic protocols, setting the program apart from purely charitable approaches.

Launched in 2025, the Memorial of Care is an ongoing initiative. Over the past year, we expanded the project's reach with the implementation of the “Memorial of Care Station” during the 2025 All Souls' Day (Finados) event.

Through this action, we reached more than 8,000 people, offering qualified in-person support and informational materials that strengthened our bond with the community.

Based on qualitative feedback from users, we continuously refine our digital strategy.

We have incorporated multimedia formats — such as short-form podcasts and quick video clips — to better serve the needs of different demographic profiles, ensuring that the program remains relevant and aligned with global standards of excellence, proving that the funeral services sector can, in fact, be an ally of public mental health.

Cornerstone Funeral Services, Birmingham, Alabama

The Grief Forward Initiative – An Innovative, Community-Centered Aftercare Program

At Cornerstone Funeral Services & Cremations, we recognize that a meaningful funeral experience extends far beyond the day of the service. Many families continue to struggle long after arrangements are completed—particularly during the months when initial shock subsides and long-term grief begins to take shape. Research published by the National Institute of Mental Health identifies prolonged grief as a growing concern affecting individuals of all ages and emphasizes the importance of accessible, structured grief-support resources in reducing complicated grief responses. Recognizing this critical need, Cornerstone developed the Grief Forward Initiative, an innovative aftercare program designed to support individuals and families through practical, faith-sensitive, and culturally responsive healing tools.

Program Description

The Grief Forward Initiative began as a simple yet intentional concept: a self-paced grief workbook that families could use privately after the funeral service. Over the past year, the program expanded significantly into a comprehensive series of grief-support publications authored by Bernard C. Buggs, Jr., owner and funeral director of Cornerstone Funeral Services & Cremations. As one of the few funeral home owners who is also a published grief-care author, Mr. Buggs is dedicated to extending care beyond the arrangement conference by providing meaningful resources to the families Cornerstone serves, the broader community, and an expanding global audience.

The series includes:

Grief Forward: Your Journey Toward Healing (Adult Workbook)

Grief Forward: A Teen Guide for Healing, Growing & Moving Forward

Grief Forward: Walking Through Grief – Understanding and Healing Through the Five Stages

Each guide incorporates therapeutic writing prompts, emotional-wellness exercises, reflective storytelling, and gentle guidance informed by established grief-counseling frameworks. The materials are intentionally designed with large, easy-to-read fonts, ample journaling space, emotional-regulation tools, and practical coping strategies.

The books are available in 6×9 and 8.5×11 formats, making them approachable and discreet for readers of all ages. Cornerstone provides access to these resources for families served by the firm, while additional copies are available to the public through Amazon and directly through Cornerstone's website, allowing the initiative to extend beyond local service into regional, national, and international reach.

Over the past year, program enhancements have included:

Supplemental worksheets designed for family and caregiver discussions

A teen-specific chapter structure addressing school pressures, identity development, and emotional expression

Facilitator-friendly versions for grief workshops and group settings

Soft-cover printed editions with ISBN registration, enabling wider distribution and professional credibility

Partnerships & Community Engagement

To broaden access, Cornerstone has partnered with local schools, clergy, neighborhood associations, and healthcare providers. Pastors utilize the adult workbook during counseling sessions, while school counselors and youth advocates rely on the teen edition to support students navigating loss. Cornerstone retains full responsibility for authoring, printing, distributing, and teaching the content, while community partners assist in identifying individuals and families most in need of these resources.

Benefits to the Funeral Home and Staff

The Grief Forward Initiative equips Cornerstone's staff with structured tools to engage families well beyond the initial arrangements, strengthening aftercare conversations and reinforcing trust. The program has enhanced staff confidence, deepened professional partnerships, and positioned Cornerstone as a leader in education-driven, compassionate funeral service.

Benefits to Families and the Community

Families consistently express appreciation for receiving grief-support tools that remain accessible long after services conclude. The teen edition has been particularly impactful, offering adolescents a developmentally appropriate way to process grief, emotional change, and identity shifts. The broader community benefits from stigma-free, accessible grief resources rooted in empathy, cultural awareness, and dignity.

Conclusion

The Grief Forward Initiative exemplifies Cornerstone Funeral Services & Cremations' commitment to meaningful, long-term care. Through authored resources, community partnerships, and expanded availability via Amazon and Cornerstone's website, the initiative transforms aftercare into an ongoing journey of healing—extending from local families to communities around the world. This evolving program continues to empower individuals to move forward with compassion, dignity, and sustained support.

Dwayne R. Spence Funeral Homes and Crematory, Canal Winchester, Ohio

Dwayne R. Spence Funeral Homes and Crematory, Pickerington, Ohio

We are blessed to be our community's place for pet cremations outside of local veterinary offices. Without us, our community would have to travel to another city to provide a final disposition for their beloved pets. Though we are still rural in some areas, the ever-encroaching metropolis of Columbus is heading our way, and burial on family property is slowly fading as an option for many people.

What we see in our community is a deep love for our feathered and furry friends, and though we provide a disposition option, we did not have a strong grief resource outside of a simple brochure. So, this year became the "year of our pets." We created a memorial event and grief support program for our community centered around the loss of a pet.

The Pet Grief Support Program held three key moments for community members, young and old, to come to our funeral home and memorialize their pets. The first was a memorial craft. With every cremation, we provide a lock of the pet's hair or feathers, a nose print or paw print, and of course, the cremated remains of the pet in an urn chosen by the family. We invited the public to bring in a lock of hair or a print to decorate and place in a frame for memorialization, pictured below.

The second key moment was a ceremony. We held a candle-lighting ceremony where each person could come forward and light a candle in honor of their pet. Finally, we invited licensed counselor Lisa Huelskamp, LPC, CWC, NCC, PhD, to speak about grief and validate those who feel their sorrow is "too great for just a pet who died." We also provided printed grief-support materials for those who did not necessarily want to talk but still needed support.

This event also benefited the funeral home in two ways, one of which we did not realize at the time. The first and most important benefit was opening our doors to the community and showing them that we care about them not only during the loss of a loved one, but during the loss of a beloved pet as well. Many people call us asking whether we provide pet cremation services because they simply do not know that we do. This event showed the public that we offer this service and can even assist with transportation arrangements for their pets.

The hidden benefit was gaining Lisa as a community partner. Since the event, we have continued sharing resources and events with one another. We recommended books and brochures back and forth, both excited about possible additions to our grief-support libraries and programs.

Though this will not be a recurring event, it opened many watery eyes that day and reminded our community that grief over a pet is real, valid, and worthy of support.

E.J. Fielding Funeral Home & Cremation Services, Covington, Louisiana

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Funeral Director Rona Koenig-Cristadoro recognized the profound and lasting impact that the unprecedented loss of life had on the community. The effects of the pandemic extended far beyond the immediate health crisis, leaving many families to cope not only with grief, but also with the pain of being unable to gather, comfort one another, or honor their loved ones through traditional funeral or memorial services. Because of public health restrictions, countless individuals were forced to mourn in isolation, often without the usual support systems that help people begin to heal after a loss. This created a deep and ongoing need for compassionate grief support within the community.

In response to this need, E.J. Fielding Funeral Home partnered with a professional grief counselor to establish the Good Mourning Grief Support program. This free support group meets on the first Tuesday evening of each month and offers a warm, welcoming, and compassionate environment where participants can speak openly about their loss, share their experiences, and receive professional guidance. The group also provides an opportunity for individuals to connect with others who understand the challenges of grief, helping participants feel less alone as they navigate the healing process. To ensure the program reaches those who may benefit from it, E.J. Fielding Funeral Home promotes the group through its social media platforms, website, and broader community outreach efforts.

The success of the Good Mourning Grief Support program led Christwood Retirement Community to invite E.J. Fielding Funeral Home to sponsor a dedicated grief support group for its residents. This partnership began two years ago and continues to thrive today, reflecting the strong need for ongoing emotional support among older adults who are coping with the loss of spouses, friends, siblings, and other loved ones. The Christwood Good Mourning Grief Support group meets on the first Wednesday of each month from 1:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m., providing residents with a consistent and accessible space to gather, reflect, and receive encouragement in a supportive setting.

The Good Mourning Grief Support program offers comfort, understanding, and hope to individuals grieving the loss of a loved one. In addition to the monthly support meetings, participants are invited each April to a special Celebrating a Life Well Lived ceremony, which honors the memory of those who have passed while also recognizing the strength and progress of those who have continued their grief journey. Individuals who have completed the program are presented with a Congratulations on Your Courage to Grieve certificate in recognition of their resilience, growth, and healing. These meaningful ceremonies have become a cherished tradition at Christwood Retirement Community and are exceptionally well attended, serving as a powerful reminder of the importance of compassion, connection, and community during times of loss.

Empresa Vila - São José Crematório e Memorial, Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil

Vila Pet Talk's Evolution: a holistic approach to grief support, professional well-being and community engagement

In recent years, Vila Pet (a brand of Empresa Vila focused on the pet deathcare sector) has developed Vila Pet Talks, a pioneering initiative that emerged from the need to provide solace for the intense grief experienced by multispecies families. Conceived as an empathetic and safe space, the project was created to validate the guardians' grief, act against social negligence surrounding this loss, and welcome families in their moment of greatest vulnerability. This listening platform created such a profound impact that Empresa Vila was awarded the 2025 "Prêmio Empresa Acolhedora" (Welcoming Company Award) from ACEMBRA/SINCEP, the primary association for the cemetery and crematorium sector in Brazil. Although this award confirmed the effectiveness of Vila Pet Talks in overcoming historical barriers, the expansion of this supportive ecosystem revealed a still-neglected wound: the profound emotional toll suffered by professionals who dedicate themselves daily to the preservation of pets' lives.

Thus, our innovation proposal evolves, expanding Vila Pet Talks to "care for the caregiver," introducing exclusive sessions to discuss the emotional impact of grief experienced by veterinarians, clinic teams, and hospitals when losing their patients. The choice of institutions was made strategically with Empresa Vila's grief psychologist Anna Claudia Abdon, connecting the initiative to key locations of great relevance and representation in the veterinary ecosystem of Natal, RN. The first edition took place on August 21, 2025, with the Hospital Veterinário Reino Animal (Animal Kingdom Veterinary Hospital) team, recognized as the main reference in 24-hour emergency care and high-complexity support in the city's North Zone. The second edition was held on September 5, 2025, with students from Clínica Escola Uninassau (Uninassau Teaching Clinic), a hub that unites the academic environment with the sensitivity of community social assistance in the South Zone. The journey was consolidated on March 26, 2026, with the team from Hospital Natal Clinic, a space traditionally associated with preventive care and proximity to pet families in the East Zone.

Vila Pet also extended its support to the sector by participating in the "I Jornada Potiguar de Veterinária da Roval Pet" (1st Roval Pet Potiguar Veterinary Symposium) event held on October 7-8, 2025, in Natal, which brought together professionals from the pet segment for two days of immersion and networking. The company had a prominent presence on October 7, presenting a lecture by Bruno Gondim, marketing coordinator at Empresa Vila, to an audience of approximately 120 veterinarians. The central theme was "Who Cares for the Veterinarian?" (attached), discussing high stress levels and the psychological challenges of clinical routine. Bruno emphasizes that the relationship developed goes far beyond the commercial aspect: "by embracing the veterinary community with respect and support, we ensure that care for the grieving family begins long before they reach us."

The true dimension of this presence, however, is reflected by those who experience it. Veterinarian Isadora Fonseca, a participant in one of the sessions, highlights that the routine of saving lives often causes the profession to neglect their own pain to support the suffering of guardians. According to her, having the project create space for veterinary grief was a watershed moment that strengthened the resilience of these professionals.

In parallel with the "care for the caregiver" movement, we launched Vila Pet Convida (Vila Pet Invites), opening the Vila Pet unit to host meetings of breed clubs, transforming our space into an environment for socialization and the exchange of information regarding animal welfare. The events occurred throughout the second half of 2025 and the first half of 2026, starting with the first Vila Pet Convida on September 20, 2025, with Clube das Patas (a group dedicated to mixed-breed dogs); subsequently, we welcomed the Pug Club on April 18, 2026, and the final meeting was held with the Beagle Club on May 17, 2026.

Throughout the period from July 2025 to June 2026, according to the graph and report extracted directly from the company's ERP (attached), of the total cremation services provided by Vila Pet, 41% were

referred by partner vet clinics and 59% occurred organically. The absolute peak of partner referrals occurred in October 2025, representing 46.7% of that month's total which reflects the positive residual effect of the institutional activation's in August and September with professionals from Hospital Reino Animal and Clínica Escola Uninassau, environments that naturally boost the partnership and referral

channel. In November and December 2025, the partner channel sustained more than 40% of the business flow at a time when Vila Pet's organic capture was most affected. On the other hand, in March and April 2026, while partner referrals remained modest, organic demand reached historical highs of attendances.

This balanced oscillation between the strength of institutional referrals and organic growth is not accidental; it is a direct reflection of the "care for the caregiver" strategy. By consolidating Vila Pet Talks as a support space and fostering community engagement through Vila Pet Convida, the brand ceased to be merely a service provider and became a trusted reference in the local pet ecosystem. Thus, the complementary between the partner flow and the direct demand from guardians validates that, by prioritizing human relationships and emotional support for veterinarians, Vila Pet brand transforms its "Only Love" philosophy into solid and sustainable results that are resilient to market variations, shattering taboos and building a mutual and genuine network.

This extensive support network is fully aligned with the social responsibility guidelines of Empresa Vila by proposing a space for dialogue that values both human and animal well-being. This social and effective dimension connects directly with the sustainable practices adopted by the company, which also seeks to generate positive environmental impacts through its activities. Pet cremation, for example, is conducted under Atmospheric Emissions Control, with pollutant analyses performed every two years, ensuring that our emissions remain within the limits permitted by environmental legislation. In this way, we ensure a responsible and transparent service for the society, consistent with the principles of the UN Global Compact, contributing to SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).

By reinforcing the relevance of individual cremation, we raise awareness among veterinarians about the dangers of clandestine burials, which can contaminate soil and water resources, ensuring dignified and ecologically appropriate disposal for animals, mitigating environmental damage, and promoting the preservation of natural resources. Thus, the program contributes directly to the reduction of soil and water pollution, avoiding harmful practices such as illegal pet cemeteries. This measure protects public health and preserves environmental balance, aligning with SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation).

Because the construction of the Vila Pet brand occurs collaboratively and within a network, this structure relies on the direct engagement of veterinarians, psychologists, grief therapists, and partner clinics, as well as representatives of civil society dedicated to the animal cause. Such cooperation reflects a joint commitment to the progress of this agenda, consolidating the guidelines of SDG 17, which focuses on Partnerships for the Goals.

In this way, the evolution of Vila Pet Talks into initiatives that encompass the entire pet deathcare ecosystem transcends the simple provision of a funeral service. By listening to the needs of guardians and veterinarians, we transform ourselves into an aggregating pole of empathy that follows the animal life cycle in all its phases, celebrating health, educating the community, and ensuring dignity in the farewell.

Funeraria Jaramillo, Loja, Ecuador

Community Tributes: Seven Years of Presence, an Embrace Loja Does Not Forget

Funeraria Jaramillo — Camposanto Jardines del Zamora — Loja, Ecuador

There is an hour of the day that grieving families know well. It is the hour when the wake ends, the friends say goodbye, and the door closes. Outside, life goes on with a normalcy that hurts. Inside, someone sits down facing an empty chair and understands that this solitude has no expiration date.

That hour is the one that changed us. In 2019, Funeraria Jaramillo — a company with 57 years of history walking alongside the families of Loja — decided that its responsibility did not end when the lights of the wake went out. We decided we would be there the following month. And the month after that. And every month for as long as it took.

Seven years later, that decision has a name: the Homenajes Comunitarios (Community Tributes). More than 80 free monthly gatherings, uninterrupted, at Camposanto Jardines del Zamora in Loja, Ecuador, for any family that has lost someone and needs a place to go. No contracts. No conditions. With the door always open.

I. The reasoning: when grief is left alone

Through our Unidad de Atención al Duelo (Grief Support Unit, UNAD), we documented for years a pattern that repeated with painful regularity. Our Catholic tradition accompanies the first days with force — the novena gathers the family to pray for nine nights, and then comes the month's Mass. But when those rituals end, the visits grow further apart and the world moves on, the family is left alone with its pain — and between the month's Mass and the anniversary Mass lie eleven months of silence.

The doctor had other patients. Friends had their own lives. Society, uneasy in the face of death, preferred not to ask. And the grieving person learned to stay quiet, to function, to appear well — carrying a weight no one could see.

Science confirms what we were seeing. In 2018, the World Health Organization added prolonged grief disorder as a mental-health condition in the ICD-11 — formal recognition that grief without support can become disabling. We lived it in every family that came back to us months after the service, not to arrange anything, but simply because they had nowhere else to turn. Because in Loja, as in so many Latin American cities, grief is made private. It is carried behind closed doors.

We also knew that the calendar has a memory. Mother's Day when she is no longer here. Father's Day when the armchair sits empty. Christmas when one place is set fewer and everyone pretends not to notice. All Souls' Day when the cemetery fills with flowers and families do not know whether to weep or to remember — or both at once.

The Community Tributes were born to answer that reality with action — not as an extension of the funeral service nor as a commercial strategy, but as a lasting commitment: to be present when we are needed most, month after month, on the dates that hurt the most.

II. The story: from a promise to an institution

In 2019 we organized the first Community Tribute. It was a Sunday at Camposanto Jardines del Zamora — a place the families of Loja know through pain, and one we wanted them to know through comfort as well. The setting could not have been more fitting: the Acacia chapel, 22 by 18 meters, with room for 400 people, and a panoramic view of Loja at the feet of those who come to remember. Around it, tended gardens, open spaces for honoring the dead, easy parking, and a landscape that invites you to stay. Families do not come only for the tribute — they walk, they take in the city, they find one another again. The memorial park stops being a place you want to leave quickly and becomes a place where the family gathers. The event was free and open to the whole city. They came. And they came back the following month.

From the first year, the program was set at a monthly rhythm — one tribute each month, every month, with its own date and theme — because grief does not wait for special occasions. Over that steady rhythm, certain dates draw the largest crowds: Mother's Day, Father's Day, and All Souls' Day. Because each tribute is also an act of hospitality — a way of telling whoever arrives: we were expecting you.

Then came the pandemic. In 2020, when the world closed its doors, we made the decision that would define the character of our organization: we did not cancel the Tributes. We transformed them.

We moved to a virtual format from scratch — with no prior experience, no infrastructure, no instruction manual. We acquired livestreaming platforms, Panasonic and Sony dual-broadcast cameras, digital consoles, and wireless transmitters. We built custom furniture for the equipment. And we trained our technical staff for months — camera operators, console operators, production coordinators — until every broadcast was as human, as warm, and as present as an embrace in person.

It was not a simple process: there were technical failures, unstable signals, steep learning curves. But we achieved something few companies can claim: we made digitalization human. We gave the technology the humanity of loss — a gesture of comfort, hands trembling as they hold a photograph, the exact moment someone closes their eyes in prayer. We reached beyond the physical without losing the soul.

The first virtual events began with about 100 people connected. In time, the audience surpassed the usual in-person attendance. Each tribute was recorded on Facebook and YouTube — a permanent archive of family memory, available again and again on the hard nights.

It was during the pandemic that one of the program's most powerful elements was born: the Altar de Vida (Altar of Life). Unable to gather in person, we learned to build altars in front of the camera — without fully realizing it, we were reclaiming a tradition that reaches back to the Inca world and lives on in the Andes: the dead are not sent away, they are kept company. They are given a place, surrounded by their belongings, their memory shared. Tables arranged with love, where families placed whatever best described the person they had lost. The rosary prayed every night before sleep. The notebook full of cramped handwriting — recipes, errands, stray thoughts. The jewelry box with the bracelets she never took off. The hat that always hung on the same hook by the door. The scarf that still held a trace of perfume. Small, everyday objects that mean nothing to a stranger and everything to a family.

Our team learned to frame those objects with the delicacy of touching something sacred: a close-up of the rosary among the flowers, the worn texture of the notebook, the afternoon light falling on the hat. Families on the other side of the screen saw their loved one in a way they never had before. Many wrote in the comments that it was the first time they had truly wept since the loss. The Altar of Life made us a national reference in ritualization in Ecuador.

In 2022 we returned to in-person gatherings — and we returned more human, more present. Hospitality became the axis of our organizational culture: we invested in ongoing staff training and in programs such as the Escuela del Duelo (Grief School), where our team learns to accompany with knowledge and with heart. The Altar of Life became a permanent part of the program. And the team that had learned to see grief through a camera learned to see it with new eyes as well.

III. November 2025: when we decided to celebrate life

Over the years, families taught us something no manual contained: that they did not always want to come to weep. That sometimes they needed to laugh as they remembered. That the best tribute to someone who is gone is not sorrow but gratitude — for all they were, for the marks no one can erase.

In November 2025, with the All Souls' Day Tribute we called "Un abrazo colectivo para el alma" (A Collective Embrace for the Soul), we made a decision that transformed the program at its root: we stopped placing death at the center of the ritual and put life in its place. It was not a change of décor. It was a deep shift in how we understand grief.

The UNAD redesigned the way it creates rituals. The language of our invitations changed — from commemoration to celebration. The setting changed. And something invisible yet unmistakable — the energy, the tone, the intention of each gathering — changed as well.

Since November 2025, our Tributes are gatherings where people weep and laugh, where they remember and celebrate, where a family can mourn the absence of a mother and at the same time laugh telling the story of the hat she never took off. They are spaces where grief stops being a solitary burden and becomes shared memory. And there is visible proof of this transformation that no statistic captures better than our own photographs: families no longer dress in black. Looking back through the record of recent tributes, we noticed it with wonder — people arrive in color, in ordinary Sunday clothes, like someone going to meet a loved one rather than to say goodbye. We even discovered that families read the program before coming: when they see that a tribute includes a toast, they arrive dressed to celebrate. The community understood — before we said it in words — that these gatherings are a celebration of memory. This transformation did not come from outside. It came from seven years of listening to the families of Loja. And that cannot be bought or copied in a short time.

IV. The program: what happens at each Tribute

Every Community Tribute is built with purpose in every detail. Behind each lit candle, each projected name, each plate served, there is a deliberate decision to create an experience families carry with them long after they return home.

The spiritual opening. A Eucharist opens each gathering — we give priority to the Catholic faith professed by the great majority of those who attend, always with respect and with open doors to all beliefs. During the celebration, we read aloud and project on screen the Intentions — the names of the loved ones that families send us through all our channels: WhatsApp, social media, email, phone calls, and in person. Between 300 and 400 names per tribute; we estimate 4,000 to 5,000 intentions a year, peaking in May, June, and November. Since January 2025, when we began systematizing part of this through our HubSpot CRM, we have documented 1,920 intentions by that channel alone. To hear the name of a loved one spoken before an entire community is confirmation that the person existed, mattered, and will not be forgotten.

The commemorative ritual. The UNAD — our Grief Support Unit, made up of specialized psychologists — designs a symbolic ritual with therapeutic purpose for each Tribute. In the "Jardín de la Vida" (Garden of Life), each attendee plants a seedling and receives a certificate — the gesture of entrusting to the earth what we love. In "Cartas al Cielo" (Letters to Heaven), families write what they never had the chance to say and release it in balloons. In the "Ritual de la Luz" (Ritual of Light), lit candles illuminate the path of those who have gone. And the "Osito del Consuelo Terapéutico" (Therapeutic Comfort Bear) travels home in the arms of someone who arrived alone and leaves accompanied. Eighteen different rituals over the history of the program.

The art-therapy workshop. Guided by the UNAD as a holistic therapy, creativity heals what words cannot reach. Families have painted tote bags, made "Mi Campeón de Vida" (My Champion of Life) medals, printed canvases with their handprints, and built bouquets of hope. Something to take home as proof that this day existed — that it hurt, and that it was also beautiful.

The free health day. In partnership with M&J Medical Center, Econo Gafas, BeNatural Sueroterapia, Farmacias Cuxibamba, and the Instituto Superior Tecnológico Sudamericano, the largest tributes include five to six medical specialties at no cost. Because grief also lives in the body — in the insomnia, in the appetite that does not return, in the back that carries what the heart cannot yet let go.

Puente Arcoíris (Rainbow Bridge). Our pet-loss grief program has an active presence at every tribute — with the puppet show "El Cielo de las Mascotas" (Pet Heaven), the "Huellitas Felices" (Happy Little Paws) space, canine fashion shows with local entrepreneurs, training demonstrations, and even a living nativity

of pets at the December tribute. Because losing the one who waited at the door each afternoon is losing a member of the family. And that grief deserves the same respect as any other.

The shared table. No Tribute ends without food or celebration. We serve sweet bread with hot chocolate and coffee — the flavors of childhood, the flavors of home. On special dates: tamales, mote pillo, and regional dishes. And each gathering closes by celebrating the month's birthdays with a toast: we raise

our glasses to those marking another year of life, in the very space where we honor those who are gone. That gesture — celebrating life amid remembrance — sums up everything these Tributes are. To eat together, to toast together, is also a way of remembering. And of going on living.

V. The impact: seven years, month after month, without exception

Over seven years of uninterrupted monthly Tributes, we welcome between 300 and 400 people each month — the capacity of our Acacia chapel. But there is one date when everything multiplies: All Souls' Day, when we mount our largest logistical effort of the year and receive around 5,000 people over two continuous days. Across these seven years, cumulative participation exceeds 70,000 attendees — in a city of 203,496 inhabitants according to the 2022 National Census, the equivalent of more than a third of Loja's population. Not over a single weekend. Over seven years of sustained presence, built embrace by embrace, name by name.

The data backs that commitment. In seven years: more than 80 Tributes without a single interruption — not even during a global pandemic. Each year: between 4,000 and 5,000 intentions received through our various channels — 1,920 of them registered in our HubSpot CRM since January 2025. Each tribute: 2,150 email invitations, 1,555 by WhatsApp, and 183 people enrolled in the preceding workshops. Each campaign run on META: 47,938 people reached — one in every four residents of Loja. And after each gathering, around 2,350 thank-you messages reach the families, because our relationship with them does not end when the event ends. All of this is sustained by 10 active external partners — health professionals, local entrepreneurs, and cultural groups — and 18 support rituals designed and carried out. The result is not a figure: it is a community of families that returns each month because it finds a place where its loss is acknowledged and no one asks them to be well already.

VI. Benefits for our company, our team, and our community

The Community Tributes have turned Funeraria Jaramillo into something more than a funeral home. In Loja we are known as an organization that walks alongside people in the hardest moments of their lives. That perception generates genuine loyalty, organic recommendation, and preference when families arrange pre-planning services.

The program has shaped a more human team: monthly contact with grieving families has developed skills of empathy, active listening, and compassionate communication that raise the standard of all our services. Our people have been essential — the interlocking of our logistics, marketing, grief-support, and production teams works because they all look toward the same horizon: the family. The technical infrastructure from the pandemic is now a permanent asset. And although these Tributes were not created as a commercial strategy, the trust they build returns to the company naturally: families who feel accompanied choose us when they need a service, they recommend us, and at each gathering they discover lines of service — such as Puente Arcoíris or the UNAD workshops — they did not know existed.

For the families of Loja, we provide free, sustained emotional support, open to anyone who has lost someone. We give visibility and dignity to losses that society silences. And there is something more, hard to put in a report: for the person left alone after the death of their loved ones, these gatherings may seem ordinary — but for that person they are a community, a gentle look amid the solitude. Because the reason these Tributes exist is not the objects on an altar or the figures in a report: it is to keep memory alive, to make remembrance present, and to pay tribute to life. Seven years, month after month, without exception — and the door has never closed.

Milward Funeral Directors - Broadway, Lexington, Kentucky

Milward Funeral Directors - Southland, Lexington, Kentucky

Milward Funeral Directors - Man 'O War, Lexington, Kentucky

Art therapy can be a deeply healing and transformative process for individuals grieving the loss of a loved one. Grief is complex and often difficult to express through words alone. Art therapy offers a non-verbal, creative outlet that helps individuals explore and process their emotions in a safe and supportive environment.

On May 6, Milward Funeral Directors invited families they served in the past to participate in a neurographic art creation with light refreshments and a chance to relax and have a time of self-care and reflection. The purpose of the workshop was to offer individuals an opportunity to create a small neurographic art piece with quiet meditation in a casual atmosphere to connect, and express their creativity. All art supplies were provided and included an opportunity for guests to enjoy a light appetizer and fellowship. Milward limited the event to just 10 people in order to keep it an intimate and non-intimidating environment.

Milward is fortunate to have a funeral director on staff who is passionate about art and even more so about leading art workshops with families who are on a healing path from the loss of loved ones. Funeral Director Angie Walters led the workshop.

Angie Walters began as an artist at an early age during junior high and high school in Elkhart, Indiana where she is from originally. Her works include pen & ink, mixed media and pastel, acrylic, and most recently, watercolor. Throughout the last 20 years, Angie has volunteered or held membership with Studio 315 in Mishawaka, Indiana, Shelby Artists on Main in Shelbyville, Kentucky as well as Art House Kentucky in Lexington. She started her journey in funeral service in 2012 and now works for Milward Funeral Directors.

One of the primary benefits of art therapy after a loss is the ability to express emotions that are difficult to articulate. Grieving individuals may feel overwhelmed by sadness, anger, guilt, or confusion. Art allows them to communicate these feelings through symbols, colors, and imagery, offering relief and a sense of release. This form of expression can be particularly helpful for children and those who may struggle to talk openly about their grief.

Art therapy also promotes relaxation and stress reduction. The act of creating can be calming, helping to reduce anxiety and bring a sense of peace during a time of emotional turmoil. The focus required for artistic expression can provide a temporary respite from ruminating thoughts and painful memories, creating moments of mindfulness and emotional clarity.

Another benefit is the opportunity to maintain a connection with the deceased. Through creating memory books, portraits, or symbolic artwork, individuals can honor and remember their loved one in a personal and meaningful way. These creative rituals can become part of the healing journey, offering comfort and a sense of continuity.

Art therapy can also foster greater self-awareness. The creative process often brings unconscious thoughts and feelings to the surface, allowing individuals to better understand their grief and how it affects different areas of their lives. This insight, especially when guided by a trained art therapist, can lead to emotional growth and acceptance.

In group settings, art therapy can reduce feelings of isolation. Sharing artwork and experiences with others who are grieving can build a sense of community and support, reminding participants that they are not alone in their pain.

Ultimately, art therapy empowers individuals to cope with loss in a way that feels authentic and healing. It offers a space for both expression and reflection, helping people move forward while honoring the

memory of their loved one. Even without prior artistic experience, anyone can benefit from the healing potential of art during the grieving process.

This is the second year implementing this program. Small improvements were made, including having more staff participants and promoting the event much earlier than in the past. Three event dates were provided on the initial invitation distributed with aftercare materials. Following the event Milward posted info and photo about it on its Facebook page.

Mueller Memorial and Interra Green Burial by Mueller Memorial, St. Paul, Minnesota

Mueller Memorial, White Bear Lake, Minnesota

In the funeral profession we know that the memorial service is just the beginning of a family's grief experience. After a loss, each family member wants to get back to feeling like themselves, but no one ever teaches us just how to do that.

At Mueller Memorial we believe that the families we serve should never be left to figure this out on their own. This is why we created Grief Compass.

After the death of his father, and fellow funeral director, Al Mueller, Scott Mueller was feeling tired, foggy, and lacked concentration but couldn't figure out why. It took the outside input from a colleague to help him realize what he was experiencing was, of course, grief.

As funeral directors, we at times feel like grief doesn't apply to us...we're professionals, right? But when faced with it ourselves, we realize that there's no sidestepping grief, it's something every human must go through.

So that got Scott thinking, "If this caught me offguard, what must the families we serve be going through?" And that planted the seeds for a program that would help the families we serve to navigate grief in the first year after loss.

While listening to Tony Robbins "30 Day Personal Power Program" Scott wondered if there was a way to apply the idea of small incremental changes to grief— how can we encourage practical, weekly insights into the healing journey to gently guide a family toward a path forward.

To build this program, he enlisted his step-daughter and Mueller's Communications Director, Taelor Johnson, to research the commonalities and timeframe patterns for the emotional, social, psychological, and physical effects of grief and Grief Compass was born.

- Detailed description of the program, service or activity.

Grief Compass provides just a little bit of help navigating grief in the first year after loss. We do this by gathering email addresses from everyone at the arrangement table then sending them a weekly email addressing a topic that might be impacting them at this time after their loss.

The first year of the core Grief Compass program includes 52 weekly emails. Every email has a summary of the topic being discussed, a quick insight about that topic, a link to deeper discussion, and a link to a 1- 800 number so they can talk to a Masters level or higher counselor any time 24/7 if they need it.

Our White Bear Lake office manager, Anne Meyer, is in charge of entering families into the program. The emails are customized by the type of loss (age, illness, traumatic, infant) and are individually personalized to address the survivor and the decedent by name, and their relationship to each other.

We also send date-specific birthday and death anniversary emails. About six months after the loss, in conjunction with emails about mindful journaling, we mail families a physical journal and a list of prompts to encourage them to put journaling theory into practice. Then just before the one-year anniversary of the death, we send the survivor a card listing some things to expect on the anniversary and ideas for what to plan for the day. We also include a silicone bracelet that says "today I remember," to give them a physical touchpoint and a conversation starter if they need it.

After the year concludes, and the 54 emails have been delivered families can opt in to subscribe for an additional year. Since 2017, over 5,000 people have been through the program and in the 12 month period from July 1 2025 to June 30 2026 we sent 37,205 emails and maintained a 47.31% open rate. Throughout 2025 and into 2026 we migrated the entire program from one digital platform to another to foster greater capabilities and future expansion.

- Benefits provided to funeral homes and staff.

Grief Compass doesn't just provide our families with additional help, but it also acts as a way for our funeral directors to build continuing relationships with our families.

Grief Compass sends families a message acknowledging birthdays and death anniversaries, not just on the first year but every year after. When others have forgotten, we have not and that means a lot to families. We know this because anniversary emails come signed by their funeral director and often receive replies expressing gratitude for remembering their person. When someone replies their funeral director can respond directly, fostering genuine connection.

It has been a wonderful surprise to our staff how many people actually email us back and thank us for acknowledging their loved one. Families do not want to feel their person has been forgotten, so they truly appreciate the messages. This continued praise and effort from families is an uplifting reminder to our staff about how appreciated our work is. Our continued connection with families through Grief Compass has allowed us to create what we refer to as "our tribe" –our most loyal families. For the families we serve, Grief Compass includes a seasonal newsletter and invitations to Mueller Game Night—we host Bingo online from October through April, which is described in detail in Category 4: H1. The trust we build through our aftercare efforts creates continued support for our funeral home and staff.

- Benefits provided to families and/or the community at large.

Grief Compass is a very intimate and private way for families to begin exploring their grief journey. Families can choose to what degree they want to engage with the content, and even if they do not utilize the resources we provide, it reminds them that we are still looking out for them.

Some of the events noted above, like Game Night night, are also a way for us to create a larger community within grief. Family members may feel isolated in their loss, but having a very clear way to build a larger community of other individuals who have experienced a loss without feeling the pressure to talk in depth about that experience. Grief Compass is a stepping stone into the new life without their person.

- If your organization partnered with a business or community organization(s) (e.g., church, hospice, etc.) to develop and/or implement the program described in the essay, clearly define the role of the funeral home and the role of the organization(s).

To enrich the Grief Compass experience we partner with a group of professional grief counselors called Caring Voices. This service is included in Grief Compass and is paid for by Mueller Memorial. It is anonymous and can be utilized 24/7, 365 days of the year.

Caring Voices provides us a unique access code that we share in every Grief Compass email. This is what allows families to call and receive this service at no cost and without providing personal identification. We recognize that grief groups and the public acknowledgment of a loss can create an overwhelming sense of vulnerability; we want to create a safe space for people to talk about their loss whether it's 5PM or 2AM, and we can do that with our Caring Voices partnership.

- If you are describing a program/activity that is conducted annually, is an on-going program, or has been used in a previous year's entry, clearly describe changes or improvements that have been made during the past year.

As a continuous program, we are always seeking ways to improve Grief Compass and increase the value it provides to families. We receive a lot of positive feedback on the insights it provides, and are currently working to expand the program to make it even more robust. This was the inspiration for the months-long migration from one digital platform, Infusionsoft, to another, Go High Level. This migration required thousands of dollars of investment for programming and skills development for staff.

The goal is to eventually transform Grief Compass into a subscription based program that can be provided to families we did not serve who could use a little help navigating grief. Within the last year, there has been conversation around whether Grief Compass could be a platform that can partner with other funeral homes and hospice facilities in a business-to-business relationship, or if it could be

available for subscription directly to family members. We know Grief Compass has helped so many of our families, and we'd like to find a way to help even more.

O'Connell Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Services, Ellsworth, Wisconsin
O'Connell Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Services, Baldwin, Wisconsin
O'Connell Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Services, River Falls, Wisconsin
O'Connell Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Services, Prescott, Wisconsin
O'Connell Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Services, Hudson, Wisconsin

Good Grief: Continuing Care Beyond the Funeral

One of the realities of funeral service is that grief doesn't end when the funeral does, nor should our services. Or, at least, they shouldn't. Families often leave the funeral home surrounded by support, only to discover that in the days and weeks that follow, life becomes much quieter. Questions arise. Emotions change. People wonder if what they're experiencing is normal, and many simply don't know where to turn. That is why we created Good Grief.

Good Grief is a podcast produced by O'Connell Family Funeral Homes & Cremation Services, but it is much more than a podcast. It is another way for us to continue serving our communities long after the funeral has ended. Rather than focusing on funeral merchandise or promoting our business, we focus on people and the questions they have. We talk about the conversations families are already having, or often avoiding. Topics include grief, pre-planning, caring for aging parents, veteran benefits, estate planning, funeral traditions, what to do with a loved one's belongings, and many of the questions people ask every day.

There are industry-led podcasts, such as the NFDA's A Brush With Death. Interestingly enough, the host, Gabe Schauf, worked for me several years ago, where he started his career before taking a position with the NFDA. Only a very small percentage of funeral homes provide podcasts. So in that way, we are innovative in the industry. Our podcast offers one new episode every month.

One of the things that makes Good Grief different is that it brings together voices from throughout the community. Funeral directors are only one part of a family's journey. We invite grief counselors, clergy, hospice professionals, financial advisors, veterans, law enforcement, and other community leaders to share their knowledge and experiences. Every guest offers a different perspective, helping listeners realize there is no single way to navigate loss or many of the issues that affect families as they age.

The podcast has also become an extension of our community education efforts. Many of our episodes begin with questions families have asked us during arrangements, community presentations, or pre-planning seminars. Instead of helping one family at a time, we now have the opportunity to educate hundreds. Because each episode remains available online, families can listen whenever they are ready. Grief doesn't follow a schedule, and neither should support.

Technology has allowed us to expand our reach far beyond the walls of the funeral home. Episodes are available through major podcast platforms, our website, and social media, making the information easily accessible to anyone who may need it. More importantly, the conversations often continue outside the podcast. Families tell us they shared an episode with a sibling, started a discussion about pre-planning around the kitchen table, or found comfort simply by realizing they were not alone. I love hearing, "I just listened to your podcast."

The impact has extended beyond those who are grieving today. Good Grief has become a resource for our entire community. It encourages people to have conversations before a crisis occurs, helps reduce the fear surrounding death, and provides practical information in a comfortable, approachable way. I do not approach it from a sterile or purely factual format. People who know me in the community recognize and appreciate my lighthearted personality and sense of humor. It has also strengthened our own staff, encouraging us to continue learning, collaborating with professionals from other disciplines, and finding new ways to better serve the families who place their trust in us.

Innovation is not always about creating something new. Sometimes it is about finding a better way to fulfill the same calling. For us, Good Grief is another way of doing exactly that.

Señoriales Corporación de Servicio, Guatemala

Casa de Acompañamiento: A Space to Hold the Heart While the World Keeps Moving

What happens to a person after the funeral?

What happens when the flowers begin to fade, the visits become less frequent, and silence returns to the home? Who accompanies someone when everyone else goes back to their routine, but their world remains paused at the exact moment of a farewell?

At Señoriales Corporación de Servicio, these questions emerged from our daily work accompanying families through moments of loss. We saw them return home after a dignified farewell, surrounded by love during the service, but then facing a profoundly different reality: absence was no longer contained within a ceremony. It was now in the empty chair, the untouched room, the familiar scent that still remained, the first Sunday without that person, the first Christmas, and every routine that would never be the same again.

We understood that a funeral service provides a necessary space to honor, say goodbye, and bring together those who love. But we also understood something deeper: many times, grief truly begins when the tribute ends.

In much of Latin America, talking about grief is still difficult. We have been taught to be strong, to move forward, and not to speak too much about what hurts. Many people go through life-changing losses without emotional tools, without safe spaces, and, in many cases, without access to specialized psychological support. Pain remains in silence. The family tries to continue. The world keeps moving, even though for the person who has lost someone, everything seems to have stopped.

It was precisely in that invisible space of human pain that Casa de Acompañamiento was born.

The program was not created as an additional service. It was born from a human need. It was born from a fundamental question: how can a funeral service company become a permanent space of support for families, even after the farewell?

Casa de Acompañamiento was created by Señoriales Corporación de Servicio to extend funeral service into an integral model of emotional support, grief psychoeducation, and community. Its purpose is to validate the emotions of those experiencing a loss, provide tools to understand grief, create spaces for meaningful remembrance, and offer a place where people can speak without being judged, without being rushed, and without feeling they must “be okay” before they are ready.

The program operates at Señoriales Corporación de Servicio locations in Guatemala and Mexico, and is built on three main pillars: monthly psychoeducational talks, support groups, and experiential workshops in art therapy and emotional well-being.

The first pillar consists of monthly talks and workshops about the grieving process. Each month, a coordinated agenda is developed across both countries to address topics that respond to the real needs of families: how to begin the grieving process, how to validate emotions, how to face the first Christmas without a loved one, how to support one another as a family after a loss, how to honor the memory of those we love, and how to understand that pain, guilt, anger, sadness, or anxiety are part of a deeply human process.

These talks are not merely lectures. They are spaces where many people discover, often for the first time, that what they are feeling has a name. Where someone allows them to speak about their loss without asking them to overcome it quickly. Where they come to understand that missing someone deeply is not weakness, but love searching for a new way to remain.

The second pillar is support groups. From the first talks, attendees were invited to share the type of loss they were experiencing, with the purpose of creating communities that were more closely connected and sensitive to each experience. This led to the creation of groups for people who have lost their parents,

their spouse, their children, as well as groups for those experiencing silent grief and families facing mixed or complex losses.

These groups meet every fifteen days and have become spaces for emotional release, listening, and support. People who have never met arrive with different stories, but with a similar pain. Some arrive believing that no one could possibly understand what they feel, until they hear another person describe exactly what they thought was impossible to put into words. There are mothers who speak their children's names again after years of silence. There are people who cry freely for the first time. There are families who arrive feeling broken and discover that what they are experiencing is not weakness: it is grief.

The third pillar consists of experiential workshops in art therapy, conscious yoga, and emotional well-being. At Casa de Acompañamiento, we believe that grief does not only need to be explained; it also needs to be felt, expressed, and accompanied through the body, creativity, and inner calm. Art therapy allows deep emotions to be transformed into color, shape, and symbol when words are not enough. Conscious yoga helps release accumulated physical tension, regulate breathing, and find moments of serenity in the midst of absence.

One of the most meaningful moments of the program takes place at the end of some gatherings. The room slowly darkens and each person receives a lit candle. Then, the Memorial Tribute Coordinator shares words of peace, hope, and accompaniment. Many people hold the candle with both hands, as if they were also holding a memory. That light does not end there. Families may take it home and light it again on difficult days, when the absence hurts again and they need to remember that they are not alone.

Casa de Acompañamiento also extends through digital communities. Through cards with QR codes, participants can join support groups and WhatsApp communities where they receive messages of accompaniment, information about upcoming activities, support resources, and emotional content. This tool allows accompaniment not to depend solely on an in-person or virtual session, but to remain available in everyday life.

Since its creation, Casa de Acompañamiento has accompanied more than 40,000 people through talks, support groups, workshops, and digital communities. In addition, its monthly gatherings bring together hundreds of participants and have helped build an active support network for families in Guatemala and Mexico. On emotionally significant dates, such as Mother's Day, Father's Day, Children's Day, and Christmas, virtual talks and special activities are held to accompany moments when absence is often felt more intensely.

The benefits for families and the community have been profound. People find a safe environment where they can speak about their loss without being judged. They receive tools to understand their emotions. They discover they are not alone. They find others walking similar paths. And, perhaps most importantly, they come to understand that there is still life after loss, even if that life must be learned again, little by little.

For Señoriales Corporación de Servicio, Casa de Acompañamiento has also represented an internal transformation. The program strengthens our institutional promise to serve before and after the loss. It has generated greater trust and loyalty among families because it demonstrates that the company genuinely cares about their emotional well-being.

It has also strengthened the team's sense of purpose. Psychologists, thanatologists, grief companions, Memorial Tribute Coordinators, service personnel, marketing, social media, and different administrative areas work together around the same mission: to accompany families with humanity during one of the most difficult moments of their lives. Each talk, each group, and each workshop also sensitizes the staff and reminds them that working in the funeral profession means participating in a human mission of comfort, respect, and hope.

The program has been strengthened through partnerships with organizations such as Caminemos Juntos and Fundación Margarita Tejada in Guatemala. Señoriales Corporación de Servicio leads the program

structure, outreach, communication, logistics, family follow-up, and the integration of accompaniment spaces. Partner organizations contribute specialized knowledge, psychoeducational tools, professional participation, or collaborative spaces depending on the nature of each activity.

During the past year, Casa de Acompañamiento has evolved significantly. The topics of the monthly talks were expanded, support groups segmented by type of loss were strengthened, digital accompaniment communities were integrated, experiential workshops in art therapy and conscious yoga were incorporated, and support materials were developed, such as brochures on the stages of grief, resources on perinatal, neonatal, and gestational grief, mental health publications, guidance for experiencing Christmas while grieving, emotional support playlists, and digital content on art therapy and the grieving process.

Casa de Acompañamiento transforms the traditional understanding of funeral service. It does not limit itself to accompanying a farewell. It remains after it, becoming a network of emotional support, education, memory, and community. It takes accompaniment beyond the ceremony and responds to a need that often remains invisible: the pain of those who return home after the funeral and do not know how to begin living with an absence.

But perhaps the most important thing is not only the structure of the program, the number of sessions, or the people reached. What truly matters is what happens within those who arrive.

Some people come believing they are there to learn about grief and end up finding something much deeper: a place where they feel understood without having to explain too much. A space where pain stops being a silent burden. A community that reminds them they do not have to face absence alone.

And so we return to the initial question:

What happens to a person after the funeral?

At Casa de Acompañamiento, we have discovered that after the funeral, life still remains. That love still needs a place to stay. That memory can become refuge. And that sometimes, what truly sustains a person in the midst of absence is not a perfect answer, but finding someone willing to accompany them while they learn, little by little, how to live again.

Because at Señoriales Corporación de Servicio, we believe that every life deserves to be honored, every grief deserves to be accompanied, and every family deserves to feel that, even while the world keeps moving, they are not alone.