



Pursuit of Excellence

Remembering A Life Award

Personalized Service Stories from the 2026 Remembering A Life Award Recipients

Publication and Privacy Note

The following stories are based on essays submitted by funeral homes participating in the Pursuit of Excellence Award program. They have been edited and rewritten to protect the privacy of the deceased and their families while preserving the heart of each story and the meaningful ideas demonstrated by the funeral home. Names and other potentially identifying details, including locations, organizations, dates, ages and specific affiliations, may have been removed or generalized. In some cases, details have also been condensed or reorganized for clarity and consistency. The substance of the service, the family's wishes and the funeral home's creative approach to personalization have been retained so these stories can serve as inspiration and idea-sharing resources for funeral service professionals.

Elton Black & Son Funeral Home, White Lake, Michigan
Elton Black & Son Funeral Home, Highland Township, Michigan

Messages That Kept Arriving

When we began planning a funeral for a longtime mail carrier, we quickly discovered that his career was only one of several passions that had shaped his life. He was also devoted to dogs, active in his community and committed to helping people in need. Our challenge was to bring those different parts of his story together in ways that felt natural and meaningful to his family.

His career provided the inspiration for one of the service's simplest – and ultimately most lasting – elements.

We incorporated a mailbox into the memory display and placed pre-addressed, stamped postcards nearby. Guests were invited to take a postcard home and, whenever they felt ready, write a memory, share a story or offer words of encouragement to the surviving spouse. For privacy, the cards were addressed to the funeral home rather than the family's home. When they arrived, our staff delivered them personally to the family. The idea extended remembrance well beyond the day of the funeral.

Cards began returning in the days and weeks following the service and continued to arrive months later. Each became an unexpected message of support at a time when the activity surrounding the funeral had ended and grief remained. The postcards also gave our staff a natural reason to stay connected with the surviving spouse, allowing us to check in periodically and continue the relationship that had begun while making arrangements.

His colleagues were invited to play an important role in the funeral as well. Fellow mail carriers, dressed in their work uniforms, served as pallbearers, and a postal vehicle joined the procession to the cemetery. These elements honored not simply an occupation, but decades of relationships, routines and service to others.

Our conversations with the family also revealed another significant part of his life: his deep involvement with dogs and canine activities. One of his beloved dogs attended the visitation and remained nearby throughout the gathering, greeting visitors much as he might have done at home.

The dog's presence changed the atmosphere in a way no decorative element could have accomplished. Family members and guests found comfort in seeing such a familiar companion there, and our staff made sure the dog had food, water, attention and a comfortable place to rest throughout the visitation. His presence created an immediate connection to the life being remembered and became one of the most meaningful elements of the service.

Trophies, ribbons and other awards earned through years of involvement with dogs were incorporated into the displays, giving guests another window into a passion that had brought great enjoyment and purpose.

The family also shared their loved one's commitment to helping people experiencing food insecurity. Rather than simply mentioning that interest in the obituary or service, we looked for a way to allow guests to participate in it. Attendees were encouraged to bring nonperishable food items to be donated to a community food pantry. The response was extraordinary; the collection container had to be emptied several times during the visitation.

In that way, the funeral did more than describe his generosity. It continued it.

Each element of the service reflected a different part of the person his family knew: the mail carrier who faithfully served others for decades, the devoted dog enthusiast, the community volunteer and the person whose relationships continued to matter after his death. None of the individual ideas was elaborate, but together they created a service filled with authentic connections to his life.

The family later expressed how much these thoughtful details meant to them. For our team, however, one of the most meaningful outcomes continued long after the funeral. Each time another postcard arrived, we were reminded that remembrance and support do not end when a service concludes.

Sometimes an idea created for a funeral can become part of a family's grief journey for weeks or months afterward. By listening carefully and finding creative ways to translate this individual's passions into experiences, we were able to create not only a meaningful farewell, but also opportunities for his community – and our staff – to continue caring for his family long after the funeral was over.

Families First Funeral Care & Cremation Center, Savannah, Georgia

A Celebration Filled With Music, Movement and Connection

From the beginning of the arrangement conference, our goal was to understand the things that had brought joy to the life of the young woman whose family had entrusted us with her memorial service. We asked about her favorite colors, foods and music, but more importantly, we listened for the passions and relationships that had shaped who she was.

Music and dance quickly emerged as central themes.

She had loved to dance and had shared that passion by teaching children. Music was equally important to her, and her family wanted the memorial to capture the energy, movement and joy that had been such an important part of her life. Rather than simply referencing those interests through photographs or music played in the background, our team looked for ways to bring them into the service itself.

We arranged for a band she loved to perform live at the funeral home. Musicians filled the space with songs that had meant something to her, and the response was immediate. Family members and friends danced, cried and smiled together as the music transformed the memorial from an event people simply observed into one they experienced.

Her dance students also participated, performing for the family and other guests. Their presence created one of the service's most moving moments. Through their performance, the children demonstrated that her love of dance had not ended with her; it continued in the lives of the young people she had taught and encouraged.

Technology gave us another way to tell her story and, just as importantly, helped overcome the distance separating some family members from the service.

A tribute video incorporating favorite music and family photographs was shown during the memorial, helping guests experience different chapters of her life. During the eulogies, an additional video presentation featured messages from relatives living outside the United States who were unable to attend in person.

We wanted those distant family members to be more than passive viewers, however. A dedicated video-conferencing area was established at the funeral home so guests could speak directly with relatives watching from abroad, sharing condolences, memories and messages in real time. Although miles separated them physically, technology allowed the family to grieve and remember together.

The room itself was also designed to reflect the family's stories. Her favorite color appeared throughout the space in flowers, linens and decorative elements, while butterfly imagery added another meaningful visual motif. Favorite pastries were served, along with a traditional dish connected to the family's Caribbean heritage. These familiar foods added another sensory dimension to the gathering, evoking home, family and cultural connection.

Each element was intentional. The live music reflected what moved her. The children's performance demonstrated the impact she had made through dance. The videos told her story visually. The virtual connection brought distant relatives into the experience. The colors, imagery and food surrounded guests with familiar reminders of the person they had gathered to remember.

The result was a service that felt less like a collection of personalized products and more like an expression of a life.

Guests responded warmly to the experience, with many commenting on how completely the memorial captured the individual's personality and passions. The combination of music, movement, family participation, technology and cultural touches created an atmosphere in which tears and grief existed alongside dancing, smiles and joyful memories.

For our staff, the experience reinforced why asking the right questions during an arrangement conference matters. "What music did she love?" can lead to much more than selecting a song. "What brought her joy?"

can inspire an experience. "Who was important to her?" can reveal people who should have a role in the ceremony. And "What would make this feel like her?" can transform the entire service.

By listening to the family's answers and then finding creative ways to bring those answers to life, we helped create a memorial filled with the things that had mattered most: music, dance, family, culture, connection and love.

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

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

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

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

A Childhood Remembered Through Imagination, Music and Joy

Some services remind us that personalization is about much more than creating beautiful displays. It is about listening closely enough to understand what brought someone joy and then finding meaningful ways to surround a grieving family with those memories.

Our staff had the privilege of caring for a family following the sudden death of their young child. From our first conversations, our goal was to create a service that reflected the joy, imagination and personality that had filled his life. His parents shared stories about the things he loved most: animated characters and superheroes, toy cars, thunderstorms and an unexpectedly eclectic taste in music. Those details became the inspiration for a service designed to help family and friends remember the happiness he brought into their lives.

Rather than simply placing favorite toys and photographs around the funeral home, our team worked to create an environment that felt like an extension of his world. His casket was customized in-house with graphics featuring favorite characters, and a superhero figure was incorporated into the display as though watching over him. Memorial folders, keepsakes and other printed pieces carried the theme throughout the service, creating a cohesive visual tribute. Even elements used for the committal were personalized so the family's vision continued through the final farewell.

Toy cars became another important part of the experience. A staff member whose own child enjoyed the same toys brought several large playsets from home, allowing us to create imaginative displays rather than simply arranging cars on tables. The result resembled something that might have been found in a child's bedroom and helped bring a sense of childhood, playfulness and familiarity into an extraordinarily difficult setting.

The family then shared an idea that transformed those displays into something even more meaningful: they wanted everyone who attended to be able to take home a toy car as a remembrance. Hundreds were incorporated throughout the displays with signage inviting guests – children and adults alike – to choose one. During the visitation, people searched through the cars together, smiled through tears and selected one that reminded them of the child they had come to honor.

Photographs became part of that experience as well. The family brought hundreds of candid snapshots capturing everyday moments and hoped guests might take those home, too. Rather than placing the photographs in stacks, our staff tucked them throughout the toy displays and invited visitors to choose a photograph along with a car.

The result was an interactive memorial rather than a passive display. Adults lingered over photographs, sharing stories as familiar moments caught their attention, while children searched for a special toy. Each guest could leave carrying a tangible reminder of a life that, although far too brief, had brought tremendous joy to others.

Our staff also found personal ways to demonstrate care that the family had never requested. Team members purchased a plush version of a favorite character and a soft themed blanket to accompany the child. These were small gestures, but they reflected how personally invested our team had become in caring for this family and creating an environment filled with tenderness and love.

Music added another dimension to the service. Rather than choosing conventional funeral selections, the family asked us to play the alternative rock and pop-punk music their child loved. We embraced their request and allowed the music to become a prominent part of the visitation rather than quiet background sound. It was unexpected, energetic and entirely appropriate because it reflected him. Guests remarked that everywhere they turned, they encountered another piece of his personality.

The ceremony itself incorporated the family's spiritual beliefs and was led by a chaplain who had already provided support to them following the child's death. Having a familiar person officiate offered continuity and comfort while allowing the service to remain deeply personal.

Technology also helped weave the many elements together. Video tributes, custom graphics and personalized memorial materials incorporated family photographs and meaningful imagery, helping guests focus not on the circumstances of the death, but on the happiness and love contained within this young life.

One final moment of personalization came unexpectedly. At the conclusion of the committal service, heavy rain began to fall. Under other circumstances, the sudden downpour might have seemed unfortunate. Instead, the parents smiled through their tears: their child had loved thunderstorms. A moment no one could have planned became one more connection to him and an unforgettable part of the family's farewell.

Afterward, the family told us they could not have imagined a tribute that more completely reflected their child. Guests also commented on how different the experience felt from other funerals they had attended. Despite profound sadness, they encountered joy, imagination, music and memories everywhere they looked - and many left carrying a photograph and toy car as a lasting reminder.

For our staff, this service reaffirmed that extraordinary personalization begins with listening. The family's stories gave us the inspiration; thoughtful collaboration and creativity allowed us to transform those stories into an experience. By embracing the things that made this child happy, we were able to create a farewell filled not only with grief, but also with the imagination, laughter, music and love that had defined his life.

Roller Funeral Homes

Roller Funeral Home, Mountain Home, Arkansas
Roller Funeral Homes, Paris, Arkansas
Roller-Chenal Funeral Home, Little Rock, Arkansas
Roller-Christeson Funeral Home, Harrison, Arkansas
Roller-Citizens Funeral Home, West Memphis, Arkansas
Roller-Citizens, West Helena, Arkansas
Roller-Coffman, Marshall, Arkansas
Roller-Cox Funeral Home, Clarksville, Arkansas
Roller-Daniel Funeral Home, Searcy, Arkansas

Roller-England Funeral Home, England, Arkansas
Roller-Farmers Union Funeral Home, Jonesboro, Arkansas
Roller-McNutt Funeral Home, Conway, Arkansas
Roller-McNutt Funeral Home, Clinton, Arkansas
Roller-McNutt Funeral Home – Greenbriar, Greenbriar, Arkansas
Roller-Owens Funeral Home, North Little Rock, Arkansas
Roller-Swift Funeral Home, Osceola, Arkansas

One Final Ride

When a family shares an unconventional idea for a funeral, our role is not simply to determine whether it has been done before. Sometimes it is to ask, "How can we make this happen safely, respectfully and meaningfully?"

We had the privilege of serving the family of a young man whose passion for demolition derby racing was an important part of his life. During the arrangement conference, his family shared stories about his love of racing and the cars that had brought him so much enjoyment. As we talked about ways to incorporate that passion into the funeral, they expressed one very specific wish: they wanted his final ride to be on one of his own demolition derby cars.

Our staff immediately embraced the idea.

Making it possible, however, required far more than simply bringing the vehicle to the funeral. The family's vision needed to be carried out safely and with the dignity appropriate for the occasion. Working collaboratively, a custom casket carrier was designed and built to attach securely to the front of the derby car. Our team carefully considered how the casket would be loaded, secured and transported at each stage of the funeral.

We also coordinated with the family, church representatives, transportation providers and cemetery personnel. Every step of the journey needed to be planned in advance so that what appeared effortless to those attending was, behind the scenes, carefully orchestrated.

On the day of the funeral, the derby car was transported to the church by trailer. Our staff secured the casket to the specially designed carrier before the service. Following the traditional church ceremony, the casket was again placed on the vehicle for the journey to the cemetery. Once there, the derby car was unloaded and carried him through the final portion of his journey to the graveside.

The vehicle itself helped tell the story. It wasn't restored or polished to perfection for the occasion. Its weathered exterior and the dents and scrapes accumulated through competition were part of what made the tribute authentic. This was not simply a vehicle chosen for dramatic effect; it was something connected to a passion that had brought him excitement, friendships and memories during his life.

Watching it carry him one final time became the defining moment of the service. Family members and friends smiled through tears as something so familiar – and so unmistakably associated with the person they loved – became part of their goodbye. What might otherwise have been a conventional funeral procession became an intensely personal celebration of his life.

Importantly, personalization did not replace tradition. The family wanted the funeral to reflect their Christian faith, and the service included a traditional church ceremony and graveside committal. The derby car complemented those religious traditions rather than competing with them, demonstrating that deeply personal elements can be incorporated into a traditional funeral while maintaining reverence and dignity.

Photographs and video also documented the tribute, preserving the experience for the family and allowing them to revisit a remarkable expression of their loved one's passion. Following the service, the family expressed heartfelt gratitude that our team had been willing to embrace their idea rather than dismiss it as too difficult or unconventional. Guests likewise remarked that they had never experienced a funeral quite like it.

For our staff, the experience demonstrated an important aspect of meaningful funeral service: listening to a family's idea is only the beginning. Sometimes exceeding expectations means bringing together creativity, technical problem-solving, collaboration and careful execution to turn that idea into reality.

The family knew what would make the farewell feel right. Our responsibility was to find a way to make it possible. In doing so, we helped give someone whose life included a passion for demolition derby racing one final – and unforgettable – ride.