



Southern

◆ FUNERAL DIRECTOR ◆

MAGAZINE

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Acquisition

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May 2019

SFD's "Q&A" for the Annual "M&A" Issue with
Jake Johnson
Thinking About Selling? You Have Work to Do! Notes
From the Editor" by John Yopp
How to Sell Your Business Twice: A Case Study by
Alan Creedy
Transfer of Ownership-When Is the Right Time?
by Jeff Harbeson
Transitioning Your Funeral Home to the Next
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Wilbert Funeral Services Acquires Astral Industries
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May 2019

Southern Funeral Director Magazine®
Vol. 174 No. 5

The National Funeral Service Journal
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POSTMASTER:
Notify us of address changes by form 3579 to:
Southern Funeral Director Magazine®
P.O. Box 768152
Roswell, GA 30076



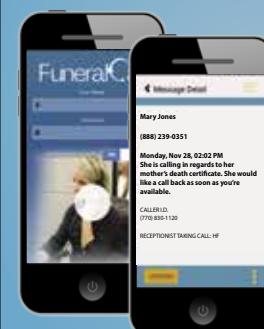
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notes from the editor

by John Yopp

Thinking About Selling?

The funeral and cemetery profession is made up of small, middle and large market company owners and executives, the last thing they might be thinking about during the growth phase of their businesses is planning for an eventual sale. However, a successful “exit strategy” can take years of preparation, and only those owners who take the initiative and right steps along the way will get the price they want.

The main goal of early preparation is to minimize potential purchase price adjustments in the due diligence phase. Very rarely do you uncover assets or liabilities that were not disclosed, that actually made the purchase price go up. It’s usually the opposite and the purchase price can be adjusted downwards due to many circumstances, i.e., unfunded preneed policies, tax liens, etc....

Here are “7” Steps you can take to make a deal process as painless and streamlined as possible:

1) Nail Down the Numbers – Buyers usually will want to look at the past 3 years financial statements and tax returns, as well as year-to-date. To receive the highest value, it is best to report all revenues (even the cash) and make sure all payroll taxes, property taxes, IRS obligations, preneed funds, merchandise trusts (if cemetery) and other liabilities are paid to date and current. Any shortfall will raise red flags and reduce the purchase price.

2) Disclose, Disclose and Disclose – Even the best companies have skeletons in their closets. The smartest companies recognize those issues early and proactively identify and address them in the sale process. The larger the deal, the more the due diligence process will be scrutinized.

3) Identify the Right Buyer – By understanding the different types of buyers, the seller can focus their time, efforts and resources on those things that will maximize the company’s value. Buyers fall into three categories:

You Have Work to Do!

Strategic, Financial and Internal. Strategic buyers want a trend of growing profits, Financial buyers want free cash flow and growing revenues and Internal buyers want strong financials and balance sheets and good corporate culture.

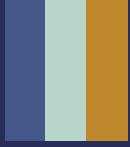
4) Focus On Driving Value for Your Target Buyer

– Develop a list of three to seven items that will make the selling company seem more attractive to the buyer. You do this when you sell your home, so why not do it when selling your business? For example, strong preneed program or amount in preneed, community involvement such as an active aftercare program, or steady demographic growth which those numbers can be obtained through your local Chamber of Commerce.

5) Know Your Walk Away Number – Before you sell have a specialists evaluate your business, then see what your tax ramifications are and what your “net number” is. Make sure that net number can be budgeted to suit your lifestyle for “life after the deal.”

6) Don’t Forget the Business – Selling a company can take its toll and be a distraction to your day-to-day operation, as an owner. It may be best to engage an industry broker or your accountant/attorney to help in some of the process. Any downward trend in the business due to neglect will obviously effect your final purchase price number.

7) Think About Your Future – Selling your business will change your life. In most cases, your routine and being “the boss” will be altered and may cause a bit of sellers remorse. Remember you traded a significant amount of money that is now in your account for someone else to operate the business. Most business owners will only get the chance to sell their business once in their lifetime, so it’s important to maximize the chances of success by putting your best foot forward. As Benjamin Franklin once quoted, “By failing to prepare, you’re preparing to fail.”



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SFD's "Q&A" for the annual "M&A" Issue with Jake Johnson, Johnson Consulting Group



1.) Independent firms are increasingly approached by consolidators (big and small), what are the top 3 considerations when contemplating the sale of a generational, family owned firm?

There are many important factors to consider when contemplating a sale that range from financial to emotional. To pick only three, I would have to say, right successor, right structure and right time. By right successor, will the new owner be a good fit for the business, the employees and the community. The best price is not always the right one. The right structure is where the magic happens, this is where you need experienced professionals in your corner to make sure all the details are discussed and understood completely for your situation. The third is one that most struggle with, right time. Like timing the stock market. When is the right time to sell? This is the primary reason to start Succession Planning discussions early.

2.) Why is it so important for a funeral business or any business to keep impeccable, up to date "Profit & Loss" statements? Does paying the government more taxes on your tax return guarantee a higher sales price if one decides to sell in the next 5 years?

We believe any business should pride itself on keeping accurate records over the years, especially a funeral business. How does one make day to day decisions without solid information? There is a great quote I once heard that states "Great Leaders use Relevant Data to make Wise Decisions". It is important to have accurate P&L statements as 'relevant data' to operate your business and eventually to assist with the transfer of ownership. Sales price is based on EBITDA (True Cash Flow) and demand. If there is little or no demand for your business, then EBITDA and your tax bill don't come into play.

3.) How effective or accountable are "Non Competes" in any sale or change of business ownership?

Almost all buyers will want a strong non-compete as funeral service is a very personal service. Terms will

vary. This is especially true of the smaller to mid-size firms. This is not necessarily true with large firms as they have become more of an institution and not tied to an individual for the most part. Enforceability varies from state to state. Another reason to have the experienced professionals help structure these details of the transaction.

4.) Are you seeing less and less of the next generation taking over the family business? And why has this shifted from 25-50 years ago when it was a given that son or daughter would be the successor to the family business?

In the funeral business most definitely. However, there are a number of wise and talented next generation men and women we see and interact with staying in the profession. The reasons why others are not, too numerous to list. I would have to say they see the challenges the current generation faces daily. The 24/7/365 this profession requires is probably the biggest barrier. Many pursue other career interest and more common to be away from the community where they grew up.

5.) With interest rates at an all-time low, and banks paying bare minimums on CDs and other secured investment options, how can one get his equity out and still live through retirement on the low interest without going in to the principle?

If you get enough money for your firm it makes little difference! In some cases where a business is declining, selling is the smart thing to do. Too many funeral directors wait too long to sell their firm and

value evaporates. If someone has a stable or growing firm they need to consider your question. Their CPA should be able to assist. They may also consider doing some owner carry at above investment rates. But they should only do so if they are selling to a very stable buyer.

6.) Do you expect to see more sales of business or internal changes of ownership in the next 10 years compared to the previous 10 years, and why?

The last few years have been pretty active for sure. Its been especially interesting to see some of the regional operators deciding to sell. We believe that this trend will continue as profits continue to get pressured by rising cremation rates and families opting for lesser casket and service options. The strong will survive for the most part, but the future is most uncertain.

7.) SCI, Carriage Services, Park Lawn, StoneMor Partners and Security National Financial Corporation are the last of the 4 publicly traded funeral home/cemetery companies. Do you see any of these companies selling to another funeral/cemetery company or outside investment company in the near future?

Good chance this will happen at some point down the road if history is a precursor for the future as it has happened in the past.

8.) Other small consolidators seem to be purchasing the businesses that are too small for the publicly traded companies to acquire. Are these cluster of 50-150 call firms a liability to the small consolidator. For example, if

cremation continues to rise, then a 100 call location would theoretically have a little less revenue every year. How can less revenue increase profitability and value?

If run efficiently and one has the right processes in place, this can make for a very valuable enterprise. We see a number of operators that are interested in expanding their market area to capture additional revenue. All acquisitions need to be strategic and not cause additional stress on the existing operations bottom line. These deals make a lot of sense if there are a lot of synergies in the combination.

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Johnson Consulting Group announces winners of the 2019 Excellence in Customer Service Awards

Scottsdale, AZ –Johnson Consulting Group (JCG) announced the recipients of the JCG 2019 Excellence in Customer Service Awards.

The Awards were presented to JCG client funeral homes who achieved the highest Total Value Index Score from family satisfaction surveys mailed to each family they served during 2018. The Total Value Index is a calculation of the sum of the Overall Performance Score, the Net Promoter Score and the price paid for goods and service question. The Overall Performance Score is a calculation of nineteen independent questions that measure results in four areas: 1) Initial Contact with the Funeral Home, 2) The Arranging Director, 3) Facilities and Vehicles, 4) Staff and Services Provided.

The JCG client funeral homes are divided into three categories based on call volume. On behalf of Johnson Consulting Group, we want to congratulate the following winners:

Category One: 150 Surveys Sent

- Rose Lawn Funeral Home and Cemetery
- Ascension Funeral Home
- Fuqua-Bankston Funeral Home
- Ingold Funeral & Cremation
- Powell Funeral Home
- Garrett-Sykes Funeral Service - Ahoskie Chapel
- Johnson Funeral Home & Cremation Services
- Weigel Funeral Home
- Minton-Chatwell Funeral Directors
- LaFond-Ardoin Funeral Home
- Muehlebach Funeral Home
- Anderson-Peterson-Mahn Funeral Home
- Carey Hand Colonial Funeral Home
- McGuinness Funeral Home - Washington Township
- Roberts-Reed-Culver Funeral Home

Category Two: 151-300 Surveys Sent

- Posey Funeral Directors
- Biggers Funeral Home
- Crapo-Hathaway Funeral Home
- Reardon Simi Valley Funeral Home
- Blessing Funeral Home
- Rushing-Estes-Knowles Mortuary
- Wheeler & Woodlief Funeral Home & Cremation Services

- Kersey Funeral Home
- Heartland Funeral Home
- Benito & Azzaro Pacific Garden Chapel
- Herr Funeral Home & Cremation Services
- International Cremation Services
- Beinhauer Family Funeral Homes
- Sibile Funeral Home
- Keizer Funeral Chapel

Category Three: 300+ Surveys Sent

- Treasure Coast Funeral Home & Crematory
- Whitney & Murphy Funeral Home
- Luyben Dilday Mortuary
- Ott and Lee Funeral Home
- Smith North Little Rock Funeral Home
- Rabenhorst Funeral Homes - Downtown
- Ingram Funeral Home & Crematory
- Menke Funeral & Cremation Center
- Starks & Menchinger Family Funeral Home
- Andrews Mortuary Market Street Chapel
- Michels & Lundquist Funeral Home
- Hansen Mortuaries - Desert Hills
- Twiford Funeral Homes
- Greenwood Funeral Home
- Sunset View Cemetery & Mortuary

The JCG Performance Tracker™ provides funeral home and cemeteries timely, accurate measurements of customer service and sale performance. The software offers comprehensive reporting that shows business owners what they are doing well and identifying the areas that need fine-tuning and improvements. Johnson Consulting Company started its customer survey program in 2008 and has experienced rapid growth. This large amount of survey data has proven invaluable to providing insight into customer needs and satisfaction. The company attributes its rapid growth based on its ability to offer the program with no contract to sign, a low monthly cost and accessibility to its management professionals for interpretation and usefulness of the reports. “With social media and more customers going online to share their experience, it’s imperative that funeral homes and cemeteries have a way to understand and track their families’ responses,” Jake Johnson says “It is also imperative to have actionable reports to act on when necessary.”



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Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service Welcomes Hope Iglehart as President



May 24, 2019 – Pierce Mortuary Colleges is pleased to announce the hiring of Hope Iglehart as President of Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service, Decatur, Georgia.

Iglehart has extensive experience in both higher education and funeral service. Over her eighteen years in the academic arena, she has served in numerous roles in Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, most recently as Campus Academic Dean at Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service (GJCFS), where she also was Student Support Coordinator, Instructor and Program Chair. Prior to joining GJCFS, Iglehart held various positions at Athens Technical College and the University of Georgia, including learning specialist, academic advisement, registration and recruitment, and faculty.

Iglehart is a fourth-generation licensed Funeral Director and Embalmer as well as a Certified Crematory

Operator and Cremation Arranger. She holds a Master of Business Administration from Piedmont College, a Bachelor of Arts in English from Bennett College for Women, and an Associate of Science from Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service.

“Hope Iglehart brings a solid foundation of experience and deep passion to education and funeral service,” said Jill Karn, Chief Operating Officer of Pierce Mortuary Colleges. “She has already made a lasting impact on students in her prior roles at the College and I am confident that she will take the leadership reins with that same commitment to students and faculty.”

Iglehart is a member of many civic organizations including The Links, Incorporated; Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated; and the Georgia Funeral Service Practitioners Association. Among her many distinctions, she is especially proud of the Humanitarian Award bestowed by Church Women United.

“I am honored to be named as President of this excellent college that has such a proud heritage of preparing funeral professionals to serve families with compassion and professionalism,” Iglehart said.

Wilbert Funeral Services, Inc. Acquires Astral Industries, Inc.

June 3, 2019 – Wilbert Funeral Services, Inc. (“WFSI”) is pleased to announce it has completed the acquisition of certain assets of Astral Industries, Inc., Astral Carrier Inc. and other related Astral companies (“Astral”). Based in Lynn, Indiana, Astral is a leading manufacturer of steel caskets and has supplied independent distributors and funeral homes across the United States for over 45 years. Astral Carrier is a 48-state contract carrier with a fleet of air-ride tractors and trailers. This transaction supports WFSI’s continued growth strategy through continued reinvestment in complementary products and services benefiting funeral professionals and the families they serve. This commitment to offering solutions to industry professionals and their customers will continue to drive the combined enterprises.

“We are very pleased to welcome Astral to the Wilbert family,” stated Dennis Welzenbach, President & CEO of WFSI. “We will retain Astral’s manufacturing

platform and offices, and Don Robinson, currently Executive Vice President – Licensee Products & Services and President of Signet Supply for WFSI, will be relocating to Lynn to assume the position as President of Astral, while retaining his role with Signet Supply.”

“We would like to thank Astral’s independent distributor and funeral home customers, as well as the Signet Supply distributor group, for their support as we worked to complete the merger of these iconic brands,” stated Robinson. “We are committed to building on Astral’s industry-leading quality, great customer service, and dedicated transportation, which provide both distributors and funeral professionals unequalled value. In the months ahead, Astral plans to introduce an expanded line of burial and cremation products for distributors under the new brand Astral SELECT™.”

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Admittedly, the stats are pretty impressive. No other insurance assignment company can boast the number of funeral homes served or the amount of money paid out yearly to make sure every funeral goes off without a hitch. But what's truly impressive is the way in which we work with our clients, as if each one is our only one. And serving them quickly and painlessly is our only job, which, in fact, is so. While bigger isn't always better, sometimes it is. As in the case of the company you want servicing your insurance assignments.

How to Sell Your Business Twice: A Case Study

By Alan Creedy

It never fails. The Letter of Intent (LOI) is signed, the lawyers are preparing documents, the buyer's bank is asking increasingly personal questions and due diligence is scheduled for next month. It's 3 AM and suddenly you are wide awake. You look at the clock. You know you are not on call and then it hits you...

...OMG! What have I done?

The rest of the night is a lost cause as your mind wrestles with a growing list of questions:

- What will I have to pay in taxes?
- Will I need to pay off the debt immediately?
- Will I be able to invest what's left and replace my income?
- How will my community react?
- How will my employees react?
- How much is the broker's fee in dollars?
- Will I be able to retire comfortably?

Seller's remorse is not only common, it is normal. For some reason, that period leading up to the actual signing of a Letter of Intent is an abstract process. Once it is signed and "things begin to happen", it starts to become real. The emotional process is very much like the five stages of grief as it begins in denial and travels through the phases ultimately ending in acceptance.

But there are things you can do now to mitigate the stress of the process and understanding how it all works helps tremendously.

I have found that I can help my clients in significant ways. But I have to wait for them to be ready. Many are so intent on getting a buyer at the right price that they just aren't open to some of the more challenging truths. For instance:

The likelihood of selling your business and investing what is left after taxes and debt payoff at a level that will replace your income is almost nil.

Case Study:

Miles Shaugnessy owns a funeral home serving 175 families annually. This generates close to \$1,150,000 in yearly revenue (excluding cash advances). Miles

takes a salary of \$95,000 a year and, since he owns the land and building separately, he receives rent of \$125,000. He is now 65 and recently signed a Letter of Intent for \$1,725,000 to sell the funeral home assets including land and building.

My phone rings at exactly 8:30 AM. Miles is on the other end. "I've been up since 3:00," he says. "I am worried I won't have enough money to retire after I pay taxes and debt."

My response: "Settle down, this is normal; I have you covered. Remember, we talked about this when we started. I told you then: you can't replace your Seller Discretionary Earnings by selling your business. So, we created a plan. We are effectively selling your business twice."

Miles: "I know, but can you remind me how that works?"

Most small business owners think about their salary, the rent they might receive and, sometimes (not always) business profits. They don't really think about the economic benefits they actually derive from ownership. So, there is this point where it sinks in that they can't replace their income with what they will have in their pockets after a sale. And it frightens them.

The economic benefit of ownership in accounting circles is commonly referred to as Seller Discretionary Earnings (SDE). SDE is the actual economic benefit you derive from your firm and it might look something like this:

Owner's Salary	\$95,000
Owner Rent	\$125,000
Business profits	\$36,500
Depreciation	\$33,000
Personal vehicle	\$13,500
Gas for wife's vehicle	\$1,800
Memberships	\$10,500
State Winter Conference	\$5,300
Other perks	\$5,000

Less: Owner retirement	-\$100,000
Less: Capital Expenditures	-\$15,000
Gross SDE	\$210,600
Loan payments on business RE	-\$57,500
Net SDE	\$153,100

So, Miles is thinking he can live on about \$125,000 a year pretax. Then one night he wakes up and realizes it is something more than that, but he doesn't know what. In fact, he has actually been living on closer to \$150,000 annually.

Assuming a conservative investment portfolio yielding 6%, net proceeds after the sale of his business would need to be \$2,500,000 ($\$2,500,000 \times 6\% = \$150,000$) to maintain that level of annual earnings. He just signed a deal to sell his firm for gross proceeds of \$1,725,000!

And he knows he isn't keeping all of that. After taxes (about \$195,000) and paying off debt (about \$110,000) and seller fees (about \$38,000) he will have \$1,382,000

to invest. At 6% that will yield pretax income of \$82,920. A shortfall of \$67,000. OOPS!

The point of this illustration is that, while the sale numbers may seem large, what is important is being able to replace your Seller Discretionary Earnings (SDE).

The key element in fixing this puzzle is time. Fortunately, Miles and I had worked on this for several years. This enabled me to develop a true succession plan. Because Miles was in his late 50's when we started, working for another five years didn't bother him. In actuality, he wasn't ready to retire at 63 so five years turned into 7 which exponentially improved his plan. This enabled him to pay down debt and build an investment portfolio by realigning his cash flow.

Small business people struggle with the concept that they are really only selling cash flow. They tend to look at the intrinsic value of their assets, goodwill and revenue and think the independent value of each of these should equal greater value. It doesn't. But the idea that you are really selling cash flow holds the key

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to selling your business twice.

Miles had purchased the business when he was 30 from his father. It was a marginally “sweetheart” deal, but it still involved debt over a period of years. After he paid his father off, he refurbished his facility and incurred a new loan. In addition, he was bearing the cost of raising his children for the first 25 years of his career. The last one had left the nest a couple of years before we met. This freed up a lot of personal cash needs.

At 58, we created his succession plan. He had no children in the business and no employees who he thought would buy the business. So, his only option was a third-party sale.

Knowing he couldn’t replace his SDE by simply selling the business, we set about to take some of the freed-up cash flow and reallocate it. It turned out there was a little-known IRS-approved strategy for enabling small business owners to “catch up” retirement savings later in life. By deploying that, we were able to invest a significant amount of cash on a tax deferred basis. Over 7 years, we had amassed an additional \$1,030,000. This along with his after-tax sale proceeds put him at \$2,412,000 in investments. As part of the sales agreement Miles will continue working 40 hours per week at \$100,000 a year for two years. At the same time, he will apply for Social Security. The combined Social Security benefits for both Miles and his wife will be \$45,000 annually. So, Miles will let his investment portfolio “cook” for a couple of years. At age 68, when he actually retires, Miles’ retirement portfolio will have accumulated to \$2,760,000.

The portfolio we have chosen for his post retirement years guarantees 6% income. It could earn more than that, but the floor is 6%. Now Miles and his wife will have a total yearly income after retirement has started as follows:

Social security income	\$45,000
Portfolio income @ 6%	\$165,689
Total first year retirement	\$210,689
Pretax	

What a difference a few years makes. It is unlikely the Shaughnessys will ever need to invade the corpus of the

retirement portfolio. This gives them the opportunity to leave a nice legacy for their children.

This is how you sell your business twice.

Alan Creedy is the owner of Creedy & Company, a business advisory service he founded in 2008. His hands-on industry experience of more than 35 years enables him to quickly analyze core problems, develop and prioritize solutions and implement strategies for quick turnaround. For more information, visit www.funeralhomeconsulting.org.

Over time I felt like the business was running me. What scared me was that I had more than 80% of my wealth locked up in it. I was a funeral director running a business...I needed to learn how to be a business man running a funeral home. Alan Creedy came in and helped me understand where to focus, how to count, how to prioritize and figure out where I wanted to go. I feel I am back in charge and on my way to achieving something of value...without giving up my life's work.

Creative Solutions to Unique Issues

As small business owners we don’t have much choice... do we? We wear a lot of hats and so we must be:

- A worker
- A Leader
- A manager
- A financier
- And so on. We don’t often have the luxury of getting off our bikes to fix them. We have to do it as we keep moving along.

We have limited resources. Solutions that require lots of manpower and money are not always feasible. You are not a major corporation with lots of specialized talent like full time accountants, lawyers, marketers and trainers.

No, it’s more realistic that you will have to implement solutions yourself. So, solutions have to be something you can accomplish in steps and with the resources you already have.



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Transfer of Ownership - When Is the Right Time?

By Jeff Harbeson

The transfer of ownership within the funeral profession is projected to increase as aging funeral home owners exit the business. On the surface, the transaction would seem to be as simple as placing a house on the market for sale. However, selling or transferring ownership of a funeral home is much more complex. Many inaccurate assumptions about valuing a funeral home, who the available buyers are, and the process exist. This article will provide clarity and information for funeral home owners considering retirement or a career change.

Determining the value of a funeral home business is the first step. The business and real estate are not necessarily valued separately. The Business Analysts at the Foresight Companies often hear funeral home owners declare "I know the real estate is worth \$x,xxx,xxx because I had a real estate appraisal a few years back." Funeral homes differ from other commercial properties because they are special use and generally not easily converted for other commercial uses. What is often not understood, is that changing a funeral home property into another commercial use property can be cost prohibitive.

Another impact on value is location. Older firms that were once geographically centered face the issue of a downtown location that was formerly the epicenter of commerce, business, and shopping now gone or moved. Shopping and business areas are developed away from city centers creating a dilemma for some funeral homes; stay put or move?

Let's look at the example of a funeral home in an urban area that serves a specific demographic market. Over twenty years the residents gradually moved to a suburb and rarely returned to the old neighborhood. Patronage declined except for an occasional at need service and the preneeds that were previously written. The owner decided to move to where most of his former client base had moved. Rather than rebuild from the ground up, he renovated an old building for a fraction of the cost of a new facility. He leased the original facility to an organization which provided additional revenue.

Not only did the original patrons return to the legacy funeral home at a new location, new relationships with families were developed and the move proved to be very profitable. If the community served shifts and no traction is made with the new inhabitants, owners should take decisive action or face the peril of extinction.

Choosing the right time to sell a funeral home presents a quandary for funeral home owners because it is not like deciding on a set retirement date for employment departure. As a rule, preparing to place a funeral home on the market for sale or timing a succession plan are transactions which can be lengthy. Deciding to sell or transfer ownership is like running a marathon; months of preparation are required. You cannot just lace up your sneakers and decide to run a race. The probability of failure is high.

The sale of any business has tax implications. This is not always a simple question of what your "basis" or purchase price for the business was. Your business entity structure will impact your tax bill. Are you a corporation or a limited liability company? A "C" corp. or an "S" corp? A partnership or sole proprietor. All these variables must be taken into consideration before the decision to sell is made.

It is also important to determine the impact the net proceeds from a sale will have on your retirement plans. Are they substantial enough to sustain your retirement goals and expectations for quality of life in retirement? A funeral home is generally the largest investment a funeral home owner has. Other assets such as life insurance, financial investments, real estate, as well as social security proceeds all contribute to funds for retirement. If the valuation analysis does not provide a result that will yield the expected net cash after sale, an owner may need wait and take the opportunity to improve the financial posture of their business.

This can be done by making changes to operating overhead as well as pricing. For example, personnel

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costs are typically the largest expense of operating a funeral home. Conduct a cost analysis of personnel to find areas where overhead can be trimmed. A reduction in expenses can potentially result in a significant increase of funeral home value.

Likewise, I am often astounded by the number of owners that have no buy-sell agreement or legal documents prepared to address actions in the event of disability or death. Unfortunately, the notion that “I have life insurance in place to cover everything” is not the answer. In a world where funeral directors work so hard to advertise the need for consumers to pre-plan and pre-fund their funeral, personal planning for their own demise is a rarity. Although there is a common belief that funeral home owners and directors never die, we do occasionally see how untimely deaths have created chaos for the survivors.

Finding a suitable buyer also takes time. Many owners cling to the days of yesteryear when public companies were buying businesses to bolster their footprint in the marketplace. I can attest those days are over, in fact, some of the large companies which participated in “the funeral home acquisition grab” are now divesting properties. This will invariably put added competition on the privately held businesses looking to sell.

Additionally, the lending rules have significantly changed making it more difficult for first time owners to purchase their first business. The SBA has changed their funding requirements. Basically, the borrower must provide 10% of the purchase price. This means that for a \$1,000,000 funeral home purchase, the SBA may provide up to \$900,000 and the borrower must provide the balance. I see two problems with this scenario. First, if a funeral home owner were to allow a “holdback” or seller financed portion of the purchase, the SBA requires complete payment prior to the owner being paid. This results in the owner being in the second position, in complete standby till the SBA gets paid off. Second, how many potential first-time owners have access to \$100,000? In many cases, funeral home owners are averse to selling their business to competitors, however in the current climate, such consideration must be put on the table.

As a funeral home owner, the decision to transfer ownership of your largest investment is a significant life event. As you can see, there are many complex facets of selling which may not be at the forefront of consideration in the decision-making process. The most important first step is to understand the current market value of the business as a going concern (real estate included). Employ a trusted business advisor with experience in funeral home transactions. Your local accountant and real estate agent simply do not understand the nuances of valuing and selling a funeral home. If you are a funeral home owner and transferring ownership is in your future, let’s have a conversation, I would like to listen to your thoughts about the future.

Please call me at 800-426-0165 or email jeff@theforestcompanies.com so we can schedule a time to chat.



Dan Isard



Chris Cruger



Doug Gober



Jeff Harbeson



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The Foresight Companies Announces Dynamic New Collaboration with Roosevelt Investments

Daniel Isard, Managing Partner of The Foresight Companies, and Adam Sheer, Co-Chief Executive Officer of The Roosevelt Investment Group, Inc. (Roosevelt Investments), announced today they have entered into an agreement to provide support to each other's clients and to jointly market to the funeral and cemetery professions. "Our company has continued to evolve for over the past four decades. We continually strive to find innovative services that our clients need. We identified that we needed a company to refer our clients to that reflects our values in how we treat our clients and provides solutions to meet their additional needs," Isard stated. "Doug Gober and Adam Sheer have had a great relationship for many years. Almost 20 years ago I spoke with Adam as he expressed his desire to have a greater presence in the funeral and cemetery worlds. After months of due diligence on both sides, we have concluded that Roosevelt Investments is the company we need to align with," Dan added.

"I am thrilled that Roosevelt Investments will be collaborating with The Foresight Companies to provide additional value added services for our clients," said Adam Sheer. "Many wealth managers claim to provide comprehensive planning, but only advise clients on their liquid wealth which, in the case of a funeral home owner or cemeterian, pales in comparison to the true value of their business. Through our new collaboration, our ability to refer clients to The Foresight Companies for M&A services, valuations, accounting and human resource consulting will allow us to offer truly comprehensive planning. Additionally, we are honored to work with, and learn from, two industry icons and thought leaders, Dan Isard and Doug Gober and the entire Foresight team."

Roosevelt Investments is a privately held boutique advisory firm, which traces its roots back to 1971, when P. James Roosevelt, a cousin of former President Theodore Roosevelt, founded the investment advisory firm. The firm manages assets for endowments and individuals, including several members of the Roosevelt family, as well as the Theodore Roosevelt Association. Roosevelt presently advises on approximately \$2.3 billion in assets (consisting of approximately \$2.2

billion in assets under management and approximately \$67 million in programs where it supplies an investment model) as of February 28, 2019.¹ Of those assets under management, about \$306 million come from working with funeral homes, cemeteries, and their owners.

"Through my past relationship with Roosevelt Investments, I have found them to be a source of skilled investing and attentiveness to their clients. In this case, the client is me!" said Doug Gober, Partner of Foresight. "I began working with Roosevelt after I first met Adam at the Death Care Management Conference and have respected their contributions to that annual event. I am even more excited to have them take care of our clients' needs for the future," he added. Foresight Roosevelt Wealth Management aims to reinv

ent financial planning. We will provide holistic resources for business management, personal wealth investment, asset protection, business succession and estate planning. No matter the age of the client, we can help them craft an individualized plan to seek financial independence upon retirement or if they die or become disabled before retirement. The power of our alignment has not existed for the service of business owners in our professions.

The Foresight Companies, LLC. is located in Phoenix, AZ, with offices in Louisiana and Oklahoma. The Foresight Companies, LLC. is the premier provider of integrated financial and management consulting services including valuations, accounting, family transition, strategic planning, merger, acquisition, and financing. Roosevelt is located in New York City with clients throughout North America. For interview requests of Dan, Doug or Adam please contact Catherine Belliveau at 602-274-6464.

Assets under advisement figures for 02/28/2019 (and as incorporated into total firm assets for 02/28/2019) exclude assets under advisement from a model-based program that Roosevelt's All Cap Core Equity Strategy participates in. The program sponsor has not yet provided Roosevelt with these asset figures for 02/28/2019.

Transitioning Your Funeral Home to the Next Generation

By Tony Kumming, Managing Partner, NewBridge Group

The funeral industry has historically been one of the most family oriented businesses in the United States. It's not unusual for us to work with third, fourth and even fifth generation funeral home owners. Many owners began with a plan to always "keep the business in the family". However, in the last few years we have noticed a few trends among the up and coming younger generations:

1. There are more market dynamics and competitive threats to the family business.

Many younger generation owners are experiencing significant changes in the values of families served, such as preference for cremations, lower pricing and less value placed on loyalty to a particular business. This, as you know, presents re-pricing and re-branding opportunities, but also is creating risk if not addressed with a well-thought-out strategy. In addition, low cost cremation services are advertising in smaller towns and taking market share. Some younger generations are facing a tougher road ahead than their grandparents and parents faced.

2. Lifestyle trends.

We've heard from several younger generation family members who've watched their parent's lifestyle and the work required to operate a funeral home and decided this is not for them. Being on call all weekend, getting up in the middle of the night to respond to a death or working with grieving families is not as appealing to them. On top of this, many owners are facing what all small business owners across the US are experiencing in today's economy - lack of talented staff.

3. Younger generations are pursuing other career options.

The pace of change with technology in the new economy has provided more and more career options for next generations. Many see how much hard work and commitment is required to own and operate a funeral home and so are deciding that lifestyle isn't appealing. And we've seen a trend of the next generation choosing to go into technology, social media, finance, or other careers rather than following their parents into

the funeral industry. Despite this, we still occasionally see younger family members choose to return to the family business.

4. Lack of funding.

Often, the best buyer for a business may not be the next generation, it can be a talented director who has worked for you for many years. However, with unemployment rates near all-time record lows, owners are finding it increasingly difficult to identify talented staff. Also, many employees don't have the funds to pay a price for the business that other companies can. Furthermore, SBA financing has continually changed its rules, making it hard to have a consistent understanding of that as an option for funding.

What Other Options Are There?

There are four types of buyers – Three that can be the right choice for a smaller number of sellers, but really one type that we're seeing as preferred by the majority of our clients.

1. Public companies.

Everyone is familiar with Service Corporation International (SCI) and other publicly owned funeral consolidators. For the most part, these large public companies are only interested in buying larger groups of funeral businesses, so this option isn't available to many family owned businesses. Even when this is an option, most family owned businesses have real concerns about this type of successor after years of seeing how they operate. Still, for some owners – especially those that don't have a next generation staying in the business or that plan to leave town after they sell - and so are less concerned about how the business will be operated, this type of sale is option.

2. Local competitor.

Most people we have worked with have strong preference not to sell to one of their competitors. To many, the idea of selling to a lifelong competitor just isn't appealing at any price. There's also a concern of, if the transaction doesn't work out, your competitor would still have a copy of all the information you

provided and would know you're interested in selling. There are ways to remedy this concern, but in general, dealing with this type of buyer presents challenges that other buyers wouldn't face.

3. Venture capital buyers.

The history of the funeral industry is littered with examples of venture backed consolidators who have come and gone. Many start off with industry experienced management teams, but then find out the venture money that's funding the group is really the one pulling the strings. Prime Succession, Meridian Mortuary, Keystone Group, Paragon, Sentinel and Osiris are a few that fit this category and all were eventually acquired by SCI. There are a couple of these companies in the industry today, and we see them going down a similar path as companies before them.

4. Strategic privately funded buyers.

Finally, there is a class of buyer that in many ways is the best of all scenarios. These companies are filling a void and providing owners with a great succession planning option. Most of these companies do not have specific acquisition targets, however, we've found them to be able to pay as much or more than the buyers listed above. These types of companies are owned and managed by lifelong funeral industry

professionals, and they're making strategic acquisitions and decisions that are building strong companies that should continue to provide great career opportunities for employees and former owners and their children. Many of these companies - Pinnacle Funeral Service, Rollings Funeral Service, and newly formed Beacon Funeral Partners – may not be familiar to everyone, but we think you're going to be hearing more and more about them as their style of acquiring and operating becomes more recognized.

In a recent informal survey of former clients, we have found that those who sold to these strategic private buyers are much happier than those that sold to a public company, a venture capital backed company, a local competitor, or an employee. We advise owners interested in considering a sale to consider all options so they can make an informed decision. You're only going to sell once, so do everything you can to make sure you have as much information as possible.

NewBridge Group works with owners of funeral homes to help explore their succession planning options. Services offered include valuations, strategic planning, acquisition services, funding and sale exploration.

INDUSTRY NEWS

Virginia Funeral Home Sells to Manager

Strasburg, VA – Stover Funeral Home was purchased on March 8, 2019 by long-time Manager Marty White. The Stover Funeral Home was established in 1878 by Francis Marion Stover. The funeral home was first operated in connection with a cabinet shop and later in combination with a furniture store. Francis' son Frank Stover later took over the active management and in 1924 built a completely new funeral home, separated from the furniture store that was known as Stover & Stover Furniture. Frank Stover's daughter and son-in-law joined the firm in 1936 and took over management in 1965. The funeral home stayed in the Stover family until Madolyn Stover Kitchin sold it to Stanley & Patsy Morehead in 1985.

also assisted in obtaining financing for Mr. White to be able to complete the transaction. Mr. White stated that "NewBridge presented several funding options and helped facilitate the entire process. They were instrumental in completing the transaction."

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NewBridge Group represented the Stover's in the transaction. NewBridge brought a number of buyers to the table but Mr. Stover decided he preferred to sell to his long-time Manager, Mr. White. NewBridge

Another Wisconsin Funeral Home joins Pinnacle Funeral Service

Pinnacle Funeral Service, LLC is pleased to announce its recent acquisition of Hartson Funeral Home, Inc. and Wisconsin Cremation Services, LLC.

The two businesses, which are located in Hales Corners, have been serving southeastern Wisconsin since 1989. Founders Gary and Christine ("Missy") Hartson have developed their clientele substantially over the past 30 years, and together they are now serving more than 500 families annually.

"We are proud to be the succession-planning partner for the Hartsons," Paul Haarer, CEO of Pinnacle, said. "Having been a part of the Wisconsin funeral service landscape for a number of years, we've taken notice of the solid business that Gary and Missy have built. They've worked hard and we admire that."

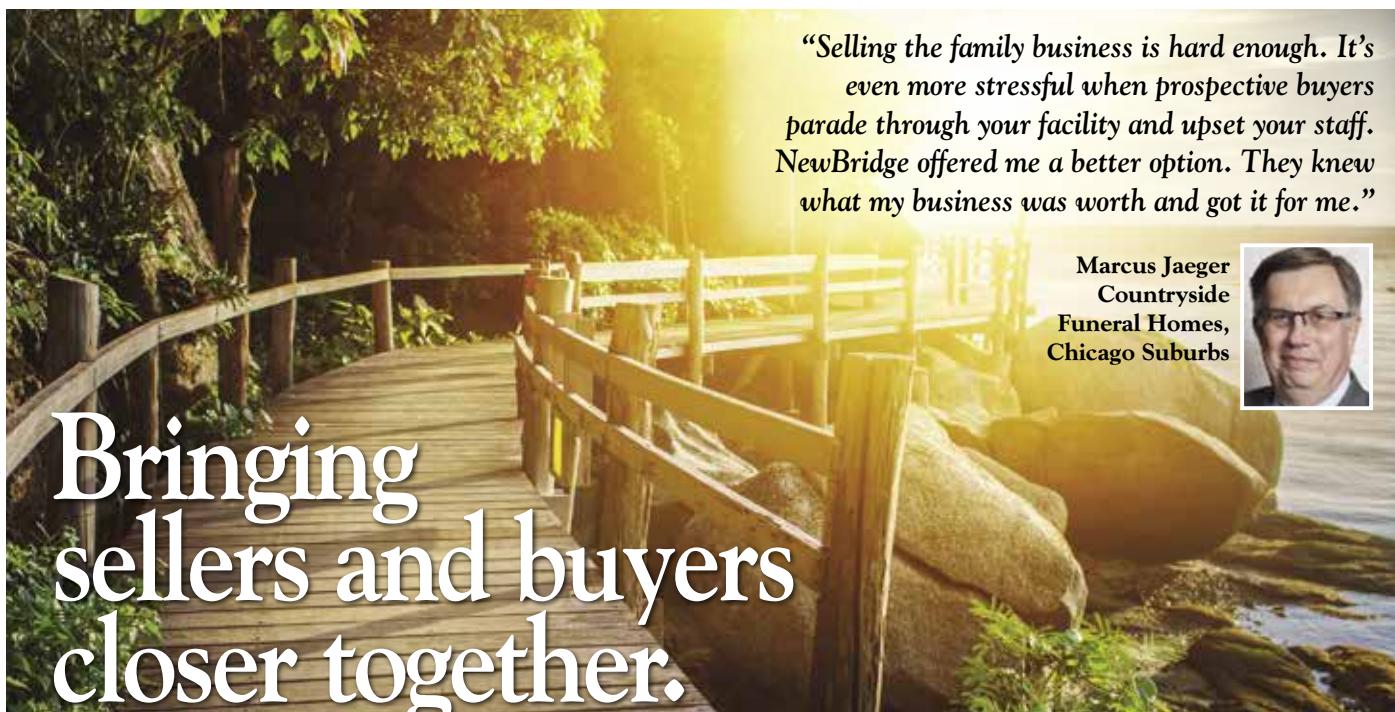
With this acquisition, Pinnacle strengthens its position in Greater Milwaukee, owning a growing number of

high-quality funeral homes in the state of Wisconsin. Pinnacle plans to continue to be active in acquiring funeral homes, giving retiring owners an important alternative to selling their businesses to a publicly traded company.

"We favor the kind of arrangement that will allow families to continue to be served with compassion and care by people already in the community," Haarer said. "Local, family-owned businesses like Hartson are a great fit for Pinnacle, because we can offer a unique succession plan to meet owner's individual needs."

Pinnacle's strength is in offering owners the assurance that their hard work and dedicated staff will continue to set the tone with local customers and families who have turned to them for decades.

NewBridge Group assisted with the funeral home valuation of the purchase.



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"Selling the family business is hard enough. It's even more stressful when prospective buyers parade through your facility and upset your staff. NewBridge offered me a better option. They knew what my business was worth and got it for me."

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ICCFA Annual Convention Crosses the Finish Line in Charlotte, North Carolina

The International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association (ICCFA) held its Annual Convention & Exposition on April 2–6 at the Charlotte Convention Center in Charlotte, North Carolina. The Convention drew in 1,850 total attendees and 504 supplier booths. There were 383 first-time attendees who experienced the 2019 Convention. Of the total attendees, 602 took part in the Tuesday Welcome Reception at the NASCAR Hall of Fame.

The breakdown for the 2019 attendance numbers is as follows:

- Total cemetery, funeral home, crematory and allied business representatives: 902
 - 25 percent representing cemeteries
 - 41 percent representing funeral homes
 - 3 percent representing pet loss providers
 - 11 percent representing crematory operations
 - 20 percent “other,” including insurance agents, mortuary school faculty, representatives of industry associations and others
- Exhibitor and supplier registrations: 948

Attendees classified their positions as follows:

- Owners: 39 percent
- Managers: 46 percent
- Staff: 15 percent
- Final purchasing authority: 53 percent
- Make purchasing recommendations: 40 percent
- No purchasing authority: 7 percent
-

As in past years, the event was highly rated by attendees, with 73% percent indicating their overall convention experience was “excellent” or “very good,” and 92% percent indicating they “definitely” or “probably” will attend the ICCFA 2020 Annual Convention & Expo when we return to San Antonio, Texas.

Among the comments:

“As a first time attendee to the ICCFA Convention, I rated it a A++. The amount of knowledge and material presented was just awesome. I brought three of my young mentees with me, and all were amazed with the



knowledge they received. They asked if I could bring them to San Antonio next year and I told them we all can go! They are the future of this industry.” Anthony Roberts, Roberts Funeral Service, Lexington, North Carolina

“This was the best convention concerning funeral service that I have encountered in my entire life! I am completely amazed, transformed, and inspired to keep pushing in the career!” Terez Blue, student

Over 60% percent of exhibitors rated their overall exposition experience as favorable. When asked about their plans next year, 90% percent indicated they planned to exhibit at the 2020 ICCFA Annual Convention & Expo.

Among exhibitor comments:

“We receive[d] a lot of positive interest that has led to strong business potential follow ups.” Stephen Power, Urn Towers Ltd

“We made amazing contacts with some large groups and several independents. These contacts are total game changers for us as a keepsake company. What an awesome event! Can’t wait until next year!!” Chuck Ferris, Eternity’s Touch, Inc., Wallaceburg, Ontario, Canada

Founded in 1887, the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association is the only international trade association representing all segments of the cemetery, cremation, funeral and memorialization profession. Its membership is composed of more than 9,100 rooftop locations and 20,000 professionals in the cemetery, funeral home and crematory industries, as well as supplier and related businesses worldwide.

ICCFA Elects New Officers, Directors During the 2019 Annual Convention

STERLING, VA (April 16, 2019) – The International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association elected new leadership during its 2019 Annual Convention & Exposition, April 2–6 in Charlotte, North Carolina.



President Jay Dodds

Rose, CCFE, CCrE, Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, New York;

- Vice President, Membership & Marketing—Shawna de la Cruz, Forest Lawn Memorial-Parks & Mortuaries, Glendale, California;
- Vice President, Internal Affairs—Andrés Aguilar, Los Parques, Guatemala City, Guatemala;
- Vice President, External Affairs—Lee Longino, Service Corporation International, Houston, Texas;
- Treasurer—Christopher Keller, Sunset Memorial Park & French Funerals and Cremations, Albuquerque, New Mexico; and
- Secretary—Robbie L. Pape, Service Corporation International, Houston, Texas.

Members elected to serve three-year terms on the ICCFA Board of Directors are:

- Stacy Adams, Memorial Park Funeral Home and Cemetery, St. Petersburg, Florida;
- Stephen Bassett, Elmwood Memorial Park & Funeral Home, Abilene, Texas;
- Shawna de la Cruz, Forest Lawn Memorial-Parks & Mortuaries, Glendale, California;
- Buddy Ewing, Tharp-Sontheimer Tharp Funeral Home, Metairie, Louisiana;
- Robert Gordon Jr., CCE, Cypress Lawn, Colma, California,

- Caressa Hughes, Service Corporation International, Houston, Texas;
- Andy Lopez, StoneMor Partners LP, Trevose, Pennsylvania; and
- Jennifer Olvera, CCE, Green Hills Memorial Park, Rancho Palos Verdes, California.

Past presidents elected to serve a one-year term on the Board:

- Kenneth Varner, CCFE, CCE, Cypress Lawn, Colma, CA; and
- Bill Wright, CCE, Greenwood Funeral Homes & Cremation, Fort Worth, Texas.

The International Memorialization Supply Association appointment to the Board is Jordan Yearsley, Ensure-A-Seal, Brooklyn, New York.

The presidential appointments to represent the ICCFA on the Cemetery Consumer Service Council are:

- Thomas P. Daly, CCE, CHS Consulting Group, Westwood, Massachusetts; and
- Stephen Burrill, CCE, CCrE, Mount Hope Cemetery, Bangor, Maine.

Members of the 2019-2020 Executive Committee are as follows:

- ICCFA President Jay Dodds, CFSP, Park Lawn Corporation, Houston, Texas;
- ICCFA President-Elect Gary M. Freytag, CCFE, Spring Grove Cemetery & Arboretum, Cincinnati, Ohio;
- ICCFA Immediate Past President Christine Toson Hentges, CCE, The Tribute Companies Inc., Hartland, Wisconsin;
- Jeff Kidwiler, CCE, CSE, Blackstone Cemetery Development, Santa Ana, California (president's appointment); and
- Frederick Lappin, CCE, Knollwood Cemetery Corporation, Canton, Massachusetts (past presidents' appointment).





Dennis Smith and Dave DeCarlo during lunch in the Expo Hall



Spending time on the Exhibit Floor with (L-R) Kyle Noble, Sherri Shahl, Anne Vetter and Doug Gober



Keeping it "All in the family" with the Price family during opening NASCAR Hall of Fame Reception (L-R) Kim Price, Jim Price and Nicki Price Adams



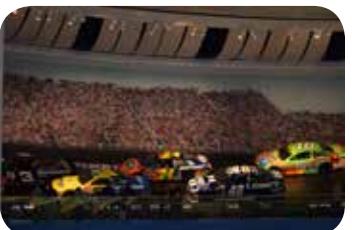
(L-R) John Tonjes, Jody Myers and Dan Bywater at the Ready Capital booth



Opening NASCAR Reception with (L-R) Peggy Rouzzo, Chris Lindom and Kim McGuire-Graham



Harry Joachim celebrating ICCFA's "Best in Show" Award to FuneralOne



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Keys to Service = Exploration

By: Todd Van Beck, Director of Continuing Education, John A. Gupton College, Nashville, TN

It is fascinating to realize that in reality most experienced funeral directors use most of the psychological and counseling interviewing techniques that therapist, psychologists, pastoral counselors and clergy use every day, but just haven't given the skills a label or title. The process of using exploration in the funeral interview experience is a prime example of this.

Exploring with our clients is most often the main body of the funeral interview and most of the time spent in this mutual exploring translates into a variety of important life matters by trying to examine all aspects of the options and alternatives available and then to reach certain conclusions which are meaningful to our client families. There are some safe ways to approach the process of exploring a client family's options, suggestion, and alternatives which we will "explore" together. These approaches might not apply to every funeral professional in every circumstance, but still they are worth exploring, and they just might be valuable to you. Your bottom line depends on it.

Our learning from the past.

I believe that most funeral directors excel at having and using a myriad of life experiences in the funeral interview whether they are aware of this resource or not.

Intending no disparagement of any other sources (both written and spoken), I would say that you can best help yourself by using your own past funeral interviews as guideposts – thinking about them, discussing them with other funeral colleagues and supervisors, possibly even taping and listening to your own recorded interviews and those of others. In other words systematize your life experience, and make that system part of your life-long learning.

Every funeral interview in every death situation is different (or is certainly should be), and if, as funeral interviewers, we get stuck in routine habits the consequences can be extremely distasteful to both the funeral professional, and the bereaved client family which domino's quickly into a diluted and shallow overall ceremonial and ritualistic experience – and in our profession this is NEVER GOOD.

I believe it is appropriate at this juncture to mention a few words about the easily untapped wisdom of the veteran funeral professional.

We live in a time that seems to worship youth, but this worshipping of the young, while trendy and attractive, has inherent risks attached and particularly when we are exploring something as important, dramatic, and sensitive as the consequences of the death of a human being, and the decisions that will be arrived at concerning what will or will not be done with that deceased human being. No Pollyanna stuff here!

In the critically important step of funeral interview exploration the veteran funeral professions have one great advantage over their youthful compatriots, and that is: the funeral road is not new to the veteran funeral professional, in fact they are still on it, and it is still taking them places. The risk of youth is they sometimes think that the funeral rules have changed, and certainly in many ways they have, but the veteran funeral director is keenly aware of the risks involved in moving too fast, too quick and in fiddling with customs, and community standards simply based in the immature notion of just changing things.

There is an old Iowa farm saying which goes this way: "Better not take the fence down before you understand why it was put up in the first place." Changing things simply for the sake of change usually translates in

going from nothing to nothing.

Because of the wealth of knowledge that most veteran funeral professionals possess because they have been on the frontline for a long time, this type of wisdom needs to be shared with the youth who are entering funeral service.

CASE STUDY:

It is nice to be at a place in life where you don't have to be bashful about telling stories on yourself, and particularly stories that have a point to make about what you are writing or speaking about.

This story is an account of one of the many of bonehead mistakes that I have made in my life and career. The only comforting aspect of this story is that it happened 45 years ago, but honestly I must confess I am still making mistakes.

I worked for a veteran funeral director who was most highly respected and beloved in our community. Looking back at his approach to our beloved profession he possessed some magnificent gifts, and one of them was he was a master at exploring with other human beings. While he never called it exploring, none-the-less he was highly skilled at asking good questions, and then being still, and let the exploring process take its course.

We were called out one beautiful summer afternoon to North Omaha on a suicide. When we arrived at the residence the Douglas County Coroner was already there, as were two police officers. Clearly the poor man had taken his own life. I hadn't been exposed to many suicide's and was unnerved by what I saw and what I was asked to do – but step up to the plate I did, because I wanted to be a good funeral director.

Two nights later the poor decedent was reposing in our chapel, the casket was opened, he looked great, and the calling hours had begun.

My job was to be the attendant at the front door, which was a job I loved (anyway back then I did). I would stand there in my dark suit, trying desperately to look highly dignified, even though my chronic acne always gave me away.

The widow of the deceased was in the chapel, and she

was in a very bad way. My employer had been in and out of the chapel all afternoon, and I noticed that he really didn't say much. However the widow couldn't stop talking.

About 4:00 p.m. my employer came by and told me that he had to step out for a moment and do a personal errand. I was given strict instructions to watch my p's and q's, which was code in the funeral home to keep my mouth shut.

I well remember the moment I saw his car leave the funeral home parking lot I had a very stupid and dangerous thought: "I am now in charge!" I started strutting around the funeral home like I was the Archduke of Death, and I must have made myself look ridiculous, well anyway today I am embarrassed to even think about how I acted.

In short order the widow of the decedent came to me and with tears running down her cheeks asks me this question: "Why do you think he did it?"

I proceeded to tell her straight away why I thought he did it, and what I had to say back then on this sensitive

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subject – well it was a kid talking, it was insensitive, it was highly opinionated, it was unkind, and looking back it was totally unnecessary because in truth I wasn't in the least interested in exploring anything with her – hell I didn't even know what exploring was, even though I had watched my employer doing it with her all afternoon. What is the saying? "Youth is wasted on the young." Well in my case it sure was!

My employer's car pulled into the funeral home parking lot, and before he got into the building the widow had pulled him aside. I stood by the front door guiding my post, and knew by the look on his face and the blood draining from his lips, that I was in big, big trouble.

Around 8:00 p.m. that evening the widow left and my employer motioned for me to come to his office. I hated those moments in my life, but in truth I deserved most anything he was going to say to me. Instead of a scolding he looked at me and said this "Todd you are terribly young. Next time just listen, and then walk with them, ask them questions, but keep your high level opinions to yourself. The funeral experience is a journey not a destination."

He was talking about taking the time and being sensitive to the process of exploring with another human being. He didn't even use the word "exploration" but that is precisely what he was talking about.

Possessing old-fashioned insights, approaches and ethics does not mean that a veteran funeral director cannot embrace the new memorial concepts like eternal reefs, or memory glass for instance, and likewise possessing youth does not automatically translate into high level creativity, and non-conformist risk taking. To say anything akin to this notion is just making a thoughtless sweeping comment about both groups of professionals which is just not true.

As time goes on in the development of your funeral interview approaches, you will perhaps discover a pattern, your own style; but this will only take shape because of the way you feel inside and hence how you function, the way you are as a sensitive human being regardless of your age.

Discovering, examining, deciding what to keep and what to change in your own funeral interview exploring pattern, will provide the sort of professional and

personal growth that, I feel, will be most meaningful for you. Remember we cannot change anything about our client families we can only improve on our own skills and attitudes. Remember also that while books, seminars, writings, and speeches on the importance of exploring life issues with another human being are extremely helpful and valuable – the greatest value to help that any funeral professional has is what is in their hearts. This I believe is true for the simple reason that in the end all funeral service is a matter of the heart.

Some practical suggestions.

Certain practical aspects of exploration in the funeral interview deserve careful consideration. I shall point out some of them, knowing that I can only touch briefly upon them. Again my wish is to stimulate a discussion and a dialogue – not to present pat answers but to help you find your own. Think about your responses to these questions.

- Did you help the bereaved family to come closer to a comfortable knowledge as to all their options and alternatives?
- Did you help the bereaved family explore and express what possibilities and creativities are open concerning designing a meaningful ceremony?
- Did you enable the client family to tell you how they genuinely feel, how things truly look to them?
- Did you let the client family explore what they wanted to do in their own way, or did you lead them in a direction you chose for them?
- Did your behavior truly indicate the absence of control and the presence of genuine exploration? Were they afraid to express themselves, and if so, what did you do to relieve this fear?
- Did you really want to listen to them, or did you want them to listen to you because you already had the answers to their problems, and because like I was 45 years ago you were anxious to "give them a piece of your mind," or worse yet because you really didn't want to hear more about their situations as you wouldn't have known what to do with it anyway?
- Are you prepared to let the client family take the initiative and you keep the exploring going as long as they need to?
- Are you skilled at quietly moving the funeral interview along with gentle persistence undetected by the client family?

Are you prepared to let them assume final responsibility for themselves, or do we feel we must assume it for them?

Are we prepared to explore with them by letting them lead, or do we need to have them follow us?

These are very tough questions to ask of ourselves, but they are also critical questions that when honestly confronted open the avenues for the continuous improvement of our funeral interview skills particularly in the area of exploration. Asking tough questions of oneself is one method of avoiding stale habits or worse acute burnout.

Exploring with the client family means listening and gently responding to what they are saying and feeling. It means enabling them to express themselves fully and this can and does require genuine interest, and genuine positive regard.

In the funeral interview this means following them rather than asking them to follow us, while at the same time keeping the interview moving ahead.

The issue of control versus exploration in the funeral interview is of utmost importance in inspiring funeral professionals to move ahead and genuinely connect with the contemporary expectations of the modern consumer.

I feel it is very timely for funeral professionals who are actively engaged in the funeral interview experience to ponder seriously the thoughts expressed in the points made in the list of questions presented in this article.

There was a time when the funeral “director” was indeed the “the absolute director.” I fear that some in our beloved profession still yearn and search for those times, I know I used to.

Sometimes, possibly many times, this still happens, but more and more the tension of who “leads” the funeral interviews becomes a gray area, a fuzzy area, not quite and clearly defined as it was some years ago. The solid skill of exploring, making new discoveries with a bereaved client family is a good safe way for funeral professionals to embrace change and move forward in service to humanity.

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