

Lord and Stephens Funeral Homes, Athens, GA

Lord and Stephens – West Chapel, Watkinsville, GA; Lord and Stephens Danielsville, Danielsville, GA

In March 2024, Lord and Stephens instituted their first annual Hospice Caregiver Award. This award was inspired by the Pursuit of Excellence Best of the Best ideas featured on the NFDA website, specifically the 2016 entry from Tetrick Funeral Home in Elizabethtown, Tennessee. This year our funeral home has focused on honoring our community partners, especially hospice workers, and so this idea fits in with other programs we were instituting to honor the hard work of the healthcare workers we work closely with every day.

The award was advertised on Facebook to our community and directly to the different hospice groups in the area. We also handed out nomination cards to the families we served who had been through hospice with their loved ones. "Hospice Heroes" could be nominated by families they had helped, fellow hospice staff members, or members of our staff in recognition of service that went above and beyond.

Each month of the year, we drew a name out of the submitted candidates and awarded that individual with a certificate of appreciation and a "self-care"-themed basket of treats, which included a campfire mug, lotion, hand sanitizer, hot chocolate, lip balm, and a coffee shop gift card. The idea was the winners could care for themselves so they can continue their excellence in caring for others. At the end of the year, a grand prize winner will be drawn from the list of monthly winners. The grand prize is going to be a gift certificate for a local day spa.

The monthly winners were announced on our company Facebook page and to the hospice group directly so that the winner could be congratulated by their coworkers during the company's weekly staff meeting (many of the hospice companies now conduct their weekly staff meetings via Zoom, so unfortunately, we were unable to present the prizes in person). We delivered the prize basket to the hospice office, which allowed us to meet the office support staff that we often interact with as part of the death certificate filing process.

We received a lot of great feedback from the hospice groups expressing gratitude for the recognition of their difficult and often unseen work. The hospice groups expressed interest in how the nominations were collected and who had nominated their winners. Our staff really enjoyed getting to treat the workers who have most impressed us and made our jobs much easier over the years. Hopefully this will be the beginning of a valuable ongoing relationship deepening the connections between hospice workers and funeral home staff in our community.

Nie Family Funeral Home & Cremation Services, Inc., Ann Arbor, MI

Nie Family Funeral Home & Cremation Services, Inc., Ann Arbor, MI; Nie Family Funeral Home & Cremation Services, Inc., Ypsilanti, MI

The Nie Family Funeral Home is proud to serve families throughout Michigan for the last 45 years. One of the things we pride ourselves in is our partnership with local hospitals to assist parents who have suffered through a miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant death. Through our partnership we closely work with their social workers to make contact with these families and to offer our services as a complimentary courtesy. Concluding our interactions with any of the families we serve, we always like to follow up with suggestions on how to deal with grief.

During the past four years, Nie Family Funeral Home has partnered with a local non-profit, Remembering Cherubs, whose goal is to provide support, guidance, and education to parents, their supporters, and providers following pregnancy loss. In the past we've held events at our funeral home facilities for the families we collectively serve and they have been great success.

Instead of having another event at our facility this year we looked to how we could assist Remembering Cherubs in continuing their outreach. Monica Anderson, the Remembering Cherubs founder, has been working on publishing a book and creating a toolkit that could be given out to families in need. Not only would these be available at funeral homes but the intention is to have these available with partnering hospitals and organizations.

The toolkit in its entirety includes a copy of Monica's book, *The Pregnancy Loss Guidebook: Coping Well with Pregnancy & Infant Loss*, as well as a condolence card that can be signed by the organizations providing a toolkit, and finally, access to the Remembering Cherubs Care Concierge. The Care Concierge is a personalized supportive service for those who have experienced pregnancy or infant loss. Remembering Cherubs will provide a tailored list of resources based on the families geographical location and their specific needs. This service is free of charge to any families in need.

To assist in making these toolkits a reality, Nie Family Funeral Home helped organize a packing party for the community to come join us in helping such an important cause.

On Saturday, April 6, 2024, we held a packing party at our local library. We asked volunteers through social media to come join us to help fill the toolkit bags as well as enjoy some snacks and beverages with us.

We had a great response from the community as there were over 30 people who came to help. In just a few hours we were able to get 500 toolkits filled and help Remembering Cherubs to their next step.

At this time, Remembering Cherubs has now received partnerships and is providing toolkits to some of the largest medical groups in Michigan to include Michigan Medicine, Henry Ford Medicine, Detroit Health Department, and Beaumont Hospitals.

We intend to continue helping Remembering Cherubs with larger packing parties so that they can continue their important work and helping the families in need in Southeast Michigan.

Smith Family Funeral Homes, North Little Rock, AR

Smith Family Funeral Homes, Benton, AR; Smith Family Funeral Homes, Glenwood, AR; Smith Family Funeral Homes, Hot Springs, AR; Smith Family Funeral Homes, Little Rock, AR; Smith Family Funeral Homes, Sherwood, AR; Smith Family Funeral Homes – Westbrook, Beebe, AR; Ruggles-Wilcox Funeral Home, Arkadelphia, AR

A Paramedic Supervisor clocked in to her night shift at the emergency management headquarters in downtown Little Rock with the expectation that it was just going to be another casual night. Chris had learned that one of her coworkers was involved in a domestic situation just a few weeks prior. Concerned, she and Cassandra linked their Apple watches together so that in the event of an emergency, Chris would be notified. But that night, what seemingly started out as a normal night shift pivoted to one of the most horrific nights for a paramedic.

To her surprise, Chris's Apple watch alerts her of Cassandra's heart rate rapidly declining. She walks to Cassandra's cubicle to no avail. She then heads outside quickly where she located Cassandra laying on the pavement of the headquarters parking lot, shot by her estranged husband. With the quick and intentional actions of this heroic paramedic, Chris kept her coworker alive until they could get one of their own to the hospital. Cassandra's family entrusted Chris and asked that she make all end-of-life decisions for Cassandra. It was then that Cassandra became an organ donor, where she saved 4 other lives across the country.

There once was a time when the phrases "Healthcare Heroes" or "Essential Workers" became forefront of all news, social media, and podcasts. These brave individuals were recognized for their care and expertise during such an unfathomable time. But most failed to recognize the end-of-life caregivers who face the challenges of deathcare every day, some of those even volunteers. These individuals are the unsung heroes in so many end-of-life stories. But rarely do we hear about them.

Funeral Directors across the country sit at the arrangement table daily with grieving families, privileged to hear of the beautiful, astonishing, and heartwarming stories of their loved one's end-of-life journey. These are compelling examples of the positive perception one can have during the death journey.

Sadly, that arrangement table is also where that story usually ends...

Death Care. End-of-life Care. Palliative Care. Hospice Care: never a comfortable subject. It is oftentimes not recognized at all nor appreciated enough. In seeing firsthand in the past 4 years how these individuals have fallen through the cracks of recognition, Smith Family Funeral Homes set their sights on helping grieving-but-thankful families recognize these unseen heroes in Arkansas.

Who Are End-of-Life Caregivers?

These individuals could be in the form of Pastors, Nurses, Volunteers, Certified Nursing Assistants, EMTs, Physicians, Hospital Units, Chaplains, Administrative Staff, Law Enforcement, Respiratory Therapists, Private Health Aides, Hospice Facilities, Medical Assistants, Private Hire Caretakers. The list is endless!

Jeff Smith, owner of Smith Family Funeral Homes in Arkansas, recently shared his thoughts on why it was important to transcend our appreciation to the other corner of healthcare. He stated "During the pandemic, everybody was talking about and recognizing first responders and medical personnel; and rightfully so. But when all of that was going on, it occurred to me that there's heroes that I work with everyday that most people do not think about; and that is end-of-life caregivers." He went on to say "In our funeral homes, we have the chance to help families after their loved one has passed away. But I always think about hospice workers, the nurses, the people in the nursing homes who are with that individual and their family as they are transitioning to the next life. And so, we created the Willow Award: Excellence in End-of-Life Care. The Willow Award will give even more people a chance to hear those exceptional stories and pay honor to the wonderful caregivers in our communities."

The end-of-life experience is very personal for the Executive Director of the Willow Award, Jodie McGinley. After the birth of her twin boys, Eli & Walker, an unexpected diagnosis and prognosis would

bring her family to face difficult end-of-life decisions for Eli. Later that week, Eli was extubated. But astonishingly did not die immediately off of the life support. "This left the medical teams perplexed," she said. Both hospitals collaborated quickly to transport Eli back to his twin brother in his last unexpected hours of life. "It was an untraditional move that we later learned did not come easily without pushback. But both medical teams at these 2 hospitals knew what the right thing to do was. And because they advocated for us, we now have photos of our twin boys together as well as the only family photo we will ever have for the rest of our lives." Jodie has spent the last decade dedicated to healthcare recognition for patient and family centered care and bereavement education, having the opportunity to share the story to healthcare organizations across the U.S. "What they did for us changed the trajectory of the rest of our lives. When eventually I allowed myself to surrender to the calling of becoming a funeral director for child loss families, I assumed this was it; there wasn't much more peace to have in this bereavement process. And then came the day Jeff shared with me his heart of having an award created for end-of-life caregivers, I was all in. This needed to happen."

Why the Willow?

"There is an old adage about the relative strength of trees and which tree is the strongest. That adage suggests that there are those who believe that the mighty oak is the strongest of all trees. Tall, thick, sturdy...

But the contrasting view is that the willow is the strongest of trees. Supple, swaying, flexible...

And the adage suggests that when the wind is sufficiently severe – damaging, hostile, punishing and harsh – the oak will withstand up to a point, but then snap. The willow on the other hand will yield and bend and nearly touch the ground, and after the horrific wind, will stand upright and resume its place."

We believe end-of-life caregivers are like willow trees. They bend and bare the storms with the families each and every day to accommodate the needs of their patients and families in the storm. The death occurs. The storm is over. And the end-of-life caregiver will stand back upright and tall, and is ready to resume their place for another incoming family. And so, the Willow Award was born.

We partnered with a world-renowned glass artist James Hayes, a native Arkansan, to create the award. The green and gold swirl embedded into the teardrop shape of the glass was designed to represent the relationships formed between the family and the caregiver during the grief journey. Each Willow Award is created on a marble base with the nominee's name and credentials embedded onto a gold plaque. Each award is intricately designed, with no two awards alike. Artist James Hayes adorns each one with his customary signature located on the back of the glass.

The tri-fold Willow Award brochures are located at each Smith Family Funeral Home locations. They are also distributed to our local hospitals, nursing homes, and hospice center waiting room areas for families to consider nominations of their caregivers. We also utilize our website and Facebook to promote the Willow Award, encourage nominations, and post photos of the ceremonies.

Families or coworkers are encouraged to send a nomination letter by way of email, website (www.willowaward.com), or USPS mail. Nominations are then selected by the Willow Award selection committee. From there, we contact the nominee employer to let them know of the nomination so that we can schedule a date to come in during a regularly scheduled staff meeting to present the award. We read the nomination letter out loud while the recipient(s) do not know they are receiving it until their name is read. The emotions that come with these nomination letters are powerful for the nominee as well as all staff.

If you are familiar with the healthcare industry and their methods of recognition, then you would know that lapel pins are the most popular form of acknowledgements, oftentimes seen on their employee lanyards. For the Willow Award, it is no different, in that the nominee is also pinned with their very own Willow Award lapel pin during their ceremony. We want patient and families to not only know that they are in the

best hands, but perhaps they will ask the caregiver about the Willow Award and why they received it. The continuation of the story is still at work.

The co-sponsor of the Willow Award, florist Tipton & Hurst, is one of the largest and oldest businesses in Arkansas, beginning in 1886. Tipton & Hurst is proudly "built on a foundation of family". And so, it made sense to partner with Smith Family Funeral Homes on an award that is centered on this very thing. 3rd generation owner, Howard Hurst, proudly attends each of the Willow Award ceremonies to personally award each nominee their very own custom "Rose & Willow" floral arrangement made up of 2 red roses (recognizing the end-of-life caregiver and the family) adorned with stems from a willow tree. This symbolic representation is beautifully arranged in a coordinating Willow Award vase.

The Willow Award has now been featured on NBC KARK 4, published in the Baptist Health Magazine and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Magazine after a fellow RN was nominated for the Willow Award. Reva Martin was the Labor & Delivery Bereavement Coordinator of the hospital system. She had been nominated by the Billingsley family for her extraordinary compassion during their times of loss. In their letter, they expressed their lifelong gratitude for the positive impact she made during the loss of both of their babies, Charlotte and Camden. They stated:

"Reva helped us grow and heal through acceptance, encouraging us to make the most of nothing. Reva even gave us peace by showing continued love, care, and support throughout the entire hospital stay both times. She went to our lowest points with us as though she was made to do that very thing. One with such diligence to her job, patient advocacy, and selflessness should never go unnoticed. That is why we have nominated Reva Martin to receive the Willow Award "

In a recent nomination letter, one family shared with us the story of the extraordinary care that their daughter, Amy, received by a longtime caretaker named Rosa. Rosa could see that Amy's neurological condition was worsening. She also knew of Amy's love of Reba McIntire. So, what does Rosa do? She loads Amy, her electric wheelchair and medical supplies into the van, and surprises Amy with a trip of a lifetime: a Reba concert at Simmons Arena.

Then we received a beautiful nomination that shared the story of an Oncology Nurse at Arkansas Children's Hospital who loves her pediatric cancer patients so much, that she keeps her head shaved. This is a strategic method of love on her part so that her patients feel embraced in their everyday fight against cancer. And a 6-year-old patient named Gus deeply connected with Nurse Karly in his final year of life.

Nationally, what sets the Willow Award apart from other healthcare recognition awards is the design to allow any family in our state, whether served by Smith Family Funeral Homes or by one of our competitors, the opportunity to extend the gratitude to the caretaker or organization on a more formal and public platform. We also feel that it's just as important to encourage our nominating families to join us in as much of the award process as they are comfortable. "Having the family present with us at the award ceremony can be a part of their healing too. Not to mention how impactful it is for staff. It definitely brings a bigger perception to the picture for both sides." says McGinley.

With more nomination letters arriving, the Willow Award is now honoring a monthly recipient in the state of Arkansas. "We are excited to see the program expand so we can honor more deserving caregivers. We hope in the future to begin recognizing more than one per month." says Smith.

Since its inception in November 2022, Smith Family Funeral Homes has now awarded 15 Willow Award recipients in Arkansas through nomination letters written by families or staff members. The Willow Award has been invited into 12 different facilities such as our largest statewide hospital systems, hospice organizations, corporate offices, and even an adult daycare center, to present the Willow Award to its recipients. Our selection team has gained more insight on the needs of our fellow death care partners through the relationships formed. And to think that this is all achieved by a simple "Thank You."

Excellence in end-of-life care can transcend even a death experience into a positive life-altering experience when you have the called in place. It is our job and responsibility to recognize those individuals who are giving the gift of healthy grieving to families. "A lifetime is a long time to not have peace about a situation. End-of-life caregivers have one chance to get it right, as do we to tell the story."