

Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home, Hammond, LA

Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home, Ponchatoula, LA. Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home, Denham Springs, LA

Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home has always put a strong emphasis on the inclusion of children when experiencing the death of their loved ones. Children are resilient, compassionate and curious. They are valuable members of their families and should be allowed to grieve and express themselves in a comforting and welcoming environment. A few ways in which we have welcomed children into our business is by providing expansive and brightly colored playrooms in all three of our locations. They are very popular! In addition, we provide Little Free Libraries at all three locations, which draws readers of all ages to our grounds at any given time. We also provide Sesame Street "When Families Grieve" kits, along with other age-appropriate literature, pertaining to death and grieving.

Another way in which Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home reaches children is by hosting annual Christmas toy drives. We have held a toy drive benefitting children in foster care, in partnership with our local Child Advocacy Center. We have also hosted a toy drive for patients at our local children's hospital, in partnership with The Savannah Smile Organization. For the past several years, we have partnered with the Salvation Army Toys For Tots program, providing toys to underprivileged children in our community but we were informed in October 2023 that they would no longer be active in our area.

After much contemplation, we decided to have an inhouse teddy bear drive to lift the spirits of the grieving children we serve. And that is how "Thompson's Teddy Bears" was born. According to Silver Lining Stuffies, "Emotional support stuffed animals have proven to be a valuable source of comfort and solace for people facing emotional challenges. Their ability to reduce stress, provide anxiety relief, and offer companionship makes them truly remarkable companions." We spread the word of our teddy bear drive on our Facebook page, in live interviews on our local radio stations, and posted fliers throughout our community. We also invited all local civic groups and organizations, such as the Kiwanis and rotary clubs, and high school Key clubs to partner with us, and received tremendous support. People began asking if we would accept plush other than teddy bears and we decided that would be a fun twist. One of our employees, Ronnie Mazie, donated his entire TY Beanie Baby collection, while some others took their children shopping to help pick out the perfect bears to donate. After Christmas, we divided the bears and other stuffed animals among our three locations and displayed them all in fun and unique ways in our main offices. During visitations, children are invited select their very own bear or other stuffed animal. Thompson's Teddy Bears has been a huge hit! The children love picking out their new friend and it has been interesting to see which plush they're attracted to.

"To give a child a teddy bear, is to give them a friend for life." ~ Martha Mckneely Thompson

Jones and Son Funeral Home, Richton, MS

Jones and Son Funeral Home, Moselle, MS; Jones and Son Funeral Home, Hattiesburg, MS; Jones and Son Funeral Home, Beaumont, MS

Jones and Son Funeral Home has always taken steps to be more involved in our community and different social and civic organizations. We were honored to once again be asked to take part in the Greene County High School Career Day, in which their students had to opportunity to visit with different businesses and industries that serve the community, to offer them insight and potentially steer them in a career path.

On November 9, 2023, Ladd Pulliam, funeral director and embalmer with Jones and Son Funeral Home, set up a table top display to introduce the students to funeral service and what exactly goes into the "funeral". Through a display of embalming fluids, cosmetics, instruments, cups, pens, personalization items, and flags, Ladd was able to generate questions and inquiries from students about all different aspects of the funeral business and what it takes to make things actually happen.

We feel that all too often, children are left out of the funeral process and really don't have a great understanding of how funerals are planned, organized, and conducted. They certainly don't have a very good understanding of the embalming process, which on this particular day, generated the majority of the questions. It is our belief that the more we can educate and inform children and young adults about what we really do, the more they will understand the industry and its importance to our community.

We also look at this event as a wonderful opportunity to encourage young people to consider a career in funeral service by talking to them about mortuary schools in our region and different licensure requirements by the state. Many have never even thought about there being a school that teaches "embalming", much less considered that as a possible career path, and we hope through taking the time to talk to them about funeral service and its importance to the community, they will at least consider it in hopes that we can secure more young men and women into our industry to preserve our future.

By participating in this event and we hope to change the stigma surrounding the funeral industry that it is just a bunch of "creepy" old men in dark suits that take grandma to the cemetery. We want them to know that we are just as much a part of the community as any other industry and can be just as involved, and hopefully, maybe one or two of them will want to join our team.

Memorial FH – Edinburg, Edinburg, TX

Memorial Funeral Home was a proud sponsor of the Boys & Girls Club of Edinburg Rio Grande Valley's 15th Annual Signature Gala "Steak" In Your Community which was held Saturday, February 1, 2024, at Bert Ogden Arena in Edinburg. This event is the club's annual fundraiser in which they honor persons and organizations in our community who have made an impact with the Boys & Girls Club of Edinburg RGV. The event began with cocktails and included a sit-down dinner, musical entertainment by Texas Dezire, the presentation of honorees, as well as a box raffle and live auction, which we also donated a weekend condo stay for. All funds raised is for the club's programs and activities.

The Boys & Girls Club of Edinburg RGV was incorporated in 1969 and in 1979 became part of Edinburg's Parks and Recreation Department. The purpose of this club was to provide a designated space for programs and activities for "at risk" youth in Edinburg. In 2011 the club moved into a 32,700 square foot, state of the art facility. The Boys & Girls Club of Edinburg RGV currently has five facilities serving the community - Edinburg, San Manuel/Linn, San Carlos, Faysville, and Hargill.

The event's guest of honor was Honorable Texas State Representative Terry Canales. Since 2012, Rep. Canales has represented District 40. He has fought for the public school system, current and retired teachers, and helps ensure that the students in our community are given the opportunity to succeed. Also honored was the Hacienda Experience Movement 4 Everyone (H.E.M.E.) corporation, a non-profit organization that operates for charitable purposes. This group has collected over \$47,000 in donations and through partnership with the club, have been able to give two families brand new vehicles.

Two Edinburg youth were also honored by the club. Renata Sena, a sophomore at IDEA Edinburg College Prep has been part of the clubhouse for over five years and was named Youth of the Year. She has assisted fellow members and staff and has made a positive impact in the community. Renata is committed to raising scholarship funds to assist students facing financial struggles. Isabella Villescas has also been part of the clubhouse for over five years and was named Junior Youth of the Year. She has shown remarkable leadership skills not only for herself but also in working with others. Isabella is also actively involved in community events, including Christmas in the Park and Celebration of Families.

Memorial Funeral Home was proud to partner with Boys & Girls Club of Edinburg RGV for this event. We recognize that children are the future of our community and it is important for us to contribute to the organizations that promote leadership and education. Although individually we award scholarships to graduating seniors from each Edinburg high school, working with the club is a way to reach out to more children in our community.

Pray Funeral Home, Inc., Charlotte, MI

Pray Funeral Home recently endowed two scholarships to Wayne State University Mortuary School. The scholarships, named after our very own Joseph Eugene Pray and Laurel Marie Pray, award \$1,000 each to a Wayne State student. The criteria is based off an application, and a personal interview conducted by Joe E. Pray and Tyler Pray with each candidate.

This year, we decided to publicize to our community our scholarship recipients with a newspaper article showing the awards being granted by Joe and Tyler at the annual Michigan Funeral Director's Convention on May 15, 2024 in Port Huron, MI. We are excited to share with our community our dedication to our profession and passion for supporting others to serve their own community the way our grandparents did throughout their careers here in Charlotte, MI.

Joseph Eugene Pray was awarded his 75 year pin as a licensed funeral director and was on hand at the ceremony to help present his namesake scholarship, as well as the one named after his wife. Laurel was the last remaining dual licensee in the State of Michigan when she died in 2010. We were proud as a family to publicize to our community the achievements of Joe and Laurel, and how we honor them. It is our hope that community members and potential families we serve will follow the example of honoring their parents and grandparents with a memorial service and other lasting monuments to the loved shared by their family.

"It is very encouraging to hear the stories and experiences of these two [recipients] and why they decided to enter the funeral profession. Their passion and goals are very inspiring and we wish them the best of luck as they work toward joining the funeral profession," said Joe E. Pray, in reference to awarding this year's recipients. We submit this essay as fulfilling elements of both Professional Development and Community Service. While the community service component of these scholarships is not directly connected to our home community, it is connected to our State-wide community in regards to promoting the value of funeral service, and demonstrating a commitment to promoting funeral service to the public.

It is a great honor to award these scholarships, and our family is thankful to the community for supporting our funeral home for over 100 years, and allowing us to be successful enough to establish these scholarships and pass on our passion for funeral service to future generations of funeral service practitioners.

Soxman Funeral Homes, Ltd., Pittsburgh, PA

August 12, 2023 began like any other Saturday: birds chirping, the sun shining, neighbors helping neighbors. An ordinary day that became anything but in the blink of an eye. In Plum Boro, an eastern suburb of Pittsburgh, PA, a catastrophic home explosion in the mid-morning hours claimed lives, homes, peace of mind, and any hope of calm within the community. Six souls perished as a result of the events that day, three homes completely leveled, and countless other homes damaged in the wake of the blast.

When the news of explosion began to reach us, feelings of confusion, shock, and devastation took over. In the immediate hours following the blast, they had yet to identify those injured. As time went on, efforts went from rescue to recovery. Hours turned to days before all six victims were identified including a father and his 12 year old son, a husband and wife, a father of 2, and our Boro Manager, the man that would have been leading the crisis management efforts under different circumstances.

There were no words. There was no comprehension. There were so many feelings.

Our Funeral Home, not five miles from the site of this tragedy, was eventually called on to handle several of the services for the victims. We employ many who are residents of Plum, some of whom knew those who lost their lives. Of course, with the nature of the circumstances, there was a period of delay before we were able to bring the decedents into our care. It was in that time, that limbo, that we felt that we had to do something for our community. As such, Storytime with Lilo was born...

As each of us came to work the following Monday we found ourselves unsure of what to do for the community or even for ourselves. After some discussion, we got the idea to create a space that would open up the funeral home to the community for book readings while also making that available online during Facebook live events. We began to transform one of our visitation rooms into the designated space for this project. Grief books were displayed around the room, crafting supplies were spread out on tables, and extra seating was put out. In addition, we reached out to the Highmark Caring Place for Grieving Children for resources to share with people coming in. They generously provided us with boxes of supplies. These included literary handouts on grief, handmade teddy bears, bracelets, and booklets. We also set up coloring stations for kiddos to work at and feeling journals that older kids could take with them.

Funeral Directors, Anna and McKenna took turns elocuting books on grief which were read each day. Being one of the only local funeral homes to have a service dog on staff, we try to offer Lilo's comforting services as often as possible. Her presence during the reading of these books was not just a sweet sense of levity as she snored through the stories, but a great way to help younger visitors feel comfortable coming into the funeral home for the event. Throughout the week, she not only made an appearance in the videos, but also greeted all who stopped in for the resources that we made available.

The read books included, "The Invisible String" by Patrice Karst, "The Memory Box" by Joanna Rowland, "Healing Your Grieving Heart" (for kids/teens) by Dr. Alan Wolfelt, "You'll Find Me" By Amanda Rawson Hill, and "The Grief Rock" by Natasha Daniels.

As the week went on, we had several people stop in and listen while the stories were being read. More than that, we also had people come in for resources to share with their children and even for themselves. Aside from the in-person conversations and visits, we were shocked and humbled to see the online response to the program. With thousands of views, and hundreds of engagements, Storytime with Lilo was impacting people far and near. Online and in person, discussions were had; as well, welcoming people in to the building gave visitors a chance to say the things they needed to in a place that felt hallowed and appropriate. It was truly a humbling experience for us to know that we created a space that made people feel so comfortable that they willingly stopped in to see and speak with us. Additionally, we were called on to handle services for several of the victims from the explosion, so we also made the resources available during those visitations as well.

Storytime with Lilo also led us to create our grief book nook in our family lounge. A place for us to showcase books uniquely discussing the tough feelings that can come with loss and funerals. These books are available to borrow and we try to make them easy to find for families that want to add them to their own libraries as well.

Overall, we feel that in the wake of this tragedy, our staff came together to create an idea and see it to fruition. This idea was out of necessity but has remained as a source of continued comfort. We have been able to continue to develop this into other events and programs such as Children's Grief Awareness Day, again bringing people to our funeral home and offering care and support in times other than immediate need.

Hoping that a call like this never comes again, but knowing that we will be here to answer just the same, we are humbled and honored to present to you our cherished Storytime with Lilo.