

Pixley Funeral Home – Rochester, MI

A Live-Event

As the ever-changing world of funeral service continues its rapid run into the unknown, sometimes the most simplest of opportunities are passed by for much more grandiose events that seek to inform the consumer of our immense value to the community. Those events are all well and good, matter of fact I rather enjoy sharing the stage with a group of civic leaders and reminding the community of our irreplaceable service, but at times we seem to be missing the message to Joe and Jane Doe. In Michigan, as in much of America, the cremation rate has grown drastically and we have seen a decline in families choosing a ‘traditional’ funeral, and opting instead for a simplistic service, or no service at all, especially when selecting cremation as the final mode of disposition. At the same time simplistic, low-cost cremation providers are setting the narrative that if cremation is preferred, there is no need to use the local funeral home. In regular discussions with our funeral directors, a common theme is the concern that is expressed by families that when they choose cremation, it must be immediate. We continue to be stunned by clients proclaiming that they understood that cremation ‘had to be immediate’ and were services desired, they would not include the body present. Another common concern echoed by the directors is the difficulty of educating families at the time of arrangements, especially those who have experienced a sudden loss, or perhaps have gone days without sleep. We in funeral service point to the fact that is what pre-arrangement is all about, and yet we still are missing a large segment of our communities with our message.

In an attempt to educate the community before the need arises, we decided to host an evening seminar that would cater to veterans, and their spouses, while showcasing our capabilities with live settings. We have a great relationship with our local veteran service organizations, so we chose the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion to target our advertising to. Invitations were created and sent out, requesting RSVP’s and a maximum of 40, which we achieved.

The evening began with a brief presentation of the Federal VA Benefits that are available, as well as the benefits of interring in the National Cemetery which is located less than 30 miles from us. The group was then led into a chapel which contained a rather detailed vignette which included a metal casket, American flag, and the theme that the deceased would be a veteran of the Marine Corps, an outdoorsman and a college graduate. A full size kayak was set up in the room, as well as a deer blind, college memorabilia, and US Marine Corps memorabilia. General Manager Tim Summerford explained to the group the room’s theme, and how families can create a personalized service regardless if the body is present, or not. He then discussed the importance of a Life Well Celebrated and the impact such a service may have on the family and friends. The guests were then led into a room which had the vignette for an air force veteran who was a rock music fan, as well as a musician. This set up also included a ceremonial casket (often referred to as a rental). A discussion ensued as to the set up and how a ceremonial casket may very well

meet the need of a family. The Q & A session became very involved with the discussion of the ceremonial casket and how embalming could in fact be utilized even when cremation will occur. Most in attendance remarked about how different their image of a rental casket verses what is actually provided. (Funny how we funeral directors can be our own worst enemies with our choice of words and in trying to explain a concept to a family.) The group then moved into a room that was celebrating the 'life' of an army veteran, who was a college graduate, and devoted to his alma-matter. This vignette was designed to reflect a simple memorial service, and the group discussion delved into the myriad of options that are available, and how the funeral director is best equipped to assist a family in planning a unique memorialization, whether it be at a the funeral home, church, club, or backyard. Again, surprisingly, many in attendance voiced their perception that funeral directors would not be the one to create a unique celebration.

The evening's final, and most anticipated, destination was the funeral home event room which hosted a catered dinner. The tables were decorated in themes that corresponded with each of the previously visited vignettes, as well as personal mementos that one might would give to guests as a 'take-away' from the service. The importance, and history, of food within the funeral and grieving process was shared with the group, as well as the numerous options that we can provide our families. Everything from a cookie tray for visitation to a multi course meal with bar service.

The event was a tremendous success, with many of the guests staying well into the evening asking questions, and discussing their own ideas for memorialization. Over the following weeks, numerous guests had returned to the funeral home to plan their own arrangements.

Due to the overwhelming success, plans were made to repeat the presentation numerous times throughout the year. However, the Covid-19 pandemic struck early and Michigan was quickly launched into lockdown and our world changed drastically for a few months. All non-essential events were eliminated from the schedule. Although, as Michigan slowly moves back into a new normal, we have begun to plan several of the live demonstrations for the balance of the year, knowing that we are only allowed to accommodate 10 people in the funeral home. In addition, we are likewise planning zoom and livestream educational events.

Our greatest learning moment of this event, was the incredible importance of educating our clients. Being willing to devote the space, time and resources for the opportunity to educate our community is as important use of the building, as is a funeral service. Our future depends on it.