



TRADITION & INNOVATION IN FUNERAL CARE

Essay for the 2019 Pursuit of Excellence Award

Oakey's Funeral Service and Crematory

318 Church Avenue, SW

Roanoke, VA 24016

"Cremation Tribute Center"

October of 2016 ushered in a new era of cremation service at Oakey's Funeral Service & Crematory located in Roanoke, VA. This date was when our new Cremation Tribute Center opened at our South Chapel. Our first crematory was built in 1996 at our North Chapel and so much has changed in both funeral services and the public's perception in the past twenty-three years. Our goal with the new facility was to offer families a more intimate and meaningful experience when they select cremation for a loved one. "We have gone as far as we can go," are words that we have heard uttered countless of times at gravesites over the years. The Cremation Tribute Center gives families who choose cremation as a final disposition a chance to accompany their loved one as far as possible. Think of it as

traveling alongside someone special through the end of their journey.

Some history is essential to understand why we now find ourselves offering Roanoke Valley residents new options in the field of cremation. Our firm has seen a steady influx of consumers who have decided to choose cremation for their loved ones. In 1976 Oakey's saw a cremation rate of around 3%; forty years later, it was at 36% and still rising. The numbers showed that a second retort chamber would soon be needed and it was built ten years later in 2006 at our North Chapel. As with most all crematories that were built at the time, ours was installed in the rear of the building and designed without any thought to aesthetics or the possibility of family members being present or wishing to view the cremation. While we have certainly never been ashamed of the appearance of the North Chapel crematory, it did not lend itself easily for families to be present for cremations. The reason for this is pretty simple: families in the '90s were not often offered the chance to be present for the cremation of their relative. Those that were asked if they wanted to witness the final moments before cremation almost always declined. Now, however, we have new generations of people making decisions. Baby Boomers; Generation X; Millennials and Gen Z are often the ones making funeral arrangements.

These groups do not feel compelled to do things the way their parents and grandparents did. While they do not mind spending money, they demand value for their purchases. They also place great importance in the personalization of ceremonies, whether they are planning a wedding, graduation, or funeral.

As the new millennium opened, we had begun to see more families that want to "go as far as we can go," and be present just before the cremation takes place. Also, several religions dictate that families be present when the body is about to be cremated. It became evident that we would need to examine constructing a cremation facility that would have a warmer and more tasteful feel to it, one that families would find comfort in as they say their final goodbye. With more and more funeral homes with their own crematories, we began to think about what we could do that might differentiate our cremations from other funeral homes. A decision was made in early 2015 to proceed with the erection of a first-class cremation center at our South Chapel. While there were no other funeral homes built in the Roanoke Valley area to compete with Oakey's between 1965 and 1995, there have been five new funeral homes constructed here since 1996. Now more than ever, our organization needed to provide better service than our competition.

The Cremation Tribute Center was opened in 2016 during our 150- year celebration and is truly is the jewel in our crown. This is a way for us to give back to the community that will live long after all of us are dead and gone. One way we celebrated and showcased the "Jewel" was by inviting nonprofit groups to the center and take a tour. We also had all the Hospice groups come and visit and finally, promoted it with TV/Radio/website and Facebook advertising to created awareness.

We established a new policy of dressing the bodies before cremation. We believe there is more dignity in clothed bodies both for family ID as well as the actual cremation. It's just another step in giving families the best memory picture possible of the final time they see their loved one.

Our Cremation Tribute Center is a facility dedicated to helping families that select cremation. Arrangements to use the Cremation Tribute Center can be made at any of the five Oakey's Chapels..

Some families will wish to have a few last moments with their loved one and then leave before the container is placed for cremation. Some families will want to stay for the moment when the retort chamber receives the casketed body for cremation. Some families will say "yes" when given the opportunity to push the button to begin the entire process. In other words, each family is different and will have a different

comfort level as to how far they desire to go in the cremation process. It comes down to the philosophy of making this time more meaningful and comforting to families, and we desire that families who choose this venue do not doubt that they have made the right decision. If a family does want to be present at a cremation, they should be encouraged to bring any items with them that might make the gathering more meaningful, such as photographs, personal possessions, flowers, or anything else that might represent a bond with the decedent. The gathering is simply an intimate group that wants to say their goodbyes prior to cremation and accompany a loved one on that final trip. There is a sizable area for family and friends to gather for some final moments before the cremation. The casket or container will be on a stand, with an open casket, if the family indicated that as their preference. There are extended vases built into the wall near the retort chamber, where families may place floral pieces that they might have brought with them. There are no additional costs for a family to be present at a cremation. This is a gift from Oakey's to the community that allows loved ones to be present and participate in the method of disposition they have selected. Comparing being present at the cremation to going to the cemetery for a committal after the funeral would be accurate and appropriate.

While it's impossible, to sum up, the significance of our new Cremation Tribute Center in just a few pages of this essay, we

hope that we have communicated to you some of the thoughts and inner workings that went into the inception and construction of our newest Oakey's facility. We have enclosed a DVD to show you how innovative this facility will be to the future of our organization. You will observe how the design of this addition offers our cremation families various ways to value all creation through the vibrant accents of light, rock, wood, water, etc.

Our Cremation Tribute Center is a beautiful, peaceful, and healing environment where families who choose cremation can accompany a loved one as far as possible in their final journey.