

## Services During Covid

COVID-19 and the pandemic had an early and devastating impact in the Detroit area. Not only were cases high and businesses were closed, with funeral homes being especially limited until just a few weeks ago when restrictions were lifted on June 22, 2021. Thus visitations and funeral services in the building have been very restricted since March 2020.

During this time we worked especially hard to listen to what families wanted to do, what they felt safe doing and what would be acceptable under the current protocols. This meant asking questions and listening to priorities. It sometimes meant saying no to families. It also meant brainstorming with families. And it meant letting some ideas evolve.

Incorporating outdoor space into visitations became more common. This took different forms, dependent on the COVID restrictions at the time and the aims of the family. For a few families, we set up a living room kind of outdoor space that they occupied during visitation. A few others had a more lounge like atmosphere, using high tops. Some families preferred setting up a tent or tents in the parking lot with a more tailgating kind of vibe. Some visitations became a kind of drive-thru experience.

One service stands out for all of us. Working very collaboratively with the family to identify what was most important to them, we brainstormed on how to achieve this while still following the COVID-19 pandemic protocols at the time. Eventually services and details evolved to meet their needs and then exceed their expectations.

At the time of the services, only 25 people were allowed in the building at a time. The deceased was in his 30s, came from a large close family, had a large social network, had been in the military and had died suddenly. His family alone was more than 25 people. The family was devastated by his death and felt they needed as much relative and friend support to help them mourn and grieve as possible. They also hoped to interact with the relatives and friends who were offering them support. Because of the role of the military in the life of the decedent, the family wanted to involve as many people as possible in military honors. Importantly, they wanted to keep everyone safe by social distancing and follow the shelter in place order.

After the family had private time, a drive-thru visitation began. In the chapel with direct access to the parking lot, the casket was set up in a window to be seen from the parking lot. The family sat at the open doors between the casket and the parking lot. Microphones and speakers were set up so that the family and visitors could all chat and hear one another, enabling visitors to drive-thru, see the casket and visit briefly with the family while remaining outside and socially distanced. Visitors then drove up to the red, white and blue balloon arch where they could take a few minutes to speak directly to the family. Red, white and blue balloons also decorated the light poles of the parking lot. This stream of cars created what we called A Hero's Homecoming and Farewell Parade. Those that wanted to stay remained in the parking lot to live stream the private services. At the conclusion of the service, the military honors were conducted outside. Visitors stayed in or near their cars throughout the military honors, then all clapped and honked their horns at its conclusion.

Family then preceded to the National Cemetery. This too was live streamed.

Family felt that they were able to visit with relatives and friends. They shared their grief and felt support. They shared the military honors with others. They felt great support during the parade and

A.J. Desmond & Sons Funeral Directors, Troy, MI

appreciated the cars (and people) that stayed during the service, and remarked that seeing the number of cars who witnessed the military service was helpful. Because of the live streaming, their son's friends from all over the world participated. In the end, the family felt something very honorable and special occurred to honor the life of the loved one. Given that this happened when COVID restrictions were high, made it especially noteworthy for all involved.

Neighbors also noticed the events, complimenting us on how we are able to provide support for the family while respecting the COVID restrictions. While most funeral services are inside, away from the general community, this became very public as the wider community witnessed the Hero's Homecoming and Farewell Parade, acknowledged the death. The saw how we can honor a loved one in a unique way.

F. Submit an essay describing an innovative program, service or activity executed by your funeral home. The essay must be a minimum of 400 words.

In a small coal mining community such as Pineville, Kentucky is, it is very unusual to service families that are in need of bilingual services. Our daughter, Margaret Steele, had recently returned home to help us in our business and was very helpful in sitting in with Jay to wait on a Guatemalan-Mexican and American Family. Through her basic Spanish knowledge, she was able to converse with both sides of Mr. Cesar Depaz's Family. She was able to interpret for us their wishes for a bilingual service so that both sides of his family would be able to understand and participate in his services.

Working with the family we understood that there were certain circumstances that forced the funeral to be on a Sunday, which is not conducive for a Catholic Funeral. Working together, we were able to assist the family in having many elements of a Hispanic Catholic Mass. From the set up of the funeral home and a kneeling bench near the casket.

We were able to get the local High School's Castillian Spanish Teacher to come in and assist us in translating the minister's message from English to Spanish as well as translating the portions of the Mass from Spanish to English and he did an excellent job. We were very blessed for all of his assistance in communicating back and forth with the Family that traveled up from Guatemala and Mexico.

Our daughter worked in the background listening and catching on to some of the family needs and making that happen to the best of her abilities with the service folders and obituary.

During the time we were in the middle of the Covid Pandemic and wondered how we would be able to communicate the need for social distancing, wearing masks, and other mandates that our Governor had on Funeral Services. The family was very understanding and kept a constant 6 foot distance between themselves and everyone else. In fact, they were more aware and more consistent than the Family that lived locally. The family even requested that there be a separation between visiting hours so that the Hispanic side of the family could come and have their visitation and then leave before friends could come so that we stayed within the number mandates for visitations.

Through this experience we have learned even more how important it is to work within ourselves and our community to help grieving families have a more personal touch and understanding during their final moments with a loved one before burial. We know more about how to find interpreters, how to utilize various keyboards to correctly type translated text. And how to offer care and comfort to our families even when we do not speak the same language or have a full understanding of other cultures and traditions. Being elastic in the Funeral Business is very important, sometimes you have to pause and pivot from your traditional services to meet the needs of those you serve.

E. CUSTOMER SATISFACTION FEEDBACK

I certify that Gardinier Funeral Home, Inc. gathers customer satisfaction feedback by participating in a survey program through the International Order of the Golden Rule. Continuing Care Ministry Provider, Beth Ann Fisher (CPC Assoc.) incorporates the surveys in the continuing care packet which is given to the next of kin approximately one week following funeral services. The survey examines vital information in regards to all areas of the funeral home and services provided. Families then return the survey directly to the International Order of the Golden Rule, where they are compiled anonymously and returned to the funeral home once a month. The staff at Gardinier Funeral Home, Inc. then reviews and discusses the surveys. Please review the provided enclosures for further details.

Thank you,



Michael W. Gardinier, CFSP, CPC  
Supervisor & Owner  
Gardinier Funeral Home, Inc.

<Enclosure 1E>

F. INNOVATIVE PROGRAM ESSAY

We hope you enjoy the following essay describing an innovation program The Gardinier Funeral Home, Inc. implemented. Enclosed are photos and external pdf copies to support our entry. Thank you.

PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE 2021

INNOVATIVE PROGRAM ESSAY

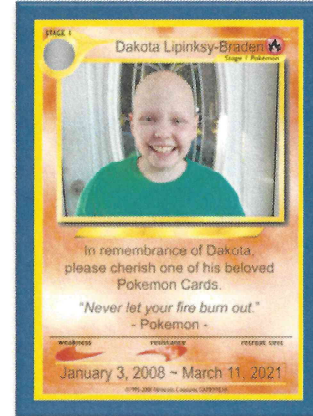
When Gardinier Funeral Home, Inc. receives telephone calls regarding pre-arranging a loved one's funeral, the staff at the funeral home usually expects the individual to be an older person. The day we received a telephone call regarding the pre-arrangement of a young boy, our hearts were heavy. A brave soul who had been fighting a battle with cancer was told his fight would soon be over. Dakota was only 13 years old.

Dakota's tragic life story began when he was a little over a year old. He lost his father due to a tragic motorcycle accident. For many years he grew up as any typical child. When he was 10 years old, he fell off his trampoline and bumped his head, which led to the discovery of something more sinister – a Neuroepithelial Brain Tumor. Most tumors of this type are benign, but Dakota's was malignant. Surgery was performed to remove the larger tumor from his brain, but smaller tumors located around his frontal lobe were unable to be eradicated. He underwent radiation treatments and chemotherapy for a couple years, and finally in early 2021, Dakota and his family received the news that no one ever wants to hear – his cancer was spreading too aggressively to treat.

Once Dakota's family received this devastating news, his mother contacted Gardinier Funeral Home, Inc. to begin his 'final tribute'. The Gardinier Funeral Home, Inc. staff met with Dakota's mother and began forming ideas for his perfect life celebration. Dakota had a love for Pokémon cards and Nerf guns and his favorite colors were black and red.

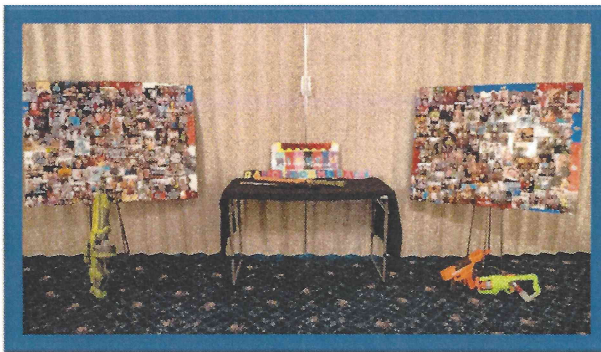


Using these themes, the Gardinier Funeral Home staff designed a personalized register book and memorial folders that incorporated the Pokémon characters and the Nerf logo. A customized trading card with Dakota's picture and the Pokémon phrase, "Never Let Your Fire Burn Out", were tied to a collection of his Pokémon trading cards with black and red ribbon. These cards, as well as red and black beads, were given as keepsakes to all who visited and paid tribute to Dakota at the funeral home.

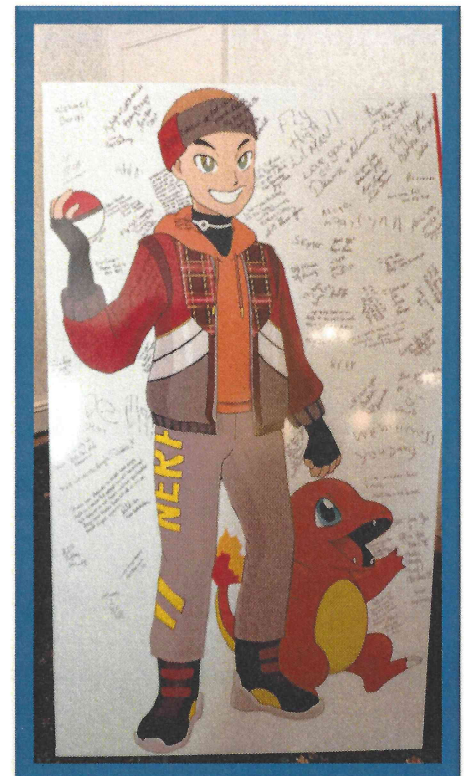


His prized Nerf gun collection, and numerous other of his favorite personal items, were placed throughout the funeral home for all to see. To honor his late father, a display was set, which included his father's military honor's flag, photos and other precious mementos.

Photo boards were placed throughout the funeral home so everyone could see Dakota's beautiful life and how happy he was, in spite of the turmoil he endured. His smiling face permeated the hearts of everyone he came in contact with – even through his photos.



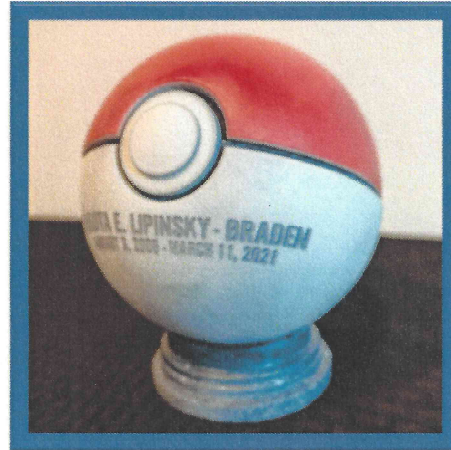
As a surprise for Dakota's mother, the staff at Gardinier Funeral Home, Inc. took a photo of Dakota and transformed it into a life-size Pokémon trainer with his favorite Pokémon character, Charmander, at his side. This silhouette was printed on a life-sized white board, where family and friends were encouraged to write a tribute to Dakota.



From the start of Dakota's funeral service, it was evident that this would be less of a somber experience. Laughter filled the air when the pastor started 'telling his story'. As many memories were shared, laughter filled the room and became contagious. Tears were shed, but it was evident how special Dakota was to many people, how many lives he touched, and what a special individual he was.

During Dakota's funeral service, you could occasionally hear the 'pop and whir' of a Nerf gun being shot. At the end of Dakota's funeral service, as a special tribute to him, all in attendance were encouraged to have a Nerf gun battle. The children attending were filled with joy and laughter and even tried shooting the funeral home staff.

Dakota was cremated and as a final tribute to him, the Gardinier Funeral Home, Inc. staff were instrumental in helping to create a 3-D Pokémon Urn in the likeness of a Poké Ball for his mother to keep and cherish for many years.



<Additional Enclosures 1F>

## CATEGORY 2: LEADERSHIP AND STAFF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### A. TECHNICAL SKILL TRAINING

#### EVERYDAY EMBALMING TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

PRESENTED BY: WALLACE HOOKER CFSP, MBIE (OWNER/FRIENDS FUNERAL HOME, INC.)

On Wednesday, October 21, 2020, Heather J. Brown (Assistant Manager/Funeral Director) attended the seminar entitled "Everyday Embalming Tips and Techniques" at the NFDA International Convention and Expo held virtually.

The seminar description is as follows: Take an in-depth look at the steps required to create an acceptable and viewable body. Families and friends need to have the opportunity to experience a proper goodbye and have a lasting memory picture that will help them heal from their loss. Following the body from start to finish, you will discover useful information that you can use every day.

(1 CE Hour)

#### RESTORATIVE ART AND MODERN TECHNIQUES

PRESENTED BY: EDUCATION WORKERS GROUP

On Wednesday, September 09, 2020, Madalyn King (Funeral Director) completed the self-study course entitled "Restorative Art and Modern Techniques" from FuneralContinuingEducation.com.

The seminar description is as follows: Embalming and body restoration are closely linked. As a result, restoration specialists and embalmer's duties often overlap. Because of this, it is beneficial for funeral directors and embalmers to become educated in restorative arts. For the purposes of this course, we will assume that the embalmer is performing the restoration without any outside help from restorative arts specialists or mortuary cosmetologists. Thus, the course will present embalming techniques alongside restorative techniques for a balance presentation.

(3 CE Hour)

## F. Innovative Program

During Winter 2021, Milward Funeral Director Brad Allred completed his Celebrant Certification. The timing of Milward having a Celebrant to provide a personalized service could not have been more perfect for the family of Josh Allen Conley. Joshua Allen Conley, affectionately known to everyone as, JoshJosh, passed away at the young age of 39, on February 2, 2021. Josh was known to be the life of any party and was able to light up any room he walked into. He was ready to greet you with a big “JoshJosh” hug and with a line from one of his favorite movies or tv shows.

He was loved by every person he met, had a personality that was infectious. He was there if you needed a shoulder to cry on, or if you just wanted to binge watch a tv show and needed a partner. JoshJosh was a bartender at a local bar and also love watching marvel movies including the Green Lantern.

When JoshJosh’s mom sat down with Dan Hanshel, she told him she wanted to have a service that would allow his many friends and family members to celebrate his life. Dan immediately introduced the concept of having a Celebration of Life with the help of Milward’s new Celebrant, Brad Allred. Open to the idea, Diane Conley met with Brad and Dan who came up with some very unique ideas to help JoshJosh’s family and friends celebrate him.

There were several specific ideas that JoshJosh’s mom wanted to include in the service per her son’s request was playing, “Keg on My Coffin” by Chris Trapper and having the photo of JoshJosh in his Green Lantern costume on his casket. Milward took had a few ideas, too! Considering it was mandatory for everyone who had to attended the funeral to wear a mask, Milward ordered Green Lantern face makes for the family to wear during the visitation. Additionally, Brad and Dan got a small “keg” to put on the casket and also put some permanent markers by the casket for guests to sign it.

The real personalization for JoshJosh’s funeral service was in the remarks shared by Brad Allred. Brad spent time getting to know the family and wrote remarks that were joyous and made his friends and family smile and laugh, just as JoshJosh would have wanted them to do. The family was pleased with the service that Brad Allred and Dan Hanshel provided to the family. The special touches truly helped the Conley family memorialize JoshJosh in just the way he would have wanted his family to remember him.



**Category 1: Basic Requirements**

**Section F Covid Rebirths Use & Awareness of Double Casket**

In his 35 years in the funeral profession, the president/owner of Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre had conducted several double funerals resulting from vehicular accidents, fire and tornadoes but the emergency health crisis of the Covid pandemic belonged to a different genre. Just as tragic, but different. Husband and wives who had celebrated 13, 65 and 69 years of marriage died within days of each other. Families knew several weeks ahead that Covid was vanishing all hope for



recovery. Not once but over and over, their children commented to Rodney Nay in early phone calls that their parents “did everything together” and could there be a double ceremony when death called the last partner home. Preservation of first body, matching caskets, extra vehicles and chapel configuration presented no problem. But the director felt multiple mechanics did not adequately capture the loving bond of these couples, who had spent their adult lives together, hand in hand, in sunshine and rain, and with the key to each other’s heart. Their sunset should be the same. And as a result of CDC and governmental restrictions, the traditional visits, heartfelt hugs and kind condolences from friends and neighbors would largely be missing at the funeral itself. Wheels began to turn. Early Google searches referenced the use of double caskets during the dysentery “flux” virus in 1919-1921, as well as the historic image of Thomas and Mary Souder in a double casket in 1921 and three other times in 2008, 2012 and 2014. A plethora of online ads featured oversized caskets for sale, but no double caskets to purchase with the click



of a computer key. But that provided no reason to give up. Mr. Nay had dis-interred bodies before and placed them in a double casket with a parent or spouse who died years later, but those situations lacked the force of a deadly pandemic visibly robbing loved ones of life and simultaneously threatening the surviving. The veteran

director had ordered custom made caskets from Goliath-Paragon in Richmond, IN and an Amish casket maker in Missouri before. Maybe once again, they could help or furnish leads. Surely, some small company or craftsmen group - without the time and financial cost of retooling a mechanical or



robotic production line - could build a double casket that would accommodate two who “did everything together.” Within 24 hours, the quest came to fruition with Morgan & Nay ordering five double caskets between the two companies. Centre personnel had to drive five hours to pick up the two caskets in Missouri and two hours for the three in Central Indiana. Once purchased, both companies fulfilled the orders within three to five days. The next hurdle was to secure vaults to house the 60-inch width and retrofit a company vehicle to accommodate the large dimension. The company’s hearse gear could only accommodate a standard 28-inch casket with 12 inches of play for minor adjustments. Another 20 inches rendered the impossible. Without much trouble, one of the company’s new vans became a temporary funeral coach and the vault company could easily comply. During the official time period of the pandemic, Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre served 87 families who lost a loved one to Covid 19. Knowing we will not always have the advantage of a few extra days to accommodate tragic occurrences, the Centre now has a solid cherry, double casket in stock. Even though we hope not, those in the funeral profession know too well that family tragedies often involve more than one. Many funeral homes nationwide offered other innovative, yet compassionate and dignified, ways to serve families during the Covid crisis. For Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre, the double casket approach certainly afforded the four families we served an extra dimension of comfort, as well as gave rebirth and public awareness to a concept that might accommodate many preferences. Rather than arise from an unexpected tragedy, the need could simply generate from the bond of love. So many people have since

commented that they did not know a double casket even existed. In the Covid era, not even death separated our four couples who “did everything together.”

Whether the need for a double casket stems from a double tragedy or the bond of love, Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre now stocks a solid cherry unit in its inventory.



# *They Did Everything Together, Even Their Closure*

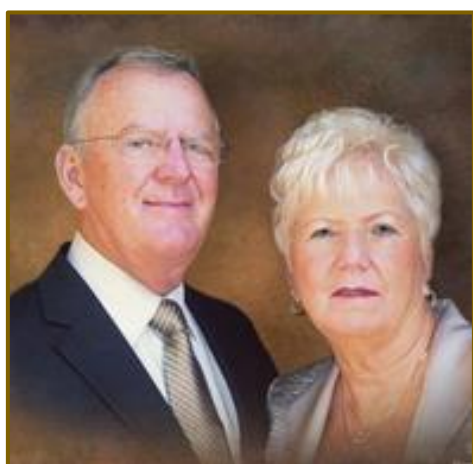


## **James & Eleanor Alexander**

*Married 65 Years*

James died Jan. 17, 2021, Eleanor Jan. 28, 2021.

11 Days Apart



## **Ronald & Evangeline Greves**

*Married 65 Years*

Ronald died Jan. 1, 2021, Evangeline Jan. 17, 2021.

16 Days Apart

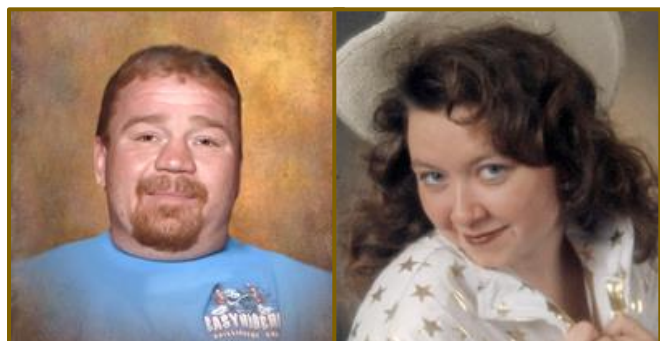


## **Gobel & Lois Liter**

*Married 69 Years*

Gobel died Nov. 10, 2020, Lois Nov. 12, 2020.

2 Days Apart



## **Steven Cosby & Sabrina Carter**

*Together 13 Years*

Steven died Sept. 22, 2020, Sabrina Sept. 29, 2020.

7 Days Apart



I-F

## ESSAY

In my 35-year career, I have never experienced anything like 2020 and 2021, professionally or personally. The political climate, race relations, and the COVID-19 pandemic made for an unprecedented difficult year, especially for those of us in funeral service.

In January 2021, our company served more families than any other month in our 108-year history. Our staff was working 50-70 hours a week, suppliers could not keep up with demand for their products, families were being torn apart by the ravages of this never before heard of Corona Virus, and everyone was trying to keep themselves healthy.

As exhausting as those days were, it was ever clear why we as funeral professionals “do what we do.” My colleague, Wendy Thames, wrote a poignant essay about a very meaningful experience she had with a family during the pandemic. I share this essay in hopes that it will serve as an encouraging word to fellow funeral service professionals. It is a bit longer than the standard POE essay, but I ask that you take the time to read about this touching experience.

Sincerely,

Tim Gossett

## Cole's Butterfly

During the late evening hours on Friday, February 19, 2021, a young family gathered at the bedside of their two-and-a-half-year-old son, Cole, as he ended his courageous battle with neuroblastoma cancer and victoriously journeyed back to his eternal home in Heaven. He took his last breath at 1:14 a.m. on Saturday morning cradled in the arms of his mother and father.

Later that afternoon, I was driving in Pendleton, South Carolina headed to pick up my son's birthday cake from our local bakery. As his special-order cake was not quite ready, I wandered into a local antique shop on the town square and started browsing to pass the time. On a table in the back corner of the shop was a basket filled with inexpensive pins, earrings, bracelets, and other



random costume accessories. After several minutes spent digging through the items, I picked up a card with a handsome pair of identical butterfly pins attached. These butterflies struck me as unusual as their wings were colored black and their bodies were a vivid green. Holding them in my hand I felt an instant connection to them and wanted to take them home and share them with someone dear. Everyone has different tastes when it comes to jewelry and accessories, but I decided the sincere gesture of sharing a gift would be appreciated regardless of the style of the item. I purchased them for \$8.00 and raced home with my son's cake.



*Because I have been a Funeral Director for almost 20 years, I seldom purchase decorative jewelry to wear at work because it is attention drawing. I was trained to dress and accessorize myself in a way that is minimalist and classic. A seasoned Funeral Director in Texas 'schooled me' while mentoring his young apprentice, "As Funeral Directors we should strive to be in the background quietly attending the needs of the family and never distracting the public by drawing negative OR positive attention to ourselves. This applies to our conduct as well as our attire. The funeral is about the family and not the Director!" I embodied this*

*advice 100% and began collecting a simple and understated wardrobe of mostly black and navy that over two decades would become like my second skin, a uniform of comfort and security.*



Saturday night I was sitting on my bed blowing up balloons with my husband thinking about the coming week, and I logged into our funeral home schedule to see what was happening. This is when I first learned of Cole's passing and felt immediate sadness for the family and relief for myself when I saw my colleague's name assigned to meet with his family on Monday morning. It felt like I had been spared for two reasons: 1. Children are not supposed to die. Period. It is the scariest call a funeral director

can receive from a family. 2. I am a mother of three wonderful boys, ages 7, 6, and 2. My two-and-a-half-year-old son is a golden-haired cherub with an inquisitive mind and a joyful heart. I do not know how my husband and I would process losing a child and the more I thought about Cole, my mind filled with fear.

Sunday came and went, balloons, cake, songs, presents, picnic by the lake, and sushi for dinner...it was a magical sunny day with a cool breeze, and I enjoyed every moment spent with my family.

As I laid down that night, I said a prayer for Cole's family and for my colleague who would serve them... *Lord, I ask you to help these parents find the strength to face this and allow those around them to help them. Please watch over us as we try to guide them and help them take these first important steps on their journey. Please watch over their family and keep us all safe. Amen.*

Monday morning while driving to the funeral home I received a text that I was scheduled to meet with a family at 10:00 a.m. and learned shortly after it was Cole's family. My heart began to race. I had calmed my fears and relaxed knowing I would be in the background and not intimately involved with this child's arrangements. His masked mother and father arrived promptly, calmly carrying travel mugs filled with strong coffee. They came together without other family members and considered the other's feelings and opinions when asked a question. They had forged an unbreakable bond while watching their son experience multiple medical procedures and treatments even prior to his cancer diagnosis. They took one day at a time, crying through the hard times and celebrating even the smallest of victories. Dealing with terminal illness during a pandemic also presented unforeseen challenges for two parents who so desperately wanted to spend every waking moment with their son. Through it all they received tremendous support from the medical community, countless relatives, and lifelong friends, as well as their Pastor, church family, and professional colleagues. Their abundant gratitude and expressions of love for the people in their lives was inspiring.

Cole's Mommy and Daddy were open to share with me about their amazing little boy (who was quite a big boy for his age) and what he had experienced in his 1,070 days on earth. When talking about him, they teared up, smiled, and even laughed. We shared parenting moments and exchanged personal stories about what it means to be a Mommy and Daddy to a little boy who is ready to take on the world.

*I consider the time spent with a family talking about their loved one the most precious gift a funeral director can ever receive. It is the time in which the decedent becomes more than a stranger with an associated case number but a flesh and blood person you wish you could have had the privilege to know in life. This time also allows us to become comfortable with one another and establish trust. It is all about trust. I am passionately committed to serving families and want them to have full confidence in, first and foremost, my sincerity, and secondly, my professional excellence. "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." – President Theodore Roosevelt*

It should be mentioned that Cole had a social media presence and an enormous community of friends and family following his journey on



Caring Bridge. He even has a hashtag, #strongasabear. His parents often referred to him as Cole Bear. Closer to the end of our conversation, I asked about Cole's favorite things. His mother immediately looked up, smiled, and mimicked her son saying, "Geen my favit." I felt a flutter in my heart in hearing these words and instantly saw the butterfly pins in my mind.

The endless details of planning a funeral for a child can be overwhelming to the family and funeral director but in this case his mother was a planner with a capital P! Due to COVID-19 restrictions and Cole's compromised health, his mother was unable to execute the big party she had organized for his 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday. It became clear in our discussions that the theme and display she wanted was already in her mind (and in boxes in her living room) and the location was going to be the challenge. They were expecting many people and needed a venue that could safely accommodate their guests. This is where the funeral director becomes vital! After negotiations and many conversations, I secured the desired venue on the desired date (miracles all around us) and planned to meet the family at the church on Thursday morning.

At this point I had only seen one photo of Cole, and it tore a hole in my heart. He was so beautiful with his sparkling eyes and big smile. After I looked at the photo on his mother's phone, I could not shake the image of his perfect bald head and the long-sleeved, button-up shirt he wore. It reminded me of

my middle son at his 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday party. Cole's family then decided to share more special family photos in order for our staff to create a video to play before his memorial service. After the video was available to view on our website, I could not bring myself to watch it.

Wednesday night while lying in bed, trying to rest from a very busy day, I decided to watch the memorial video on my phone. I was able to keep my emotions inside and for the benefit of my husband, muted the gentle background track that can so often destroy the composure of the viewer. He knew what I was watching and asked why I was watching it and turned away to avoid seeing any of the images. It was too hard for him.

I should tell you what I saw in the video that affected me the most. It wasn't the photos of Cole in the hospital receiving chemo treatments or the touching holiday moments like the previous Halloween when Cole and his brother dressed up as a chef (Daniel) with a lobster in a pot (Cole). It is always an image that reaches you on a personal level and connects with your personal experience. For me it was an image of Cole wearing a cranial band painted to look like a Clemson University football helmet. Cole's parents are passionate Clemson fans and alumni!

*I am familiar with cranial band therapy because our youngest child (future LSU quarterback) ⇒ wore one for almost a year. This was a difficult time in my life, struggling with postpartum depression, traveling 90 miles round trip twice a month to the band clinic for adjustments, and pretending not to see strangers staring at my baby in the grocery store.*



*I instantly felt so connected with Cole's mother and the hurt deep inside began to grow and push against my chest. How I wished things could be different for her. Why did this happen to her? This unanswerable question which so many families have asked me in my career always creates the same thought...It hurts to look in your eyes knowing there is no explanation or rationalization that anyone could give that will lessen the pain you feel right now.*

Thursday morning came quickly, and I placed one butterfly pin in my raincoat pocket and knew what I needed to do. As we gathered with his family and close friends to walk through the logistical challenges of executing a socially distanced memorial service for 200 people, I learned even more about Cole from his grandparents, aunts, and uncles. They explained how Cole became a hopeful blessing to other families battling childhood illness and inspired his community to never give up. As

we prepared to part ways, I felt brave as the butterfly tried to fly out of my pocket. I approached Cole's Mom and shared my story. I was honest and told her how and when the pins found me and the ways I felt connected to her. I shared with her my sincere feeling that this pin was meant for her and asked her to please accept it in memory of her son. She cried and held it in a shaking hand and hugged me tightly. She said she believes God sends special people to us when we need them.

*The young family planned to gather later that afternoon at our cremation center for private viewing and to witness Cole's cremation. I cannot describe the moments we shared at the cremation center because I do not believe my emotions would allow me to type the words. I will have that memory burned on my heart forever and will never forget the red Mickey Mouse sheets lining the seagrass casket or the two green apple flavored Dum Dum lollipops his Mother placed in his hand.*



Saturday morning was gray and cool with a continuous mist that glazed the roads leading to the church. After dressing for this child's memorial service, I felt dark and hidden under my black face mask and decided it was vital to visibly show my support and encouragement of this young family. I defied my instincts, dress code, and past training and wore my butterfly pin up on my shoulder and green Converse Chuck Taylor sneakers on my feet! It felt like the right thing to do and his family was elated by my gesture. The entire family and audience were clad in varying shades of green and mingled

around the Disney themed floral sprays on either side of his Mickey Mouse cookie jar urn. This service was indescribably personal and uplifting, and his father's eulogy brought me to tears. We cried, we sang, we smiled, and said goodbye to a brave little boy.



In the month following his service I emailed his parents a reminder of how special I felt to have met their entire family and to have been personally trusted to care for their son's arrangements. They were very thankful to the McAfee Family for their generosity and support through this difficult time in their lives and for the dedication and creativity of our staff.

His mother emailed me a special photo of her son's urn with the butterfly pin resting gently beside it. She said she could never forget me and the special ways I helped them.

Cole's birthday came in April, just 10 days before my son turned three. It was an emotion filled time preparing for this rite of passage and beginning to see my baby disappear and an independent child emerge. While planning this celebration for my son, I experienced heartache thinking about this boy who will never turn three. Grieving and feeling the need to purge these feelings in a positive way, I began privately verbalizing the entire experience and composed the first poem of my adult life. I remember thinking, so what if no one ever reads it...it was for me.

*Funeral directors may understand this next admission...I dread holidays. It is not for the obvious reasons one might assume, like missing out on special events due to the unplanned death or service. It is almost entirely because of the guilt I feel when meeting people who will never again celebrate that special day with their loved one. It is such a sensitive and painful time for most people, and I find it difficult to become fully engaged in merriment while carrying the sadness of others in my heart and mind.*

It was on Mother's Day Sunday, May 9, 2021, after a week of serving two families who experienced the unexpected deaths of young adult sons, that I felt moved to share my words with Cole's mother. She was visiting her favorite beach struggling to find solace and comfort watching the waves, knowing her special place would never feel the same because someone was missing. Cole's mother admitted that spending Mother's Day with her family at the beach was harder than she had imagined it would be and that my poem came to her at the right moment and 'turned her attitude around'. I felt an immediate relief in finding courage to share this personal work and knowing it helped ease her sadness.

Before COVID-19 changed our lives, I was mindful to control my emotional and physical reactions when confronted with the pain and sadness radiating from grieving families.

*I was trained our self-protection is accepted as professionally respectful and appropriate and allows the funeral director to function as an unbiased yet sympathetic observer.*



The pandemic created yet another measurable buffer between the Director and the bereaved...six feet to be exact. To cope with the changes and feel that I was continuing to make a difference, I opened myself up to learn more about the emotional needs of grieving families and share more of my personal emotions with them. In offering my ears and heart, I gave them something that posed no exposure risk...my attention! Creating these connections that were so desperately needed throughout the

pandemic improved my communication style and ability to help families. The hundreds of lengthy conversations and heart-to-hearts I shared with people taught me so much about why our lives are significant and reminded me of the need to share my life experience with others.



Serving Cole's family challenged me to overcome feelings of isolation and fear and show love with meaningful words and noticeable actions. I am grateful for Cole and his family as well as the thousands of other families I have been privileged to know throughout my career.

Because of them, I will remain #strongasabear.

Written by,

Wendy Smith Thames

Thomas McAfee Funeral Homes, Greenville, South Carolina

F. Submit an essay describing an innovative program, service or activity executed by your funeral home.

World War II Veteran Boilermaker 1<sup>st</sup> Class William Eugene Blanchard was laid to rest on Monday, June 7, 2021, by Twiford Funeral Home Memorial Chapel in Elizabeth City, NC. Boilermaker 1<sup>st</sup> Class William Eugene Blanchard died during the attack on Pearl Harbor when a torpedo hit the U.S.S. Oklahoma on Sunday, December 7, 1941, at approximately 7:56 a.m. The arrangements for his funeral with his descendants followed the verification of his identity through the U.S. Department of Defense.

David H. Twiford, Sr., CFSP, worked with the family, the Department of the Navy, the U.S. Navy Honor Guard, local press, the U.S. Department of Defense, musicians, the N.C. Patriot Guard, New Hollywood Cemetery, and local law enforcement for his service. Almost forty people attended the service officiated by the Reverend Jason Wise and live streamed on the Twiford Funeral Home Facebook page. The service began at 1:56 pm, timed to correspond with the time the first torpedo hit the Nevada Class battleship nearly eighty years ago resulting in the loss of four hundred twenty-nine lives.

The obituary was placed in seven papers from Idaho to North Carolina to Georgia and detailed Boilermaker 1<sup>st</sup> Class Blanchard's posthumous awarding of the Purple Heart Medal, American Defense Service Medal, and World War II Victory Medal. Special programs were printed. The Daily Advance newspaper in Elizabeth City covered the event and placed the story on the front page on June 8, 2021.

Four days prior to the service the N.C. Patriot Guard and law enforcement from Virginia and North Carolina escorted Boilermaker 1<sup>st</sup> Class Blanchard's casket from the airport in Norfolk, VA to Twiford Funeral Home in a driving rainstorm. A prelude was played by bagpiper Robert White as the family was escorted into the funeral home by the funeral home staff and members of the N.C. Patriot Guard while others stood in a flag line to honor the deceased.

Patriotic songs were played as the attendees were being seated. Stephanie Blanchard Smith, the granddaughter of the deceased, spoke eloquently about her grandfather while sharing family stories. "God Bless America" and "Amazing Grace" were sung by Ken Bateman accompanied by Edna Earle Meads, and all stood while Sandra Krueger sang the National Anthem.

Military honors were rendered by a six-man U.S. Navy Funeral Honors Unit and the Patriot Guard presented a plaque to the family.

Following the service, local law enforcement and the Patriot Guard, led by N.C. District State Captain Roy Hankinson, escorted Boilermaker 1<sup>st</sup> Class Blanchard to his final resting place at New Hollywood Cemetery in Elizabeth City, N.C.

The organization instrumental in identifying the deceased, the Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), utilized DNA from a relative in Georgia to verify Blanchard's identity. The Blanchard family asked for donations to this worthy agency, bringing much needed attention to the valuable services they provide.

The Blanchard family benefitted greatly from the funeral service, as it allowed them to come together to memorialize and honor their deceased loved one, share stories, and learn about the man who died before his son could know him. They were finally able to verify his death and lay him to rest with the honor he deserved.

The community at large, including a number of military personnel and retirees, came out to support the Blanchard family and to honor the fallen hero. Several attendees mentioned how impressed they were with the service itself, how grateful they were to have been able to attend, and how glad they were to discover and be able to support the invaluable services provided by the DPAA.

Twiford Funeral Home staff felt honored to have been involved in and benefitted from this service as we assisted in putting all the details together, coordinating with the multiple agencies and groups involved. Twiford was selected by the family because his son lives in Elizabeth City. In addition, Twiford Funeral Home is very active in the community especially in honoring our military and is known to be a Veteran's Funeral Care provider. This was a rare opportunity and privilege for the staff to help a family bring history alive and to participate in a historic occasion.