NFDA Pursuit of Excellence Criteria Essay Section I – Basic Requirements - Letter E

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On June 14, 2005, I arrived at Porter Loring Mortuaries in San Antonio, Texas, to attend a Selected Connections program entitled "Developing a Bereavement Program – An Integrated Approach". Selected Independent Funeral Homes had only recently initiated the Selected Connections program, which allowed staff from member funeral homes to attend seminars hosted and conducted by other member funeral homes which had expertise in certain fields. Having had an aftercare program for several years, we had reached a point where we needed a fresh look at what we were doing, and I was hoping to find that in this program. My expectations were exceeded.

From the Porter Loring staff I learned about Continuing Care Consultants and Grief Companions. I knew that, due to the smaller size of our firm, I would be unable to implement a program of the size and reach of Porter Loring's, but I was determined to adapt this program to our needs.

Upon returning home, I spoke with our two aftercare providers, neither of whom was willing to take on the scope of the program I envisioned. However, Phil Partridge was intreagued by the Continuing Care Consultant portion of the program, and indicated that he might be interested in attempting that job in January of 2006. This position was placed on hold for the time being.

Grief Companion Position:

A Grief Companion is a person whose strengths include the ability to: quickly develop a supportive and long-term relationship with others, listen and let others share their stories, recognize the need for bereavement care, be service oriented, and in general have an empathy and care for others. Pat Lazenby, a lady who had worked visitation for us for two years, was the perfect choice for a Grief Companion.

To give Pat a description to follow for the duties and actions suitable to a Grief Companion, I wrote a program similar to that I had learned about at Porter Loring. I compiled a notebook for Pat which contained the following information and instructions: (a) A detailed job description with advice and instructions; (b) a Profile of a Grief Companion; (c) a Grief and Loss Timeline covering a one-year period; (d) Follow Up Phone Calls Outline, The Difference between a Courtesy Call and a Caring Call; (e) Do's and Don't's When Communicating with the Bereaved;

(f) Helpful Listening Phrases; (g) Personal Messages which can be used for Thank You Notes; (h) General Things To Remember When Dealing With A Grieving Person and (i) Grief Companion – Follow Up Tracking Sheet to keep up with families' situations. I have enclosed a copy of each of these items for your information. Often, Pat will already be acquainted with family members from having worked with them during visitation. However, basically, Pat's job is to make first contact with a family within a week to ten days after the funeral service, and to follow that family for the next year. She becomes better acquainted with family members, makes telephone calls, sends cards for appropriate occasions, and makes personal visits when deemed necessary. Pat lets our families know that we don't forget about them after the funeral service is done. Many people have let us know how much they appreciate her calls and cards, and they are amazed that a funeral home still cares enough about how they are coping that they have someone who keeps in touch with them after the service.

Although Pat became our Grief Companion in July of 2005, we began with the list of families we had served from May of 2005. Since that time, Pat has sent out 181 cards, made 394 telephone calls, and 7 personal visits. A copy of Pat's record of cards, calls and visits is enclosed. About being a Grief Companion, Pat says, "I love to talk and I love to help people, so being a Grief Companion has been a blessing for me, and I hope for the people I've worked with."

Continuing Care Consultant Position:

In January of 2006, Phil Partridge became our Continuing Care Consultant. A Continuing Care Consultant has some duties similar to those of a Grief Companion, but they are broader in scope. As a CCC, Phil sits down with a family in the conference room prior to the beginning of the arrangement conference, gets to know the family, finds out about the life, likes and personality of the deceased, and through this knowledge helps the family plan a personalized funeral service reflecting the life of the deceased. Phil usually spends about twenty minutes with the family before the funeral director comes in to begin funeral arrangements. Phil continues in the conference as a second pair of ears to help the funeral director obtain vital statistics and service information. Our funeral directors have been very receptive to Phil's presence in the arrangement conference, and seem to appreciate the assistance he gives to them and to the families.

Phil also follows families for one year after the funeral service. He makes telephone calls, sends cards and notes, and visits when needed. In his capacity as a grief provider, he provides event-appropriate literature and consults with family members who need help in understanding and working through the grieving process.

A notebook was compiled for Phil which contains several instruction sheets exactly like those used by Pat for the Grief Companion Program, which, in addition to those items listed above, also contains the following: (a) Mission Statement for Continuing Care Consultant; (b) Profile of a Continuing Care Consultant; (c) Family Checklist; (d) What People in Grief Need; (e) Family Assessment Form; and (f) a Continuing Care Consultant – Follow Up Tracking Sheet. Those items which are different from the Grief Companion list are enclosed herewith.

Phil also works the visitations of those families whom he helps during the arrangement process as their CCC. At the first viewing prior to beginning of visitation, Phil meets with the family and lights a candle to be placed beside the casket. The candle is a special reminder to the family to focus on the life of the deceased.

Phil has handwritten a brief summary of things he has done for families since beginning with aftercare and while serving as a CCC, and that list is enclosed. (Names of deceased persons hav been blacked out.) As a closing to this list, Phil has written a summary of what this job means to him. I am rewriting it here, in order to be certain that you are able to understand what he says. "Working with these families is a ministry for me. I feel as though God is using me as an instrument to help these families during a most difficult time. Establishing a relationship with them allows me to understand the struggles they are going through and how to better serve them. When I help a family and they say that it meant so much my being there, my heart swells with pride that I was able to be there for them."

Summary

The Grief Companion and Continuing Care Consultant programs have been two of the best, most rewarding and most successful programs we have ever implemented. The gratitude of the people who have been served by Pat and Phil has been amazing to us. All of our staff genuinely cares about the people we serve, and we were searching for a new and better way to help them through their grief. We found it.

I am not aware that any other funeral home in our area has any type of aftercare program. I am certain that they do not have a program which matches our Grief Companion and CCC programs. We plan to continue and expand these programs as our business, hopefully, grows when our new funeral home and crematory are complete and operational.