## Carlson Funeral Service, Inc. 2012 Pursuit of Excellence Essay

Ref: Criteria 1. H

"Grief Support and Education for Students of Nativity Catholic School"

Carlson Funeral Service, Inc. is a four generation family operated funeral home located in Rhinelander, Wisconsin. The firm serves an average of 140 families living in this his northern Wisconsin community of 7500 people. In earlier in its history, Carlson's was considered the "Protestant" funeral home but has gained much ground in serving people of the Catholic faith as well. The staff of Carlson Funeral Service has dedicated many hours of volunteer service and leadership to numerous community improvement projects as evidence of the firm's commitment to not only providing professional funeral service but also to making Rhinelander a "better place to live" for all its residents. As part of this effort, 2012 will mark the ninth year of Carlson's participation in the Pursuit of Excellence program.

In January of 2012, G.G., age 52 passed away very unexpectedly. G.G. was a much loved secretary and library coordinator at the Nativity Catholic School in Rhinelander for the past twelve years. At 325 students, Nativity is the largest Catholic school in the Diocese of Superior and G.G. had daily contact with nearly all students and staff. Her loss was not only devastating to her family but to the school as well, especially the younger students who had an extremely difficult time of dealing with the emotions surrounding such a sudden death.

G.G.'s family engaged Carlson Funeral Home to provide services including traditional visitation at the funeral home with mass celebrated at the Catholic Church the following day.

Staff from Nativity were in almost immediate contact with Carlson's to discuss the effects the death were having on both students and staff and as a leader in the community concerning death and dying issues, Carlson's was called upon to offer guidance and support. After meeting with teachers and support staff at the school on the day prior to the visitation, Carlson's took the lead in formulating a comprehensive plan to offer grief support and opportunities to remember and memorialize Mrs. G.G.

As a first step, a letter was sent home to parents advising them of the situation and planned activities to help students cope with the death. With permission and support from the family, students attended the mass and were involved with the service as readers and gift presenters.

On the day following the service, John Mayo and Bruce Carlson made presentations to each grade from kindergarten to eighth grade concerning death, dying, and grief issues and to provide students with an opportunity to share their feelings and ask questions following their funeral experience. Teachers relayed how helpful and positive the opportunity was for students to ask questions and get honest and sincere answers from knowledgeable professionals.

In honor of G.G.'s work with the library at the school and to provide students with a lasting keepsake, Carlson Funeral Home in conjunction with their printer, created a custom laminated book mark that contained a picture of Mrs. G.G. as well as one of her favorite poems and these were distributed to students with a supply for the future placed in the library.

The staff of Carlson's then arranged for a special memorial program, encouraging each class to come up with a creative way to honor Mrs. G.G.'s memory through a special activity. A morning was set aside from the regular school schedule for these events and Carlson Funeral Home arranged for a special luncheon featuring Mrs. G.G.'s favorite meal of Subway sandwiches which G.G.'s husband and son were able to attend.

Some of the memorial activities included a special story time of Mrs. G.G.'s favorite children's stories held in the library for kindergarteners, third graders created special paper folded flowers in honor of G.G.'s love of gardening and these were presented to the family at the luncheon, and seventh and eighth graders tried their hand at cross country skiing which was one of G.G.'s true passions.

It was truly a memorable day for the students, school and funeral home staffs, as well as the family of G.G. The events brought home the message that in our sadness at a loss, we can also find much joy in remembering a life well lived and the importance of celebrating and memorializing when someone dies. In May of 2012, Carlson Funeral Home staff worked with students to create a section of memorial garden in the school's Reflection Garden. The firm purchased plants and flowers as suggested by the third graders following a field trip to a local greenhouse as well as a 12X12 bronze plague that noted the passing of Mrs. G.G. and her dedication to the wellbeing of students of Nativity School. The funeral home also purchased five new books for the school's library

that dealt with children and death, appropriate for a number of age ranges, and were donated in memory of Mrs. G.G.'s memory.

The rewards and benefits of this program were multi-fold for all involved. Students were provided with lessons that will last a life time concerning healthy grieving, the importance of remembering and memorialization, and that funeral directors are professionals that are there to be of support, assistance, and comfort in times of loss. Furthermore, students were exposed to the community commitment of the staff at Carlson Funeral Home as were parents and school staff which may impact future decisions regarding funeral home choice.

The family of G.G. found much comfort in the efforts to remember G.G. and to honor her impact to the school and students. This provided both strength and peace in the face of such an over whelming loss. The family also came to appreciate and understand the importance and value of traditional services as well as the need for competent and professional service providers.

The staff of Carlson Funeral Home was energized by the enthusiasm and genuine emotion that was shared by students and staff at the school. New relationships were forged and old relationships strengthened. Carlson's standing within the Catholic community was solidly established and will generate far reaching rewards for the business.

## Best of the Best Kilpatrick Funeral Home

## Community Impacted by Death

Nine suicides in 14 months, seven students and two adults made the staff at Kilpatrick Funeral Home determined to do whatever it would take to prevent another. Our mission was to provide community service to the living and the hope to decrease the incidence of depression and suicide through awareness and education. We knew we needed to help educate, advocate, and volunteer within the community as well as band together with community partners, and spread a message of hope and worth to our youth.

Kilpatrick Funeral Home is located in the city of West Monroe, Louisiana that is rural with 5,734 households of which 26.7% have children under the age of 18 living with them. We partnered with the Ouachita Parish School Board, West Monroe High School, local churches, and other partnering agencies to send a message to all who would listen, and especially to our students. The message was there is hope now and you do matter.

Kilpatrick Funeral Home family and staff were excited to be able to bring **Lisa Athan** to our community December 5 and 6, 2011 to provide information, strategies and techniques to use in dealing with complex issues our children face. (Visit her web site at <a href="https://www.griefspeaks.com">www.griefspeaks.com</a>).

On December 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Lisa's spoke at **West Monroe High School** where 300 students participated in her seminar on <u>Coping with Grief</u>, <u>Loss</u>, and other <u>Tough Stuff</u>. As students entered the class for Lisa's presentation her IPOD played Selana Gomez, "Who Says". The students were surprised to be given Play Dough, to be used as a stress ball as well as Dum Dum lollipops representing all the dumb things they may hear from others as well as dumb things they may say to others who are dealing with loss. Lisa shared with the teens some of the different types of losses that they may experience; loss of relationship (which may include friend changes, pet loss, breakups, divorce, moving, a death of a loved one or less than loved one, incarceration of a family member, deployment of a family member, estrangement in the family, lack of availability of a parent due to mental illness, addiction, over work and more). Lisa talked about the loss of intangibles like self esteem, loss of status and loss of safety, which can come from being bullied.

Dominoes were used to represent the most important things to the students in their lives that give their life meaning. Lisa slowly dropped all the dominoes on the floor. Lisa explained to them that at times in our lives there are suddenly or not so suddenly, we all suffer losses, which can feel like all our pieces are all over the place. Also discussed were the temptations and dangers of turning to risk taking behaviors as a way to numb themselves of their pain. Lisa then provided healthy ways to cope with different losses. Also students were advised to join a service organization in their school to help make a difference in the lives of others and this will help them regain a sense of meaning and purpose, which is an important part of one's healing process.

While "Lean on Me" by Bill Withers played in the background, Lisa gave students a couple of minutes to write anonymously on index cards, some of the tough stuff that they have experienced and what has helped them through it. At this point Lisa read index cards she had received from other schools. The students were very interested to know that they are not the only ones' dealing with many of the same issues. Interesting that teens in Minnesota are coping with many of the same challenges as teens in Louisiana.

As the class hour ends they are asked to drop their index card into bag at door of classroom. The students were handed a card to keep with them that said on one side: You are Special! You are Smart! You are important! The other side of the card the phone number for Lifeline (a crisis center hotline). Playing in the background was the upbeat music, Kris Allen's "Live Like We're Dying" to energize the students for their next class. Many of the students thanked Lisa for doing what she does and thanked Pam Lavender, Director of Grief and Community Outreach from Kilpatrick Funeral Homes for bringing Lisa to their school.

About a week after the visit school counselors called about the presentation and were positive of reactions from the students. One student told her counselor, "Now I know I am not the only one going through tough stuff." She also stated she was being nicer to her peers because she does not know what they are dealing with. What great news for our staff at Kilpatrick's to hear! We are so often on the other side helping the families struggle through their loss but from these seminars our staff could see Love, Hope, and Laughter.

Lisa Athan also presented two seminars on "Raising Resilient Children in Difficult Times":

- December 5, 2011 for pastors and youth directors at 6:00 PM at the Pentecostals of the Twin Cities.
- December 6, 2011 for the general public at 6:00 PM at Christ Church.

As parents, grandparents, and members of our community, the Kilpatrick family and staff strive to act on behalf of the community to provide the highest level of excellence, education, information, advocacy, empathy, dignity, and respect not only to the families that we serve but to the community as a whole.

Matthew 5:16 to "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, who is in heaven."