

On Saturday, December 5, 2009 we had our first open house.

Cridersville is a small town of about 1800 residence. We knew this had to be extraordinary and that we needed to come up with some creative and unique ideas to get folks into the funeral home. Many people feel a funeral home is a place of sadness, filled with unhappy memories. It was our job to make this a stand out event, comfortable, upbeat, happy, and inviting for adults, children, and pets.

The first step was promoting our open house. A local sign company made a dozen 2' x 3' plastic coated signs. These signs will be used with future open houses. They were positioned in different areas around town. Flyers were printed and posted at businesses in the surrounding communities and positioned inside our front office. Invitations were sent out to some of the families we had served, friends, and business associates. We wanted to make sure the residences at the local retirement center along with several nursing homes had the opportunity to attend. We offered our services picking them up and returning them at their convenience or schedule. Several people used our services and appreciated that we offered this.

Being a funeral home we only had the traditional Christmas decorations. We contacted the area florist to participate in decorating the funeral home. Each took an area, brought in decorations (trees, windows, crates, sleighs, snowmen, and much more), and staff to decorate. All of this was volunteered and donated. After the event they returned and tore down their displays and the one left theirs up for the season. We made sure the funeral home smelled good with the aroma of cinnamon and played upbeat Christmas music that was played through the music system indoors and outdoors.

We contacted the local church to have the children's choir entertain. It was good timing, they were working on their Christmas program. The director thought this would be ideal and used this for dress rehearsal. Having the children's choir brought in their parents, grandparents, and other family members that probably would not have attended the open house. We were amazed by the number of people who turned out for the children's choir. Their following was extraordinary.

Along with the great decorations from the florist we had two of our own Christmas trees, a refreshment table and an area to register for a chance to win one of three door prizes. One tree was a seven and half foot pine tree. It was filled with "Merry Christmas from Heaven" book marks. We punched

a hole in the corner of each, tied a green or red ribbon through it, and hung it on the tree. We invited people to take one and hang it at home in memory of a lost loved one. Many people, after reading the poem, wanted to get more for friends and family. People were contacting us after the event for the bookmarks. This had a great impact! The second tree was a six foot felt tree attached to our convention display. We had a variety of bright colored post-it note pads lying on a table beside the tree along with markers to write with. People wrote a name or a remembrance to a lost loved one and filled the tree. On our refreshment table we offered coffee, tea, and punch. We also served cookies, nuts, mints, and even some warm snacks. There were three categories for the door prizes. Each gift bag was filled with items, one for a child, and another for an adult, and the third for a pet. The children's bag contained pencil, eraser, candy, and some other small treats; while the adult bag held special tea, chocolate, mints along with some other items, and special treats for the four legged friends.

Our mini classes consisted of kid's knot tying, decorating ornaments, making Christmas cards, and making homemade laundry soap. The knot tying was instructed by a Navy Veteran. Children were given hands on lessons on tying a variety of knots. Even though it was geared for children, the adults wanted in on the action. The arts and crafts table had lots of items

for kids to make ornaments, Christmas cards, and even some jewelry to take home. Our logo is a lighthouse and we had a local man make miniature lighthouse wood cutouts for the children to decorate. They had fun creating items with glitter, bells, stickers, and scrapbook materials. Their faces lit up with the finished products. For the adults we had a laundry soap making demonstration. A table was set up showing what was needed to make the soap along with the cost savings. Everyone was given a sample bag, enough for four washings along with two different recipes for the laundry soap.

Our pet pictures with Santa were a huge success and much better than anticipated. Valery's husband Gary volunteered to be Santa. We set up in the garage to allow the pets and owners to come in if we had inclement weather. We had artificial grass laid down, a Christmas tree, a Christmas background, and of course Santa Clause. People brought their pets in; we put a Santa hat on the pet, and had the pet sit on Santa's lap or beside Santa. We took a minimum of three pictures of each. Each pet was given a Christmas gift from Santa. The gifts were doggy bags with doggie treats or kitty cat bags with kitty treats. All pets, good or bad received a gift. The pet owners were given a least two pictures in a card from Santa. People wanted to pay for this, but no money was accepted. This was a big hit.

Our Christmas open house brought a smile to everyone's face that attended and participated. In opening up to the public, the residences were able to visit the funeral home in a different way. The community saw it was not a scary place. We displayed a variety of good quality programs, with positive interaction between our staff and the public, increasing our public image, and making new friends. In supporting our staff's interaction with the visitors, this gave them a larger sense of responsibility with heightened awareness about giving to the community. The staff was excited about the program and enjoyed the positive interactions. They demonstrated true team spirit and enthusiasm with this project and have already started planning for the next one. It was a win-win for everyone with connections turning into friendships. The gratitude expressed made everything that much more rewarding. This has been one of the more satisfying, fun, and productive projects we have done. The open house provided a relaxed, comforting, joyous experience for everyone. We have reaped unexpected rewards from the exposure. This has adjusted some of the public's misperceptions about a funeral home strengthening our connection with the community. With today's economy this totally free event allowed families to experience holiday cheer with neighbors and new friends, be entertained, learn new skills, and everyone received something, even the pets.