Spencer Family Funeral Home

Athens, MI 2010

Pursuit of Excellence

At Spencer Family Funeral Home, we have made it our goal to accommodate each of our unique patrons to the fullest and provide services for them that go above and beyond convention, touching them in a personal way.

We were met with a unique challenge this year when one of our Native American Tribal leaders passed away and we were asked to provide the funeral arrangements.

Laura Spurr was the chairwoman of the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of Potawatomi Indians. She grew up in the area, and like many in our small community, moved away as a young lady to matriculate in college. She came back to the community to serve her tribe as a council member and the chairperson. Laura was an erudite woman with teeming energy and a charisma that could light up a room. Over the years, she had embraced the community, educating them on the importance of the Tribe. She was a driving force in bringing a Tribal-owned casino to the region, a tedious process that took 10 years to gain approval and construction. Laura Spurr was a leader you could bet on.

Mrs. Spurr passed away February 19, 2010 at the age of 64 after suffering a heart attack while attending a conference in California, and we were asked to do her funeral. Clearly, this presented acute preparatory and timing challenges. We worked closely with Mrs. Spurr's husband and two sons on making arrangements to transport her body back to the area for preparations and services. Her husband and sons live over two hours away but they desired to hold the services in this area because of her active tribal life here.

Spencer Family Funeral Home has held numerous funerals over the years for tribal members. We have also made arrangements for prominent members of our community. We knew, however, that we would need to move the funeral to a larger venue for Mrs. Spurr to accommodate the sizeable amount of mourners that were expected to attend. The service

would be a blend of Native American and Christian, drawing folks from both groups, many from long distances. March weather in Michigan is always unpredictable and that played into the plans as well.

After visiting with the family in Grosse Point, MI area, some 130 miles from Athens, it was determined that there would be a visitation and viewing.

Everyone agreed that the best approach would be to move the funeral service to the local high school gymnasium. We took proper care in transforming the gym into a dignified setting for the service. A stage was set up for the speakers, and tables and chairs were brought in to receive the multitudes of people. We made plans to deliver the 400 plus flower arrangements from our funeral home to the school the morning of the service and display them there in a way that would aptly commemorate and honor the life of Laura Spurr. To ensure the service started on time and to assist with the large number of attendees, Spencer Family Funeral Home provided extra staff.

We were reminded of Laura Spurr's unique and powerful life when we received word from a local congressman, as well as other public officials, who offered to speak at the service. In addition, the local newspaper planned on sending a reporter to cover the important event. Eight people were scheduled to speak at the service, including a former chairperson from another tribe, family members, a tribal council member, a tribal youth member, the vice president of a national gaming company and the local congressman.

With the high number of speakers, a slide show and music, we made recommendations on the most appropriate way to honor Mrs. Spurr while allowing it to flow smoothly, with as little time delay as possible. We worked with the family and the pipe carrier on how best that would happen. We suggested that her body be brought to the school prior to the service so mourners could stop by her casket and pay last respects. We also had the casket set up front next to the speaker's stage and arranged the flowers and plants around her in a dignified manner. Flags representing the United States, the State of Michigan and the Tribe were also displayed near the casket. We also worked with the pallbearers on the timing and route to escort the casket out of the gymnasium at the end of the ceremony.

The funeral service was held on February 27th at the school on a treacherous and snowy day. With a backdrop filled with flowers and eagle feathers, approximately 650 people paid tribute to Mrs. Spurr. Our staff was prepared to direct mourners to sign the guest book, hand out programs and answer any questions. As we had expected, we were ready to handle the last minute rush of people so the service could begin on time.

Combining the two cultures, the service included both tribal and Christian music. A Native American hand drum performed a couple of traditional honor songs and a Broadway singer who was home visiting her family and who worked with the tribe, volunteered to sing. She wonderfully performed "The Lord's Prayer" and "Morning Has Broken".

This was our first funeral service with a Native American pipe ceremony. Family members and invited friends solemnly prayed over the tobacco which was placed in the ritualistic receptacle and then smoked as each person allowed the plumes of smoke to wash over them. The pipe carrier described this as a way to celebrate Mrs. Spurr's life. He also presented the family with a tribal flag.

Spencer's drove Mrs. Spurr's body back to the funeral home to await final decision from family on burial plans. In the meantime, we hurried to deliver the 400 plus flower arrangements to the Tribal Community Center for a luncheon. There were so many flowers that they dominated the Community Center in a vast array of floral beauty.

Later, the family made the decision to bury Mrs. Spurr's body at a family plot in East Alstead, New Hampshire. Her body was driven in our hearse, accompanied by one of her sons, from Athens to New Hampshire.

This concluded one of the more unique funeral arrangements we have ever been involved in at Spencer's Family Funeral Home. Having worked with the family shortly after the time of Mrs. Spurr's passing on February 20th in southern California to preparations and coordination of her memorial service in Athens, Michigan, to laying her to rest in Alstead, New Hampshire. Though difficult and time consuming, it was an event we were honored and fulfilled to be a part of.