Spencer Family Funeral Home Athens MI 2011 Pursuit of Excellence

Spencer Family Funeral Home's Candle Memorial, an annual tribute to deceased members of the Athens (MI) High School class that is celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its graduation that year, was captured on video for the first time in 2010.

As a result, the poignant, yet occasionally lighthearted, remembrance of the 12 members of the 69-member Athens High School Class of 1960 who died during the half-century that followed their graduation will not be forgotten with the passage of time.

In 2010, the fifth year that the Spencer Family Funeral Home in the rural town of Athens, Michigan, has hosted its Candle Memorial as part of the town's summer homecoming celebration, a caterer also became part of the tradition, bringing in hors d'oeuvres for those in attendance.

Spouses and children of the class members who had passed on took part in the ceremony, as has become tradition, and were not only able to share memories of their loved ones, but also to listen to how much they meant to others in their class.

Class members have come to look forward to the memorial service that provides a buffer between the festive homecoming parade in the morning and formal dinner in the evening, and gives them the chance to recall both heartwarming and hilarious tales.

Meanwhile, parked outside the funeral home during each year's service is a classic car — or sometimes two — from the year the class graduated, appropriate since many of the stories inside have to do with the automobiles that class members drove as teenagers.

One by one last July 25, relatives and classmates who were gathered at the funeral home paid homage to the deceased members of the Class of 1960, then lit a candle, with a picture of them on it, in their memory.

"Homer was loved by all of us. He was just full of life," recalled one participant.

"He was such a genuine person," a woman related about Bill, another deceased classmate. "He loved his country, he loved his family and I loved him as though he were my brother."

Elsie, who was recently deceased, was a wonderful wife for 46 years and the dedicated mother of five children, her husband shared.

Harold was a do-gooder, said a classmate who was the recipient of one of his good deeds when her car broke down and he pulled up behind her. "He took us clear to Coldwater where we needed to go," she said. "He was a neat guy."

"If there was a party, Les was there, and he made the party," one person said of a departed classmate.

"I never knew anybody who skipped as much school and (still) graduated," he added.

"He was crazy, but we loved him," said another.

Then there was Gene, who was remembered as "the glue that held the rest of us together."

Spencer Family Funeral Home is proud to now be the glue that brings classmates together 50 years after they graduated from Athens High School.

The tradition began five years ago when a member of the Class of 1956, who lived in the Detroit area, died just a few months before the 50-year anniversary of his graduation.

During preparations for his funeral, we learned that he had been looking forward to returning to Athens for his class reunion and introducing his wife to his former classmates. Not knowing anyone from the class, his wife had decided not to attend.

That's when we got the idea to hold a special service, not only for him but also for others from that class who were deceased, and inviting family members to take part in the celebration of their loved ones' lives.

Through the years, the candle-lighting service has included special music, several times by a bell-ringer and once by a woman who sang a personalized song for each member of the class who had died.

But the most important sound during each Candle Memorial is of voices that tell stories and keep memories alive despite the passage of time.