

## **Empresa Vila - Crematório e Centro Funerário São José, Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil**

### **Innovation and Welcome in Farewell: Vila Pet's Transforming Proposal**

The relationship between human beings and pets has transcended mere companionship, evolving into a bond of deep affection and family belonging. Recognizing this transformation and the inherent pain in the loss of a pet, Empresa Vila, with its vast experience in funeral services, conceived Vila Pet. This brand, exclusively dedicated to the pet universe, represents not only an expansion of services but a milestone of pioneering spirit and sensitivity in serving bereaved families. Through strategic rebranding, the inauguration of a new unit located in a prime neighborhood of Natal/RN, and a focus on comprehensive assistance, Vila Pet redefines the concept of animal farewell, culminating in innovative initiatives such as Vila Pet Talks.

The central idea of Vila Pet arises from the realization that the love devoted to pets is immense, and consequently, the pain of their loss is equally significant. Vila Pet's purpose is clear: "We work to ensure dignity and respect for pets, support and solutions for guardians at the time of loss." We live in a society that sometimes underestimates the grief for an animal. Vila Pet emerges to fill this gap, offering a space for validation and welcome, where farewell can be experienced with the respect and solemnity that the bond deserves. The rebranding to "Vila Pet - Funeral Assistance" reflects this comprehensiveness, communicating that its services go beyond cremation, encompassing all necessary support. The brand's positioning, "Só amor" (Only love), synthesizes the driving force behind every action: the love that justifies all efforts for a dignified farewell.

Vila Pet is structured on values such as respect, empathy, welcome, integrity, and excellence. Its differentiators include a high-standard physical and service structure, the agility inherited from the credibility of the Vila brand, and a genuine commitment to promoting the animal cause. The company offers a complete portfolio of solutions: removal and transport of the body, personalized wake ceremonies, individual cremation with ash delivery, and, crucially, psychological support for guardians. The vision of "Being the first choice in pet funeral assistance" drives the continuous search for innovation, such as the future inclusion of funeral plans and a pet cemetery.

Within this ecosystem of care arises Vila Pet Talks, an innovative and affectionate initiative. This program consists of meetings, inspired by lectures and discussion circles, designed to open space for meaningful dialogues about the pet universe. The central pillar of Vila Pet Talks is pet grief, offering a safe and empathetic environment for guardians to share their experiences and find comfort. Psychologists, grief therapists, and veterinarians are invited to collaborate, enriching the discussions with technical knowledge and sensitivity.

However, Vila Pet Talks expands its scope beyond loss, celebrating animal life and well-being. Workshops on homemade pet treats have already been held, promoting healthy eating and strengthening the bond; chats with veterinarians on preventive care and quality of life (3.- Attachment); and sessions with trainers on behavior and respectful coexistence (4.- Attachment). The initiative materializes Vila Pet's commitment to the animal cause, going beyond discourse and promoting concrete actions.

For Vila Pet, the implementation of comprehensive funeral assistance and the creation of Vila Pet Talks bring numerous benefits. Firstly, they reinforce the brand's positioning as a pioneer and reference in empathy and professionalism in the pet segment. This strengthens the credibility inherited from Empresa Vila and attracts a public seeking a differentiated and humanized service. The genuine promotion of the animal cause generates a positive connection with the community and aligns the company with its values of respect and welcome.

For employees, working in an environment that values animal dignity and offers emotional support to guardians is deeply gratifying. Vila Pet Talks, in particular, allows the team to engage in positive community activities, expanding its impact and reinforcing the company's purpose. This connection with Vila Pet's mission and values contributes to greater engagement, professional satisfaction, and a feeling of significant contribution to society.

The benefits for bereaved families are immeasurable. Vila Pet offers welcome and empathy, ensuring dignity and respect for the pet and providing resolution and support to guardians in the most difficult moments. Psychological support and farewell ceremonies allow grief to be processed in a healthy and respectful manner.

Vila Pet Talks, specifically, offers a broad community benefit. By giving visibility to pet grief, it combats the taboo and validates the feelings of guardians, creating a mutual support network. The informative sessions on animal care, health, and behavior empower guardians to offer a better quality of life to their companions, strengthening the bond and preventing problems. The initiative promotes a culture of respect and responsibility towards animals, benefiting the entire community and fostering a more conscious and loving relationship between humans and pets.

Vila Pet Talks is a clear example of collaboration with the professional community. For the development and implementation of the meetings, Vila Pet actively involves several specialists:

**Psychologists and Grief Therapists:** Play a crucial role in leading discussion circles about pet grief, offering tools for coping with pain and validating the emotions of guardians. They help structure the content of meetings focused on the emotional aspect.

**Veterinarians:** Contribute their technical knowledge in lectures on health, disease prevention, specific care (such as summer care), and animal quality of life, enriching the meetings with practical and relevant information.

**Professional Trainers:** Participate by sharing guidance on behavior, education, and harmonious coexistence, helping guardians better understand their pets and build more positive relationships. These professionals are not just speakers but partners in the co-creation of a space that combines qualified information and sensitive welcome, ensuring that Vila Pet Talks achieves its goals of supporting and educating the pet guardian community.

In conclusion, Vila Pet, with its comprehensive approach and the innovative Vila Pet Talks initiative, transcends the offering of a funeral service. It establishes itself as a safe haven of support, respect, and love, honoring the memory of pets and supporting those who loved them, while actively promoting animal welfare and the animal cause in the community. It is the materialization of the concept "Só amor," demonstrating that even in the moment of farewell, care and connection can generate transformation and comfort.

**J. García López, Mexico City, Mexico**

**J. GARCÍA LÓPEZ PROMOTES READING AND LITERATURE**  
**Inviting you to enjoy The Best Chapter of Your Life at FILCO**

- The company joined forces to promote reading at the 3rd Coyoacán International Book Fair.
  - Offering special activities to the community: a keynote address, an art workshop, and a dance competition.
  - Working with the 130 publishers participating in FILCO, it promoted reading as a tool for personal development and a role model for life.
- J. García López joined the commitment to promoting culture through reading and literature at the 3rd Coyoacán International Book Fair (FILCO). It launched a unique value proposition as a funeral services provider, alongside the 130 participating publishers.

In 2012, the company began its efforts by joining the Communications Council and the leer+ initiative, opening reading rooms for employees in its operational facilities. This included a donation of 500 books from its founders' libraries, in addition to 150 titles donated by the Mexico City Ministry of Culture's Reading Program. Since then, it has made a commitment to promoting this habit as a tool for personal development and a role model.

From that moment on, and for 12 years, J. García López has collaborated on projects to bring culture closer to society, as a link to a shared memory.

In 2024, this initiative will evolve to directly impact the community at the third edition of FILCO, held in the heart of Coyoacán from June 7 to 16. To this end, J. García López designed special free wellness activities for the general public, including senior citizens, who are often overlooked, so that everyone could enjoy the literary presentations.

With the theme "The Best Chapter of Your Life is Today," J. García López addressed the topics of longevity and the role of women through distinguished professionals who offered recommendations for reflecting on the stages of life, the legacy we desire, and the necessary steps for a dignified departure.

Valuable information was shared about the challenges at the end of the road, allowing participants to appreciate the benefits of adopting a culture of funeral planning, without the fear of leaving worries behind.

The Best Chapter of Your Life is Today, inviting you to enjoy new experiences:

- "The Stages of Life" Conference: June 9 at 4:00 PM  
Taught by psychologist María Guadalupe Urrutia Guillén.  
Covering: Cleaning Out the Emotional Pantry, How Do You Write This Chapter of Your Life?, What Ink Do You Choose to Write It With?, Today I Have Something to Say; among other topics.
- "Tribute to Them" Art Workshop: June 12, 3:00–5:00 PM  
Masterclass by Mexicráneos artist Yadira Martínez.  
Materials sponsored by the company.
- "Salsa and Danzón Dance Competition": June 16: Salsa Category from 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. / Danzón Category from 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.

"Concurso de Baile Salsa y Danzón": 16 de junio: Categoría Salsa de 11:00 a 12:00 hrs. / Categoría Danzón de 12:00 a 13:00 hrs.

Directed by Félix Rentería, dancer, teacher, and choreographer.

## **John M. Oakey & Son Funeral Home & Crematory, Salem, Virginia**

This year, John M. Oakey & Son Funeral Home has had the distinct privilege of partnering with Masterpiece Alliance to provide a fun-filled "Night at the Movies" for their organization. Masterpiece Alliance, a faith-based organization founded on Ephesians 2:10, is a community of friends of all ages and abilities who gather together to "laugh, live, love, serve and grow". Like Masterpiece Alliance, we collectively believe that "having a disability shouldn't lead to living in society's margins." Our firm became connected with Masterpiece Alliance because of one especially treasured member of our staff. Kaitlin Litz joined our staff in 2010 as part of a grant funded job readiness and coaching program for special needs adults. The program is no longer in existence; however, Kaitlin still faithfully maintains both her job at the funeral home and her job at our local high school. Kaitlin is very active in Masterpiece Alliance and asked if we could host a private showing of a documentary produced by Buzz4Good and which later aired on our local Blue Ridge P.B.S. Our funeral home chapel with its large screen and multimedia capabilities was the perfect place to welcome an invitation-only premier party! When our friends saw themselves on the big screen, they couldn't contain their excitement – nor could we. What is so often a place of solace and mourning was instead a room full of pure, contagious joy! Our staff couldn't wait to extend another invitation; this time, for a Night at the Movies to show one of Kaitlin's favorites, Alvin and the Chipmunks. Most of our full-time staff and their families as well as several of our part-time associates came to grill and serve hot dogs and chips, movie theatre candy and of course, popcorn popped in a fragrant, nostalgic popper. We were all in agreement that the best part of the night was the spontaneous dance party that erupted when the movie credits rolled.

Having a child or guardianship of an adult with physical or developmental disability can be an isolating and lonely journey. Masterpiece Alliance serves to provide not only respite for families caring for the vulnerable but also a sense of belonging and inclusion for those often overlooked. Our firm is grateful for our partnership with Masterpiece Alliance and looks forward to many more opportunities to serve and host their organization, perhaps maybe an even bigger dance party!

## **Johnston & Williams Funeral Homes, Ellensburg, Washington**

*Johnston & Williams Funeral Homes, Cle Elum, Washington*

At Johnston & Williams Funeral Home, we believe innovation in funeral service doesn't always require new technology, it can also mean finding meaningful, creative ways to connect a community through shared remembrance.

In December, when former President Jimmy Carter passed away, we saw an opportunity to do just that: to provide a space for quiet reflection, public gratitude, and symbolic tribute. The result was a multi-faceted commemorative gesture that blended simplicity with significance and resonated deeply with our community.

Much like Duane Hills and the team at Gawlers in D.C. we had been preparing for this moment for a number of years. In fact, when word first broke that President Carter was entering hospice in 2023, we had all the elements (banner, bookmarks, guestbook) ready to go with generic dates. Then we got into 2024 and re-ordered... and were about to place the same order for 2025.

We began by releasing a post on Facebook shortly after news broke that he had passed and, on Monday morning, we put up the formal memorial banner outside our Ellensburg location that we had printed earlier in the year. It featured a professional portrait of President Carter alongside dignified wording, designed to mirror the solemnity and respect of a presidential tribute. It invited passersby to stop by and sign a guestbook, which we would (and later did) forward to the Carter Center.

Inside our Ellensburg chapel lobby, we created a dedicated tribute area that remained in place for several days. A public guestbook was displayed prominently, allowing visitors to share notes of condolence, memories, and reflections. The entries ranged from heartfelt to historically insightful, and many community members expressed their gratitude for having a local space to honor a national figure.

Understanding that our service area spans across two distinct communities, we made the tribute mobile for a day, bringing the guest book and display setup to our Cle Elum office so residents on the Upper County side could also participate. This ensured accessibility and inclusivity, hallmarks of President Carter's own values.

The Ellensburg Daily Record also featured a front page story about what we were doing. (See in uploads).

To add warmth and personality to the tribute, we included two small but symbolic gestures that sparked conversation and connection.

First, we distributed commemorative bookmarks featuring President Carter's portrait, his life dates, and the quote "Tremendous progress can be made if we persevere through difficult challenges".

Second, in a lighthearted yet thoughtful tribute to his well-known background as a Georgia peanut farmer, we offered small packages of roasted peanuts to all visitors. It was a humble, nostalgic touch—something that brought smiles, sparked conversation, and humanized the moment. In combining reverence with warmth, we aimed to reflect the spirit of the man himself.

This wasn't a political statement. it was a community experience. By providing a respectful, locally-rooted opportunity for reflection on a national life, we bridged history with the present moment and allowed grief to find form in remembrance.

That, to us, is innovation: using the tools we already have and arranging them in a way that brings people together.

In an era where national loss can feel distant and intangible, we made it local. We made it personal. And in doing so, we honored not only President Carter, but the people he inspired.

## **Kemp Funeral Home & Cremation Services, Southfield, Michigan**

Our funeral home is located near an office building that houses several businesses, one of which is a family planning clinic. Ever since we located near them, there has been a group of church members who come to pray in front of the building. It never made a difference to us except when the funeral home was under construction and didn't want competitors to know that we were entering the market. The clinic was inconsequential. That is until we received a call from one of its patients.

What we thought (as many in conservative politics describe) was a place to end the life of a mistake, was instead broken hearts, broken dreams, near-death experiences and criminal assaults on pregnant families.

The call we received from the clinic's patient was to memorialize the life that should have been. And like what we do for all new situations or customs, religions or requests, we found a way to serve the family. After necessary permissions, we proceeded with a cremation and in many cases a baby urn or cremation jewelry.

After supreme court rulings limited or barred a woman's right to choose, we noticed an increase in these cases. We care for families from other clinics from the tri-county area. We also serve families from States that have banned this life saving health care for pregnant women. We have served families from North Carolina, Ohio and even Texas—not just neighboring states.

Our rapport with the families grew more compassionate over time and sometimes families felt the need to explain why they had "the procedure", an abortion. The diagnoses that rendered these in-utero children terminally ill or as a threat to the life of the mother ranged from genetic diseases to anomalies such as missing vital organs. Pregnancy complications, including placental abruption, bleeding from placenta previa, preeclampsia or eclampsia, and cardiac or renal conditions, may be so severe that abortion is the only measure to preserve a woman's health or save her life.

Witnessing the pain in these families made us want to reach out more. We felt after all of this hurt, we as mothers and fathers ourselves wanted to leave them with a big hug. But a literal hug in many instances would be inappropriate or feel awkward. And so one of our directors found a toy bear with a special message to give to our families to express our condolences.

We're not sure how we became so blessed to take care of these families who needed our help when other funeral homes refused. What we do know is that our mission to serve underserved families led us to find a way. Our further concern is for the millions of women and families who cannot travel for this life-saving medical procedure.

### **Benefit for the Funeral Home**

Without advertising, but by good deed, word of mouth and working with the administrators at the clinic, other clinics send their patients to us when they want to memorialize their child.

## **Kerrville Funeral Home, Kerrville, Texas**

*Kimble Funeral Home, Junction, Texas; Krestridge Funeral Home, Levelland, Texas*

Rural areas of Texas are just that – rural. Towns are spread out with miles between people residing there. Rural Texas towns thrive on the comradeships built between neighbors and bond together to help each other. These are the towns whose people gather together as friends on Friday nights to cheer for the local kids as they go up against another town's high school football team or grieve together when there is a loss in the community. Junction, Texas is no exception to this narrative.

With a population of 2,531, Junction has no malls, no high-rise apartments and no high-end restaurants. What Junction does have, though, is a heart to care and help others. And Kimble Funeral Home is a part of that.

When a town has only one funeral home, residents rely on that establishment. Kimble Funeral Home is where passersby look to see if a certain light at the funeral home is on, signifying that there has been a death. The residents of Junction know and trust the staff at Kimble Funeral Home. These people know that when their time comes and they or a loved one dies, KFH will be there to take care of them.

Just like Junction, Menard is another rural Texas town that fits this profile. People depend on those around them and support local businesses to keep the town alive. As in Junction, the older population rely on the knowledge that the local funeral directors would be the ones to care for them when the time comes.

This spring, however, the funeral home in Menard unexpectedly closed leaving residents to question who would care for their loved ones. Kimble Funeral Home stepped up to help fill this gap for those expecting to utilize a local business. Despite only being around 30 miles apart, KFH staff offered to make the trip to Menard to meet with families, rather than expecting them to come to the funeral home in Junction. Kimble Funeral Home took action and filled a need for citizens in this rural town.

Funerals were not all that Kimble Funeral Home has done to support and aid others in their rural Texas area. In early October, 2024, water levels in the Edwards Aquifer region, which encompasses much of south-central Texas including the areas surrounding Junction, dropped into the Stage III Critical Drought threshold. Although Junction had water, others to the southwest did not. The city of Rocksprings, Texas was one of these that had no drinking water. To assist with this need, KFH staff loaded cases of water and took them to the Rocksprings city hall to be handed out to anyone in need.

Like most people in rural Texas towns, Kimble Funeral Home staff are there to help. From stepping up to meet the needs of families when a funeral home closed to delivering water when a town needed it most, KFH continues to show a heart for the people.

## **Macz Funeral Homes, Centralia, Illinois**

*Macz Funeral Homes, Odin, Illinois; Macz Funeral Homes, Sandoval, Illinois; Macz Funeral Home, Patoka, Illinois*

### **Recognizing the Difference Makers: A Tribute to Teachers Pursuing Excellence**

Teachers are the unsung heroes who shape the future, one student at a time. They are the ones who guide small hands through the doors of their very first school day and who stand as steady support for teens navigating the storms of anxiety and growing up. They carry their work—and their students—in their hearts well beyond the classroom walls. They recognize when a child is struggling with a test, and they care deeply. They buy extra supplies without being asked, simply because they know a child needs them.

At Macz Funeral Homes, we believe that those who quietly and consistently make a difference deserve recognition. That's why, early in the year, we launched a campaign to honor the teachers who go above and beyond—often without a single thank you. These are the difference makers in our communities, and we wanted to shine a light on their dedication.

We reached out to schools across the area with a simple application process. Anyone could submit a nomination—students, fellow educators, administrators, parents, grandparents, or colleagues. The response was heartwarming. We received over eighty nominations, each one telling a unique and powerful story of a teacher making an impact.

As the school year came to a close, Traci and George Macz visited each selected teacher to present a heartfelt tribute. Each recipient received a gift card to Amazon to use in their classroom, a small commemorative plaque recognizing them as a "Difference Maker," and, most importantly, a moment of appreciation shared with those who had nominated them.

Some schools chose to make the celebration public with surprise assemblies, while others opted for more intimate moments among colleagues. In every case, the recognition was heartfelt and meaningful. Every teacher was surprised, humbled, and deeply moved.

At Macz Funeral Homes, we are honored to support the educators who give so much of themselves. We hope this tribute served as a reminder that their efforts matter—that they are seen, appreciated, and celebrated for the tremendous role they play in shaping our future.

George Macz presented his first Teacher Pursuit of Excellence Award at Sandoval Grade School. Mr. McDaniels was nominated for welcoming each child with personalized handshakes or high fives, and is fostering meaningful relationships and driving significant improvements in K-3 special education, ELA standards, and skills.

It was a privilege to honor Mr. McDaniels during the school assembly, recognizing his tireless dedication to empowering his students. His work is a shining example of pursuing excellence in the classroom!

Stop #2 Patoka High School

Nominated by Olivia Murray

Nominee- Christine Meng school guidance counselor

Ms. Meng is the heart of the school. Olivia shared that her significant traits are kindness, selflessness, and an unwavering commitment to student success. She is a true advocate for each student individually, always providing support and keeping the best interest in mind. When a student is dealing with personal struggles, needing help with homework or simply lacking confidence, Ms. Meng is there to offer a listening ear, guidance, and encouragement.

George Macz SURPRISED Ashley Allgood, middle school science teacher, for the Teachers Pursuing Excellence Campaign at Central City School District. Mrs. Allgood was greeted with a middle school student assembly and her family being present for this special recognition ceremony. Colleague Corrie Tellefsen shared a heartfelt essay with Team Macz that Mrs. Allgood's mantra is "Go Be Great!" She lives



this mantra to its fullest in all she does in and out of the classroom. Mrs. Allgood has been a mentor and supporter for student teaching and set the bar high for an educator. Mrs. Allgood raises the bar high for educators and making the field of education a better place with her mentorship, leadership and support to the next generation of teachers!

George Macz delivered an amazing speech for a wonderful end of the year school assembly held to wrap up the school year, to not one, but three deserving Teachers who are Pursuing Excellence for the Macz Teachers Pursuing Excellence Campaign at Odin Public School District #722.  
Nominee: Deb Ellis, Denise Wolf, and Sean Cochran

George opened his speech with the Charles Schultz philosophy.

1. Name the five wealthiest people in the world.
2. Name the last five winners of the Miss America Pageant.
3. Name the last ten recipients of the Nobel Prize.
4. Name the last decade worth of world series winners.
5. Name the last five winners of the Heisman Trophy.

Then he moved on to another quiz, for those present at the assembly.

1. List five teachers who have helped you.
2. Name three friends who have helped you in a difficult time in your life.
3. Name five people who have taught you something important.
4. Think of three people who have made you feel special.
5. List five people who you enjoy spending time with.

The point he shared is: The people who make a difference in your life are not the ones in the headlines, or have the most awards or money, they are the ones who care and make differences in your life!

Team Macz wrapped up their Teachers Pursuing Excellence Campaign at Centralia High School.  
Nominee: Brittany Huff

Mrs. Huff was called to the CHS office with Dr. Reid Shipley and Kyndal Pennington surprising her with their presence and honor for all that she does for CHS.

Thank you to Kyndal Pennington for sharing a beautiful essay on how Mrs. Huff had made an impact on her freshman year; not only academically, but also personally. She shared that Mrs. Huff has amazing teaching skills when it comes to math, but Mrs. Huff is deserving of this recognition because of the impact she had on her personally. Kyndal shared that Mrs. Huff made her feel like she was enough, and was one of the most kind, compassionate and caring teachers she has ever had.

Mrs. Huff is the definition of a difference maker. Someone who can make a big difference in the world with just a few words or actions. An enthusiastic person who is dedicated to improving the lives of others and has the power to inspire and rally others to bring about positive change.

Speaking at each of these schools offered a meaningful opportunity to engage with our community and shine a light on the values upheld by the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) and its Pursuit of Excellence program. Traci and George Macz proudly represented Macz Funeral Homes, using this platform to inspire students and staff alike about the importance of striving for excellence in every aspect of life and work.

The NFDA's Pursuit of Excellence program is not just a title—it is a national recognition of funeral homes that go above and beyond in service, professionalism, and community outreach. Traci and George emphasized how this recognition aligns with the mission of Macz Funeral Homes: to always do their best, to set the bar high, and to maintain standards that honor the families they serve.

By sharing real-world experiences and lessons learned in the funeral profession, the Macz team helped students understand that success is rooted in integrity, attention to detail, compassion, and continual improvement. These core values are not only essential in funeral service but in any career path.

The Pursuit of Excellence has become a guidepost for Macz Funeral Homes. It holds them accountable to national standards while motivating the team to consistently exceed expectations. From updating facilities to investing in staff education and community outreach, every aspect of the program encourages excellence—not just in business, but in heart and service.

Ultimately, speaking at these schools allowed Traci and George to plant seeds of inspiration. They encouraged the next generation to pursue excellence in their own lives—whether in school, in relationships, or in future careers. Their message was clear: greatness is not achieved by chance, but by choice. It begins with setting high standards and doing the work every day to meet and surpass them. Through NFDA and the Pursuit of Excellence, Macz Funeral Homes continues to lead by example, proving that excellence is not a destination but a lifelong pursuit.

## **Mitchell Family Funeral Home, Marshalltown, Iowa**

The year 2025 is a special year for us at Mitchell Family Funeral Home. It is this year that signifies our 20th year of serving Marshalltown and the surrounding areas. A brief history of our funeral home is that the ground for our funeral home was broken in September of 2004. The dream to have another funeral home serving the Marshalltown community and was set forth by Marty and Sue Mitchell. The funeral home officially was opened in March of 2005 for our first families. With this being such a significant year, we decided that this would be a great opportunity to be able to give back to our community as well as those surrounding us that trust us in caring for their loved ones.

What we have done this year is we have given \$20,000 (\$20,000 for 20 years) to 100 various non-profit organizations that are within the many communities we are honored to be called upon to serve their families and care for their loved ones. Within those 100 various organizations, we had donations of \$200 to 48 cemeteries, 6 Veterans organizations, 11 local libraries, 21 various fire departments, and 14 other non-profit organizations.

Now when we look at these numbers and see that almost half of these are cemeteries, the ones that we have sent the donations to are going to be those that are the small cemeteries that have little to no regular income that come in and are typically cared for by a small board or the counties but all are ones that we as a funeral home have taken to for burial at least once if not more in our 20 year history. When selecting for Veterans organizations we had selected those who we use for local honor guards that have not only served themselves but serve for their fallen brothers in this final time and typically work on a donation basis. With the libraries, we have selected a list of libraries in smaller communities that we serve since they typically are non-profits and rely on donations from others. They are very important to have in every community. For Fire/EMT we work with a lot of volunteer organizations outside of our community of Marshalltown. It is these brave men and women who are always there when we need them and are always willing to go an extra mile as well as serve whenever needed to do so. Lastly, in our miscellaneous organizations, we have included community centers, local programs within Marshalltown, and various food pantries.

**Oliverie Funeral Home, Manchester, New Jersey**  
*Oliverie Funeral Home, Jackson, New Jersey*

### **Honoring Our Nation's Symbol: A Community Flag Retirement Initiative**

At Oliverie Funeral Home, we have always believed in the power of service, not only to the families we care for but to the community we call home. This past year, we launched a new initiative aimed at honoring the service and sacrifice of our veterans while also addressing a surprisingly overlooked need: providing a respectful, accessible option for the proper retirement of worn and tattered American flags.

The idea was born out of several conversations with local veterans and families who shared a common concern: they had old or damaged flags but did not know where or how to dispose of them properly. According to the U.S. Flag Code, flags that are no longer fit for display should be "destroyed in a dignified way, preferably by burning" (U.S. Flag Code, Title 4, Chapter 1, Section 8k). Unfortunately, many community members, especially the elderly or those without access to local veterans' posts, found this difficult to do. Recognizing this gap, we saw an opportunity to serve our community in a new, meaningful way.

To bring the project to life, we partnered with a local veteran and skilled woodworker, who handcrafted two beautiful, weather-resistant wooden boxes designed specifically for the purpose of collecting retired American flags. These "flag retirement boxes" were installed in front of both of our funeral home locations, making them easily accessible year-round.

The benefits of this program have been far-reaching. For our funeral home staff, the initiative has become a source of pride, another way we demonstrate our core values of respect, service, and community leadership. It has also created meaningful conversations with families, many of whom express gratitude for having a designated place to retire the flags of loved ones who served.

For the community, the boxes provide a tangible symbol of patriotism and respect. Veterans and non-veterans alike have used them, often leaving notes or stories behind. We've received heartfelt messages from residents who felt relief in knowing their flags would be treated with the dignity they deserved.

Our funeral home maintains the boxes, and we work in partnership with our local American Legion post to ensure that the collected flags are ceremoniously and properly retired during their scheduled flag-burning events. This collaboration has deepened our relationship with local veteran organizations and reinforced our shared mission of honoring service.

Though the program is ongoing, we plan to host an annual Flag Retirement Ceremony at our facility, inviting community members to witness and participate in this honorable act.

At its core, this initiative is about more than just a box, it's about continuing to serve, to listen, and to honor those who have given so much to our country. We are proud to offer this meaningful program and believe it embodies the spirit of innovation, community partnership, and reverence for tradition.

**Patrick T. Lanigan Funeral Home & Crematory Inc., East Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**

*Patrick T. Lanigan Funeral Home & Crematory Inc., Turtle Creek, Pennsylvania*

**Springtime is Volunteer- time for Patrick T. Lanigan Funeral Home and Crematory, Inc.**

When springtime arrives in our corner of Allegheny County, just outside Pittsburgh, PA, we view it as a harbinger of another 'time', which we have termed 'Volunteertime'. Spring is the time of rebirth and remembrance, fresh air, flowering gardens, and the cleansing of winter's trash and harshness. At Patrick T. Lanigan Funeral Home and Crematory, Inc., springtime gives us the motivation to give back to our communities in a visible, tangible way. We roll up our sleeves, don our jeans, sweatshirts and T-shirts, and get to work volunteering to make our communities a better place. There are 6 activities that have comprised our 'Volunteertime' this spring.

1. Turtle Creek, PA Clean-Up Day.
2. Placing of flags on veterans' graves at Braddock Catholic Cemetery for Memorial Day.
3. Planting of the Triboro Garden on the border of East Pittsburgh and Turtle Creek, PA.
4. Participating in 3 Memorial Day services.
5. Fruit Tree planting at The Homeplate Orchard in Turtle Creek.
6. Weeding and sprucing of the Jack McGinty Day Lilly Pathway on Linden Avenue in East Pittsburgh.

Saturday, April 26 was Clean-Up Day in Turtle Creek, PA, (Home of the 1949 Heisman Trophy winner, Leon Hart of Notre Dame). Holly Slobodnik, a resident intern with our firm, Paul Borgony, a long-time Funeral Director and Pat Lanigan volunteered to help with Clean Up Day. They roamed the 'numbered streets' portion of Turtle Creek and gathered all sorts of discarded plastics, bottles, and other trash. They filled multiple garbage bags that were removed by the Turtle Creek Fire Department and Mayor Adam Forgie.

Friday, May 23 was the day that our staff partnered and volunteered with the Amvets Post #60 to place flags on the graves of veterans at Braddock Catholic Cemetery in Braddock Hills. Hundreds of flags were placed in time for Memorial Day and the upcoming service to be held there. Pat, Paul, Holly again volunteered along with some of our part-time staff, Georgia Andelmo, Zac D'Allesandro (who is enrolled in the September class at Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science), Noah Gordon, and Joe Strednack, F.D.

Friday, May 23 was also the first of two consecutive days in the annual planting of the Triboro Highway Flower Garden, located just 2 blocks from our East Pittsburgh funeral home. The garden is supplied with flowers, mulch and tilling by the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy. We then do the actual planting of hundreds of flowers, and mulching of the garden area and we keep it weeded throughout the year. In late fall we uproot the plants and have them discarded by the East Pittsburgh Street Department who continually mow the grass areas in the garden. Holly, Paul, Zac, A.J. Davis, Noah, Pat and Joe participated at the Triboro Flower Garden.

Monday, May 23 was Memorial Day this year. We actively participated in 3 Memorial Day services in our area. Pat Lanigan appeared in uniform acting as Bill Lacey who was Killed-In-Action during the Vietnam War. Pat, speaking as Bill Lacey, thanked everyone for attending that particular service as he represents his comrades from all wars who were killed. Due to time constraints Pat, as Bill, was only able to appear at 2 services, Forest Hills Borough and Braddock Catholic Cemetery. Paul and Joe were at the Church Hill Cemetery service and the Braddock Catholic Cemetery service and distributed water, grave flags and provided folding chairs.

On Saturday, May 31, Noah, Pat and Holly volunteered in the planting of The Homeplate Orchard in Turtle Creek. The site is a former Little League ballfield that 10 years ago was transformed into a volunteer vegetable garden. Due to the constant upkeep and gardening skills and energy needed, it was decided to transform it once again, this time into an orchard which requires less man-hours and labor. The trees and professional expertise were provided by a non-profit, Tree Pittsburgh. The volunteers dug holes, planted the trees and mulched as needed.

On Saturday, June 14, the Lanigan Funeral Home volunteers were at it again. Stephanie Doriguzzi, Pat, Noah, Holly, Zac, A.J. and Layla Rocco weeded and cleaned the litter from the Jack McGinty Day Lily Pathway on Linden Avenue in East Pittsburgh. Jack was a WW II veteran who was honorably discharged with a disability. He was unable to secure any employment throughout his life and lived with his mother. His main activity was gardening and he was known for his large and delicious tomatoes. Jack was a volunteer at all events in town and attended all public meetings. He also transplanted hundreds of wild growing Day Lilies from roadsides and neighboring highways to an unkempt strip of land on Linden Avenue. It took years for Jack to uproot enough of those plants to fully beautify the pathway on Linden Avenue. Those blossoms flourish every May and June in remembrance of Jack and we are pleased and proud to keep his Pathway attractive and delightful.

## **Pollock-Randall Funeral Home, Port Huron, Michigan**

*Karrer-Simpson Funeral Home, Port Huron, Michigan; Marysville Funeral Home, Marysville, Michigan*

The Pollock-Randall, Karrer-Simpson, and Marysville Funeral Homes family have always been proud of our partnership with the state's organ procurement organization, Gift of Life Michigan. Recently, we have had the opportunity to expand this relationship which has opened up new opportunities for the families we serve.

In August of 2024, we received an invitation from the Funeral Home Liaison, Sharon Gee-Mascarello regarding the Gift of Life and Michigan Funeral Directors Association donation work group. One of our directors, Aiyanna Rivera, joined this group and continues to meet, several times each year to discuss organ and tissue donations. This time fosters a partnership between Michigan funeral directors and the Gift of Life organization in order to better support the families who choose to give the greatest gift, organ and tissue donation.

Shortly after this, Sharon approached Ann and John Kendrick about becoming a "Donation Champion Funeral Home". This program was designed to distinguish funeral homes, educate funeral professionals, create community advocates for donation, and most importantly honor donors and their families. On October 3, 2024, Sharon delivered a presentation on organ and tissue procurement and shared various ways we could celebrate Donor Heroes. After this educational session, our three funeral homes—Pollock-Randall, Karrer-Simpson, and Marysville—formally joined the program and were among the first 50 Donation Champion Funeral Homes in the state.

That very afternoon, we had a visitation for a donor hero and were able to immediately apply the knowledge that had been provided to us. We had a pinning ceremony for the Donor Hero. Each of the family members received a Donate Life pin or bracelet. We prominently displayed the Donate Life flag at the front of the chapel, and each of our staff wore "Donation Champion" pins. On our digital sign, a large monitor outside each building that digitally displays service information and community events, we honored the deceased by displaying that they were a Donor Hero. This particular family, who had lost their loved one far too soon, was so proud that they were a donor, and we were able to advocate for them each step of the way. The following day, we brought the flag to the church as well as a Gift of Life medallion, but kept it simple unsure of what the family would want. We were very pleased to see that each family member arrived with their pins and bracelets proudly displayed. They once again thanked us for honoring their loved one in such a beautiful way. We have been able to do this with several other families throughout the year, and each time they are so grateful for the opportunity we have given them.

Our partnership with the Gift of Life has not stopped here. Aiyanna's participation in the work group allowed us the opportunity to send two funeral directors on a trip to the Solvita tissue processing center in Dayton, Ohio. There Aiyanna and Kaitlyn Meldrum learned about tissue donation, the creation of allografts, and attended a presentation from the author *The Burning Shield*, Jason Scheterle. This trip was in partnership with several organ procurement organizations in the Midwest and has allowed funeral professionals to communicate with families and peers about donation.

By working more closely with our Michigan procurement organization, and learning various ways to honor donor families, we have both increased our understanding of this important process and created more meaningful moments for those we serve.

## **Posey Funeral Directors, North Augusta, South Carolina**

### **The Village Serves the Village: Funeral Service Amidst Hurricane Helene Cleanup**

As the old adage states, "it takes a village" and while this well-known proverb really relates to the raising of a child, in the days and weeks following Hurricane Helene's strike on our community it applied to conducting funeral services as well. In the weeks that followed Hurricane Helene's impact on our communities in late September 2024 truer words could not have been spoken. The display of neighbors helping neighbors and individuals going out of their way to help another were common stories. Our community saw the worst storm devastation on record with hundreds of trees uprooted and tens of thousands of residents without power for days and weeks. Entire neighborhoods looked like third world country warzones with homes demolished, roads blocked, powerlines and debris scattered about, yet through it all death continues and we, as funeral directors, must continue to serve the families of our community. Our funeral home was without power for four days during which time our embalmers had to complete preparation with limited resources as we were utilizing a portable generator that afforded us minimal operations of our refrigeration in our crematory, an embalming machine, a small fan and minimal lighting in the care center.

The only loss of human life in our area was an elderly couple who tragically died under the dark of night when the storm's worst impact struck as a tree crashed through the roof of their home killing the seniors in bed while other family members slept in bedrooms just down the hall. Due to the danger of the storm with undriveable roads, downed powerlines, damaging winds and torrential rain, first responders were not able to gain access to the home for several hours after the impact of the tree. Once the coroner's office personnel and first responders were able to reach the home and safely remove the debris, they found the couple huddled or hugging in the bed, the elderly man was holding his wife trying to protect her from the impact they both would sustain. The couple's sweet story of love and death gained national media attention from sources that included CBS News, USA Today, People Magazine and several other local, state and national outlets. As the couple's grandson is quoted in a USA Today article, "My grandfather apparently heard the tree snap before hand and rolled over to try and protect my grandmother."

As funeral director, Brian Van Heck met with the family in the days that followed the storm and tragic event he learned that the couple were high school sweethearts and were actually born on the same day. The difficulty of losing both parents and grandparents at the same time and in such a tragic way was hard on the family. Additional challenges were that most of the family were still without power and had significant damage to their own homes and yet they were forced to be making funeral arrangements for mom/grandma and dad/grandpa. As service arrangements were being finalized and Mr. Van Heck contacted the cemetery, he learned that a large tree had fallen on the graves where they were to be buried and had to delicately share this information with the family. Funeral home staff had to work with the cemetery, who was without power, and their crew to determine an appropriate timeline as to when they thought they could have the cemetery roads cleared and the elderly couple's final resting place accessible for services to take place.

On the afternoon of October 5, 2024, we gathered at the cleared gravesite, along with the family and members of the elderly couple's church family, to pay tribute to the sweet couple that were tragically taken by the violence of Hurricane Helene. While there is nothing simple about arranging and conducting a double funeral, if you serve in our profession long enough these types of events happen more often than one might realize. The particulars of these arrangements and funeral presented several unique challenges and difficulties and it truly "took the village". Though the winds blew, the rain came, trees toppled, roofs collapsed, power poles snapped, power outages crippled the region for weeks through it all Posey Funeral Directors served their community as we have for four generations since 1879 and will continue to do so today and tomorrow despite what Mother Nature may send our way.



## **Pray Funeral Home, Inc., Charlotte, Michigan**

The most popular page visited on our prayfuneral.com website is an essay written by Joe E. Pray about Viking Funerals. In fact, each year we receive at least a few legitimate requests for Viking funerals based on both this article and our participation and exhibition at the Nordic Fire Festival, one of our town's largest annual festivals. More regularly, however, we are approached with questions about not only Viking funerals, but funeral customs the world over. To this end, one member of our community, Inna Phelps, approached Joe with an idea for a program. Originally from Russia, Inna immigrated to the United States in 2000 and settled in the Charlotte area. Many recognize her as a talented hairdresser, a dedicated paraprofessional in local schools, or a passionate storyteller and performer. She previously curated a Russian room at the Courthouse Square Museum, hosted Russian tea parties, and performed at various local venues. Inna was now curious to team up with our staff to host a Tea Party at the funeral home revolving around Russian heritage and funeral customs.

Food is a central part of Russian culture, including both the traditional Russian Tea and funeral gatherings. Joe E. Pray used his creative approach to transform our visitation room into a Russian tea room, complete with a samovar, a beautifully ornate Russian tea urn that symbolizes hospitalities. Guests also enjoyed a delightful selection of authentic hors d'oeuvres and sweets, including the famous Napoleon cake and Sharlotka apple pie—a charming coincidence, given its name and our city, Charlotte. Additionally, Inna provided a stunning display of Russian nesting dolls and cultural souvenirs, offering a glimpse into the country's artistry and heritage.

Nearly 100 people attended from up to 30 miles away, far exceeding expectations. Once guests had a chance to experience the warmth and camaraderie of the tea room and specialty food and displays, guests settled in for an interesting presentation and discussion with Inna about her own family funeral experiences back home in Russia, and the way many immigrants experience their customs at home in the United States. Guests and the funeral staff alike were surprised at some of the differences in traditions, as well as many of the similarities. In this way, the event benefited both the funeral home staff and the community at large, offering insights into death and memorialization and providing an open dialogue within the community. The funeral home staff thus developed a further appreciation for our services to families in need.

The success of the event has led it become the first in a planned series at Pray Funeral Home, showcasing funeral traditions from around the world.

### **Weeks' Funeral Home, Buckley, Washington**

*Weeks' Enumclaw Funeral Home, Enumclaw, Washington; Weeks' Dryer Mortuary, Tacoma, Washington; Edline-Yahn & Covington Funeral Chapel, Kent, Washington; Columbia Funeral Home, Seattle, Washington; Haven of Rest Funeral Home & Cemetery, Gig Harbor, Washington; Newell-Hoerling's Mortuary, Centralia, Washington*

### **Memorial History Walk & Guided Tour**

Each Memorial Day weekend, our funeral home in Buckley, Washington, hosts a self-guided History Walk to accompany our Memorial Day services at the cemetery we manage for the city. Working in partnership with our local historical society (Foothills Historical Society & Museum), we have researched the history of several people who rest with us at the Buckley City Cemetery. Their individual stories along with any pictures we can find, are printed, laminated, and posted near their gravesite for the History Walk. Visitors to our cemetery can stroll through our grounds to learn more about local pioneers who helped build our little town of Buckley, WA. (population 5,300)

The idea featured in this essay, started as a fun field trip for local seniors, especially those who don't do much walking these days. It was a way for us to bring our History Walk to them, so to speak, so they could enjoy it too.

Working with the Program Coordinator of the Buckley Senior Center, we set the date for our Guided Tour for May 23rd -- the Friday before Memorial Weekend. We created a flyer and got busy spreading the word.

On May 23rd, participants hopped aboard the senior center bus and came across town to our funeral home and cemetery. Several other people in carpool vehicles followed behind the bus.

Upon their arrival, our funeral home team welcomed everyone and then off we went for a hometown historical tour. Nine stops were planned throughout the cemetery. At each of the stops, spokespeople were in position to tell the story of our honoree. Giving tribute to Memorial Day, most of our honorees were veterans; veterans of multiple wars and heroic deeds, local heroes and founding pioneers of our town.

For spokespeople, we asked our current Buckley Fire Chief, former city mayor, board members of the Historical Society, the VFW Commander for our local Post, and family members of honorees. Each spokesperson had a microphone and speakers, a music stand (for a mobile podium), and a packet of information to be used as speaker's notes. Some speakers added fun details to the information we knew. Our little caravan travelled from one stop to the next making our way through the cemetery and a lot of hometown history.

After the Guided Tour, we headed back to our funeral home for a delicious, old-fashioned ice cream social. Our funeral home team made our welcome warm and the refreshments special. Our reception room was filled with laughter and shared memories.

This little Guided Tour had huge impact for many of us and will be done again next year.

### **Quotes from our partners**

"We would like to extend a warm thank you for the memorial tour of the cemetery. It was a very powerful series of presentations highlighting some of the important pioneers of the Buckley area and it was humbling to hear of their life and death stories. Thank you! Our seniors appreciated the opportunity to learn and to then gather for the ice cream social. Thanks again! It was a memorable event and one I hope we can look forward to again next year." -- Lorrie Lund, Buckley Senior Center

"I was honored to be able to tell the story of a Civil War Veteran who distinguished himself in service to his country and family and our small community. With the History Walk, the visitors to our cemetery were reintroduced to many people whose contributions and hardships in building our city will not be forgotten."  
-- John Griffin Jr, VFW Post #1414

"Everyone had good things to say about the Memorial History Walk & Guided Tour. They thought it was well organized and well timed. One woman said that she's lived here most all her life and she learned a lot." -- Jean Contreas, Foothills Historical Society