

Arlington Memorial Chapels, Inc., Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines

HEARTS THAT HOLD:

A Campaign to Advocate for a National End-of-Life Carers Day

In the funeral profession, we often talk about the importance of being present for grieving families. But rarely do we pause to ask: who is present for the caregivers? The ones who quietly carry the weight of loss every single day?

At Arlington Memorial Chapels, we believe that end-of-life professionals—whether funeral staff, caregivers, or hospital personnel—deserve to be seen, supported, and celebrated. This belief gave rise to a deeply personal and pioneering initiative we called Hearts That Hold.

Held in June 2025, Hearts That Hold was a week-long series of events dedicated to honoring those who hold space for others in their most painful moments. It culminated on June 21—the summer solstice, the longest day of the year—which we now propose to mark annually as National End-of-Life Care Professionals Day.

There's a national day for almost everything—donuts, pets, sisters, even stationery—but none yet to recognize the people who spend their days standing at the threshold of life and death. This is a day we propose to be dedicated to those most exposed to grief and mortality: the nurse who has to pull the plug, the embalmer who tends to the body with quiet reverence, the funeral director who holds space for shattered families, the hospice worker who keeps vigil until the last breath. These are the ones who carry the weight of death—not occasionally, but daily—and who deserve, at least once a year, to be seen, honored, and held.

The symbolism of June 21 was intentional. It is the longest day of the year—and for those in this field, almost every day feels like the longest. The weight of another person's grief, the emotional labor, the stillness after loss—it stretches the hours. And yet we continue to show up. Not just as witnesses to sorrow, but as quiet lights in the dark. In the invisible, often overlooked work of end-of-life care, we are the ones who carry the flame of compassion through the longest days.

The week began with the unveiling of our Appreciation Wall—a mural and mosaic composed of real messages of gratitude from families we've served over the years. Handwritten notes like "eternal gratitude" and "you brought us peace" were mounted in a permanent installation that now lives in our main building. It was our way of saying: you are remembered, too.

Each day that followed was dedicated to a simple but meaningful act of care. On June 17, we launched Care for the Carer, providing transportation and errand assistance to selected caregivers. The next day, we visited six partner hospitals—UERM, St. Luke's, Cardinal Santos, National Children's, and more—bringing tokens of gratitude to ER, ICU, and morgue staff. These are people who encounter death daily, often with no time to grieve. Our visit was a reminder: you are not invisible.

On June 19, we hosted a movie night at our very own crematory chapel and invited funeral directors and practitioners from neighboring funeral homes—a pause in the week to laugh, rest, and share a moment together outside our roles. This was followed by Wellness Day on June 20, where staff received free haircuts, manicures, pedicures, and massages. These small indulgences brought joy, but more than that, they restored something internal: dignity, peace, and permission to care for oneself.

The culmination on June 21 was a full-day gathering that brought together both reflection and renewal. We began with powerful talks by Dr. Elizabeth Rondain and Dr. Pia Babao Guballa, experts on grief and compassion fatigue. Their words gave voice to the silent burden many of us carry and offered tools to navigate emotional exhaustion. After the talks, participants chose among three breakout wellness workshops: yoga for beginners, creative expression to process grief, and meal prepping made simple, which included nutrition consultations and live demos. The goal was simple: to offer holistic care for the mind, body, and heart.

What made this project transformative was not just the programming, but the people. Our team found themselves reconnected to the deeper meaning of our work. They didn't just plan events—they showed

up for one another. Funeral professionals who are used to remaining in the background finally had a space created just for them.

Our client families noticed, too. Many reached out with appreciation, moved that we would honor the very people who once served them.

To help others bring this vision to life, we created a comprehensive playbook—submitted alongside this essay. It includes a breakdown of each event, sample timelines, proposed budgets, communication templates, and creative assets. It is our sincere hope that this toolkit inspires other funeral homes—not just in the Philippines, but around the world—to replicate or adapt Hearts That Hold in their own communities.

Because while grief may be universal, so is compassion. And just as we honor the dead, we must care for the living who walk with them to the end.

This is more than a project—it is a movement.

And today, we invite the National Funeral Directors Association—and the global funeral community—to join us in this call. To help turn June 21 into an internationally recognized day for end-of-life care professionals. One ripple at a time, we can create a wave of recognition, care, and dignity that travels across borders.

A day to remind the world: behind every goodbye is a hand that held someone through it.

And those hands—tired, gentle, steady—are not just witnesses to loss.

They are the light in the longest days.

They are the hearts that hold.

Jefferson Memorial Funeral Home, Inc., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

In 2023, we set a "Wildly Important Goal" (WIG) focused on strengthening our relationship with local hospice providers. This initiative was born out of the recognition that cohesive and collaborative partnerships are essential in providing high-quality, compassionate care to the families we collectively serve. We understood that building trust and familiarity outside of the day-to-day professional setting could lead to better service and a greater shared understanding of each other's roles.

To bring this goal to life, we organized a community-building event that would bring hospice professionals and their families together in a relaxed, enjoyable environment. We decided that we would host our first "Hospice Night at the Ball Park." On July 28, 2024, we hosted an evening at the Washington Wild Things baseball game, offering food, beverages, and fun on a reserved party deck. This was not only a gesture of appreciation but also an opportunity to deepen our connections beyond the walls of our respective organizations.

Leading up to the event, we made personal visits to each local hospice office to deliver ballpark goodie bags. These included nostalgic favorites like peanuts, cracker jacks, bubble gum, and baseball-themed stress balls, along with an invitation flyer encouraging RSVPs. These visits served a dual purpose: promoting the event and offering a small, thoughtful token to spark engagement and conversation. The excitement was contagious, and we received a positive response from many.

The event itself was a wonderful success. Our staff was on hand to welcome guests, help them navigate to our reserved space, and most importantly, to mingle and connect. The atmosphere was lively and friendly, with professionals and families alike enjoying a summer evening of baseball and camaraderie. It was heartening to see so many smiles, shared stories, and meaningful interactions throughout the night.

Ultimately, this event accomplished far more than a night of entertainment. It laid the groundwork for stronger collaboration and greater understanding between our organization and local hospice providers. By fostering these personal relationships, we're better positioned to support one another in our shared mission: to provide compassionate, comprehensive care for families in need. The success of this WIG has inspired us to continue investing in relationships that matter—and to keep finding creative ways to bring our care community closer together. It was from this event and perhaps even the legwork before the event that led us to the connections made that developed into our new Grief Support Program. This program would not be functioning today had we not made connections with our local hospice providers.

Pantalone Funeral Home, Inc., Greensburg, PA

In the summer of 2024 Nat had read in the PFDA trade journal about an organization in a neighboring county, the Angels of Allegheny Honor Guard. They are a group of volunteer nurses that will do a tribute service at a funeral home, cemetery or place of gathering for a deceased LPN, RN, Nurse Practitioner or Nurse Anesthetist. A few days after reading the article, we happened to have a retired nurse from our area that passed away and Nat approached the family to see if they would be interested in having a service here at the funeral home in her honor. We were so impressed with the service that Nat encouraged me to start one in our county. I am a retired director of nursing and I currently work as the office manager and family coordinator for the funeral home. By the early fall I was able to get a group of five active and retired nurses to join and become the board for what would become "The Angels of Westmoreland Honor Guard". Our funeral home sponsored the upfront costs of becoming an honor guard, applying for an EIN number, purchasing capes, caps, lanterns, brochures, thank you cards and any supplies that were needed.

We received our EIN number in November and were able to get brochures sent to the fifty-three Westmoreland County funeral homes that described in detail about the service we would be honored to provide. The service includes up to 8 nurses that present a ten-minute service at the time and place of the families choosing. It is free but donations are accepted to help defray the cost of supplies and mailings. This Honor Guard, even though started at the Pantalone Funeral Home, with Melanie as the current President, can be held at any funeral home, cemetery or gathering place, not specific to our funeral home.

In January of 2025, we held our first service at the Pantalone Funeral Home and up until this essay, we have had a total of nine services. We have done services at Ott Funeral Home in Irwin, Nickel's Funeral Home in Herminie, Galone Caruso Funeral Home in Mt. Pleasant, New Kensington Fire Hall #3 in New Kensington, Bacha Funeral Home in Greensburg, Harrold Zion Lutheran Church in Greensburg and Twin Valley Memorial Mausoleum in Delmont. We have 70 volunteer nurses and the only requirements are that they have an active/retired license that is in good standing, they wear white uniforms, socks/hose and white shoes, and that they are available to do two services a year. There are no dues and we only hold meetings twice a year. All correspondence is through email. To put in perspective, the Allegheny Chapter has been in existence for six years and have about sixty members as of this date and their first year, they only performed four services. We are off to a great start. We were asked to participate in the White Mass at the Blessed Sacrament Cathedral in April to celebrate and pray for healthcare workers and were honored to process into the church along with the Bishop of Greensburg.

One of our long-term goals with this group is that if we get enough donations accrued, that we may be able to develop some sort of nursing scholarship to give to a future nursing student. The funeral home has been instrumental in getting the word out about the services that the Honor Guard provides. It has been on the funeral home's media pages where we received over 1,000 likes. We now have our own Facebook page as well. It has been advertised in three area papers and in church bulletins. Area Hospice agencies have also asked for information to spread the word about this beautiful tribute.

Presently, there are about 30 county chapters in PA, mostly in the eastern part of the state, but there are Nursing Honor Guards throughout the U.S. Each one is autonomous and are not required to belong to a National Chapter. I have been approached by several nurses that live outside of our county about how to find a chapter in their area.

This Honor Guard was started because Nat felt that it was needed in our community and encouraged me to start the ball rolling. It has been a very rewarding experience thus far. The families are so appreciative and the volunteer nurses are beyond grateful for being able to participate in such a moving tribute.