

**A.J. Desmond & Sons Funeral Directors. Troy, Michigan**

*A.J. Desmond & Sons Funeral Directors – Vasu, Rodgers & Connell Chapel, Royal Oak, Michigan; A.J. Desmond & Sons Funeral Directors – Price Chapel, Troy, Michigan*

Our Bereavement Program, Perspectives, is a comprehensive program of support following the death of a loved one. In developing and refreshing our offerings, we follow three principles:

- We believe that losing a loved is difficult and personal.
- Grief is unique for everyone, but it doesn't have to be isolating.
- Sharing with others can help to heal... allowing us to place our loss into new perspectives.

We are constantly evaluating our offerings to meet the needs and interests of the Perspectives participants. Our Director of Bereavement Services, Linda Dzbanski, LLMSW, BSW, recognized that the participants in the Take Time to Heal groups and other bereavement interactions who had experienced the sudden death of a loved one needed something more focused and with others who knew the trauma of experiencing a sudden death. Asking around, she found there to be enough interest to form a new group. Thus, Linda refreshed and redirected the curriculum to focus on experiencing grief after a sudden death of a loved one, enabling participants to have safe space and support for their own journey as well as accompanying others in theirs.

Coping with Sudden Deaths is a five-week Grief Support Group Series for those who have experienced the sudden death of a loved one - whether accidental, through suicide or due to unexpected health issued. Like all of our bereavement programs, participants are invited to continue to explore the grief journey, embrace hope and connect with others who truly understand the complicated grief of a sudden death.

This group was open to anyone in the communities we serve at no charge, with registration required. Our Director of Bereavement Service, Linda Dzbanski, LLMSW, BSW hosts and facilitates each session. The first two groups, one in the afternoon and the other in the evening, had five participants each. They were held at our location on Crooks Road in Troy. She recruited through other groups, bereavement calls, flyers and social media presence. While most participants had already attended the Take Time to Heal Support Group Series and a few had also participated in a book study series, previous grief group participation was not required.

The curriculum is guided primarily by two works, *The Wilderness of Suicide Grief: Finding Your Way (Understanding Your Grief)* by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. and *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief* by David Kessler. Starting with the recognition that a sudden death leaves surviving loved ones in a wilderness, Linda works gently with participants to create a road map with trail markers and some necessary tools to guide them through the grieving process. By sharing within the group, they gain insights and offer support to others stunned by sudden loss.

Feedback from participants was that the sessions were helpful and beneficial. Participants recognize that their grief is complicated, yet felt that they had made worthwhile progress. All still have long grief journeys, but they feel better equipped to move along it.

Linda will be offering the Coping with Sudden Deaths Grief Support Group series again. Going forward, she will require that all participants first attend the Take Time to Heal Grief Support Group series.

## **Bayliff & Son Funeral Home, Inc., Cridersville, Ohio**

### **Honoring Little Angels**

Many people have had some type of loss in their lives and so have we at Bayliff and Son Funeral Home. John Bayliff (our current owner), a second-generation funeral director, and his wife Cindy, a registered nurse, had the terrible misfortune of losing four children. Two of the babies were almost full term while the other two were less than 20 weeks conception. This was a horrible loss, and it brought so much heartbreak to our family. The full-term babies had services and a final resting place while the other two were disposed of by the hospital, which was normal. Our family never got over the loss, eventually we started working with hospitals to offer services no matter how far along the mother was. Bayliff and Son Funeral Home has used our loss and learned from it so we can help others.

Hospitals weren't always the greatest with handling early loss. Early loss is a miscarriage which can happen anytime during pregnancy while most still births happen after the 20th week of pregnancy. Either way these are both losses that bring great pain. Handling these cases now versus years ago are completely different. Early in the 20th century state officials and embryologists led to classifying these losses as "medical waste". Losing a child already hurts a family and not seeing their pain and trying to silence them by not recognizing what has happened can only make families distressed. But by mid-20th century religious guidance started emphasizing the respectful disposal of remains, suggesting burial as the "normal manner". This makes families feel more recognized and helps start the grieving process to work through the pain and not hide it.

At Bayliff and Son Funeral Home we know that all loss is hard, so we want to make families know they are seen and that their pain is okay. We are a community minded family, and this made us decide to take different approaches to help grieving families. We decided to buy a Columbarium which houses cremated remains and donated it to St. Matthews Cemetery. A couple reasons we decided to do this is to honor every life, no matter how brief which is represented on our columbarium with an elephant. The reason we chose an elephant is because they never forget, which is what we do here at Bayliff and Son Funeral Home. At our funeral home our crematory is on sight, so we have full control of the process which assures that we treat everyone with care and respect.

Families have more than one way to remember their baby. We give families the option of cremation or burial and we work with different cemeteries in the area to do what is best for the family. For families experiencing this loss we never charge. Every baby is cared for individually and has their own container because these babies matter. We also offer a columbarium where the elephant sits on top being the guardian and never forgetting our little angels. The family doesn't have to pick any of these options and can take their baby's cremated remains home. We keep all records so families can return, reflect, and remember their loved ones.

Honoring these children is a big deal to us because it is part of who we are. These children may not have taken a breath, but they lived through their parents' hearts which matters. It is important to recognize they still existed with memories and a way to have permanence will help the healing process. Others go through this type of pain and grief that is why we are sharing our story because no one should be alone in this.

Loss is a part of everyone's life, it doesn't matter how big or little, pain is still pain. Bayliff and Son Funeral Home wants to honor every little angel anyway we can. We want to help families that need guidance and support. We will care for your little angel, like they are our own.

**Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home, Hammond, Louisiana**

*Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home, Ponchatoula, Louisiana; Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home, Denham Springs, Louisiana*

**Widows Valentine Luncheon**

For many, Valentine's Day is a joyous occasion full of love and magic, but for those who have lost the loves of their lives it is a painful reminder of their loss and the enormous absence of their deceased spouses. This holiday often evokes and exacerbates feelings of loneliness, alienation and sadness. Grief is the price we pay for love and while there is nothing that can take the pain of a spouse away, at Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home, we wanted to celebrate the widows in our community this Valentine's Day by pampering them and making them feel special and loved while giving them an opportunity to honor their husbands and connect with others who have also experienced a similar loss. This desire was the rationale behind our Widows' Valentine Luncheon.

Our Widows' Valentine Luncheon was scheduled for Wednesday, February 12, 2025 at our Denham Springs location. We felt as though this would be the perfect setting, due to the spacious and beautiful reception area we have there, in our Magnolia Room. Festive invitations were designed and mailed to the widows we had served within the past two years, local churches, senior centers, and assisted living centers. In addition, the event was promoted on our Facebook pages. We used our regular radio spots to promote the event and Martha Thompson even spoke live on the radio, to further explain it. We invited local Congresswoman, Julie Letlow to speak at the event. She unexpectedly lost her husband and predecessor, due to Covid in 2021 and made the courageous decision to fulfill his term. As explained in an article written by Greg Hilburn, dated April 14, 2021 in the Monroe News Star, "Julia Letlow was sworn in Wednesday as Louisiana's first Republican congresswoman carrying the torch for her late husband Congressman-elect Luke Letlow, who died from COVID complications in December before he could take office 'Luke and I were a team with the goal to better our state and our country,' said Letlow, who enjoyed a landslide win in a March special election to replace her husband for the 5th District seat. Congress was in session during our luncheon but Congresswoman Letlow desperately wanted to be a part of the event and recorded a meaningful and inspirational message to share with our attendees.

On the day of the big event, the weather was glorious and our Magnolia Room was adorned with pink and red decorations. As we welcomed approximately thirty attendees, they were overjoyed and appreciative to see the care and planning that went into the event. We started out with a welcome from Martha Thompson, who encouraged the ladies to use our fun, balloon photo booth, which they thoroughly enjoyed. Next, we listened to the inspirational story and words of encouragement from Congresswoman Julia Letlow. Everything in Louisiana revolves around food, and this event was no exception. We enjoyed a delicious meal, while listening to oldies music. Participants created a message in a bottle craft project, in which they were able to decorate a bottle and write a message to their husbands or share a favorite memory. Every attendee participated in several games of Bingo, and guessed how many Conversation Heart candies were in a jar. We also had a plethora of door prize giveaways. At the conclusion of the luncheon, everyone was given a Valentine heart full of sweet chocolates confectioned by our local famous candy company, Elmer's. Attendees were invited to participate in our optional "hug line" on their way out and every single one opted in! Many smiles, laughs, and tears were spread at this heartwarming event. Martha Thompson, Lauren Gaudin, Amy Thompson, Shelby Duhe', and Carson Parrott were all involved in orchestrating and helping with this successful and heartfelt event.

## **Cemitério e Crematório Parque das Allamandas, Londrina, Paraná, Brazil**

### **LIFETIME MEMORIES**

The Parque das Allamandas Cemetery and Crematorium, with over ten years of experience in Londrina, PR, is committed to providing high-quality and excellent service to its clients, always attentive to their needs. Among these needs, one of the greatest challenges is helping our clients navigate the grieving process as smoothly as possible.

We understand that grief is a unique and personal journey and that even after the farewell moments—whether at the wake, burial, or cremation—the pain and solitude may persist.

Inspired by the work of Mohamed Fareez, a social worker in Singapore, who redefined the concept of the Death Certificate by encouraging people to share how they would like to remember their loved ones, we adapted this initiative to our own reality and culture through the project “Lifetime Memories”

The project is an innovative form of support those in mourning, which aims to give new meaning to this moment of grief, since at the end of the funeral service, the only tangible document the family receives is the death certificate.

Our goal is to transform the characteristic coldness of the death certificate by offering a unique experience, encouraging families to embrace this moment as an opportunity for unity and comfort, by revisiting the memory, the good times and the good memories of the loved one who has gone.

The Life Certificate was developed as a way to honor the legacy and celebrate the lives of those who have passed.

From the project's conception to its execution, it has been a long journey. Upon learning about the article published by the Singaporean social worker, we saw an opportunity to develop a new form of bereavement support for our clients.

Thus, on September 8, 2023, some employees were selected to coordinate the project, namely: Andrey Martins (administrative analyst), Barbara Galhardo (customer service supervisor), Jessica Rapcham (quality and legal manager), Josiane Amorin (sales consultant) and Kelly Mello (quality supervisor), with the support of our executive director Lilian Vivan.

In the initial stage, weekly meetings were held to discuss the main aspects of the project's viability, including a vote to choose the name, affectionately called “Lifetime Memories”.

The project gradually took shape, leading to the idea of creating a box to hold the Life Certificate, as well as defining the process for delivering the box to families, what types of certificates would be offered, what items would be included in the preparation and personalization of the boxes and to which clients they would be offered, taking into account the costs of implementing the project.

It is important to highlight that our Administrative Manager, Renata Vivan, participated in the “Academia de Celebrantes” (Celebrants Academy) training by Lab Acembra/Sincep, led by funeral service professional Gisela Adissi in São Paulo from August 23 to 25, 2023, at which time she acquired knowledge that later helped us with ideas for the composition of the box, such as the issue of exploring the senses, suggesting the use of aromas through the candle, the lavender branch and the aroma sprayed on the box.

The final project was presented to the board of directors in October 2023, and once it had been approved, the members set about implementing the proposed timetable and acquiring the necessary materials from partners.

Finally, the first “Lifetime Memories” boxes were delivered in November 2023.

As mentioned, the Life Certificate is the project's primary grief support tool. It serves as a tribute to the loved one's legacy, allowing families to cherish their personality and memories with warmth.

With the document, the family can paste a photo of a special moment of their loved one, as well as answer a few questions, such as: "What was the best thing you ever did together?", "What did you like to be called?"; What did he/she like to do?". These are questions that lead the family to recall good memories.

The box is personalized and contains, in addition to the Certificate of Life, a letter of guidance for the family, an aromatic candle and a sprig of lavender, chosen for its calming properties, carefully wrapped in tissue paper. The boxes are sprayed with a specially selected scent to promote a welcoming feeling.

For babies and children, the Life Certificate is delicately illustrated, and the guidance letter encourages tender reflections, as well as featuring a teddy bear keyring, which makes it more delicate, given that mourning the loss of babies and children is unique and different.

For teenagers, the box comes with seeds engraved with the word "love", giving the family the opportunity to plant a tree in memory of the young person who has gone.

For adults, the box offers the same welcoming elements, complemented by a comforting scent.

The preparation of the environment where the delivery takes place was carefully designed. The space, affectionately named "Sala Luz" (Light Room), features soft indirect lighting over the table where the box is placed, surrounded by rose petals. A gentle and harmonious ambient sound creates a peaceful atmosphere, complemented by a delicate fragrance of specially selected essences meant to soothe and provide a sense of comfort.

At the handover, one of our family assistants, prepared in advance and informed about the bereavement situation of the family in question, explains the meaning of the materials contained in the box and how they should be used in order to maintain the bond of love with the person who is no longer there.

Customer response to the project has been extremely positive, reflected in the increased satisfaction and loyalty of our audience. Customers express immense gratitude at the moment of delivery, where a wave of tender and nostalgic feelings fills the "Light Room", demonstrating the success of the project.

After the delivery, we receive reports of thanks, as exemplified below:

The project has proved fundamental in providing comfort and a new way of facing loss, honoring the memories of loved ones in a loving and respectful way, as well as transforming the "weight" of the death certificate into a lighthearted and cherished document that is the Certificate of Life.

As for the potential replicability of the innovation, the "Lifetime Memories" project, as a tool to support the passage of the grieving process, we understand that this idea can be extended and applied to other groups working in the funeral sector, since the initiative can be easily adopted in everyday funeral care, considering the low cost involved in implementation and applicability, below R\$ 35.00 a unit, including the box, aromatic candle, lavender branch, seeds and key ring.

In this sense, the project is also in line with the company's sustainability and social responsibility guidelines. The "Lifetime Memories" box is made from recycled materials and, as mentioned, we have included a seed for the family to plant a tree in, encouraging ecological awareness.

Our frontline funeral service staff, committed to our mission of turning moments of pain into love, carefully prepare each box, always aiming to convey comfort and support to the grieving families. The delivery takes place at the conclusion of each funeral service.

Alongside the internal preparation, the project also relies on the collaboration of various partners

Among these partners are local suppliers for the production of the boxes and supplies and mental health professionals, such as psychologists, who are crucial for providing adequate emotional support to the bereaved. Our partner psychologist Elaine Prestes, who leads the conversation circle, helped us deliver the boxes to the participants. The experience was unique and the stories touched everyone.

The box is intended for our funeral plan clients, participants in the conversation circle and for our employees when they lose a loved one.

By encouraging conversations about grief, we have fostered an environment where discussing the topic becomes less of a taboo. This has created a culture of openness and support, where people feel more comfortable expressing their emotions and seeking help when needed.

Furthermore, the "Lifetime Memories" box has provided significant support to families, strengthening community bonds, since the adoption of the box has encouraged community participation, where families and friends have come together to share memories, stories and experiences when filling in the Life Certificate, which is the orientation of the letter that accompanies the box, so that they can have this moment together.

Even without the aim of bringing in a direct financial return, "Lifetime Memories" has surprisingly excelled in this aspect as well. The direct costs per delivery are low, under R\$ 35.00 per unit, but it has already become a differentiator in our services, sought after by clients and prospects, contributing to the loyalty of our client base.

In addition, as it is part of the amenities offered to our funeral plan clients, it is an important differential at the time of sale, where clients are delighted when our consultants explain the meaning of the "Lifetime Memories" box to the family members who will be mourning. As such, we are in the process of analyzing the feasibility of selling the memory box to customers who do not have a funeral plan, so that they can purchase it at the time of the service, given all the positive feedback we are receiving.

This demand is evident when we analyze the figures from the last semester, showing a growth in funeral plan sales compared to the first half of 2023.

From a management perspective, detailed reports on the results and impacts of the innovation, including customer feedback, are shared with the board and involved employees. This not only strengthens transparency but also demonstrates Parque das Allamandas' commitment to social, economic, and financial responsibility.

We generated value for our suppliers by involving them in the project, where the innovation had the support and advice of our outsourced service provider (agronomist Márcio), who is responsible for the cemetery's landscaping and gardening, advising us on the insertion of lavender branches, the choice and conservation of seeds and the methodology for planting.

With regard to the aromatic candles included in the box, we selected a specialized supplier, who advised us on the maintenance of the candles' essences.

Looking ahead, with the support of our Information Technology manager, in the long term the project should move towards a future digitalization of the Certificate of Life, in an environment for tributes, allowing family and friends to share it online.

The innovation was also carefully structured to involve all the company's employees. The group created to coordinate the project was responsible for publicizing it and introducing it to everyone, by holding meetings with departments to publicize the launch of the "Lifetime Memories" box.

However, employees were encouraged to suggest improvements and new ideas for the boxes, providing a sense of belonging and encouraging collaboration between different departments. This collaborative

approach allowed diverse perspectives to be considered, enriching the project and ensuring that it was embraced, one of the suggestions received being the inclusion of seeds in the boxes.

Transparency and effective communication, combined with team training, are essential for a successful execution.

Our customer service team was trained to understand the importance and impact of the project, as well as for each person to understand their role in assembling and delivering the boxes, postures and behaviors at the time of delivery and creating the ideal environment where empathy must prevail.

After the initial training sessions, we held regular meetings with the team to discuss the progress of the project, challenges faced and proposed solutions. Initially, some families were reluctant to accept the box because they believed the memories might increase their suffering, which led us to change our approach, ultimately gaining full acceptance from grieving families who are immensely grateful for the care and support provided by Parque das Allamandas.

The "Lifetime Memories" box has significantly contributed to maintaining a positive image of the company, strengthening its reputation as a business that values and respects its customers, and especially is committed to its mission.

Finally, the Lifetime Memories" innovation represents Parque das Allamandas' commitment to offering meaningful and ongoing support to grieving families. Through a collaborative and sensitive approach, we are transforming the moment of pain into an experience of love, where families have the opportunity to register and preserve the legacy of their loved ones, reinterpreting the grieving process.

## **David C. Brown Funeral Home, Belleville, Michigan**

### **Did You Say "Grief Bingo?"**

On December 16, 2024, Jacqueline J. Dalzell, Funeral Director, and Kristin Mulka, Apprentice on staff at the David C. Brown Funeral Home presented a "Lunch at Learn" at the Van Buren Township (Belleville) Senior Center. This senior center is located at 46425 Tyler Road, Van Buren Township, MI. This program began at 12 noon. The senior director, MaryLynn Balewski, asked Jacqueline to visit the senior center and present a PowerPoint on grief for the seniors. As a funeral home, getting out in the community and mingling with people is helpful. It's nice for them to see your face for a happy occasion and meet under better circumstances. The funeral home staff helped to prepare the cards and were interested in making the presentation a success.

Jacqueline presented the power point and discussed various topics. In this presentation Jacqueline talked on the stages of grief, the feelings with each stage, and Kristen and Jacqueline talked about their passion for death care. Jacqueline's background as a grief counselor and caretaker to an adult child with significant disabilities was discussed. She explained how grief became a passion and how it comes in many forms. Kristin discussed her passion in caring for those at the time when they are the most distraught and learning how to guide and help. The seniors commented as Jacqueline and Kristin shared.

Since grief can be a very heavy subject, we decided to add a twist and play "Grief Bingo." This consisted of bingo cards that the staff at the funeral home prepared. We found these online and made sure to make each bingo card unique. Jacqueline wanted to put a spin of fun in this presentation, and who dislikes bingo? Not many people. The cards were handed out to all, and the seniors used a collection of pennies that Jacqueline brought from home to use as bingo markers.

The seniors enjoyed the cards and the calling out of the classifications of grief to cover their cards. Both Jacqueline and Kristin heard many of the seniors talking about the cards and how they display the feelings of grief. We had four prizes for the seniors who yelled "B-i-n-g-o." The prizes consisted of lottery tickets for the winners or bags of candy. The seniors chose the lottery tickets over the candy (not a surprise).

The seniors were very interested and enjoyed the presentation. They also enjoyed the game of Grief Bingo. One person asked to keep his card because he said it helped him see all these sayings that go along with the feelings of grief. The presentation and bingo lasted until 2:15 pm. There were a few questions and a few tears. The Bingo cards were kept to enjoy in the future, and to have another round of "Grief Bingo."



**Finch & Finch Funeral & Cremation Service, Altavista, Virginia**  
*Finch & Finch Funeral & Cremation Service, Gladys, Virginia*

**Enhancing Aftercare with Personalized Text Messaging**

At Finch & Finch Funeral & Cremation Service, our dedication to serving families doesn't end with the funeral. For years, we have maintained a robust aftercare program that includes mailed sympathy cards and follow-up letters, offering words of comfort and ongoing support. In 2024, we chose to enhance this commitment by launching a new initiative: a personalized aftercare texting program, managed entirely in-house by our full-time staff using our funeral home's office phone numbers.

This program was designed to complement, not replace, our traditional mail-based outreach. While many families continue to appreciate handwritten gestures, we recognized that text messaging offers a discreet and accessible channel of communication, particularly valued by younger generations and those navigating grief in solitude. It enables us to stay connected in a way that is gentle, timely, and personalized — all while respecting the emotional space families may need.

The program begins with a check-in three weeks after the service, when a staff member like Jessie sends a simple, caring message to let the family know we're thinking of them. Depending on the response, we follow up with additional supportive messages. Over the next several months, families receive occasional texts that:

- Share grief resources available on our website
- Acknowledge the anniversary of their loved one's passing and birthdays
- Offer comfort during the Christmas holiday season
- Invite feedback through our internal survey
- Encourage Google reviews or testimonials to help us improve and reach more families

All messages are composed and sent manually, never automated, to ensure warmth and sincerity. Families know they're hearing from someone they've met — not a system. The integration of this texting program with our traditional aftercare materials adds a layer of immediacy and intimacy to our communication, strengthening relationships built during the arrangement process.

The benefits to our team include more frequent, meaningful connections with the families we serve and earlier opportunities to respond to concerns. This has led to valuable feedback and increased community visibility through reviews and referrals.

Families have expressed deep appreciation for the messages, often noting how they arrived "at just the right moment." This simple yet thoughtful program extends the compassion and care we are known for, well beyond the day of the service.

By combining timeless handwritten traditions with modern, compassionate technology, we've created a powerful aftercare model rooted in presence, empathy, and continued support.

**Funeraria San Vicente S.A., Medellin, Colombia**

**Workshop on oral narration and storytelling as tools for remembering and healing the pain of losing a loved one.**

*"IN THE END, WE'LL ALL BECOME STORIES"*  
MARGARET ATWOOD

Rationale behind the idea. In describing the rationale for your idea, if you are using background material from a third-party – e.g., information, statistics, facts, etc. – to explain why your program was needed, please cite/give attribution to your sources.

Since humanity developed language and forms of communication, stories, myths, and legends have played an important role in our evolution as a species. As Jim Henson, creator of the Muppets, would say, they recount the past, explain the present, and predict the future. Both before the development of writing and after the invention of the printing press, stories and tales have played a fundamental role in the evolution of humanity, not only as forms of entertainment, but as essential tools for the transmission of knowledge, values, and for strengthening social cohesion.

In the grieving process, storytelling and oral narration have proven to be an invaluable resource, as they allow us to give meaning to pain, reconstruct history, and preserve memories.

That is why, in 2023, the Grief Counselling Center at San Vicente Funeral Home decided to offer its clients a workshop in oral narration and storytelling.

Detailed description of the program, service or activity.

For the Oral Narration and Storytelling Workshop, the Grief Counselling Center hired professional storyteller Yovanny Torres, who has extensive experience as a narrator, has performed at national and international storytelling festivals and events, and is also a teacher at the Vivapalabra Cultural Center (The Living Word Cultural Center), the only venue in the country that has been specializing in oral narration for more than 25 years.

The workshop included weekly meetings from February to November, culminating in a public presentation by the workshop participants at the Oral Narration and Storytelling Festival: "Live to Tell the Tale: Stories about Memory".

During the sessions, workshop participants learn vocal techniques and engage in activities related to creative writing, body language, audience management, and how to deal with stage fright.

Benefits provided to the funeral home and staff.

Since the creation of the Grief Counselling Center in 1998, the staff at San Vicente Funeral Home have expressed their support and commitment to its workshops and programs. The storytelling workshop is designed for mourners who attend individual consultations and support groups, and all staff members contribute to its development, fostering their commitment to the well-being and mental health of all our users. Every activity we carry out at the Grief Counselling Center highlights the role of funeral services as a key element in strengthening the social fabric and developing sensitivity and empathy in the face of pain, death, and grief.

Benefits provided to families and/or the community at large.

Individually, each workshop participant confronts their stories, but no longer from a place of pain, but rather from the new meaning and beauty they find in their stories. By sharing stories about who their loved one was, their anecdotes, and their qualities with others through the artistic expression of storytelling and oral narration, this generates greater cohesion, sensitivity, and well-being, since putting

into words what weighs heavily on the heart is a liberating act. Mourners develop self-confidence and the ability to face life without the physical presence of their loved one.

For those attending the Oral Narration and Storytelling Festival (mainly the storytellers' family and friends) the benefit is that they learn about aspects of their grief that they may not have been aware of, generating greater understanding and empathy for their pain, while also experiencing emotions such as happiness and gratitude for what they experienced with that person.

If you are describing a program/activity that is conducted annually, is an on-going program, or has been used in a previous year's entry, clearly describe changes or improvements that have been made during the past year.

The first storytelling festival was held at the Grief Counselling Center, with a good turnout from the storytellers' family and friends. However, due to the growing number of workshop attendees last year, it was decided to rent an auditorium with capacity for 200 people.

The event was held with all the trappings of a gala, where the workshop participants were recognized for their effort and commitment, and each received a personalized poster with the name of their story and their photo.

*"After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world."*  
Philip Pullman

## **Funeza Zaragoza, Mexico City, Mexico**

*Funeza Azcapotzalco, Mexico City, Mexico; Funeza Vallejo, Mexico City, Mexico; Funeza Calle 7, Nezahualcoyotl, Mexico; Funeza Los Reyes, Los Reyes La Paz, Mexico; Funeza Periférico, Mexico City, Mexico; Funeza Ecatepec, Ecatepec, Mexico*

How does a child talk about death?

Sometimes with silence.

Sometimes through drawings.

Sometimes with questions that leave us speechless.

At Funeza, we believe each of these expressions deserves to be heard, accompanied, and lovingly guided.

In Mexico, according to UNICEF, approximately 12.1% of children and adolescents aged 10 to 19, that is, 2.6 million minors live with at least one diagnosed mental health condition, such as anxiety, depression, or ADHD.

Globally, both the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF report that 1 in 7 children (14%) suffer from a mental or emotional disorder, with anxiety and depression being the most common. One-third of these issues begin before the age of 14.

In Mexico, the Dr. Juan N. Navarro Children's Psychiatric Hospital sees 600 to 700 new patients per month, most of them children dealing with anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts. Over 50% of adult mental health disorders begin in childhood, yet only 16.5% of children with these conditions receive treatment. Furthermore, fewer than 5% of schools and only 3% of mental health centers offer specialized care for children.

This reveals a significant gap between the need and the care available. That's why we chose to focus its efforts on children, responding with empathy and commitment to those who need it most.

### **Children's emotional experience of loss**

As a funeral service provider and through the work of our Emotional Recovery Center, we have confirmed what many overlook: Children feel, question, miss, imagine, and above all, need to be supported with tools that honor their emotional and developmental stage.

Historically, children have often been excluded from grief and farewells under the false belief that "they don't understand" or "they don't need to know." We believe that emotional support knows no age.

This year, fully aware of this need and committed to the well-being of the families, we launched a series of actions and projects designed to address childhood grief through emotional education, child-focused grief therapy, and the conscious celebration of life.

With this solid foundation, we present a program designed with purpose, supported by reliable data, and offering a clear response to a pressing social need built upon four key pillars:

1. Preventive emotional education
2. Child thanatology and psychological support
3. Commemorative events with symbolic and community-focused approaches
4. Emotional and mental support for the children of our employees

### **Emotional education: "What y feel also matters"**

At CONALEP Aragón, we opened a safe space for high school students to talk about emotions. Through an intimate and participatory session, over 70 teens explored topics such as sadness, grief, anxiety, and resilience.

This initiative helped break the silence that often surrounds emotions in educational settings and laid the groundwork for future emotional education programs.

#### Day of the Dead at Dolores Cemetery: Redefining loss through tradition

Alongside cemetery authorities and accompanied by our therapy dog, Ónix, we hosted a children-focused event to talk about death through the lens of color, culture, and Mexican symbolism.

Children explored concepts like farewell, memory, and transcendence through music, games and affection creating a space that was natural, respectful, and healing.

#### Children's Day: Celebrating loss also caring

For Funeza, commemorative dates are opportunities to nurture emotional well-being. In April, we hosted a celebration at our sales point Cuauhtémoc, welcoming families and their children to participate in playful and emotional activities designed to celebrate childhood.

We also granted a special day off to our employees so they could spend meaningful time with their children.

#### Ónix, our therapy dog

Ónix has played a vital role in our children's workshops. His presence helps ease emotional tension, break communication barriers, and foster trust during grief-related activities. His participation in events, cemetery workshops, and therapy sessions has been highly appreciated by both children and parents.

#### Psychological and Grief Support at Our Emotional Recovery Center

Over the past two years, Funeza's Emotional Recovery Center (CRE) has become a safe space for children facing loss. Through individual and group therapy, more than 100 children have received support, 40% of them being children or relatives of our own team members.

This initiative has expanded our mission to include not only the community, but also our internal family at Funeza.

#### Day of the Dead at Jardín La Paz

As part of our festival at Jardín La Paz, we created a warm and festive space for children.

Activities included skull-decorating workshops, face painting, outdoor movies, and traditional costume contests, offering young participants a chance to explore the theme of death with curiosity, playfulness, and cultural depth.

#### Event at "Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe" Church

In collaboration with "Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe" church, we organized a special day for children centered around the recognition and expression of emotions through art.

With painting, storytelling, and interactive games, we created a spiritual and creative space where children could name their feelings, reframe their losses, and connect through love and faith.

#### Specialized Digital Content for Families

Through the Funeza blog, we've published articles written by professionals to help parents, caregivers, and educators address topics like childhood grief, depression, and how to talk about death with children.

- What is child thanatology? - <https://funeza.com/que-es-la-tanatologia-infantil/>
- 10 Books to help talk about death with kids - <https://funeza.com/10-libros-de-apoyo-para-hablar-con-tus-hijos-sobre-la-muerte/>
- Siblings in grief - <https://funeza.com/los-hermanos-en-el-duelo/>
- ADHD: An overlooked disorder in Mexico - <https://funeza.com/tdah-un-trastorno-subestimado-en-mexico-y-la-necesidad-de-mayor-concientizacion/>

- Depression across life stages - <https://funeza.com/depresion-a-lo-largo-de-la-vida-como-afecta-a-cada-etapa-y-como-abordarla/>
- Dysthymia: The lingering sadness that silences well-being - <https://funeza.com/distimia-la-tristeza-persistente-que-silencia-el-bienestar/>
- Why goodbyes matter - <https://funeza.com/que-es-un-adios-y-por-que-es-importante/>
- How to talk about death without scaring a child - <https://funeza.com/como-explicar-la-muerte-a-un-nino-sin-asustarlo/>
- Stories that heal: The power of books in childhood grief - <https://funeza.com/historias-que-sanan-el-papel-de-los-cuentos-en-el-duelo-infantil/>
- Signs of childhood depression - <https://funeza.com/como-detectar-la-depresion-infantil-senales-de-alerta-para-padres/>
- How to know if your child needs psychological support - <https://funeza.com/como-saber-si-mi-hijo-necesita-ayuda-psicologica-y-donde-acudir/>
- Mental health in early parenting - <https://funeza.com/ser-padres-primerizos-tambien-duele-hablemos-de-salud-mental-en-la-crianza-temprana/>
- How to support a child who has lost a classmate - <https://funeza.com/como-apoyar-a-un-nino-que-ha-perdido-a-un-companero-de-escuela/>
- Grief in Children: Stages and processes (Parts 1) - <https://funeza.com/duelo-en-ninos-etapas-y-procesos-pt-1/>
- Grief in Children: Stages and processes (Parts 2) - <https://funeza.com/duelo-en-ninos-etapas-y-procesos-pt-2/>
- How grief affects children - <https://funeza.com/como-afecta-el-duelo-a-los-ninos/>
- Games and activities to help children express sadness - <https://funeza.com/juegos-y-actividades-para-ninos-para-ayudarles-a-expresar-su-tristeza/>
- How to include children in farewell Rituals without causing trauma - <https://funeza.com/como-incluir-a-los-ninos-en-rituales-de-despedida-sin-que-sea-traumatico/>
- Teaching children to express emotions in healthy ways - <https://funeza.com/como-ensenar-a-los-ninos-a-expresar-sus-emociones-sanamente-desde-una-mirada-tanatologica-psicologica-y-social/>
- These resources have reached many families beyond our immediate circle, providing valuable tools for emotional support.

#### Benefits for families, the community, and Funeza employees

- Strengthened connection with the community.
- Positioning Funeza as a sensitive, innovative, and socially committed company.
- Improved work environment through emotional connection with employees and their families.
- Active team participation in meaningful, human-centered initiatives.
- Development of soft skills like empathy, emotional communication, and compassionate service.
- Reduced stigma around discussing grief at home.
- Free access to specialized resources and workshops.
- Better emotional preparation for future losses.
- Over 5,000 people reached directly or indirectly.
- Increased public awareness about the importance of children's mental health.

#### Results and Impact

- 400+ children and teens participated in on-site programs.
- 5,000+ people reached through online content and digital platforms.
- Engagement in schools, cultural centers, and community events.
- Established a symbolic, educational, and empathetic approach to childhood grief support.

#### Conclusion

We firmly believe that talking about grief with children builds a more compassionate, resilient, and emotionally healthy future. Supporting children with truth, love, and empathy doesn't just heal their present, it plants the roots of lifelong emotional strength.

Our role in funeral care goes beyond farewells; it's a commitment to life, emotional education, and every child's right to understand, express, and transform their pain. Even in the darkest moments, there will always be light for those who know they are not alone.

This project isn't a tribute to what we've done, it's a promise to what's still to come because in every child who feels supported, there's a stronger future.

And in every tear that holds memory, there is also a seed of resilience.

Funeza is proud to keep planting those seeds.

## **Grupo Gayosso, Mexico City, Mexico**

*Gayosso Aguascalientes, Aguascalientes, Mexico; Gayosso Allende, Coahuila, Mexico; Gayosso Capillas El Carmen, Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico; Gayosso Capillas Marianas, Monterrey, Mexico; Gayosso Capillas Vallarta, Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico; Gayosso Colima, Mexico City, Mexico; Gayosso Cuernavaca, Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico; Gayosso Del Rio, Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico; Gayosso Felix Cuevas, Mexico City, Mexico; Gayosso Francisco Villa, Leon, Guanajuato, Mexico; Gayosso Lomas Memorial, Mexico City, Mexico; Gayosso Lopez Mateos, Leon, Guanajuato, Mexico; Gayosso Lopez Mateos, Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico; Gayosso Madero, Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico; Gayosso Morelia, Morelia, Michoacan, Mexico; Gayosso Periferico, Torreon, Coahuila, Mexico; Gayosso Reynosa, Reynosa, Tamps, Mexico; Gayosso Santa Gema, Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico; Gayosso Santa Monica, Tlalnepantla de Baz, Estado de México, Mexico; Gayosso Sullivan, Mexico City, Mexico; Jardines Del Tiempo, Irapuato, Guanajuato, Mexico; Mausoleos del Angel, Mexico City, Mexico; Valle De La Luz, Acapulco, Guerrero, Mexico*

## **Mariposa Eterna Gayosso**

### **1. Context and justification of the service**

We know the impact that the loss of a baby has on the family unit and what it means to accompany Gestational, Perinatal, and Neonatal Grief, it is a grief that defies language and is often minimized with phrases like "they were very small" or "you'll have another," denying the emotional and symbolic bond with that child.

We realized that the social environment and traditional funeral services are not adequately prepared to adequately accompany this type of grief. Therefore, at Gayosso, we developed Eternal Butterfly, a sensitive, dignified, and transformative concept that honors the brief existence of deceased babies, accompanying families in their farewell process with love and compassion.

The figures reveal profound contrasts: while countries like Norway (1.6), Japan (1.9), Germany (2.9) and Spain (2.5) have minimal infant mortality rates, other regions like Nigeria (70.2), Somalia (72.4) and Afghanistan (104) face devastating realities. Even developed countries like the United States (5.1) and Canada (4.4) continue to report thousands of infant deaths each year. Mexico, with a rate of 11.5, far exceeds its northern neighbors, highlighting an outstanding debt in terms of maternal and child health. Beyond the numbers, each loss represents a broken emotional universe. (all rates are presented as numbers per thousand)

### **2. Overview of Infant Mortality in Mexico**

Infant mortality is a key indicator of development, equity, and access to health services. Although it has decreased in recent decades, it remains a major challenge in Mexico:

- 1 in 4 pregnancies fails
- 1 in 9 babies is stillborn
- In 2023, 23,541 stillbirths were recorded, equivalent to 67.5 per 100,000 women of childbearing age

The most affected age groups are young women:

- 20 to 24 years: 24.1%
- 25 to 29 years: 23.4%
- 30 to 34 years: 19.3%

In states such as Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca, the figures are more alarming, due to factors such as:

- Lack of prenatal care
- Births in inadequate conditions
- Preventable infections
- Low birth weight
- Malnutrition



These figures are not just data. They represent thousands of interrupted stories, scarred families, and invisible grief. At the funeral level, it becomes imperative to offer responses that recognize this loss as valid, significant, and worthy of honor.

### 3. Cultural and Social Background

Although grieving for a baby has not always been visible, in many Mexican communities (especially Indigenous ones) there are deeply humane traditions, such as angel wakes, which celebrate the pure soul of the infant returning to heaven. These rituals, a blend of Indigenous spirituality and Catholic worldview, provide a sense of community and give new meaning to grief.

Currently, the Butterfly Code, implemented for the first time in 2021 at the San Martín de las Flores Hospital (Tlaquepaque, Jalisco), seeks to offer respectful medical care and psychological support to mothers and fathers experiencing this loss. This protocol has been promoted by the Respectful Mourning movement, with which Gayosso actively collaborates to bring this compassionate approach to the funeral setting.

### 4. Creation of the Eternal Butterfly service

Eternal Butterfly is the result of a process of listening, empathy, and human-centered design. It stems from a deep understanding that the way a farewell is delivered directly impacts the grieving process. It can be a source of comfort or increase suffering.

What makes it different?

- Symbolically appropriate funeral products:

- o Moses basket instead of a coffin: Represents tenderness, protection, and love, not adult death.
- o Baby carrier for transfer: Avoids the traumatic impact of forensic bags or stretchers. Allows the baby to be seen as a loved person, not a clinical object.
- o Small, warm, and customizable urns: Soft colors, space for a candle, photograph, or ultrasound. They promote a therapeutic ritual.

- Therapeutic and thanatological approach:

Each element was developed in conjunction with grief and thanatology specialists. The emotional comfort of families was prioritized, as was the comfort of Gayosso staff, who in many cases (being mothers or fathers) expressed that these services were more emotionally difficult for them to cope with.

- Inspired by ancestral rites:

We recovered the essence of rituals such as angel wakes to reinterpret them in a contemporary context, offering Mexican families a warm and culturally relevant way to say goodbye.

### 5. Conclusion

Although Mexico has made progress in reducing infant mortality, the loss of a baby remains a public health, equity, and social justice issue. But also, on an emotional level, it is a wound that often remains open due to the lack of support and appropriate rituals.

At Gayosso, we believe that humanizing death is also a way to dignify life. Mariposa Eterna represents our contribution to this goal: a funeral service designed with compassion, sensitivity, and profound respect for those who barely arrived but left an indelible mark.

**Hightower Family Funeral Homes, Carrollton, Georgia**

*Hightower Family Funeral Homes, Bremen, Georgia; Hightower Family Funeral Homes, Douglasville, Georgia*

At Hightower Family Funeral Homes, we have always believed our role goes far beyond the service itself. Several years ago, we made it our mission to walk alongside families throughout every part of their grief journey—from the moment of loss through the long and often winding road toward healing. In keeping with that mission, we are honored to introduce a new and innovative program: Grief Movement, a grief yoga class created to support individuals as they navigate the physical and emotional challenges of grief.

Grief is more than just a feeling. It impacts every part of a person—mind, body, and spirit. Research shows that grief and trauma can become stored in the body, manifesting in ways such as fatigue, muscle tension, headaches, digestive problems, and more. Traditional talk therapy can be helpful, but sometimes words are not enough to address complex issues. That's why we created Grief Movement—to provide people a space where they can move through grief in a safe, gentle, and supportive way.

Led by our Aftercare Coordinator and Certified Grief Recovery Specialist, Kim Harper, this class takes place every Wednesday at 3:30 PM. Kim received her certification from Paul Denniston, the founder of Grief Yoga, and brings a wealth of compassion, understanding, and experience to each session. Her instruction incorporates breathwork, meditation, stretching, and intentional movement designed to help participants release stored pain, restore balance, and reconnect with their inner strength.

Grief Movement is open to anyone in our community who has experienced loss, no matter when that loss occurred. We welcome all ages and stages of grief. Whether your grief is fresh or long-held, you are welcome. This class is not about perfect poses or flexibility; it's about honoring your journey, leaning into your feelings, and discovering tools that support healing. In each session, participants are also taught simple techniques that they can practice at home to continue their healing beyond the time we spend together.

At its core, Grief Movement is about creating a sacred space for grievers to show up fully, without judgment, pressure, or expectation. It gives individuals permission to feel deeply and move intentionally through their sorrow, rather than carrying it silently in their bodies.

We know that healing is not a linear process. It takes time, patience, and support. We hope that this class provides grievers with the tools and space to be present with their pain, rather than suppressing it. By offering Grief Movement, we are fulfilling our promise to care not just for families in their moment of loss, but in the months and years that follow. It is one more way we honor lives—and heal hearts—here at Hightower Family Funeral Homes.

**Jennings-Calvey Funeral and Cremation Services, Inc., Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania**  
*Scranton Area Cremation Care, Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania*

The Value of Proper Grieving

My name is Lauren R. Calvey, MS Forensic Medicine, and I proudly serve as part of the dedicated team at Jennings-Calvey Funeral Home. Our funeral home is a true family endeavor: my husband, Chris Calvey Jr., serves as the funeral home supervisor, and my father-in-law, Chris Calvey Sr., continues his long-standing commitment as an acting funeral director and president. Since stepping into my role in 2023, I have overseen most of our aftercare and bereavement support services. I have also been a grief and trauma counselor for the past 13 years. I know you'll be reviewing many essays during this time, and it's a true honor to share ours—especially as it centers on a topic that has shaped much of my career: grief, and everything that comes with it. More specifically, the vital importance of being able to grieve in a way that is personal and unique to everyone, humans and animals alike.

Tragic loss strikes in the blink of an eye, often before we can even comprehend what has happened. There are no warning signs, no time to prepare, to plead, or to change the course of events. You're given no choice. No control. And for many of us, that loss of control is what we fear most. When someone is taken suddenly and without warning, it can shatter your sense of stability and shake the very foundation of your world. So, what can we do when the universe offers us so little control over something that affects us so deeply? We focus on what we can control—our actions, our responses, and how we care for ourselves and others in the wake of grief.

June 17th, 2025, our beloved therapy dog and cherished companion, Aspen, made his final appearance at the funeral home to comfort our staff and families one last time. Just a few short hours after returning home, Aspen began to struggle to breathe. We rushed him to the nearest emergency veterinary facility. There, we received devastating news: a previously undetected tumor in Aspen's abdomen had ruptured, causing internal bleeding. We were presented with three options, but the test results soon confirmed what we feared—hemangiosarcoma. A highly aggressive and silent cancer. In the end, there was only one option left, euthanasia. We realized we would not be bringing our sweet boy home that night. We spent some time with Aspen, said goodbye to the best of our ability, and let him go. We felt powerless, lost, and hollow. We had no choice in Aspen's death—but we did have a choice in how he would be remembered, grieved, and honored. My husband, Chris, and I decided that we would take Aspen home.

So often, tragic loss leads to complicated grief. Death and loss are incredibly painful experiences, but they should never be neglected—or rushed. Grief deserves time, space, and compassion. Aspen was such a huge part of our lives—but he was also a beloved member of our funeral home family. For 8.5 years, Aspen roamed the building freely, offering comfort and quiet support to countless grieving hearts. Now, it was our turn to ensure that those who loved him had the space and support to grieve his passing. We brought Aspen back to the funeral home and placed him gently in the cooler. As the door closed, I turned to Chris and said through tears, "I can't believe this is happening—and that I'll never get to see him again." Tears streamed down both our faces as he softly replied, "I can't believe it either. But you can see him again. He's in our care now. We have a little more time to process what's happened. We can choose how we want to say goodbye." My heart pounded. The room felt airless. My mind raced—to our other dog, Aurora, and how she must be feeling. To our 2.5-year-old daughter, Izzy, and how confusing this would be for her. To all the people Aspen had touched, our staff, our visitors, the families who had come to know and love him and how they'd feel waking up to a world where Aspen was just... gone. But Chris was right. Having Aspen in our care gave us a rare gift, the time and space to process, to grieve, and to offer others who loved him the chance to do the same, each in their own way. That is when we decided that we would have a small wake for Aspen.

Wednesday morning felt heavy, dark and empty. Chris went to the funeral home and returned to Aspen's side. Gently, he positioned Aspen on his favorite bed and wrapped him in a soft blanket. He then placed the bed in a small, quiet viewing area, accessible, but private. A space where those who loved Aspen could come and say goodbye if they chose, without being confronted if they weren't ready. It was important to us that everyone had the freedom to grieve in their own way, on their own terms. Chris let our

staff know where Aspen would be. I reached out to close friends and family, giving them the option to say goodbye and find closure if they wished. We didn't care what others might think about holding a wake for a dog. We knew it might seem unconventional even taboo to some. But we also knew that creating space for this kind of farewell was essential to the grief and healing process not just for us, but for those Aspen touched.

First, Chris brought our daughter Izzy to say goodbye to Aspen. Izzy chose to read Aspen a story. She tucked a toy gently between his paws, laid down beside him, and stroked his fur. She softly touched his ears and spoke to him in her little voice. She even tried calling for Tootles from Mickey Mouse Clubhouse to use a Mousekatool to help him; but, Chris explained that while we wish we could, Aspen is in heaven and will live on in our hearts and memories forever. When Izzy came to me after her time with Aspen, I held her and sobbed. She pulled back slightly, placed her small hands on my face, and asked, "Do you miss Aspen, Momma?" We knew that at 2.8 years old, Izzy couldn't fully grasp the permanence of death, but we also knew we could help her begin to process Aspen's absence in a gentle, intentional way. Allowing her to see him one last time gave her a chance to say goodbye, in her own way, instead of waking up to a world where he was simply gone. She had been asleep when we rushed him to the emergency clinic, and without that final moment, I don't know if we could have supported her as meaningfully through the loss. Too often we have seen parents try to protect their children from grief and suffering. In the end, it does not help, it hurts them because when they do have to experience it, they do not know how to process things. Being introduced from an early age allows for a soft introduction.

Aurora, our other therapy dog, wandered in and out of the viewing area throughout the day, almost as if she were checking on Aspen. She seemed comforted by his presence. In her own quiet way, she was saying goodbye. Once again, we were reminded of the gift we had in being able to offer closure—not just for ourselves and our human loved ones, but for Aurora too. She had the chance to see Aspen, to sense the finality of what had happened, and to begin understanding that he was no longer with us. It felt important, and right, to give her that space.

After everyone had come and gone, Lauren had her own quiet time with Aspen. She laid beside him, wrapped her arms around his big body, and breathed in the familiar scent of his soft white fur. After all, Aspen had completed all his training with her—they were deeply bonded. Those 45 minutes gave her something she didn't realize she needed: peace. A peace she knows she would never have found if we had left him in the care of the emergency clinic. Being able to bring him home, to care for him one last time, gave her the chance to say goodbye on her terms... with love, with intention, and with presence. By Wednesday night, we knew that Aspen would return home—to our yard—for his final resting place. We chose a traditional burial, giving him the same dignity and care we offer the families we serve.

Thursday came quickly, and we all felt ready to lay Aspen to rest. Chris, along with our staff member and close friend Ron, and Chris's father, Chris Sr., worked together to prepare Aspen's final resting place. That morning, while the three of them tended to the burial site, Aspen and I spent time together in our sun room, his favorite spot in our house. Later, we carried him outside and placed him in the warm sunlight, letting him rest one last time beneath the sky he loved, in the yard he had called home. When the time came, we gently laid Aspen to rest. We scattered creeping thyme seeds over the burial site, something living and fragrance to grow where he now sleeps. A temporary marker was placed, along with two benches, so we would always have a place to sit with him whenever we felt the need to be close. Often, when we lose someone tragically, we're given no choice. One moment they're here, the next, they're gone. But when we are given the opportunity to properly mourn, to process, and to grieve that loss, we must take it. Yes, the loss itself is the most painful part, but it's the acceptance and processing of that loss that allows healing to begin. We proved to ourselves what we preach every day. Viewing the body is quintessential for radical acceptance and to start the grieving process. Seeing him hurt. But of course, it did. He meant so much to so many people and was so loved by so many. That's why we chose to do what we did for Aspen. We wanted to offer closure to anyone who wanted, or needed it, even if that meant only our family and staff. Grief doesn't follow a predetermined script, and saying goodbye shouldn't either. What mattered most was honoring Aspen and the impact he had on all of us.

Though this loss has been devastating for our entire staff and family, it has also opened our eyes to the profound importance of pet memorization and the need for thoughtful grief support surrounding it. Our pets hold a place in our hearts sometimes equal to or greater than that of family members, and their passing deserves the same level of care, respect, and remembrance. In response, Jennings-Calvey Funeral is actively developing ways for families to utilize our facilities for meaningful pet memorial services. Additionally, we plan to install a pet aquamation system by fall 2025, allowing us to better serve those seeking compassionate care for their beloved animal companions. We hope to extend to others the same kind of support that brought us comfort in the wake of Aspen's untimely passing.

## **McDougald Funeral Services, Anderson, South Carolina**

### **The First Annual Walk of Remembrance**

The McDougald Funeral Home in Anderson, South Carolina was formed in 1934 by Douglas C. McDougald, Sr. and his wife Grace Pearman McDougald. The funeral home was founded on the beliefs of community, integrity and compassion. We are now into our fourth generation still practicing the beliefs instilled 91 years ago.

So many times, in any business, we tend to search for a product or service to surpass our competitors. However, at The McDougald Funeral Home, we have stayed sure and steady on the path of the beliefs set many years ago. We have a strong after-care program, we continually follow up with our families, even years after serving the family. We have hosted candle lighting services, bereavement and grief seminars, gospel singing events, etc. But this year we decided to go on a different route altogether.

We chose the Saturday before Mother's Day, to host a public walk to honor the memory of a loved one. Our funeral home is located on North Main Street in Anderson, South Carolina and we wanted the walk to begin and end at our location. Our goal was simply, to incorporate our beliefs of community, integrity and compassion in this event to give each attendee a comfortable environment to honor a life. We wanted this to be an open, public event for families to attend, even those who we did not serve. We took flyers across the community, visited nursing facilities, went to restaurants and talked with other local businesses to make sure everyone knew about the event. This led to a lot of community engagement from our whole staff.

This walk was a comfortable one mile walk down Main Street that began with the singing of Amazing Grace then a balloon release. This gave each attendee a moment to reflect and remember before going on the walk with others to show them that they are not alone in their grief journey. Following the walk, we partnered with a couple local food trucks to provide food and beverages for those who attended. This created an atmosphere where everyone could relax and interact with each other. With around 150 people in attendance, it showed us that we need to make this an annual event so we have already started planning for next year!

This event was a great opportunity for our staff to "take off their suits" and really interact with the families we serve on a personal level. This adds to the layer of trust that we want each family to have in us, and we think the community seeing our staff in an environment like this helps with that. On the other side, Our staff really can see what the families we serve are going through and not just interaction with them during the time of the funeral. Each person that attended the walk was comforted and taken care of during their visit for the walk as our whole staff was there to help while also attending as a walker. At the conclusion of the event, both our staff and the attendees all left with smiles on their faces, which was one of our main goals when we began planning this community event.

**Merkle Funeral Service, Inc., Monroe, Michigan**

*Merkle Funeral Service, Inc., Monroe, Michigan; Merkle Funeral Service, Inc., Erie, Michigan; Merkle Funeral Service, Inc., Dundee, Michigan; Merkle Funeral Service, Inc., Romulus, Michigan*

For more than a decade Merkle Funeral Service has provided an Outreach Coordinator as a resource to the families we serve. At the completion of the funeral ceremony, the Outreach Coordinator begins working as a concierge or liaison between the at-need funeral directors and our families. The Outreach Coordinator starts by scheduling a time to deliver to the family's home any items remaining after a funeral ceremony. These items may include flowers, register book, death certificates, and memorials, etc... All of these items are placed in a reusable tote bag for convenience. This delivery, known as the Family Bag Delivery, may also include the transfer of cremated remains for those families who have selected cremation. The Family Bag Delivery is scheduled at a mutually agreed time for the parties involved. At this appointment the Outreach Coordinator will review all the items in the bag with the family and answer any immediate questions regarding these personal items. The ministry of the Outreach Coordinator does not stop here. The Outreach Coordinator stays in contact with the family in several different ways. First, a Family Follow-up will be scheduled within 2-3 weeks after the funeral service. At the Family Follow-up the Outreach Coordinator will attempt to visit the home of the next of kin. This is done in order to keep the client in their own element and help them to feel as comfortable as possible. Visiting the home also affords the Outreach Coordinator the opportunity to survey the home/residence to be able to offer additional resources. At the Family Follow-up the Outreach Coordinator provides a coffee mug and laminated bookmarks containing the family approved life story/obituary to the family. The mug also contains pertinent information on topics such as grief counseling, veterans' resources, or other professional services through local trusted agents. When appropriate, the Outreach Coordinator resources on services offered through the funeral home, such as the design of memorials.

The Merkle Funeral Service Outreach Coordinator quickly becomes a friendly, familiar, and respected part of the funeral process for our grieving families. To maintain relationships, The Outreach Coordinator oversees numerous Outreach Events to continue to foster and build relationships. These events include Men's Coffee, a Ladie's Luncheon, and Annual Memorial Service, and Bible Study. Our Men's Coffee event is held at 8:00am on the first Wednesday of each month. We provide the breakfast, and our male guests provide the conversation. The Ladies Luncheon is hosted every other month on Wednesday afternoon at 1:30pm. We once again provide a catered meal for our ladies and our guests either have a short presentation or complete a craft project together. A non-denominational Bible study is held every Tuesday at 8:00am and our Annual Memorial Service is held in the afternoon on the first Sunday of December.

In conclusion, the Outreach Coordinator and the Outreach Events are an essential part of the service Merkle Funeral Service provides to our grieving families. We not only strive to be a resource to our families at the time of death, but throughout their life.

**Miles Funeral Home, Holden, Massachusetts**

*Miles-Sterling Funeral Home, Sterling, Massachusetts; Kelly Cremation and Funeral Care, Worcester, Massachusetts*

**At-Home Bereavement Care: Discovering an Underserved Population Within Our Horizon in Need of Our Expertise in Grief-care**

Judi Brennan of Notre Dame du Lac Assisted Living facility first approached Miles Funeral Home by email because there was no one on their pastoral care or social worker teams with the skills to lead a bereavement support group for the several residents who were grieving the loss of families members. In her October 2024 email she noted, "We have had a number of couples who have lost a spouse recently. They are all suffering in their own ways and try to support each other as they are able. I would love to start a support group here, but I do not have experience and have not lost anyone so dearly close to me. Would you be able to help us get a group together and get started, or advise me on how I can get this started? She further noted, "With residents who are elderly, and most do not drive, going to another meeting is not possible. I would like to have meetings here - which could be open to the public too, in a space that is accessible to our residents." Then she directly asked: Is it possible for you to help us get this underway at Notre Dame du Lac?

Experiencing death loss is a natural and increasingly frequent occurrence as we age. Nearly three-quarters of the 900,000 Americans who become widowed annually are age 65 or older. One study reported that 71% of adults aged over 65 years had experienced at least one bereavement in a 2.5-year period. Congregate living is also a trend for the aging population. One such accommodation is an Assisted Living Facility where staff focus on helping residents with activities of daily living that do not require skilled nursing care. According to Statista, there were over one million residents in assisted living communities in the United States in 2022. In Massachusetts there are 300 Assisted Living Care Facilities with a total capacity of 13,600 residents. Approximately 70% of residents are female and a large percentage of residents, around half, are 85 years of age or older. After making the transition to assisted living, the average American lives for 27 months. The median length of stay in an assisted living facility is 22 months. Most assisted living residents have medical conditions. Forty-eight percent have high blood pressure, 42% have Alzheimer's or other dementias, 31% of heart disease, 29% have depression and 17% have diabetes. With the high occurrence of the death experience among this population, healthy grieving is a significant concern in maintaining physical wellbeing.

As is the case in many regions, the majority of bereavement support groups in our geographic area are public events in public places such as senior centers, churches, and funeral homes. Limited transportation and weakening health (especially after the death of a spouse or loved one) often keeps elders from accessing the bereavement care they need. Residents of assisted living facilities are among this underserved population. When we were approached by an assisted living to offer bereavement support at their facility there was no question, we had to do it! Although this population makes up a large portion of our customer base and we are known for offering a strong, effective bereavement program, we had now encountered an underserved population within our horizon, needing our expertise in grief-care.

After several conversations, the Notre Dame du Lac Bereavement Support Group, sponsored and led by Miles Funeral Home began on December 13, 2024 with a presentation entitled Bah Humbug! Healing From Complicated Grief. Now in its eighth month, this at-home program for elders offers grief literacy and emotional support. The program is open to griever and their companions. The program dates and topics are attached as a document.

Pamela Reidy, Mile's Director of Community Education leads the monthly group at the assisted living facility. The Director of Pastoral Care is always in attendance. Pam is responsible for planning each session and providing any resources needed to carry it out. Pastoral Care is responsible for posting program notices, inviting participants, reminding residents of the meeting, transporting residents to the room where the sessions are held, and remaining in the room for the session. After each session Pam and the pastoral care staff discuss any follow-up that may be needed as a result of the session.



The benefits to the funeral home include:

- an opportunity to help meet the bereavement needs of an underserved population
- increased exposure of our services with a group of potential customers
- an increased opportunity to offer preplanning that supports elders in their own environment.

The benefits to the community include:

- grief support for residents actively grieving
- education about loss and grief for residents companioning each other at the facility (creating a support community for the bereaved)
- education and support to the facility staff responsible for the emotional and physical care of bereaved residents
- residents do not have to travel outside their home to access bereavement support

Death loss among older adults is a highly relevant topic for today's funeral homes. In 2011, the Baby Boomer Generation began turning 65, and by 2030, all Boomers will be age 65 and older. Individuals between the ages of 65 and 79 account for 27.7 percent of funeral service marketplace, and individuals 80 and older account for 46.1 percent of the marketplace.

Miles Funeral home has a strong reputation for allocating resources to bereavement care. Reaching out to an underserved population, providing at-home bereavement support is a welcomed contribution, as noted by the du Lac Executive Director Jessica Brigham in her May 23rd letter: "Thank you for helping to provide the foundation of support that enables us to do the very best for those we serve. Your participation is truly a blessing."

## **Milward Funeral Directors, Lexington, Kentucky**

*Milward Funeral Directors – Southland, Lexington, Kentucky; Milward Funeral Directors – Man ‘O War, Lexington, Kentucky*

Art therapy can be a deeply healing and transformative process for individuals grieving the loss of a loved one. Grief is complex and often difficult to express through words alone. Art therapy offers a non-verbal, creative outlet that helps individuals explore and process their emotions in a safe and supportive environment.

On June 18, Milward Funeral Directors invited families they served in the past to participate in a neurographic art creation with light refreshments and a chance to relax and have a time of self-care and reflection. The purpose of the workshop was to offer individuals an opportunity to create a small neurographic art piece with quiet meditation in a casual atmosphere to connect, and express their creativity. All art supplies were provided and included an opportunity for guests to enjoy a light appetizer and fellowship. Milward limited the event to just 10 people in order to keep it an intimate and non-intimidating environment.

Milward is fortunate to have a funeral director on staff who is passionate about art and even more so about leading art workshops with families who are on a healing path from the loss of loved ones. Funeral Director Angie Walters, along with her fellow artist Stephanie Say led the workshop.

Angie Walters began as an artist at an early age during junior high and high school in Elkhart, Indiana where she is from originally. Her works include pen & ink, mixed media and pastel, acrylic, and most recently, watercolor. Throughout the last 20 years, Angie has volunteered or held membership with Studio 315 in Mishawaka, Indiana, Shelby Artists on Main in Shelbyville, Kentucky as well as Art House Kentucky in Lexington. She started her journey in funeral service in 2012 and now works for Milward Funeral Directors.

One of the primary benefits of art therapy after a loss is the ability to express emotions that are difficult to articulate. Grieving individuals may feel overwhelmed by sadness, anger, guilt, or confusion. Art allows them to communicate these feelings through symbols, colors, and imagery, offering relief and a sense of release. This form of expression can be particularly helpful for children and those who may struggle to talk openly about their grief.

Art therapy also promotes relaxation and stress reduction. The act of creating can be calming, helping to reduce anxiety and bring a sense of peace during a time of emotional turmoil. The focus required for artistic expression can provide a temporary respite from ruminating thoughts and painful memories, creating moments of mindfulness and emotional clarity.

Another benefit is the opportunity to maintain a connection with the deceased. Through creating memory books, portraits, or symbolic artwork, individuals can honor and remember their loved one in a personal and meaningful way. These creative rituals can become part of the healing journey, offering comfort and a sense of continuity.

Art therapy can also foster greater self-awareness. The creative process often brings unconscious thoughts and feelings to the surface, allowing individuals to better understand their grief and how it affects different areas of their lives. This insight, especially when guided by a trained art therapist, can lead to emotional growth and acceptance.

In group settings, art therapy can reduce feelings of isolation. Sharing artwork and experiences with others who are grieving can build a sense of community and support, reminding participants that they are not alone in their pain.

Ultimately, art therapy empowers individuals to cope with loss in a way that feels authentic and healing. It offers a space for both expression and reflection, helping people move forward while honoring the memory of their loved one. Even without prior artistic experience, anyone can benefit from the healing potential of art during the grieving process.

## **Monte Vista Funeral Home & Memorial Park. Johnson City, Tennessee**

### **"Wind Phone Project"**

At Monte Vista Funeral Home and Memorial Park, we know the importance of bringing life to a funeral home and cemetery. We want to make visits to loved ones that have passed pleasant and comforting, all the while making tactile and physical experiences that can be interacted with. Landmarks that inspire introspection and provide comfort serve a dual purpose to the property; they promote a pride in the property and a sense of being invested and involved in the community.

Monte Vista Funeral Home staff aren't just death care professionals, we are members of our community; Our memorial park isn't just "A" cemetery to choose from, we are "THEIR" family's cemetery. We assist them in times of grief and welcome them back even after helping them navigate the initial loss of a loved one. We are here to honor relationships in all stages of life, loss, grief, and regrowth.

To expand aftercare options to the families we serve, the staff of Monte Vista Funeral Home and Memorial Park began our plans to construct and install a Wind Phone for visitors to our cemetery in early January 2025. Realizing our Wind Phone became a mission for all of us. Each one of us researching Wind Phones, materials, crafts, and functions that could benefit and build on its presence in our cemetery.

It became apparent that we could help fill a need not being met within a 50-mile radius and create a healthy medium that would promote healthy grieving in a period where we see more direct burials and cremations and an absence of memorial services. Whether those family decisions are being financially motivated or coming from an aversion to the grief process, both groups deserve a healthy and beautiful way to memorialize their loved ones.

We talked to our family members and brainstormed, walked the cemetery to locate the best spot to install our booth, and had touching conversations with each other about how we would use the feature for healing in our own lives. Everyone has a grandmother, husband, sister, or friend that they desperately wish they could call; we are not without our own losses.

A wind phone at a cemetery offers grieving families a comforting way to feel connected to their loved ones. This was a staff project we all enjoyed putting together, custom building the wind phone from the ground up by our maintenance team Thomas Clark and Charlie Hollifield, to laying out the area where it sits with landscape and sign and to now see it to completion by all staff members. Families can also paint rocks as a memory and leave in the landscape bed around the Wind Phone which we already have some in place. We are excited and honored to be able to provide this to our families and community at Monte Vista Funeral Home and Memorial Park. It was officially placed and open to the public to begin using on May 10, 2025. This is such a beautiful landmark for our clients that we hope bring the start of Healing and Comfort for each one that uses it as we have heard stories already that has brought tears to our eyes and made our heart happy to know the vision has done exactly what we hoped and more.

## **Morada da Paz, Parnamirim, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil**

### **"Grief Professionals"**

#### **1. Introduction and Contextualization**

The experience of grief is a universal human occurrence, marked by emotional, spiritual, social, and cultural aspects. Although inevitable, death remains a taboo subject in many cultures, which can be especially challenging in professional environments. For employees working in funeral services and cemeteries, for instance, it is a constant presence in their daily routine.

Within the context of Morada da Paz, one of the largest funeral service groups in Brazil, professionals are exposed daily to the pain of grieving families, facing emotionally challenging situations often without adequate preparation to handle such demands. Acknowledging this scenario, the Grief Psychology department has developed the project "Professionals of Grief," with the aim of caring for those who care, valuing the mental health of these workers and promoting a new awareness of their professional role.

As Kübler-Ross (2008) highlights, death must be understood as part of the life process, not as a traumatic interruption. When ignored or trivialized, it can silently affect the health of those who face it daily.

According to Morin (1970), death breaks with the logic of productivity and denial of time — when placed before us, it reveals our finitude and forces us to confront what is essential. For workers who deal with death on a daily basis, this constant exposure can generate both deep reflections and defense mechanisms that numb their emotions.

Norbert Elias (2001) also notes that modern society has pushed death to the backstage of life, delegating it to specialized institutions, which contributes to the dehumanization of the dying process. In this sense, the workers in these environments become silent representatives of an experience that society as a whole seeks to avoid.

In light of this, the proposal to care for these professionals aligns with what Boff (1999) calls the ethics of care: a commitment that is not merely technical, but deeply human, in which the act of caring involves empathy, presence, and mutual responsibility.

This view is also supported by Corrêa (2003), who states that listening to and acknowledging the psychological pain linked to death are essential tools to humanize the experience of grief — not only for those who lose someone, but also for all those who accompany this process from behind the scenes.

#### **2. Justification**

Although they are fundamental parts of the machinery of end-of-life care, workers such as gravediggers, ceremonial staff, attendants, hearse drivers, and other collaborators in these services rarely receive emotional training or symbolic recognition for the impact of their work.

Chronic exposure to contexts of pain and loss, combined with the low symbolic value attributed to their professional roles, can lead to psychological suffering, emotional exhaustion, normalization of others' pain, or, conversely, the development of empathetic blockages that hinder compassionate service.

In our experience at Morada da Paz, it was common to hear from funeral agents — those who visit families to retrieve the deceased — a deep sense of resentment due to the lack of recognition for their work. They often reported being treated poorly during that initial contact with grieving families, who at times responded with harshness. For our agents, it was difficult to understand that their presence often made the loss feel real for those families — signaling the confirmation of a reality they never wanted to face: that someone they loved was truly gone.

These feelings, shared by our agents, further reinforced our commitment to put the Professionals of Grief project into action.

In short, the project was born out of the need to:

- Promote emotional care and qualified listening for these professionals;
- Strengthen the identity of these workers as Professionals of Grief;
- Reduce the impact of continuous exposure to death;
- And, as a result, enhance the quality of care provided to grieving families.

The denial of death, as described by Norbert Elias (2001), leads to social silences and discomforts that extend into professional environments. In many settings, those who work with death become invisible — even though they deal with one of the most profound human experiences. And how can someone commit to delivering excellent work if they do not feel recognized?

### 3. Creative and Innovative Concept

The Professionals of Grief project is based on the principle that caring for others is only possible when there is genuine care for oneself. While this idea may seem overused, it gains even greater relevance when inserted into a Western culture that values productivity, performance, and the pursuit of happiness — often silencing or marginalizing experiences of pain and suffering. In this context, professionals who deal daily with death and grief are constantly exposed to others' pain, often without having safe spaces to emotionally process these experiences. Neglecting self-care can lead to cumulative psychological suffering, fostering emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of helplessness.

Winnicott (1971) already warned that "true care is only possible when there is a sufficiently sustained self." The absence of this support can lead to what Christina Maslach (2001) describes as burnout: a state of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, common in emotionally demanding work environments. Furthermore, Norbert Elias (1989), in discussing society's denial of death, highlights how the concealment of this theme in public spaces contributes to the emotional isolation of those who professionally live alongside it.

Therefore, caring for professionals who deal with grief is not merely an act of empathy — it is an ethical and strategic necessity for them to carry out their roles with sensitivity, presence, and genuine support for grieving families. Creating spaces for listening, emotional processing, and symbolic recognition is thus an essential step in building a more humane institutional culture, aware of the complexities surrounding the experience of grief.

By combining psychological support, professional reflection, and ongoing training, the project proposes a humanized and transformative approach that recognizes employees as individuals with emotional rights and as protagonists of meaningful work. Its innovation lies in challenging the invisibility of these workers and promoting a symbolic construction of professional identity. It is not only about providing support but also about fostering belonging, recognition, and personal development.

The humanized approach to care, according to Boff (1999), acknowledges dignity and vulnerability as essential aspects of the human condition, especially in contexts of pain and finality.

Inspired by authors like Norbert Elias, who discusses the denial of death in contemporary societies, and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who values listening and empathy in the face of suffering, the project centers listening and relational bonds as the core of care and transformation.

Additionally, as Corrêa (2003) affirms, grief requires recognition and validation—not only for those who experience a loss but also for those who professionally witness it.

Taking a further step toward innovation, the project is expanding beyond cemeteries and funeral homes and reaching other places where death also occurs: hospitals. There, healthcare professionals who

dedicate their lives to preserving life often do not recognize themselves as part of the grief process. Yet, they are constantly confronted with loss — loss of patients, of connections, of expectations.

This accumulation of losses, often silenced by the fast pace of hospital work, can cause emotional fatigue, affective distancing, and even psychological illness. In an environment where the ideal of "healing" prevails, death is frequently perceived as failure — rather than a natural part of life. This perception hinders emotional processing and compromises holistic care.

Bringing Professionals of Grief into hospitals means expanding its reach and social relevance. It means offering listening and training to teams that live with death daily but rarely find institutional spaces to reflect on it. It means helping doctors, nurses, technicians, psychologists, and others to:

- Recognize themselves as individuals also affected by grief and loss;
- Care for their mental health, preventing emotional exhaustion and psychological suffering;
- Strengthen humanized care practices, especially during moments of death and the delivery of bad news;
- And thereby offer more empathetic and respectful support to grieving families.

As Kübler-Ross (1994) emphasized, speaking about death helps us find new meaning in it— and only when healthcare professionals allow themselves to acknowledge the impact of death on their own paths can they humanize how they guide patients and families through it. By entering hospitals, the project reaffirms the value of institutionalized, compassionate, and critical listening — recognizing grief as an inseparable part of the caregiver experience.

Continuing its path of expansion and innovation, the Professionals of Grief project is also reaching other spaces where grief manifests silently, yet profoundly — such as veterinary clinics and hospitals. This means recognizing and addressing a kind of loss that, though significant for many, is still often socially invalidated: grief over the death of a pet.

According to Walter (2020), disenfranchised grief (a term coined by Doka, 1989) occurs when a person's loss is not socially acknowledged, making it harder to receive support or validation for their pain. Pet grief is a classic example of this: many people feel deep sorrow after losing an animal companion but are embarrassed to express it or seek help for fear of judgment or minimization.

In this context, professionals working in veterinary settings — veterinarians, assistants, receptionists — become key witnesses to the suffering of pet owners. However, they too often experience grief, especially in cases involving euthanasia, sudden death, or long-term relationships with animal patients.

By bringing the Professionals of Grief project to these settings, we aim to:

- Offer training and discussion groups that help teams understand the grief processes experienced by pet owners;
- Create emotional care spaces for the professionals themselves, who also deal with frequent and emotionally taxing losses;
- Contribute to a culture of more humanized and empathetic support during animal farewells, strengthening the bond with pet owners and the mental health of staff.

This approach reinforces the inclusive and sensitive nature of the project, expanding its view of the many forms of grieving and recognizing that grief is not limited to human losses. In doing so, Professionals of Grief reaffirms its commitment to ethical and respectful acknowledgment of pain — in all its manifestations.

Ultimately, this entire movement contributes to re-signifying the place of death in caregiving environments, bringing health and mortality together in a more ethical, sensitive, and responsible field. By expanding the project beyond funeral services, we break the notion of death as an exclusively terminal event, disconnected from institutional daily life. We begin to recognize it as part of the human journey — present in hospitals, homes, clinics, and in our emotional ties with animals.

In this sense, Professionals of Grief becomes a cultural and transformative tool: it proposes that caring for others includes recognizing pain, that professional practice must also embrace emotion, and that institutions can be places not only of technical efficiency, but of presence and humanity. It is, therefore, a project that not only supports grief — but repositions it as a legitimate and worthy experience of care in every space where life happens and, inevitably, comes to an end.

#### 4. Detailed Project Description

The Professionals of Grief project operates through two main pillars, with ongoing and targeted actions focused both on caring for employees and on developing their professional identity.

##### PILLAR 1 — EMPLOYEE CARE

Focus: Promoting emotional health and preventing psychological distress.

Implemented actions:

Monthly Psychological Listening Groups:

- Facilitated by psychologists.
- Held with different departments (gravediggers, ceremonial staff, customer service, transportation, cleaning, etc.).
- Address recurring themes in professional routines (such as grief, suicide), or topics that arise from psychologists' contact with teams (such as alcoholism, social vulnerability, religious and gender intolerance).
- After the discussion, the space is opened for free sharing by employees.

Brief Individual Psychological Support (on-call sessions):

- Offered based on spontaneous demand or referral by the team.
- Addresses situations such as recent losses, grief due to suicide, emotional suffering, social vulnerability, suicidal ideation, among others.

Care actions on sensitive dates:

- Planned around dates like All Souls' Day, Christmas, or in specific contexts such as during the pandemic or after impactful losses within the team.
- Includes symbolic acts of support, messages, group conversations, or moments of listening and tribute.

##### PILLAR 2 — PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND IDENTITY

Focus: Strengthening the identity of workers as Professionals of Grief and improving the quality of care for grieving families.

Implemented actions:

Thematic Workshops and Trainings:

- Topics covered: grief, suicide-related grief, disenfranchised grief, loss of pets, spirituality, active listening, psychological first aid, importance of rituals, among others.
- Conducted with different departments and, when needed, adapted to each team's language and reality.

Leadership Training for Content Multiplication:

- Leaders receive structured content.

- They are guided to replicate it within their teams and submit follow-up reports documenting the process.

#### Reflective and Creative Writing Activities:

- Employees are invited to express personal and professional reflections on the topics discussed in the workshops through writing.
- These writings foster engagement, self-awareness, and deeper understanding of the subject matter.

#### Internal Appreciation Campaigns:

- Symbolic and communicative actions to reinforce employee recognition as Professionals of Grief.
- Includes bulletin boards, videos, testimonials, and tributes.

Ongoing training, grounded in psychoeducation, is one of the pillars of the Professionals of Grief project. By offering clear, accessible, and applicable information on the phenomenon of grief and its various manifestations, the project helps reduce stigma, misunderstandings, and maladaptive responses to the pain of others.

According to Worden (1998), psychoeducation allows individuals to better understand the emotional processes involved in loss, fostering both compassionate care for others and emotional self-preservation.

By developing a broader and more conscious view of their role, employees begin to act with greater empathy, preparedness, and a sense of purpose—truly embodying the identity of a Professional of Grief.

#### 5. Expected Results / Impacts

The Professionals of Grief project was born from the core commitment to transform a silent, yet powerful reality: the pain carried by those who care for the pain of others. Today, we are already witnessing the fruits of a journey that has redefined relationships, strengthened professional bonds, and established a culture of care that extends beyond the physical walls of our facilities. As the project continues, we aim to achieve:

- Reduction in indicators of psychological distress and occupational stress;
- Greater sense of belonging, self-esteem, and recognition among employees;
- Reinforcement of the symbolic identity of workers as Professionals of Grief, with a clear understanding of the dignity and importance of their role;
- Significant improvement in the quality of support provided to grieving families, with more empathetic, sensitive, and respectful approaches;
- Consolidation of a humanized organizational culture grounded in listening, care, and ethics.

More than numbers, the impact of the program can be felt in the words of those who live this transformative process day after day:

"The Grief Psychology sessions help me understand and better manage my own emotions. That way, I can support others with more empathy, respect, and sensitivity."

Cleide, Ceremonialist – RN

"Psychology is care for the soul. It's the place where pain finds a voice, where silence is listened to with respect... Those who care for others also need to be cared for."

Rosiana Solidade – Ceremonialist, Morada da Paz/RN

"Grief psychology was essential for me. I had lost my mother and was ready to give up on everything. I was welcomed with such empathy and respect that I found strength to keep going."

Beatriz – Essential Salesperson, Natal



"I realized grief is everywhere — in big and small losses, in visible and invisible pain. Grief psychology taught me to recognize and validate all forms of sorrow."

Lucineide Bento – Ceremonialist, Morada da Paz/RN

"The support I received saved my life. I was having very dark thoughts... but I was met with words that reconnected me with the desire to live."

Rafael Silva – Funeral Agent, RN

These testimonials reveal that the project saves stories, rebuilds people, and gives new meaning to work. It's not just about mitigating suffering — it's about fostering a new ethos for the funeral industry: a space where grief is respected and professionals are emotionally equipped to offer — and receive — care.

Beyond the institutional setting, the project's impact extends outward. By expanding into hospitals, clinics, and veterinary spaces, the program promotes intersectoral practices that create a broader care and listening network, where death is no longer simply an absence, but an invitation to ethical support.

"The grief training helped me see more clearly how we, as veterinarians, are also deeply affected by loss. I've had to perform euthanasia and comfort guardians during painful goodbyes, but I never had a space to process those emotions. The training gave me empathy, tools, and listening — for myself and for others. Today, I practice with greater awareness, respect, and humanity regarding pet grief."

Beatriz Silva – Veterinarian, PE

"As a nursing technician, I'm used to caring for people in critical moments, but I never had space to deal with the many losses I've witnessed. The grief training helped me understand that feeling the pain of death isn't weakness — it's humanity. I've learned to recognize my own grief, to better support families, and above all, to care for myself. Today, I feel more emotionally prepared and more connected to the human side of my profession."

Tatiana Lima – Nursing Technician, RN

Looking ahead, the project also aims to achieve broader and more impactful long-term outcomes, such as:

- Reinforcing Morada da Paz's reputation as a national reference in humanization within the funeral sector;
- Actively contributing to transforming the culture of death in Brazil, bringing it out of silence and into open dialogue;
- Strengthening employees' self-image as active agents of emotional care in society;
- Creating an emotional, institutional, and social legacy that upholds dignity at the end of life.

As Edgar Morin stated, "facing death with awareness is an act that humanizes us." By placing care at the center of the work experience, the Professionals of Grief project not only humanizes grief — it humanizes the world of work itself, reclaiming listening, presence, and empathy as the foundation of every profession that touches lives.

## 6. Final Considerations

Caring for those who deal with death on a daily basis is both an ethical and human imperative. The Professionals of Grief project is grounded in listening, appreciation, and the collective construction of meaning. It acknowledges that grief is not only experienced by those who lose a loved one, but also by those who silently witness every farewell.

By integrating emotional support and professional development, the project enables employees to recognize themselves as powerful, compassionate, and essential individuals — not merely task executors, but people who uphold, with dignity, the rituals of passage.

In a world that silences death and romanticizes productivity, the Professionals of Grief project offers a powerful counterpoint: care as a radical practice, recognition as a health strategy, and listening as a tool for institutional transformation.

Caring for those who care for death is, above all, a civilizing act. It is the recognition that these professionals occupy a liminal space — between the end of one story and the beginning of another: the story of rebuilding. They are silent witnesses to collapse, but also seeds of symbolic reconstruction. That is why they must be acknowledged not only for the roles they perform but for the humanity they sustain amid pain.

By offering listening, training, and symbolic recognition, the project operates in the quiet spaces of institutional silence, turning grief into a legitimate field for emotional elaboration — not just for those in mourning, but for those who accompany the grieving process each day. And by expanding its scope to hospitals and veterinary clinics, it reaffirms that death is present in all places — and that care must reach it wherever it occurs.

As Judith Butler (2004) emphasizes, grief is also a way of recognizing the interdependence that defines us as human beings. By acknowledging the emotional impact of loss — even when it is unnamed or socially unrecognized — we become more attuned to the pain of others and, therefore, more ethical. The Professionals of Grief project embodies this ethic: an ethic of connection, presence, and mutual recognition.

The legacy it seeks to leave goes beyond the institutional sphere. It is an invitation to all of society to reframe how we understand death, labor, and humanity. As Kübler-Ross (2008) beautifully concluded, "People are like stained glass windows: they sparkle when the sun is out, but their true beauty is revealed only when darkness sets in and a light from within shines through."

## **Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre, Madison, Indiana**

### **Grief Program Expands & Emphasizes Social Interaction for Widows, Widowers**

- Observations of recent widows and widowers smiling, chatting and sharing experiences about travel, hometown roots, children and careers of yesterday.
- Farewell gestures encompassing hugs, handshakes and waves.
- Cards expressing gratitude as well as personal thank-you's from their children for "getting Mom/Dad out."
- Online posts of their participation prompting outreach from current friends, old neighbors and high school buddies.
- Traditional grief support options attracting low attendance and/or participation.

When added up, these individual components prompted Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre in 2024-25 to re-examine its grief program and place more emphasis on social interaction for recent widows and widowers. With the emphasis primarily on psychological resources, our previous offerings featured the traditional services of grief support meetings, printed material by authorities and private counseling. Although not an instant, inclusive panacea, the enhanced social concept lets our new widows and widowers gradually experience the road to acceptance and normalcy with those walking the same journey. And even when a three to six hour outing ends for the day, its impact continues on with participants having pleasant memories and sharing happy talk about the event with family members and friends in their private, inner circle. At least for a while, thoughts of the spouse's death, personal stress and isolation take a backseat.

Without question, some new widows and widowers do need and desire conventional grief aids and Morgan & Nay certainly maintains those options. However, we certainly observed and sensed the need to implement a more, healthy "moving forward and accepting" concept.

An additional, internal factor that also influenced our expanded social thrust entailed how the death of a spouse significantly differs from the death of a parent or sibling although the latter one is much, much loved and deeply missed. But in the days or weeks following the death of a parent or sibling, there is a spouse at home to extend compassion, address the hurt, listen and do things together. That powerful support arm no longer prevails when the death involves a spouse. Although children, relatives, neighbors and friends still reach out, understandingly they must return to their routine lives and employment responsibilities. For most widows and widowers, the former house of two – filled with laughter, conversation and plans - becomes a lonely structure for one. The four part-time associates who primarily coordinate the events/activities side of Morgan & Nay's grief program are all widows and they reference that point often.

The expanded Morgan & Nay social concept spans the entire calendar year, thus always available to new widows and widowers. Activities and events range from lunch outings at a rural, bucolic bistro, holiday luncheons, Christmas show, day trips to the unique. None of the endeavors focus on grief per se nor incorporate counseling advice, but rather create and promote happy fellowship and social interaction – the sunshine of life. The aura of grief will still be there when they get home.

For several of the activities, Morgan & Nay mails personal invitations (in hand-addressed envelopes) and always creates an interactive program for each endeavor. For the holiday and luncheon gatherings, we also encourage invitees to bring a guest along to provide an extra comfort zone for the invitee. This gesture encourages attendance, plus lets Morgan & Nay strengthen the bond with old friends and clients as well as meet new acquaintances. And regardless of event type, there are Morgan & Nay AfterCare associates in attendance to make sure every guest feels involved and welcomed. No one ever sits nor stands alone. The social concept, as well as the company mission, would fail if a guest felt isolated or regret that he/she came. For most of the events, the Morgan & Nay personnel are part-time employees who comprise our AfterCare team, thus no negative impact on the company's daily operation nor full-time employment force.

## A Brief Overview of the Social Diversion Activities

### Stream Cliff Farm Luncheon

Each late spring and mid-fall, Morgan & Nay invites recent widows/widowers to be our guests at a quaint, bucolic bistro, embellished with flowers everywhere, a large herb garden, primitive antiques, concrete figurines and a savory sandwich/dessert menu that never fails to please. The setting's ambiance with its many simple but unique features not only soothes the soul but prompts conversations entailing memories, experiences and questions. Although the eatery only looms about 15 miles away from the funeral home, many of our guests have always heard about it, but never been there.

### Christmas Luncheon

For one day in early December, the gathering room in our branch chapel totally changes style and exudes Christmas with festive table décor, Christmas carols playing in the background and Morgan & Nay associates decked out in festive red and green attire. The program, designed and implemented by the Morgan & Nay AfterCare team, focuses on the happy aspects of the holiday. Segments range from most popular Christmas songs, Christmas memories that now bring a smile – such as the lights wouldn't burn but the turkey did or Santa forgot to tighten the bolts on the bicycle wheel, family traditions, must-have foods at the holiday table, family or cultural customs passed down through time and/or generations and the list goes on. Morgan & Nay associates assemble the meal from items purchased from local venues or caterers. The lunch-style menu is not elaborate nor expensive but nice and always with emphasis on presentation. The event is not about the lunch, but the ambiance and fellowship. For the Christmas 2024 hospitality token for guests to take home, Morgan & Nay gifted each attendee a small ceramic Christmas tree ornament featuring a photo of his/her spouse. Several attendees contacted Morgan & Nay days later to request an additional ornament for a child or family member. The ornament was an Amazon product, under \$2, with the photo retrieved and printed from our files, thus an inexpensive gesture with a meaningful touch.

### Valentine Luncheon

The Valentine luncheon resembles the Christmas luncheon in concept, format and social outreach, except everything sports red with lots of hearts. Again, no focus on grief per se but rather segments of happy topics with guest interaction purposely designed. Segments range from history of Valentine's Day, different Valentine customs around the world, most popular Valentine gifts, readings of humorous "vinegar valentines" of the past, extravagant gifts by celebrities and the rich, the top love songs of all times (with everyone even singing some of the verses!), memories of how guests met their forever valentine, places and/or unique locations where guests tied the knot and amusing Valentine happenings (such as the husband recycling the same 99 cents Valentine card every year of their marriage – a 2025 story) and the list goes on. For the 2025 Valentine hospitality gift for guests to take home, Morgan & Nay presented each attendee with a small ornandy sack of assorted chocolates, of course accented with a delicate red bow with embossed hearts.

### Christmas Show

Every recent widow/widower, as well as all other Morgan & Nay clients who have lost a loved one since the past Christmas, receives complimentary tickets to the Morgan & Nay Community Christmas Show which features a musical artist/group, plus a 30-minute "SingAlong of Christmas Carols" prior to the concert. There is no limit on number of free tickets whether it be for one, two or more for his/her immediate family members. This gesture differs somewhat as it promotes social interaction and camaraderie within family amidst a joyous, stress-free environment, a most valuable component in the grief process.

### Day Trip Series

Now enjoying its 12th season with 149 outings completed as of June 2025, the Morgan & Nay Day Trip Series hosts an outing to an area attraction once a month. Representing all facets of the community, the participant roster always includes lots of widows and widowers with that single-life status several years old in many situations. Unlike our other social interactive options, this popular activity (which is detailed in another category) does entail a charge for participants but for the most part money is not an issue for most of our recent widows and widowers. Getting involved and getting out is the biggest obstacle. The

trips feature all types of attractions, from historic sites, musical productions, sports, Christmas extravaganzas to art exhibits. This social diversion option certainly accommodates the fellowship and stress-free environment needed by really all widows and widowers, not just the recent ones.

#### Fishing Trip

Definitely a popular outing with our recent widowers, a fishing outing to a nearby farmer's pond certainly hits the spot. Most of the participants have the essential gear with Morgan & Nay's primary tasks being to do the organizing, fix a sack lunch and bring the worms. A great day of fellowship, nature and big fish stories of the past!

#### Spring Flowers & Growing Tips

A spring, gardening gathering always prompts a lot of internal sunshine for our new widows. They bring their favorite flower pot and Morgan & Nay provides the potting soil, flowers and a picnic style lunch. To add a little wisdom to the event, Morgan & Nay also invites a member of the local garden club or an area greenhouse to share growing tips. With perhaps a little potting soil on their shoes, every guest goes home with a happy heart, some useful growing tips and a colorful container of flowers to enjoy as the days lengthen and the grieving heart heals.

These social activities with a therapeutic impact also generate another positive side effect for which Morgan & Nay can only take partial responsibility. Our company posts follow-up coverage of every event on our Facebook page, which has 8,000 plus followers. We try to include a photo of every activity participant, along with his/her name. The participants look forward to the coverage and so many, many receive likes and comments from current and old friends that bring joy to the soul. Morgan & Nay obviously cannot take credit for the positive outreach by others, but it certainly brightens the day for our new widows and widowers and attests to the healthy benefit of social interaction.

From a company perspective, our social emphasis generates multiple dividends in addition to the principal focus of accommodating recent widows and widowers. The concept lets us bond more closely with the families we serve, connects us to potential clients and certainly casts Morgan & Nay in a positive limelight within the community. The bonding mileage and community exposure far exceed the benefits derived from most advertising and marketing expenditures. Except for the Day Trip Series which is advertised once every six months in the local bi-weekly newspaper, we do not encounter any advertising expenses for these activities. Personal mailings, Facebook posts, in-house flyers/brochures and word-of-mouth do the connecting.

Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre certainly validates the need and maintains the traditional grief resources for recent widows and widowers, but the increased response, enthusiasm and therapeutic impact of the company's expanded social direction attest to its value as well. The two approaches are sisters with different formats but the same quest.

Wanting to be part of that force, Morgan & Nay Funeral Centre certainly aligns with the paraphrased grief adage that "It takes strength, willingness and interaction with others, the human side of life, for a person to make his way through grief, grab ahold of life again and let those influences pull him forward."

## **PinesFuneral, Carthage, North Carolina**

*PinesFuneral, Robbins, North Carolina; PinesFuneral, Aberdeen, North Carolina*

### **“Canvases & Couples – A Creative Pathway to Healing”**

#### **Rationale Behind the Idea**

Grief is a deeply personal journey that affects not only individuals but relationships as well. At Pines Funerals, we recognized a recurring theme among grieving couples and partners—while both individuals may be navigating loss, they often process it in very different ways, leading to emotional distance. We wanted to create a positive, non-clinical experience that would encourage connection, creativity, and emotional healing.

Thus, the “Canvases & Couples” Painting Night was born—an idea that emerged during internal grief aftercare strategy sessions in spring of 2025. Our goal was to offer an accessible, cost-free evening of art, conversation, and companionship for grieving couples and partners in our community.

#### **Detailed Description of the Program**

The first “Canvases & Couples” event took place on May 6, 2025, from 6–8pm, hosted at our Southern Pines location. Participants were invited to enjoy a guided painting experience led by a local artist, with all materials, refreshments, and setup provided at no cost.

Couples painted side-by-side on joined canvases designed to create one cohesive image—symbolizing unity and shared healing. A grief care facilitator offered gentle prompts throughout the evening to inspire meaningful conversation between partners, all while respecting privacy and emotional space.

We included elements like:

Light background music to create a calming environment

A reflection wall where couples could write one word or phrase to describe their experience

An optional post-event discussion group for those seeking deeper connection

#### **Benefits Provided to Families and the Community**

The event was a tremendous success, with every available spot filled within 48 hours of promotion. Attendees expressed appreciation for an event that was “healing without being heavy” and “a breath of fresh air in a difficult season.”

Some couples hadn’t discussed their grief openly in weeks—and this relaxed, art-centered space allowed them to reconnect without pressure. Several requested future sessions and asked about bringing other grieving friends.

The event also gave the community a new perspective on how a funeral home can serve beyond services—positioning us as not just providers of end-of-life care, but facilitators of long-term healing.

#### **Benefits to Funeral Home and Staff**

The program allowed our staff to engage in a nontraditional form of grief support, broadening their experience and compassion in a creative, joyful environment. It also deepened our connection with local artists and therapists, sparking ideas for future collaborations.

Importantly, the positive public feedback and word-of-mouth generated new trust in our brand, particularly among younger couples and families—an audience we're working to support more proactively.

#### Community Partners

Brush & Bloom Studio: Provided our featured artist and painting supplies.

Sandhills Hope Network: Helped promote the event to grieving families in their network.

#### Conclusion

"Canvases & Couples" transformed an ordinary Tuesday into a healing experience for dozens of grieving hearts. As one participant said, "We didn't know we needed this until we walked in the door." Through brushstrokes and quiet moments, our community was reminded that love and healing can still grow—even in the wake of loss.

**Schramka Funeral Homes, Brookfield, Wisconsin**

*Schramka Funeral Homes, Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin; Schramka Funeral Homes, Thiensville, Wisconsin*

Real change often grows from something subtle—a spark of awareness, a moment that lingers. For our funeral director, Amanda King, that spark came from reading “The Right Way of Death: Restoring the American Funeral Business to Its True Calling” by Eric Layer. In it, she came across an inspiring event called Scatter Day, first hosted by Sunset Memorial Park in Albuquerque, New Mexico, back in 2017. This idea was born out of a striking statistic: according to a study by the Cremation Association of North America (CANA), 1 in 5 Americans has cremated remains stored in their home. In response, the cemetery offered families an opportunity to bring those remains in—free of charge—for respectful placement or scattering within the cemetery grounds.

Amanda immediately saw how deeply a service like this could resonate in every community, including our own here in Milwaukee. But there was a hurdle: in Wisconsin, funeral homes and cemeteries must operate separately, which made organizing an event like Scatter Day a bit more complicated. That’s when Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery stepped in. For years, they’ve graciously accepted unclaimed cremated remains from local funeral homes for free placement during their annual All Souls Remembrance in November—a tradition rooted in dignity and compassion. This was exactly the kind of partnership we needed. Amanda reached out to Holy Cross to assure the acceptance of the cremated remains collected through our emerging event. With a straightforward registration form for each family, everything began to fall into place: a purpose, a plan, and the placement.

Because we wanted this to be more meaningful than just a drop off of urns, we created a memorial service event to bring closure to the families who had been holding on to their loved ones’ cremated remains. Amanda branded the event “Gather Them Home” in a nod to Pope Francis’ decree regarding proper disposition of cremated remains. We sent invitations to all of our families from the last five years, and promoted the event through our Facebook page, local Chambers of Commerce, and were featured in an article in our local newspaper.

On the day of the event, we offered one hour of registration time prior to the service when our staff could collect, label, and photograph the urns and confirm the information on the cemetery registration form. The memorial service included readings read by staff, meaningful music selections, and words of comfort by clergy. The service was followed by a reception in our dining area for food and fellowship. We were able to collect 30 urns at our first event, some of them having cremation dates decades old. The relief we felt from families as they could finally have a place to lay their loved ones to rest was immense. We will continue to host the event annually to provide dignified placements of cremated remains in situations where they might not otherwise find a proper resting place.



## **Señoriales Corporación de Servicio, Guatemala, Guatemala**

### **Where Memory Shines – Tributes of Light and Life Introduction**

When life touches silence with its departure, the soul seeks symbols, rituals, and spaces that allow pain to be transformed into love, and absence into living memory. At Señoriales Service Corporation, at our Los Parques Cemetery location, we understand that remembering is a form of loving, and that accompanying is a sacred act. That is why November 1st is not just a date—it is an opportunity to ignite, together, the hearts of families through tributes that reconcile, rituals that heal, and experiences that plant seeds of hope.

This essay reflects on the unforgettable moments of our accompaniment, where art, culture, spirituality, and empathy intertwine to pay tribute to those who are no longer physically present, but live on intensely in every glance, every word, and every shared step. Because when memory is illuminated, so too is the path for those of us who miss them forever.

From the first ray of sunlight, as the dew still caressed the headstones and the sky began to awaken above Los Parques Cemetery, the Artists of Señoriales were already prepared. Tribute Coordinators and Pre-Need Consultants began the day with one shared purpose: to lovingly accompany the thousands of families who would come to visit, remember, and honor their loved ones.

Nothing was left to chance. Every flower, every candle, every scent, every melody, and every space was carefully designed to touch the heart. Mexico and Guatemala merged into living symbols that honored our roots, our spirituality, and our way of understanding death as part of eternal love. We knew that on these days, memories hurt more, absences weigh heavier, and silences speak louder. That is why each tribute was designed as a delicate and loving tool to reframe grief and offer comfort.

Music served as a soft whisper that welcomed our visitors, filling the air and inviting reflection and tribute. Each melody evoked memories of those held dear.

The hummingbird, messenger of the soul and a symbol of spiritual connection, hovered over our emotions with its presence in stations, decorations, and meanings. Its quick flight, like a heartbeat, reminded us that true love never dies—it transforms.

Among the most significant tributes was the 360 Tribute, named for the way it surrounded the Tree of Life with love and memory: a majestic and iconic cypress tree at the cemetery, where so many memories have taken shape over time. This day was no exception. Its crown was adorned with flowers in sacred colors of the celebration—yellow, orange, and purple—resting in handcrafted baskets that evoked our roots, our hands, and our culture.

Around it, three carefully arranged altars offered an immersive journey through the traditions of Guatemala and Mexico, two countries united by the depth with which they honor their departed loved ones.

The Guatemalan altar included traditional elements such as copal, incense, and candles, symbolically guiding souls back home. The Mexican altar showcased death in its most festive form: colorful catrinas, pan de muerto offerings, and vibrant flowers, symbolizing the connection between the living and the departed. The carpets made of sawdust and flowers, the lingering aroma of incense, and the voiced legends created a space where culture became a bridge between nostalgia and gratitude.

One of the most touching moments was the tribute to our beloved departed pets, integrated with respect and tenderness in one of the altars. Small figurines, photographs, toys, and objects representing their role in the family were placed with care. In this way, love was expressed in its fullest form: every beloved being—human or not—had a place in this tribute filled with life, memory, and affection.

**Natura Pathway: A Journey Between Nature and the Soul**

Amidst breathtaking landscapes, the Natura Pathway unfolded—an experience designed for families to walk together, not just on earth, but through memory. This intimate journey, intended for small groups of 10 people, offered the opportunity to create meaningful memories while breathing in the tranquility of the surroundings and honoring those who live on in the heart.

Gently guided by Tribute Coordinators—experts in soul-centered accompaniment—the Natura Pathway invited each family to pause, feel, plant, and release. It was more than a walk: it was a ritual in motion.

Along the way, families encountered symbolic stations filled with intention:

At the Lookout Point, the majesty of the volcanoes offered an awe-inspiring view, where the vastness of the landscape mirrored the soul. There, families began a journey of emotional release, inspired by the memory of those who walked beside them in spirit.

At the Hummingbird Station, each participant planted a succulent in a hand-decorated pot, representing the permanence of love and the life that blooms even amid grief. The hummingbird—symbol of spiritual presence and divine message—inspired families to also cultivate gratitude for the time shared.

At the Garden Station, visitors left handwritten notes of love in a space for inner reflection. Words became emotional roots, planted among soil, greenery, and memories—a way of returning to the origin and reconnecting with what truly matters.

Every step of the Natura Pathway was a pause for the soul—a path to honor, to heal, to continue. Because sometimes, what we need most is a space where we can walk in silence, hand in hand with those we love, listening to the heart say what words cannot always express.

#### Tributes of Invaluable Objects: Stories That Never Fade

In the sacred spaces of the Durantas and Pinos pergolas—carefully prepared to provide a dignified and loving farewell—small exhibitions arose, speaking without the need for words.

These were intimate tributes, profoundly human, where cherished objects of loved ones told their story, their legacy, and the love they left behind.

Each object evoked a memory. A life. An essence. A presence. The families who visited these spaces didn't just see objects; they witnessed eternal bonds.

Among the altars were conch shells resting on white sand holding a laptop—symbol of someone who fused technology with spirituality. Ballet shoes told the story of a tango enthusiast, still seeming to sway to the rhythm of memory. Board games recalled joyful family afternoons, while a worn rosary represented the interweaving of faith and love in endless prayer. A military uniform carefully placed beside a guitar spoke volumes—symbol of a person who served with courage but whose soul resonated with every chord of Spanish rock. Their life was both duty and melody. Valor and passion.

This tribute, rich in identity and soul, also became an open doorway to inspiration. Those who walked through it didn't just discover our ways of honoring—they discovered how they, too, might one day be remembered. It was a journey through life, legacy, and the profound desire to be honored with meaning.

From November 1st to 3rd, families were invited to take part in a symbolic act: to write a message to their loved one on a candle and place it wherever they felt was most meaningful. Thus was born the tribute called "Memories of Light"—a tribute where each lit flame became an unspoken word, an eternal thank-you, a spark of heaven ignited on Earth.

Thousands participated, each with their own story, their own grief, their own hope. And by the end of the journey, everyone understood: it is not about the objects themselves, but what they awaken—the certainty that love never dies, it simply changes form.

#### Kite of Remembrance: When the Soul Flies Among Colors

At the heart of this commemoration, two monumental five-meter kites rose into the sky, spreading their form and message as a bridge of paper and wind between Guatemala and Mexico. This Kite of Remembrance Exhibition was a visual and symbolic tribute to our shared roots, uniting two sister cultures with a single intention: to honor the eternal connection between the earthly world and the spiritual one.

The kites, so emblematic of our traditions, evoked the flight of souls that, like the wind, are never seen but always felt. Their vibrant colors, soaring shapes, and solemn silence became a living metaphor of what we are—memory, heritage, and hope rising together to the heavens.

But beyond contemplation, there was also room for creation. In the “Journey of Memories” Kite Workshop, families had the opportunity to assemble and decorate their own kite, sharing brushes, paper, thread, and memories across generations. It was a deeply human experience, where creativity intertwined with love, and each participant took home a unique, personalized piece filled with meaning.

Each handmade kite was more than a craft—it was a symbol, a way of expressing through form and color what the heart often struggles to say. They were paper wings carrying names, dates, promises, and gratitude. An offering to the sky made by hands that remember and hearts that continue to love.

This experience brought together grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren around memory, transforming tribute into an act of unity and continuity.

#### Experience Zones: Where Memory is Also Savored, Chosen, and Shared

At the core of each tribute day, special spaces blossomed—designed for gathering, resting, reflecting, and connecting. These Experience Zones were not just passing areas; they were corners where memory became presence, where each family found one more reason to stay... to share... to feel.

One such space was the Afternoons of Remembrance Experience, located in the charming Moments and Memories Garden. There, the café transformed into an extension of home—a place where the aroma of coffee and the flavors of togetherness opened the door to conversations that heal. As food was enjoyed, families reflected, remembered, and wove new memories in honor of those no longer physically present but still alive in everyday life.

Just steps away, the Garden of Remembrance Experience offered a sensory space where floral arrangements and products from our florist combined art, color, and elegance. Each displayed flower carried the potential to become a gesture, a living offering to adorn the resting place of a loved one. It was a space to admire beauty, choose with the heart, and honor with grace.

The Entrepreneurship Route, located in the Fine Arts Portal, offered the opportunity to explore a variety of products crafted by Guatemalan artisans. From local goods to toys and accessories, this area became a meeting point of tradition, talent, and affection. Entire families strolled through the stands, chose with joy, and shared special moments that strengthened the community spirit of the event.

To complete this holistic experience, gastronomy took center stage with a warm and vibrant offering. Under umbrella-covered tables and surrounded by twinkling lights that enhanced the November 1st atmosphere, attendees enjoyed a journey through the culinary richness of our lands. Three food areas—featuring Guatemalan, Mexican, and international cuisine—brought flavor to the tribute, while the food trucks and carts in the Momento Café Garden created a relaxed, family-friendly environment full of flavor.

In each zone, life was celebrated through the everyday—reminding us that tributes are not only lived in silence. They are also expressed when we sit together, when we choose a flower, when we eat with loved ones, or give something handmade. Because every detail lived with love... is also a tribute.

#### Thanksgiving Mass: When Love Rises in Prayer

Amid the gentle bustle of the tributes, the Thanksgiving Mass offered a moment of spiritual reflection and collective communion. It was a sacred space to honor, with gratitude, the lives of those who have passed, and to accompany families in the certainty that love continues to act, even in silence.

Days before, people were invited to share photos of their loved ones through social media. These images—full of stories, gazes, and essence—were projected on a screen outside the Ecumenical Chapel while the mass was celebrated with deep reverence and devotion.

Each projected photograph was like a candle lit. Each name mentioned, an offering of love. Each prayer, a bridge between heaven and earth. There, amidst soft songs and words of hope, faith transformed into an embrace, and the invisible presence of the departed felt more alive than ever.

#### Flight of Hope: When Love Takes Wing

One of the most moving moments of the day was the Flight of Hope Tribute, a deeply symbolic act that allowed families to express their love through words written from the soul. In an intimate and collective gesture, each attendee was invited to write a message of love and hope addressed to the loved one no longer physically present, but whose presence remains alive in the everyday.

These messages—filled with gratitude, promises, and memories—were symbolically entrusted to messenger doves, which, upon taking flight, represented the invisible and unbreakable bond that ties hearts together beyond time and distance. It was a moment where silence was filled with meaning, and tears blended with smiles as eyes turned to the sky.

This tribute took place simultaneously in three of our parks: Mandarin (by the Butterfly Garden), Fountain of Memories, and Half Moon. These places were transformed, if only for a few minutes, into altars to the sky. Guided gently and respectfully by our consultants, families experienced a moment of deep and loving connection.

More than an activity, the Flight of Hope was an act of faith—an emotional tool to reframe pain and turn absence into message. For those who participated, it was also a reminder that love does not need a body to remain, that words soar higher when born from the heart, and that each goodbye can carry the seed of a new spiritual bond.

#### Luminous Journey: A Sky Lit by Memories

The day concluded as it should—with a moment filled with magic, hope, and shared beauty. The long-awaited Luminous Journey was more than a show; it was a collective spiritual experience, a symphony of light and emotion that turned the sky into a canvas of remembrance.

From early in the day, thousands of people participated in every activity, moved by the sense of unity and reflection that surrounded them. Each tribute, each station, every lovingly designed space prepared hearts for this unique finale—where family, memory, and faith united in a single shared feeling.

Little by little, as ambient music caressed the air and poems whispered verses to the soul, the gravestones began to glow one by one, as if each memory awakened in the form of a flame. Each space was transformed into a cradle of light, where each candle lit was not only a tribute but a reunion. The silence was deep and sacred. Eyes looked to the sky; hearts, within.

It was a moment of profound empathy, where visitors and artists shared the light of their candles, walking together through the cemetery paths. Each sanctuary of love became a beacon of hope—a visible testimony that love continues to beat beyond life.

Then, the sky exploded in color. Over 120 lighting effects per minute painted emotion across the stars in a four-minute light show that left everyone breathless. The air was filled with awe, with gentle tears, and with a shared certainty: love doesn't end with life—it transforms, rises, and becomes light.

The Luminous Journey didn't just light up the sky. It illuminated memory. It illuminated hope. It illuminated the soul of those who, returning home, carried in their hearts the certainty that they had lived more than a tribute—they had lived an unforgettable experience.

It was a magical and powerful way to close the day—a luminous affirmation that memory lives on, that love never fades, and that although absence hurts, we remain... remembering with love.

Expressions of joy through tears and gestures of hope filled the atmosphere, as families bid farewell to their loved ones with open hearts, offering them a "see you soon" filled with love, light, and faith in reunion.

#### Night of the Souls: Honoring with Color and Tradition

On the second day of commemoration, the cemetery was transformed into a stage filled with symbolism and beauty, giving way to one of the most anticipated cultural expressions: the Catrina Walk. This experience, framed within the Day of the Dead celebration, paid tribute to our Guatemalan and Mexican roots through living art.

Five personalized catrinas, carefully designed and full of details that represented the fusion of both cultures, appeared throughout various cemetery parks. With painted faces, majestic outfits, and solemn presence, they walked in silence but spoke powerfully. Each one was an allegory of death—not as an end, but as part of life's natural cycle—a graceful reminder that those who have departed still walk beside us in different ways.

Their presence was deep and visually unforgettable. Families, especially children, experienced this tradition in a participatory way through the face painting station, where kids and adults transformed their faces into true works of art. Smiling skulls and vibrant designs turned the experience into a joyful yet respectful celebration, where death was dressed in culture, art, and memory.

Though not literal night, Las Ánimas shone under the sun—a day when souls found their path, when remembrance was painted in bright colors, and tradition became a living experience. Because when tribute is expressed through art, grief becomes an affirmation of life, and each step of a catrina among us brings us closer to our roots—and to those we love.

#### Day of the Stars: When Love Shines Beyond Goodbye

The third day was reserved for a silent yet profound tribute: the love for our pets. At the PET Dignity Garden, an experience was held to honor—with respect, tenderness, and compassion—the unconditional bond we share with those beings who gave us their whole hearts without words.

The Grief Workshop: Remembering with Love brought together people who, despite their pain, dared to share their feelings, memories, and stories of farewell. In this intimate and respectful space, emotions found common ground. Words became comfort. Listening, a balm. It was a collective act of empathy and recognition—because grieving a pet also deserves to be acknowledged, honored, and accompanied.

After the workshop, a symbolic and poetic tribute followed. Each participant received a small wooden star, where they wrote their pet's name and a personal message. These stars were taken home to be placed in a special spot, creating a terrestrial constellation of names that still shine in memory.

Led by a Tribute Coordinator, families joined in a brief ceremony with warm and meaningful words. The star mural, at the end of the tribute, resembled a constellation stitched with love. There, among leaves and wind, lingered the promise that every pawprint left behind is eternal—that their departure is not oblivion, and that their memory continues to beat in nature, in daily life, and in the souls of those they loved.

This simple yet powerful act united the beauty of nature with the everlasting glow of the stars, offering comfort to those who, even through their pain, found space to give thanks and celebrate the life shared with their loyal companions.

#### Pet Parade: Creativity, Memory, and Love on Four Legs

We ended this special day with a vibrant, emotional, and colorful celebration: the Pet and Costume Parade, where creativity became a language of remembrance. Children, adults, and entire families participated enthusiastically, creating a tribute filled with play, tenderness, and respect.

Pets, dressed in Day of the Dead themed costumes, didn't just walk—they honored the stars no longer with us. Each costume told a story through fabrics, flowers, paints, and symbols. Some evoked departed companions, others celebrated shared life—but all spoke the language of love.

The most creative, heartfelt, and meaningful costumes were recognized—those that best captured the deep significance of the day: the continuity of the bond with those who left their pawprints on our hearts. It wasn't a competition, but a shared tribute—where the most important thing wasn't to win, but to participate from a place of emotion and connection.

And so, with applause, smiles, a few tears, and many photos, we closed the Day of the Stars by celebrating the legacy of our pets—those who taught us to love unconditionally and who continue to shine like little lights in our inner universe.

#### Three Days of Love, Tribute, and Healing

Each day was a total act of accompaniment and love—where families found comfort and a safe space to express their love. With countless meaningful experiences, the community attending Los Parques Cemetery found ways to honor, remember, and heal.

#### Massive and Strategic Reach

This edition not only marked a turning point in attendance but also became a case study in the implementation of a comprehensive public relations and media outreach strategy.

We partnered with three major media outlets: TV Azteca Guate, Diario de Centro América, and Nuestro Diario, who provided exclusive coverage that amplified the event's impact. Over 20 digital media articles were published, reaching a potential audience of 30 million people. Two media pitches were distributed, engaging more than 60,000 individuals in key audiences.

We also had the active participation of three spokespeople from Señoriales Corporación de Servicio: David Coronado, Karim Flores, and Marilú Retana, who led interviews and briefings, highlighting the values, meaning, and importance of the event for families and the community—positioning it not just as a commemoration, but as a space for healing and connection.

This cohesive communication strategy elevated the event's visibility to historic levels and reflected a significant increase in attendance—from 16,000 to 40,000 visitors—a clear testament to the power of effective communication and a message aligned with community values.

Success was measured not only in numbers but in the impeccable organization and safety that allowed over 40,000 attendees to enjoy the event in a peaceful, secure environment. This was made possible thanks to solid partnerships with key institutions, including the Department of Transit, the Municipalities of Guatemala and Mixco, Guatemala Firefighters, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance. Their commitment ensured order, safety, and appropriate care—reflecting the spirit of collaboration necessary for events of this magnitude.

These partnerships not only strengthen the trust of the families who accompany us but also reaffirm our commitment to responsible and high-impact planning.

#### Conclusion

All Saints' Day, Day of the Dead, and the Day of the Stars not only brought together thousands of people—they united souls. Each tribute was a bridge; each symbol, a key to unlock hearts closed by grief. Families found comfort in beauty, art, words, and silent presence that speaks from the human spirit.

With lit candles, soaring kites, catrinas walking among gravestones, whispered prayers, and pets remembered tenderly—we reaffirm a luminous truth: Love does not die—it transforms.

Señoriales Corporación de Servicio continues walking alongside every family, committed to a living promise: to accompany with empathy, compassion, and expertise before, during, and after. Because changing lives also means honoring them. And as long as there's a heart that remembers—there will be a memory that shines forever.

## **St. Peter Chapels, Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines**

### **Comfort in Play: St. Peter's Care Club for the Little Ones**

Grief is a profound and complex emotion that affects individuals of all ages. While adults often navigate their sorrow through familiar coping mechanisms, children experience grief differently. When young children face the loss of someone dear, their anxiety can intensify, reflecting their confusion and fear. Their way of grieving is deeply influenced by their age, understanding of death, and ability to express their thoughts and feelings. Beyond age, many factors such as biological, socio-cultural, spiritual, and emotional can shape a person's perspective on death<sup>1</sup>.

Unlike adults, children are still innocent and lack the full knowledge and experience of loss and grieving. Death may not be completely new to children, they might have possibly experienced the death of a pet, seen dead insects, or watched it on television, however, a loved one's death, especially if experienced for the first time, can be a confusing and traumatic experience<sup>2</sup>.

When a family member passes away and someone familiar is missing, children might not fully understand what happened. Although they may not grasp the concept of death, they can observe the sadness in the adults around them and may feel a sense of loss, even if they can't articulate it<sup>3</sup>.

Each child's journey in handling grief is unique, shaped by each one's experiences and the love that surrounds each of them. Understanding and addressing child grief is crucial, especially in environments like funeral homes, where the emotional weight of grief can be overwhelming. This is where the St. Peter's Care Club plays a significant role.

The St. Peter's Care Club is a specially designated facility within the funeral home—located at the St. Peter Chapel - Commonwealth Mega Chapel in Quezon City, Metro Manila, that provides children of the families of deceased and children of visitors with a comforting and child-friendly environment. This was officially launched on October 26, 2024. The St. Peter's Care Club measures 25 square meters and is easily accessible from the chapel lobby, ensuring convenience for families and guests.

The St. Peter's Care Club is open daily from 10:00 AM to 8:00 PM and was designed to accommodate up to 15 children at a time for children ages one (1) to eight (8) years old. The facility is equipped with educational toys such as puzzles and shape sorters, along with pretend play sets such as a model coffee shop, hospital and kitchen. Larger toys, including lego blocks and a swing, add to the fun, creating a lively yet safe environment.

The primary objective of the St. Peter's Care Club is to provide the children of the families of deceased and children of visitors with a safe space play facility to manage their grief through playing and interacting with other children. On a more practical level, the St. Peter's Care Club also allows the adults to focus on essential tasks such as coordinating funeral arrangements, preparing flowers and snacks for the viewing, and attending to guests and visitors, knowing that their children are in a secure environment where they can safely play and interact with other children. This not only keeps children from roaming or running around the funeral home and maintaining the solemnity and sanctity of the viewing chapel rooms, but also maintains respect and solemnity for other families of deceased who are grieving. The St. Peter's Care Club serves as a delicate balance, ensuring that the needs of both children and adults are met during such a difficult time, which is vital to creating a respectful and supportive atmosphere for everyone involved.

To ensure a safe and enriching experience, the St Peter's Care Club has established clear guidelines. Parents or guardians are required to complete and sign a waiver before their children can enter. Children must wear socks in the play area, and each child must be accompanied by a parent or guardian for proper supervision.

Additionally, to maintain the cleanliness of the play area facility, mandatory cleaning sessions are scheduled every day from 12:00 PM to 1:00 PM and from 3:00 PM to 4:00 PM. Hand sanitizers are



conveniently made available throughout the play area to promote hygiene and safety. These house rules and measures foster a secure and welcoming environment where children can play freely, allowing their families to focus on healing and support during their time of loss.

Aside from toys, the St. Peter's Care Club offers other activities that help children express themselves during difficult times. One key feature is the Comfort Journal, where children can write or draw in the pages where the sections are titled "Dear Jesus," allowing them to share their feelings about their loved ones who passed away. The St. Peter's Care Club also provides coloring activities featuring coloring sheets with spiritual symbols such as angels, praying hands, doves, and butterflies, encouraging children to explore their emotions through art. Additionally, the St. Peter's Care Club facility features a Prayer Wall where children, parents, and guardians can post and leave short prayer notes or loving message notes on the Prayer Wall for their departed loved ones.

To facilitate these experiences, a dedicated staff member oversees the St. Peter's Care Club, ensuring the children's safety and assisting them with their activities. This combination of play, creative expression, and attentive supervision creates a nurturing environment in the funeral home that supports children in navigating their feelings and emotions during such delicate times.

Why a play area? What does it have to do with grief? In an article published by the Center for Loss and Bereavement, it is noted that there can be comfort in play. For children, play offers a vital space to work through complex emotions—whether it is solving problems, confronting strong feelings, or escaping confusing situations. Play provides a safe environment for children to process fear, love, anxiety, memories, or loss. It is a natural and essential medium through which children express themselves, explore their thoughts, and cope with difficult circumstances.

In the context of grief, play serves several important functions<sup>4</sup>:

**Emotional Expression:** Play allows children to act out scenarios related to their loss, helping them articulate feelings that are often hard to put into words.

**Normalizing Grief:** Engaging in playful activities can help children understand that grief is a normal, natural part of life—reducing feelings of isolation or abnormality.

**Social Connection:** Play areas foster interaction with peers, nurturing a sense of community and shared experience during a challenging time.

**Coping Mechanism:** Play acts as a therapeutic outlet, enabling children to manage their emotions and begin the healing process.

To understand the impact of the St. Peter's Care Club, we conducted interviews with parents and guardians about their experiences. We asked how the St. Peter's Care Club has helped their children and what improvements could be made. (Please see attachments).

On November 1, 2024, the St. Peter's Care Club recorded its highest availment of 39 children at the said play facility at different times throughout that day. As of June 30, 2025, a total of 3,549 children have benefited from the St. Peter's Care Club from its launching on October 26, 2024, highlighting its importance within the funeral home of St. Peter Mega Chapels Commonwealth, Quezon City.

The St. Peter's Care Club was created to foster a safe environment in the funeral home for children to grieve and for their parents to focus on their grieving. Through the St. Peter's Care Club, we honor their emotional needs and help them as they process their grief.

In the end, grief is not just a solitary experience, it is a shared journey that can deepen empathy and understanding among all of us.

#### **MOMents of Love: Mother's Day Memorial Wall**

"A mother's love is endless and unconditional — from the cradle to beyond the grave."

— Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh

In a heartfelt tribute to mothers who are no longer with us, and to honor them on Mother's Day, St. Peter Chapels created the "MOMents of Love: Mother's Day Memorial Wall," which was located at the chapel lobby at St. Peter Mega Chapels - Quezon Avenue, Quezon City.

The MOMents of Love: Mother's Day Memorial Wall was launched on May 1, 2025, well ahead of the celebration of Mother's Day on May 11, 2025. It aims to provide a physical platform and meaningful experience for those longing for their mothers' love. Through this memorial wall, families and guests who have lost their mothers can relive cherished memories and share them by writing and posting their messages to their departed mothers on the wall.

This memorial wall serves as a tribute to the unbreakable bond between mothers and their children. It offers an opportunity to our clients to celebrate Mother's Day at the funeral home by filling the MOMents of Love: Mother's Day Memorial Wall with memories of love. In this sacred space, we are reminded that even though our mothers may no longer be with us, their love remains an indelible part of who we are.

To make this experience even more colorful and personal, St. Peter Chapels has designed custom notepads in four different colors for clients and guests to choose from. Writing messages of heartfelt tributes and love for departed mothers bring cherished memories of mothers to life and honor the significance of mothers in our lives. As more messages are added, the wall transforms into a colorful and powerful tapestry of remembrance, weaving together different stories, memories and sharings of a mother's love into a shared community expression of connection between families and their beloved mothers.

A total of 106 messages have been lovingly written and posted on the MOMents of Love: Mother's Day Memorial Wall from May 1, 2025 until May 31, 2025. Each message note was a touching testament to the cherished memories of dearly departed mothers. Each note and memory stands as a testament to the enduring bond between mothers and their children that transcends time and loss. MOMents of Love: Mother's Day Memorial Wall is more than just a tribute; it is a celebration of the enduring love of mothers that is always and forever will remain.

The collective expressions of Mother's love on the MOMents of Love: Mother's Day Memorial Wall serve as a powerful reminder that the love between a mother and her child is timeless and forever. This initiative by St. Peter Chapels is a heartfelt effort to provide comfort and foster a sense of community for our grieving clients who had to celebrate Mother's Day at our funeral home.

The success of this Mother's Day tribute at our funeral home has laid a strong foundation for future projects. We plan to make the MOMents of Love Memorial Wall a recurring tradition, establishing it as a meaningful activity for next year's Mother's Day, as well as for Father's Day and Grandparents' Day. By institutionalizing these moments of remembrance, we hope to continually honor the enduring love of parents and grandparents who have passed away, creating a lasting legacy of connection and compassion within our funeral home community.