

Business

By Scott Ankerholz

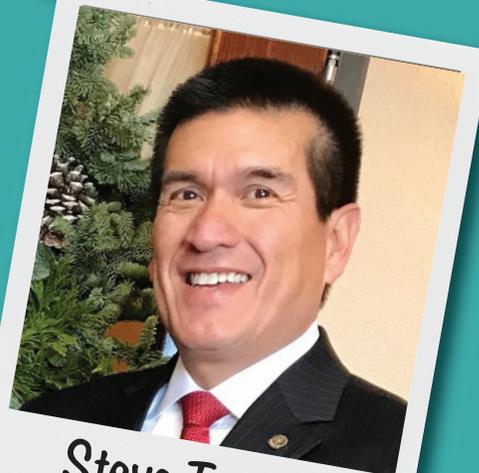
5 Ways Funeral Service Has Changed

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It's more than new tech and rising cremation rates



James Letson



Steve Trevino



John Williams



Tommie Kamm



Kevin Waterston

Ask anyone in the funeral profession to identify the biggest changes he or she has witnessed in our business over the past 30 years and “new technology” and “increasing cremation rates” will most likely be at the top of the list. While technology and cremation are very real and impactful trends that have and will shape the future of death care, we were curious to learn what other not so obvious changes have been observed by those who have devoted their lives to serving grieving families.

To that end, I sat down with five former owners, all of whom joined Foundation Partners Group in the past five years, and asked them to reflect on the “then and now” of our profession. Together, they represent nearly 200 years of funeral service experience, and some of their answers may surprise you.

Kevin Waterston, co-founder & manager, Cremation Society of Minnesota, and Worsham College of Mortuary Science advisory board member

Kevin Waterston is a recognized cremation pioneer who, along with his brother Mark, founded the Cremation Society of Minnesota in 1980 to complement the services of his family’s Minneapolis funeral home. Over the next 30-plus years, Kevin and Mark grew the business to five locations. In 2017, they sold the business to Foundation Partners and today the Cremation Society of Minnesota is the leading provider of cremation services in the state.

One thing that I find very interesting right now is that most of the mortuary school students that I come into contact with do not have a desire to own their own funeral service businesses. My dad attended mortuary school in the 1940s and I attended in the 1980s. During those years, the overwhelming majority of mortuary school students wanted to own their own funeral homes. Today’s mortuary school students, millennials and younger, do not seem to want the financial burden and

24/7 responsibility of owning a funeral service business. Many grew up watching their parents work very hard and sacrifice their own family time to serve grieving families; they want a more flexible, less stressful lifestyle.

Another change that I’ve seen is a dramatic increase in competition among funeral service businesses, especially in the cremation space. My brother and I got into the business of simple cremations early and watched it grow from 6% of all dispositions in the 1980s to more than 70% in Minnesota today. The bar for entry into the direct cremation space has been lowered greatly, allowing more and more people to get into the business. Many see direct cremation as low-hanging fruit and they get into the business without a focus on building a sustainable, long-term business. This has created a very different marketplace and new challenges for traditional funeral homes.

John Williams, Foundation Partners director of cemetery strategy and former co-owner of Farley Funeral Homes, Venice, Florida

After earning a degree in accounting from Troy University, John Williams married Michelle Farley, a third-generation funeral director, and joined the family business – Farley Funeral Homes and Crematory and Venice Memorial Gardens in Florida. In 2006, they purchased the business from Michelle’s parents. In 2021, they joined the Foundation Partners Family and John now oversees cemetery strategy and development across the company’s

entire portfolio of local firms.

One of the biggest changes I have seen in my 25 years in this business is the increasing importance of certified funeral celebrants. As families transition away from organized religion and traditional burial customs, many no longer have family priests or ministers to turn to when loved ones pass. They do, however, still want to create meaningful funeral or memorial services and certified celebrants

have stepped in to fill this void. Certified celebrants first appeared on my radar 15 years ago when I learned of InSight Institute’s Certified Celebrant Training Program. The celebrant role in funeral homes across the country has increased as they work with families to create tributes as personal and individual as the personalities of the deceased. This service adds value to funeral homes, cemeteries and to the families they serve.

James Letson, retired former owner of Becks Tribute Center, Edmonds, Washington

Over the course of a funeral service career that spanned nearly 50 years, James Letson owned and operated funeral homes, crematories, cemeteries and a preneed insurance agency. He sold his multifaceted operations to Foundation Partners Group and retired in December 2021.

Looking back over all the years of my career, the common thread has been the progressive evolution of a more sophisticated, questioning consumer. Funerals were built around the pillars of tradition – multiday viewings, church or chapel services and graveside prayers led by faith leaders whom the family may or may not have known. Today’s consumers want to know why things are done this way and they ask a multitude of questions. If you look at the rising cremation rate in this light, it’s really just a manifestation of consumers asking, ‘Why can’t we do something else?’

Many funeral directors still struggle to relate to these new consumers who prefer memorials that are less formal and costly and more spiritual and affordable. We have to do a better job of understanding and catering to these needs. This must begin in mortuary schools, where I see a great deal of focus on the science and art of embalming but less focus on developing well-rounded professionals who are proficient at dealing with people. Flexibility, adaptability and creativity will be needed in the years ahead. There are tremendous opportunities for funeral service professionals who try to understand and connect with families’ changing wants and needs. We have to be willing to take risks to create something we haven’t seen yet. It’s all about personalization and I truly believe this can be the salvation of funeral service.

Steve Trevino, funeral director, Ponderosa Valley Funeral Services, Parker, Colorado

Steve and his wife Nanci, also a funeral director, founded Ponderosa Valley Funeral Services in 2003 and teamed up with Foundation Partners in 2019. Steve is a national board certified funeral director and embalmer, and a certified crematory operator with more than 40 years of experience in all aspects of funeral and cremation service as well as a strong background in administration and management.

One big change I’ve witnessed is the increasing number of women who are choosing to pursue funeral service careers. These women have a nurturing, compassionate and understanding nature, which is a big plus for our profession and for the families we serve. I know that I have benefited personally and professionally from having the benefit of (my wife) Nanci’s perspective over the years. The attitudes of the families we serve also have changed over the past 20 years. Today’s families come to us with an immediate disposal frame of mind. Most want to proceed with services as soon and as economically as possible.

Tommie Kamm, former co-owner & manager of administration, All-States Cremation and All Veterans Funeral & Cremation, Colorado

Tommie Kamm and her brother Alistair grew up around the family business that their parents started in 1986 with the goal of providing lower-cost, simple services for families. Al and Tommie purchased the business from their parents in 2014 and grew it to five Denver-area locations before selling to Foundation Partners in 2019. Like her parents before her, Tommie is a big proponent of simple, direct cremation.

People in our area no longer want traditional funerals. They want simple, low-cost basic cremation and many prefer to go the direct cremation route. Everything can be simplified for families today and I find that change very exciting. As consumers, we’re all used to going online and buying direct, so why should purchasing death-care services be different? Today’s tech-savvy families are more educated and ask many more questions than they did in the past. Questions like ‘Do you own your own crematory?’ and ‘Are there any hidden charges I should know about?’ come up often. Of course, for funeral business owners this direct-to-consumer trend can be very challenging and it also opens the door to more competition within local markets. On the plus side, I’m finding that the young people entering our profession today are very excited about cremation and have the technical skills and knowledge that will shape our business in a positive way in the years ahead. •