

Voices of Transition

Behind the Curtain

WHEN THE AVERAGE FAMILY THINKS about funeral service professionals, often funeral directors, attendants, and certified celebrants come to mind. Team members in these “front of the house” positions epitomize the care, compassion, and empathy that earn funeral service professionals the gratitude and respect of their communities. The crucial contributions of “back of the house” team members, however, including crematory managers and operators, can sometimes be missed. In this third installment of “Voices in Transition,” team members at Foundation Partners Group’s central Phoenix care center share a behind-the-scenes look at their operations and how a change in ownership has opened new doors for their personal and professional growth.

Business transitions can be hard, but when the new team is composed of members from multiple acquisitions, integration can be even more challenging. New ownership also often means new ways of doing things, which can throw many people off balance.

“I worked in various support roles throughout the transition period, but it was clear from the outset that my opportunities for advancement would be much greater ...,” Smith said. “That was one of the great things about joining a larger company. With an independent operator, my options were

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—Jeff Davis

So what’s the secret to building a motivated, successful team after the sale of a funeral service business? At the central Phoenix care center, the secret was giving team members a voice in shaping the new operation. Today, that care center team operates like a well-oiled machine, providing the continuity of care that gives team members confidence and family members peace of mind knowing their loved ones will be handled with compassion and respect.

Care Center manager **Matthew Smith** was a transfer care specialist for Wyman Cremation & Burial Chapel in Mesa, AZ, when the business was acquired in 2021. Originally, Smith was concerned that the sale would lead to consolidation, eliminating his role; but instead, the acquisition opened exciting new opportunities for him.

much more limited; I could be a driver or arranger, but without a mortuary science degree that was about it. Nine months after the acquisition, I was named manager of the new care center; and my potential to grow into even more responsible management positions is very real.”

Smith now manages a team of 20, including transfer care specialists, embalmers, crematory operators and administrative assistants.

An Expanded Team

Jeff Davis is the care center’s lead crematory operator and a key member of Smith’s team. He also joined a larger family in 2021, when LifePlan Crematorium was acquired at the site of the current care center.

New Operating Procedures

“Jeff is a natural leader who has excelled with each new opportunity presented him,” Smith said. Early in the transition period, both Smith and Davis were challenged to adapt existing practices to their broader role as a specialized crematorium serving nine partner locations as well as third-party funeral homes. With the support of talented administrative staff, they implemented a new system for monitoring and tracking decedents that was developed in-house. It eliminates the need for repetitive data input, ensuring a faster, more efficient and reliable service to funeral homes.

“Everyone on the team provided input on how we could improve our operations, and the result is a system that is better than anything we could have purchased off the shelf,” Smith said. “We all own it and take great pride in the way it allows seamless delivery of our services.”

Davis said, “I like it a lot better than our old system. I trust people in the office, and I trust my colleagues in the retort. That gives us more confidence as a team.”

Enhanced Customer Care

The larger team and singular focus on cremation has allowed the team to serve more customers and provide a faster turnaround on cases. The team’s transfer care specialists take great pride in maintaining a high level of professionalism. It includes special attention to grieving family members during removals. “Family members and hospice teams really appreciate this level of care,” said Smith.

Once decedents reach the care center, Davis takes his role as the last to touch a family’s loved one very seriously. When a family wishes to witness a cremation of a loved one, he is their primary contact within the care center.

“Sometimes families come to witness cremations for religious purposes, and



Jeff Davis



Matt Smith



other times they simply need additional closure,” said Davis. “I consider it an honor and a privilege to care for their loved ones and I do whatever I can to make them feel comfortable and give them the time they need to say goodbye.”

From Buddhist family gatherings livestreamed to India to motorcycle clubs with more than 60 participants, Davis has managed thousands of witnessed cremations.

The Future is Bright

Looking back, Davis said that while there were some hurdles adjusting to new operating methods and procedures after the acquisition, the operation would not be where it is today without them. “Things are heading in an exciting direction. Working together, we can combine the best of our past experiences to create something new, offering families a higher level of service,” he said.

Smith agrees. “This has been a true growth opportunity for all of us. Personally,

I have had the opportunity to expand into management on a different level and have been exposed to a lot of new things. I’ve traveled to different markets to share our new tracking system, and the give and take

with colleagues in diverse markets has been invaluable. The team’s comfort with our day-to-day operations has never been higher and the trust among team members is the strongest I’ve ever seen.” 

