

2023 *Runner-up* FD of the Year Award

Stephen J. Marana Jr.

Area 2 Central Market Leader, Foundation Partners Group & Advent Funeral & Cremation Services • Washington, D.C. Metro Area

Stephen J. Marana Jr. says it's easy to pinpoint when his interest in funeral service developed.

"Growing up Catholic and attending private Catholic grade school, I was an altar boy, serving at weekly church Masses as well as funeral Masses," explained Marana, a native of Central Pennsylvania. "In doing so, I came to know the local funeral director and admired his compassion."

Watching how that funeral director comforted grieving families left an indelible mark. "I began thinking that funeral service was something I would like to do," Marana said. "That feeling has never left."

Sticking to his Italian-Catholic roots, Marana attended Mount Aloysius College in Cresson, Pennsylvania, and St. Francis University in Loretto, Pennsylvania, where he earned a degree in business management. After graduation, Marana moved to the Virginia Beach area, where he met a couple who owned a funeral home.

"They were looking to hire somebody as an apprentice," Marana said, "and I thought, 'Well, here's my break to get into the industry. And so, 30 some years later, I'm still living here and I'm a funeral director.'"

Marana would go on to graduate from John Tyler Community College (now known as Brightpoint Community College) and begin his career as a funeral director.

While he was certain that funeral service was his future, Marana was less sure the direction his career would take.

"I think my ultimate goal was to own my own funeral home, which I think most funeral directors think about," he said. "I envisioned that in so many different ways. As my career started to develop, I was going in different directions and getting different experiences – funeral home, cemetery,

crematories, pet crematories. I was still enjoying it, but it (funeral home ownership) was always in the back of my mind."

When an opportunity presented itself at Advent Funeral Services in Falls Church, Virginia, Marana couldn't say no.

"The previous owners (Advent was acquired by Foundation Partners Group in December 2019) were going to be expanding, and in doing so, they were going to make me a partner in the business. After I came on board, we opened up Chesapeake Crematory and Daisy Hill Pet Cremation Services (both in Beltsville, Maryland) and then Rapp Funeral Service in Silver Spring, Maryland," Marana explained. "I felt like I got my wish, my goal to at least be a partner in the industry."

When Advent was sold, Marana decided to stay on.

These days, as market leader for Foundation Partners Group's Area 2 Central Market, which includes five states – Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia – Marana oversees 17 locations and 93 professionals and team members. He also provides day-to-day management and professional backup for the two Advent Funeral and Cremation Services locations as well as Rapp Funeral Services.

His role is to ensure that location leaders and team members have what they need to serve client families and lead in their respective communities. He is also responsible for training, recruiting and inspiring the area's next generation of funeral professionals.

"When individuals have passion for a particular career path such as the funeral industry, it's important for professionals in our industry to provide mentorship to help these individuals be the best they can be," Marana said. "Nearly 10 years ago, I



STEPHEN MARANA VISITS LOCAL NURSING HOMES AND ASSISTED LIVING FACILITIES WITH HIS DOG TO PROVIDE PET THERAPY TO THE RESIDENTS. (PHOTO COURTESY OF ADVENT FUNERAL & CREMATION SERVICES)

had a woman named Lily contact me. She had never worked in the funeral industry and was having a difficult time getting her foot in the door. She asked me if I would take a chance on her. After meeting with her, I decided to give her the break she needed. She has become an incredible funeral service professional and has been eager to learn every aspect of the industry. I feel it's up to us as professionals in this industry to recognize talent and do all we can to keep our industry heading in the right direction. After all, they are the future."

Lily Buerkle, the woman who contacted Marana, now works for Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

“Long before I was managing burials for ‘America’s Hippest Cemetery,’ I was cold-calling funeral homes in the D.C. area looking to break into an industry that I had long thought about becoming a part of. I had one main problem. No one would call me back,” Buerkle wrote in her recommendation letter. “For an industry renowned to always be looking for good people, no one would give me a chance, let alone a return phone call. Steve Marana was the singular person who did. He talked to me, asked me about my interest in funeral service, and took me seriously. That one phone call changed the trajectory of my career and my life.”

It’s been nearly a decade since that first phone call, Buerkle said, and she’s never looked back. “Rather, I’ve looked up to Steve Marana for giving me the chance and showing me the way. I’m forever grateful for whatever it was he saw in me that allowed me to pursue this path, but mostly for the immense leadership he has shown in funeral service,” she said. “Steve is a passionate, caring leader. He’s a steady hand in days that are always filled with uncertainty.”

Having worked in the funeral profession for more than three decades, Marana is well aware that funeral service is ever-changing, especially over the past five years.

“Accelerating those changes is the fact that people are more educated about funerals and cremations, and what we experienced as an industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. From pagers, typewriters and fax machines to cell phones and computers, funeral arranging is dramatically different than when I started my career,” he said. “As funeral professionals we must embrace change and think outside the box if we want to be successful going forward. It is up to us as professionals to look outside of this industry for crossover and to bring new and ‘different’ ideas to keep this industry thriving for years to come.”

Embracing that change is exciting to Marana.

“I believe that is what helped me to become the funeral professional I am today. Since my first start in the funeral industry,

I’ve always challenged myself to absorb as much information as possible, so that I could continue to expand my knowledge and be the best I can be,” he said. “Taking on certain challenges and overcoming them can often lead to fantastic rewards. Also, during mentorship, when an individual is truly engaged and wants to learn to be the best they can be, the feeling of accomplishment I receive is very rewarding.”

At the same time, he acknowledges that the ability to adapt to and embrace change is also the biggest challenge facing the funeral profession. A perfect example is the many families today who want to hold celebrations of life outside of funeral homes.

“Funeral directors know their community. They can suggest an off-site venue or space, then make all the arrangements – the same service as the memorials held in the funeral home chapel,” he said.

In addition, many families don’t know what to ask when talking with funeral directors about memorial services. Marana trains his team members and encourages other professionals to ask questions.

“In the Washington, D.C. area, people ask for a basic funeral,” he said. “When we ask questions and give them all their options, we’re able to create a much more personal memorial.”

A long-time member of The Knights of Columbus, Marana enjoys volunteering with “Food & Friends,” the only community-based organization in the D.C. region providing home delivered, medically tailored meals and nutrition therapy to people living with cancer and other serious illnesses.

He has spent many years visiting local nursing homes and assisted living facilities with his dog to provide pet therapy to the residents. He also provides funeral information seminars to senior activity centers throughout the community, including impromptu visits with his dog during the holidays to hand out candy canes and simply say hello. He has also created strong relationships with local hospice organizations, including Capital Caring Hospice with locations throughout Greater Washington, D.C.

“Stephen has demonstrated an excep-



STEPHEN MARANA (CENTER) WITH FELLOW FOOD & FRIENDS VOLUNTEERS. THE ORGANIZATION PROVIDES MEALS AND GROCERIES TO INDIVIDUALS LIVING WITH LIFE CHALLENGING ILLNESSES. (PHOTO COURTESY OF ADVENT FUNERAL & CREMATION SERVICES)

tional level of professional service to the families within his community, and I consider him the gold standard of leadership among our portfolio of funeral homes and crematories. Stephen exemplifies the term funeral professional in his dedication to funeral service and servant leadership to his team,” Dwane A. Wills II, vice president of area operations for Foundation Partners, wrote in a letter of recommendation. “In addition to his countless hours of professional work, Stephen generously gives of himself to his local community and serves many organizations with his boundless enthusiasm, drive and commitment.”

Asked if he could imagine being anything but a funeral director, Marana pauses briefly.

“I mean there’s always been different times throughout my working career that I’ve thought about doing something different, but quite honestly other than for some, like, part-time jobs here and there right out of college, this is really the only thing I’ve ever done ... and I feel I’m exactly where I’m meant to be,” he said.