

# PROFILE

By Patti Martin Bartsche

## 'The Time was Right'

There was no missing the buzz surrounding the 2022 National Funeral Directors Association convention, held Oct. 9 to 12 in Baltimore.

“Did you hear?” seemed to be the common refrain on the exhibition floor, education sessions, escalators, and elevators.

What was everyone seemingly talking about?

Three days before the show’s opening, Foundation Partners Group announced that Mark Krause, president of Krause Funeral Homes & Cremation Service Inc. in Milwaukee, had agreed to sell his firm to the company and join Foundation Partners as vice president of industry relations and government affairs.

The announcement created a ripple throughout the profession, and the fourth-generation funeral director’s presence at the convention days was met with a congratulations ... and questions.

“It was a lot,” Krause laughed.

As it turns out, the announcement hadn’t happened by accident.

“I had been talking with (then Foundation Partners president) Kent Robertson about the announcement, and, by putting

on my marketing hat, I told him that the best time to let the news drop was right before the NFDA convention,” Krause explained. “It would be good for the visibility of Foundation Partners, which was going to have a booth, and I would be there to support and talk about Foundation Partners and what they’re all about.”

To the surprise of no one, there was a lot of foot traffic at The Foundation Partners booth.

“It was nonstop,” Krause said. “There was a line of people waiting to talk to me. Some people congratulated me, some people were shocked, and there were even a few people who were angry that I sold, basically asking, ‘How could you do this?’”

Krause took it all in stride.

“I was quite humbled and flattered by the attention,” he said. “I knew there would be interest, I just didn’t know how much interest there would be.”

Krause should not have been surprised. In Wisconsin and beyond, the Krause

name has long been associated with outstanding customer service and innovation. A fourth-generation funeral director who has been in death care since 1976, Krause transformed the modest family business into the largest funeral provider in the state. By the time of the sale, Krause Funeral Homes & Cremation Service Inc. had grown to include four funeral home locations, Milwaukee Cremation, and Informed Choice Funeral & Cremation Alternatives. The company was serving 1,850 families throughout the Milwaukee area across its various funeral home locations and services.

Krause had long learned that timing is everything, and the time was right in 2022 to sell the business.

“I don’t know if I want to keep pushing as hard as I have been for the next 10 years. I want to keep working, but I’m also ready to take things like human resources and IT off my plate,” he explained in an interview last year. “I wanted more time to do the things I enjoy. All these factors told me it was the right time to sell.”



## A LOOK BACK

In Krause's words, the Krause family's involvement in funeral service had "a funny beginning."

Krause's grandfather, William (Bill) F. Krause Sr., married a funeral director's daughter and began working at his father-in-law's firm, helping to build up a following for the business.

"Somewhere along the line, they had a falling out ... my great-grandfather was reportedly not a nice man," Krause explained. "So, my grandmother, Esther, gave my grandfather a choice: either you quit here and we start our own funeral home, or I'm leaving."

It didn't take the elder Krause long to make his decision. He quit and, with his wife, opened the first Krause Funeral Home in the Milwaukee area in 1933, six blocks from his father-in-law's business.

The couple would have five children – James, Daniel, Donna, William Jr., and Lorna. The couple's three sons became licensed funeral directors, and Donna joined the funeral home as a preneed representative.

Three of Jim's sons would go on to enter funeral service: Greg was licensed in 1981, Mark in 1982, and John in 1988. Dan's eldest son, Brad, was also licensed in 1988.



**TOP: FUNERAL SERVICE HAS BEEN A PART OF MARK KRAUSE'S LIFE FOR NEARLY FOUR DECADES. (PHOTO COURTESY MARK KRAUSE) ABOVE: MARK KRAUSE CARRIES HIS CEREMONIAL \$100,000 CHECK FOR THE FUNERAL SERVICE FOUNDATION ONSTAGE DURING THE 2023 NFDA CONVENTION & EXPOSITION IN LAS VEGAS. (PHOTO COURTESY FUNERAL SERVICE FOUNDATION)**





**KRAUSE FUNERAL HOMES' GRIEF THERAPY DOG, BENNIE, IS A FAMILIAR FACE AROUND THE FUNERAL HOME. BENNIE IS A PORTUGUESE WATER DOG WITH BIG BROWN EYES AND A JOYFUL SPIRIT. (PHOTO COURTESY MARK KRAUSE)**

The fifth generation of Krauses made their way into funeral service when Mark's daughter, Nicole, was licensed in 2019, and Gregg's son, Jacob, was licensed in 2020.

The firm, which started out as what Krause describes as a "mom-and-pop business," would grow slowly and steadily over the years, most notably under Krause's leadership. Over four decades, Krause would go on to build an innovative portfolio of businesses in the Wisconsin market designed to provide services to families across a wide spectrum of needs, from high-touch, traditional funeral service to simple direct cremation.

### **A DIFFERENT COURSE?**

Although Krause grew up coming to the funeral home with his siblings and cousins, it wasn't a given that he would "officially" join the family business.

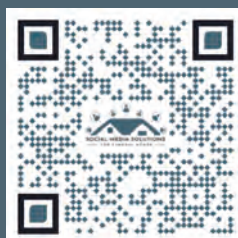
Following high school, he attended the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, graduating with a double major in political science and history.

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**MARK KRAUSE IS THE LEAD GUITARIST FOR TONIGHT ONLY, A “BLUES ROCK, FEEL-GOOD BLUES BAND FOR THE COMMUNITY.” (PHOTO COURTESY MARK KRAUSE)**

Music has always been a part of Krause’s DNA (in his off hours, he’s the lead guitarist with Tonight Only, a “blues rock, feel-good blues band for the community”), and that love of music translated into a lucrative side hustle when he was in college.

“I was actually a guitar teacher for a number of years while I was in college,” he said. “I had 50 students a week for private lessons from all ages. I learned a little bit of entrepreneurialism doing that. I also learned how to motivate people, and I was drawn to the teaching aspect of it as well.”

After graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Jim Krause point blank asked his son: “Are you going to play that damn guitar your whole life or are you going to come into the business?”

Krause laughs as he recalls the conversation. “Even back in high school, I thought being a funeral director would be a good opportunity, so I made the transition.”

He completed his apprenticeship and attended Worsham College of Mortuary Science, graduating in 1982. (He returned to school in 1993, earning his Master of Business Administration.)

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Head of SBA Lending

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[stephanie.dunn@grasshopper.bank](mailto:stephanie.dunn@grasshopper.bank)



**Ellis Tinsley**

Senior Business

Development Analyst

(910)524-8882

[ellis.tinsley@grasshopper.bank](mailto:ellis.tinsley@grasshopper.bank)



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Upon officially joining the firm, Krause hit the ground running.

"From the start, I was thinking, how am I going to change things? How am I going to make our funeral home the best?" he said. "I was impassioned ... I was ready to make a difference."

Krause described his father, who died in 2013, as an "old-school funeral director" who was reluctant to take on new practices such as "picture boards" covered with photographs and refreshments served in the funeral home. Eventually, though, he came to appreciate such changes – though many came after he retired.

"In his day, he would say, 'We will never serve food at our funeral home,'" Krause told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. "He would shake his head at all the new things we did. He was proud of it all – he was just glad he didn't have to do it."

Looking back, Krause believes his degrees in history and political science played a role in the firm's success.

"You don't know where you're going unless you know where you've been ... that's the history piece," he said. "And the

political science piece? It's certainly about how you get a consensus of people and where you want to be."

For Krause, though, the bigger picture was, "I learned how to write. I learned how to think. I learned how to organize."

Those skillsets manifested in a variety of tangible ways over the years.

As a young boy growing up in Milwaukee, Krause enjoyed learning about history. "I remember the feelings of anticipation and excitement when I would open a book about a certain time or event that happened in our country or world," he said.

That excitement has been shared hundreds of times with Krause, who talks to groups about historical events. One of his favorite topics comes from American history and funeral service history: the assassination and funeral of President Abraham Lincoln.

"Most of us are fairly familiar with the events of April 14, 1865, that occurred at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., but there's so much more to the story: details that were pivotal moments in our coun-

try's history," Krause said. "For example, did you know after Lincoln's first funeral held in the East Room of the White House, he had a total of 13 funerals over 20 days before he was entombed in Springfield, Illinois?"

Krause added another perhaps little-known fact: "There were many photographs taken of Lincoln in his casket, but Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton ordered them all destroyed," he said. "Only one photo survived, and it was uncovered in 1951 when a high school student in Springfield, Illinois, found it among some lost papers. Can you imagine being that young man making that incredible, historically significant discovery?"

His other passion, borne out of his political science background, is well documented.

He is a founder and past president of the Funeral Service and Cremation Alliance of Wisconsin; past president of Preferred Funeral Directors, International; and past president of the International Cemetery, Cremation & Funeral Association.

In 2008, he addressed the International

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Chinese Funeral Exposition in Shanghai, and served as a professor and dean at the ICCFA University, teaching in both the Cremation Services and 21st Century Services Colleges.

He currently serves as chair of the Funeral Service Foundation. And it was while serving as the Foundation's chair-elect that Krause had made a one-time \$100,000 donation in support of the Foundation's mission to uplift grieving communities by investing in people and programs that strengthen funeral service.

"Funeral service has been good to my family over the past 90 years," Krause said. "This gift is a way to give back and to invest in the future. What we as a profession do matters – we need a vision for the future, and we must deliver it somehow. I think the Funeral Service Foundation is a great way to make that happen."

Krause presented a ceremonial check representing his Foundation contribution during the General Session at the 2023 NFDA convention in Las Vegas.

"As you look at your life and career, think about estate planning, and think about the

Funeral Service Foundation when you do that. So often, people, even when we're funeral directors and we've done this our whole lives, don't think about that. But think about how funeral service has been good to you; think about the memorials at funerals. My uncle (Bill) – who I bought my business from (in the late 1990s) – recently died. The Foundation was near and dear to his heart. So that's what I'd like to challenge you with, and I couldn't be more honored to have given my gift to the Foundation."

## ADVOCACY

Krause's passion for being a funeral professional and consumer advocate led to his testifying at Federal Trade Commission hearings in Washington, D.C., and in partnering with Foundation Partners, he continues that advocacy as vice president of industry relations and government affairs.

"What I still see myself doing is the same thing that I've always done – helping to get our message out as funeral professionals," he said of his new role. "I feel that a rising tide lifts all boats. I still look at

what I do as trying to improve the profession, advance it forward, and give voice to funeral directors who perhaps don't have the same resources or opportunities."

Like the majority of funeral service, Krause believes one of the most significant issues is the FTC's anticipated changes surrounding the General Price List. "It used to be that families received the GPL at the funeral home. The FTC wants consumers to have easier access to price information," he said. "They are proposing that funeral homes offer the GPL on their websites. Of course, a GPL on its own can be confusing to many families. Many in the business feel it's best for families to review the GPL with a funeral professional to explain pricing and value based on each family's needs and budget."

While some funeral directors may be concerned that making the GPL more accessible will be a deterrent, Krause disagrees. "It will create more informed consumers. And since we know from our consumer research that price isn't the only factor in consumer decision-making, providers who highlight other benefits of their

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care will attract more families, not less,” he said. “Offering the GPL in ways people want to receive it is a positive change.”

## TIME FOR A CHANGE

Change has long been a constant in Krause’s life. Whether that meant adding rooftops to the core business, opening a direct cremation operation, bringing certified therapy dogs into the funeral home, or offering a Harley-drawn hearse for a final ride, Krause said it continues to be important for funeral directors to follow customers’ wishes instead of telling them what to do.

“You have to embrace change, it’s just that simple,” he said. “If you don’t, you become the dinosaur in your community, barely hanging on.”

Krause took his words to heart several years ago when he started seriously thinking about the future of Krause Funeral Homes & Cremation Service.

It was late 2021 into early 2022, and by this point, Krause had transformed the modest family business into the largest funeral provider in Wisconsin. “I started looking at what was going on in the world, the economy, the inflation and I told myself that this may be the time to sell.”

He also realized that he didn’t necessarily want to be pushing as hard as he had in the future, especially since his brother, Gregg, who was the company’s vice president, was getting ready to retire.

Although family succession was discussed, it was ultimately ruled out.

“We considered my daughter and nephew as possible successors,” Krause said. “She is a funeral director leading one of our locations and has been devoted to the business. My nephew graduated with a business degree and returned to the company just as COVID hit. After several months of twice our average call volume, he knew his future was at a smaller funeral home.”

Krause said he had “kind of created a monster” by being Wisconsin’s largest funeral provider. “It’s too much for one or two young people to take over such a large family business,” he added. “We started talking to different companies about a succession plan that would continue our legacy and provide opportunities for younger people, like my daughter, to grow.”

The decision to choose Foundation Partners came after many thoughtful discussions with company executives. “They were genuinely interested in what we were doing,” Krause said. “I equated Foundation Partners’ leadership style with how the American military operates. The military runs from the middle out – from the sergeants and the people in the field who know what’s going on and can make changes to become more effective. The explanation of the Foundation Partners culture seemed like a great fit for Krause Funeral Homes. Their desire to take a premium brand funeral home and make it even better was music to my ears.”

It was also important to Krause that his staff was taken care of. “Even with 70 or 80 staff members, we still treat the business like a family. We often buy lunch on busy days,” he said. “I felt that Foundation Partners Group would continue to value our staff’s personal and professional contributions.”

Coming up on two years since the acquisition was completed, Krause continues to look ahead, working hard to find new ways to move the profession forward and doing whatever he can to make Foundation Partners an even better place for team members and the families we serve.

And then there are the bucket list items.

“I would love to go on an around-the-world cruise, so that may be happening in the next year or two,” he said, adding that making musical appearances at more blues events is also on the list.

“Of course, I’m going to continue working for a while, but you never really stop being a funeral director,” he laughed. •



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