

# CREMATION COLUMN

By Keith Mann

## View from the Crematory

### *Four things to keep in mind ...*

**W**hen you work with a team that feels like family, you treat every person you serve like family, too. That's been my guiding principle since the first day I stepped into the crematory at Thompson Funeral Home in Columbia, South Carolina. We understand what families are going through because we've been there ourselves. Once they're with us, they're not just decedents – they're family.

I didn't set out to become a crematory operator. My first experience here was personal – bringing my own family to Thompson's Greenlawn Memorial Park to inter the cremated remains of my German "Oma," whose wish was to be buried in the United States. The compassion and respect my family received made a lasting impression. In 2013, I joined the Greenlawn maintenance team. Four years later, after completing my Cremation Association of North America certification, I stepped into the role I hold today. Now, I mentor other Thompson team members and travel across the country to help train and support crematory operators at other Foundation Partners Group locations.

Over the years, I've learned a lot about this profession – and about the misconceptions people have. Many think our job is as simple as placing a box in a machine and pressing a button. Nothing could be further from the truth. There's fingerprinting, DNA sampling, securing personal items like locks of hair or precious metals, and completing thorough documentation to maintain an unbreakable chain of custody. Every step matters.

Here are four things I wish more people – especially in our profession – understood about being a crematory operator:



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### **TRAINING DOESN'T STOP AT CERTIFICATION.**

Becoming certified by CANA and registered with the South Carolina Board of Funeral Service is just the starting line. In our facility, operators also must be "bona fide." New operators go through 30-60 days of on-the-job coaching before they ever work solo. And every two years, we renew our credentials. I've spent the past three years visiting care centers across the country, learning from others, and sharing practical tips like ending each day prepared for the next morning's work or recognizing the subtle sounds and signs that a retort is running at its best.

### **THE CREMATORY IS A SACRED SPACE.**

Our crematory is an extension of our funeral home. We treat each person entrusted to us as we would our own loved one. Once a decedent arrives for final disposition, silence is observed – no small talk, no jokes. Before beginning, I say a blessing, and if the person was a veteran, I thank them for their service. We are the last to touch these loved ones, and that role de-

mands absolute respect.

### **WE HELP FAMILIES PROCESS GRIEF, TOO.**

Several times a month, we host families who wish to witness the cremation. Our viewing room is designed to be comfortable, private, and accommodating. Whether it's two people or 300, I wait until they signal they're ready before we proceed. I've been on the other side of the glass myself, saying goodbye to my best friend, so I understand the weight of that moment. My goal is for every family to leave here certain they made the right choice.

### **CREMATORY OPERATORS ARE SPECIAL PEOPLE.**

I joke that I'm just "a country boy with a truck," but the truth is this work requires patience, humility, precision, and a big heart. We read our retorts like musicians read their instruments, we document every step, and sometimes – especially when caring for children – the emotions hit hard. That's OK. If you become desensitized to the human side of this work, you're in the wrong business.

In my eight years in the Columbia crematory, the number of people we serve has nearly doubled. More South Carolinians are choosing cremation each year, discovering that there are many ways to memorialize and celebrate a life well lived. I'm grateful for the opportunities I've had to travel, to keep learning, and to continue serving families with the same compassion my own family experienced years ago. **KB**

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