

From Regional Roots to a National Network

by Allison Craft

WHILE THE DATE OF AN ACQUISITION IS A KEY FLASHPOINT for both buyers and sellers of funeral homes, the true measure of a successful ownership transition plays out in the months and years that follow the financial transaction. Adapting to new ownership not only impacts existing team members, but also those who come on board throughout the critical first year following an acquisition. That's the story shared by Allison Craft, general manager of the Cremation Society of Minnesota, after Kevin and Mark Waterston sold the state's largest provider of cremation services in July 2017.

When I look back at how I began in funeral service, I see a clear thread: caring for people has always been my calling. At the age of 16, I started as a nursing assistant and fell in love with helping others. I orig-

That commitment to teamwork became even more important in 2017 when CSM was acquired. I joined shortly after the transition during those early days when both sides were still learning

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inally thought I would go into nursing, but when my grandfather passed away, I found myself drawn to funeral service. That loss introduced me to Meredith Waterston, who no longer works with us, but who served as my mentor and opened the door to the Cremation Society of Minnesota (CSM).

Commitment ... from Day One

Over the years, I worked my way from clinical student to leadership at CSM, and today I serve as general manager, overseeing four metro locations and leading a team of 18 funeral directors and attendants. My job is about making sure our team works together as seamlessly as possible so that families receive the best possible care. From day one, I knew that teamwork wasn't optional—it was essential.

how to work together. It was a subtle shift at first—one guided by Waterston family members, who continued to help bridge the transition.

What struck me most was how patient the company was in learning our unique workflows. They didn't rush to change everything overnight. Instead, they listened, observed, and slowly introduced new tools—like new arrangement software—that ultimately improved how we serve families.

At first, my role felt like that of a translator. I would take the goals from the new owners, interpret how they applied to our specific culture and processes at CSM, and then work with my team to fine-tune and implement them. It wasn't always easy, but the gradual, thoughtful approach made the changes more sustainable. Looking back now, the shift from being a regional

company to being part of a national network feels almost seamless—but only because it happened step by step.

True Teamwork

The difference between working for a family business and a national firm became clear over time. At the independent St. Paul funeral home where I started, I had the opportunity to do a bit of everything—removals, arrangements, services, and prep work. That experience shaped me as a funeral director and gave me a strong foundation.

But what I found at CSM was something different: an orchestrated approach, where no single person carries the entire case alone. It's a true team effort, like a symphony, and every member has a role that contributes to the whole.

One of the many benefits of our team-oriented approach is the ability to offer more flexible schedules that help team members achieve a work-life balance that is often very difficult to find in this industry. Our team approach allows our staff to step back when needed and rely on each other. When we take care of each other, we can take better care of the families we serve.

Another benefit of being part of a national company is access to collective knowledge. We have countless years of combined experience across our network, and we share that knowledge freely—through leadership meetings, cross-brand collaboration, and even small “hacks” that make our days smoother. It not only helps us work smarter but also creates a sense of unity across the company.

Professional Growth Through Collaboration

I have grown in ways I never expected. If you'd asked me in 2017 whether I wanted to be a manager, my answer would have been a

hard “no.” Yet, here I am, leading as general manager because our new owners gave me opportunities to challenge myself and find a new passion: helping my colleagues serve families better.

That shift didn’t happen overnight. It came from asking questions, challenging processes and offering solutions that made sense for both the team and the families we serve.

The key to identifying challenges and implementing change starts with acknowledging the “why.” Why do we need to make changes? And can we seamlessly integrate new practices and processes while providing accountability and transparency? I’ve learned that the best solution can come from anyone on the team! Working collaboratively enhances team spirit and makes change easier and less disruptive.

The funeral service profession doesn’t always offer clear paths for growth, but being part of a larger company has opened doors—for me and for my team. We connect with colleagues nationwide, share ideas and learn from each other. At the end of the day, our mission hasn’t changed: we bring ease and comfort to grieving families. That guiding light has remained constant, even as the way we work has evolved.

Transitioning from a regional company to a national firm has taught me the importance of communication, collaboration, and patience. It has shown me that change, while not always easy, can be deeply rewarding when it’s done with care and purpose. And most of all, it has reinforced what I’ve known since I was 16: this work is about people—families, colleagues, and communities—coming together in the moments that matter most. □



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