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Meeting the Needs of Today's Families





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A thoughtfully designed area for children of all ages, offers comfort and space for younger family members during services. *(All photos courtesy Twenty3 Photography)*

BY PATTI MARTIN BARTSCHE

For more than seven decades, Anderson-McQueen Funeral Homes have been a comforting presence in the St. Petersburg, Florida, community, long known for their compassionate care and innovative, personalized services.

Founded in 1952 by John S. Anderson and William F. McQueen, Anderson-McQueen's three locations, including its Tyrone Family Tribute Center, were purchased by Foundation Partners Group in 2017.

When Hurricane Milton cut a path through Pinellas County in 2024, causing damage to the building, the question wasn't "Should we repair?" but "How can we honor both the past and the future?"

The answer was revealed earlier this year when the nearly \$1 million renovation project was unveiled during a ribbon-cutting and open house.

Weathering the Storm

What had begun as a response to storm damage evolved into a larger effort to reimagine the space for the families who walk through its doors every day. The result is a brighter, more welcoming facility that feels less intimidating and more supportive during one of life's most difficult experiences.

For Gary Schluter, senior director of facilities operations, and operations director Stacey Wagner, the renovation was never just about construction. It was about asking what families need now, and how the space itself can help meet those needs. Schluter said the project took shape after the original roof repair failed and created even more damage than Hurricane Milton had caused in the first place. Rather than restore what had been damaged or destroyed, the team decided to use the opportunity to rethink the whole environment.

"As long as we're spending all

this money, why not get new flooring, new paint, and get it looking like we think we want our company to look in the future," Schluter said. That mindset became the foundation for the redesign. From the color palette to the furniture to the flooring, every detail was chosen to create a setting that feels modern, comfortable, and intentional. What started as a repair project ultimately became a full refresh.

A New Look

Wagner said the motivation behind the renovation came down to one central question: how can a funeral home feel more approachable for families? She said funeral homes are often difficult places to enter because they can feel heavy, dark, and emotionally overwhelming before a service even begins. The goal was to soften that first impression and replace it with something warmer and calmer.



The children's space at the newly renovated Anderson-McQueen Family Tribute Center.



The pet family chapel at Anderson-McQueen's Tyrone Family Tribute Center.



The renovated reception room is light, bright, and welcoming.

“Funeral homes are not easy to walk into as it is,” Wagner said. “I think that we as an industry kind of have to change that a little bit.” She said families deserve a space that helps them focus on the person they are honoring, not the stress of the room around them. That belief guided many of the design choices, from brighter paint to updated furnishings to the decision to move away from carpet and toward flooring that feels cleaner and more contemporary.

The new look was intentionally chosen to support a shift in how people experience funerals today. Wagner said the industry has changed, and families are increasingly looking for opportunities to celebrate a life rather than focus only on loss. She said the updated surroundings help reflect that change.

“We’re leaning more towards celebrating lives,” she said, “and kind of more of a happier time than making death this doom and gloom what I grew up in.” Her comments reflect a broader cultural shift in funeral service, where personalization, storytelling, and meaningful gatherings have become more central to the experience.

That idea of celebration shaped not only the building’s appearance but also how its spaces are used. Wagner and Schluter wanted the funeral home to feel less like a traditional institution and more like a place where families could actually spend time together. Wagner described the atmosphere they hoped to create as “a modern boutique hotel vibe,” something polished but still comfortable. The idea was to make people feel at home without losing the dignity of the setting.

Welcoming Families

The renovation also speaks to a practical reality: families now want spaces that can serve multiple purposes. Wagner said it is increasingly common for funeral homes to think beyond traditional services and consider how their buildings can support other community uses. That might mean hosting

gatherings, meetings, or events, but the underlying principle is the same – the building should feel useful, flexible, and open.

“That was kind of where my brain was going,” Wagner said, explaining that she wanted to think not just about grief, but about all the ways a space like this can serve the community. “What other uses or what other things can we bring into our facility, and what uses would feel welcome?” The renovation, then, was not only about aesthetics; it was about making the funeral home more relevant and

responsive to real-life needs.

One of the most important parts of the project was the creation and refresh of the children’s area. Anderson-McQueen has long recognized that children are part of the grieving process too, and Wagner said it was critical to preserve a space where they could be present without feeling overwhelmed. The room provides children with a place to watch TV, draw, color, and play while remaining connected to the service.

“I think it’s critical that they be there,” Wagner said. “That allows



The Anderson-McQueen renovation introduces a cohesive design approach to finishes and furnishings, resulting in an environment that is durable, consistent, and purpose-driven.

them to be there and be a part of the process but still have that safe place for them to go and escape.” She said families sometimes hesitate to bring children to services, but she believes that can leave them disconnected from an important part of life. In her view, children are often more aware than adults realize, and they benefit from being included in an age-appropriate way.

The updated children’s room was designed to work for a range of ages, not just very young children. Wagner said she wanted it to be versatile enough for a baby, a grade-school child, or even a teenager who might need a quiet place to sit away from the service for a while.

The glass wall near the room was another thoughtful feature. It allows parents to keep an eye on their children while still participating in the service, creating a balance between privacy and connection. Wagner compared the

concept to the cry rooms found in churches, where children can be present without being expected to sit still through an entire service. “They’re still able to be a part of it,” she said, “and still be in a comfortable space for them.”

That same focus on comfort and inclusion guided the updates to the cremation viewing area. Wagner said the space is especially important for families who want to be more involved in the process and for cultural groups that place a strong emphasis on cremation rituals. The goal was to make the experience feel less frightening and more understandable.

“How can we make this less terrifying?” Wagner asked. “How can we make this less scary for them and more just comfortable?” She said the answer begins with the environment itself. A bright, clean, respectful room can help reduce anxiety before the family even starts asking questions. Just as important, she said, is transparency.

Families should know what to expect and feel empowered to take part in the process if they choose.

Schluter said that helping families understand their options is one of the most important parts of the job. “The worst thing you want to do is have a service done and two weeks later, ‘Oh, I could have had this, or I could have done that,’” he said. “Just give them the options and let them choose.” That philosophy extends beyond funeral arrangements and into the design of the building itself. Every change, from the layout to the furnishings, is meant to make the process clearer and easier for the families.

Community Relationships

The renovation also reflects the company’s relationship with the community. Wagner said Anderson-McQueen relies heavily on word of mouth, particularly among the families it serves repeatedly over time. She said when people see that a funeral home has invest-

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ed in a better facility for them, it strengthens trust. That is especially true for communities that place a high value on long-term relationships and cultural sensitivity.

“Once they have a funeral home that they love, that they have that relationship with, they keep coming back,” Wagner said. “And now that they see we invested in this facility partly for your community as well, they respect that.” The renovation, in her view, is not just about making the building prettier. It is about sending a message that the families who use the space matter, and that their needs were part of the decision-making process.

Celebrating Pets

That sense of care extends to Anderson-McQueen Pets, which was also refreshed as part of the broader effort. Wagner and Schluter both said pet cremation is a meaningful part of the business and one that many families don’t fully realize is available. For some people, pets are just as important as any other family member, and the team wanted the facility to reflect that reality.

“We treat them just as we treat our humans,” Wagner said. “Because they can be just as much of a loss.” Schluter added that many people don’t know these services exist until they need them, which is why education and accessibility matter so much. The refreshed space helps underscore that pets are part of the Anderson-McQueen family of services, not an afterthought.

Changing the Experience

Even with all the improvements, the renovation came with challenges. Schluter said one of the biggest hurdles was keeping the work moving while also maintaining operations and eventually reopening to serve families again. Delays, vendor issues, and the discovery of additional repairs all slowed the process. At times, he said, the work felt like two steps forward and one step back.

“Communication is the key,” he said, describing the demands of



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juggling a major renovation while keeping the location functional. Despite the obstacles, Schluter said the final result is worth the effort. The updated facility now better reflects the future the company wants to build: one that is modern, thoughtful, and centered on families.

At its core, the renovation at Anderson-McQueen is about changing the experience of walking into

a funeral home. It is about replacing fear with comfort, confusion with clarity, and stiffness with warmth. It is about giving children a place to be children, giving families a place to gather, and giving communities a space that feels open rather than closed off. In every room, the message is the same: you are welcome here, and this space was designed with you in mind.

That message may be the most important part of the renovation. The colors, the furniture, the flooring, the glass walls, and the thoughtful layout all support a larger purpose, but the purpose itself is simple. Anderson-McQueen wanted to create a setting where families feel supported, seen, and cared for. In a business built around loss, that kind of intention makes all the difference. **KB**



The cremation viewing area offers families a comforting space.