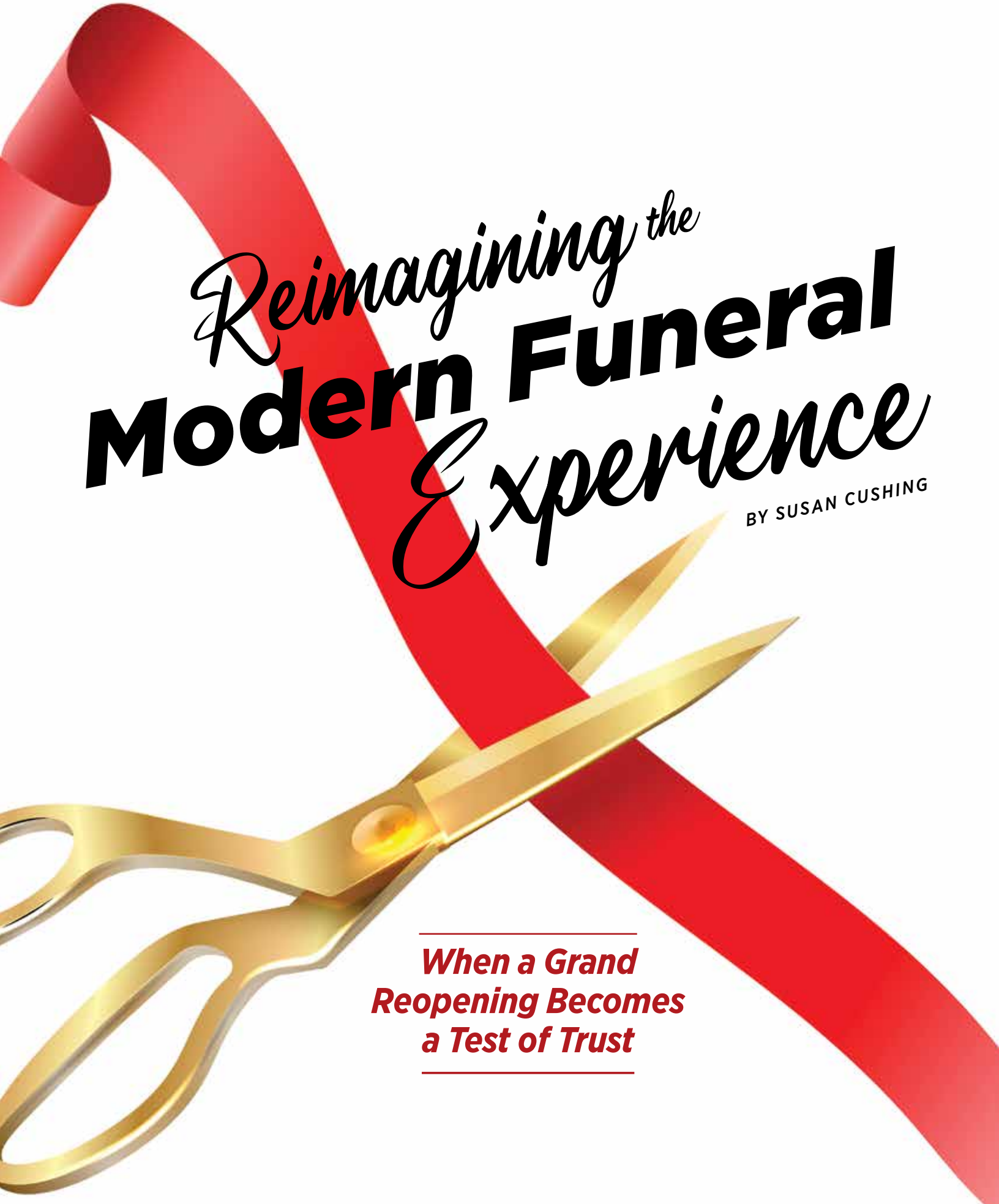

Reimagining the Modern Funeral Experience

BY SUSAN CUSHING

When a Grand Reopening Becomes a Test of Trust

When a grand reopening is underway—community members filtering in, local leaders shaking hands, a building finally restored—there's a moment of anxious wonder that feels surprisingly familiar.

"Remember when we were kids," **John D. Smith** says, "and we wondered if anybody's going to come to our birthday party?" For a funeral home that has served St. Petersburg, FL, families for generations, the stakes are higher than party punch and balloons. A ribbon-cutting isn't just an event. It's a referendum on trust.

"Is anybody gonna show up?" John continues. "It's important to us—but is it important to everybody else?"

For **Anderson-McQueen Funeral Home**, the answer was, yes. But the significance of that turnout goes beyond civic pride. It signals something else: a community's willingness to embrace a new kind of funeral home experience—one designed not only to recover from disaster, but to elevate what families can expect when they walk through the doors during the hardest days of their lives.

From Hurricane to Recovery

Anderson-McQueen has been a fixture in St. Petersburg since 1952. The brand is woven into local memory—families who once attended services for grandparents now return as adults, facing the loss of parents, spouses, and friends. In a profession built on continuity, that kind of legacy is both privilege and responsibility.

So when a hurricane damaged the property, rebuilding was the obvious next step. But John says the original intent quickly evolved.

"We certainly wanted to rebuild," he explains, "but that rebuild just evolved from, 'Hey, let's just not rebuild it per se—let's sort of envision what's possible.'"

That shift—from replacement to reinvention—became the guiding principle for the project. The goal wasn't simply to restore what existed; it was to rethink what a funeral home can be when it is designed around real human needs, modern family dynamics, and the expectations of a community that has changed dramatically since mid-century.

Foundation Partners Area Vice President **Thomas Matthews** describes the endeavor this way: "When we realized the extent of the damage caused by the hurricanes in 2024, we had a choice: restore the funeral home to its previous condition or use the opportunity to refresh the space for both the community and the team who show up every day to care for families."

Much of the team, under the leadership of Operations Director **Stacey Wagner**, is relatively new, so this became a chance for everyone to feel invested in the transformation.

"Partnering closely with our facilities team," Thomas adds, "Stacey was hands-on from start to finish—selecting colors, shaping the design, and ensuring the final result flowed together as a cohesive theme. She was involved in every step of the renovation and made a point to include her team throughout the process. When a team feels true ownership of a project like this, they take tremendous pride in the outcome—and the families we are honored to serve can feel that pride the moment they walk through our doors."

Stacey explains how she views the work the team successfully executed. "Overall, the facility is noticeably brighter following the flooring and paint updates. Today's families are looking for spaces that feel uplifting, not weighed down by the outdated gloom often associated with older funeral homes. We were going for a boutique-style environment, intentionally different from the traditional model. We wanted to create a setting that feels comfortable, welcoming, warm, and bright—a place where families can gather and truly honor and celebrate the lives of their loved ones."

Building Around Lived Experience

At the center of that re-imagination was a collaborative, cross-disciplinary team. John, who joined Foundation Partners Group a year ago, brought in a seasoned facilities and construction leader from a previous chapter of his career.

"I brought a gentleman named **Gary Schluter** from my past life," John says, "who's head of facilities and construction. I just knew an organization our size didn't have that capability."

Cremation viewing room.

One of the renovation's most talked-about features is a dedicated children's area—an element not traditionally associated with funeral home design, but one John believes is overdue.

Schluter partnered closely with Stacey and the local team that serves families every day. Together, they did what the most successful renovation teams do: they built the project around lived experience—what works in the arrangement room, what families ask for, what they avoid, what they need but don't know to request.

The result, John says, was more than a refreshed building. It was a statement of commitment.

"It really was about how do we reinvest in the community to communicate our commitment," he explains. "Not just rebuild from a hurricane perspective, but really step it up a bit."

Designing for Difficulty

Funeral professionals know the truth families often can't articulate: grief is disorienting. People arrive exhausted, emotional, and uncertain. They may be coordinating travel, managing family dynamics, balancing faith traditions, and confronting financial realities—often all at once.

"This is a tough time in people's lives," John says. "And, unfortunately, it's one of those times where families and friends come together. And we want to do that in a way in our homes where it feels … comfortable."

Comfort is an understated word for a profound design challenge. Comfort is lighting that doesn't feel harsh. It's a space that doesn't feel sterile or transactional. It's furniture that invites people to sit and stay rather than hurry and leave. It's a layout that supports privacy without isolating people. It is, in many ways, the physical embodiment of a funeral home's promise: we will carry some of this weight for you.

Smith describes the ambition this way: creating "a different destination," a place where gathering feels possible even amid pain.

Space for Children

One of the renovation's most talked-about features is a dedicated children's area—an element not traditionally associated with funeral home design, but one John believes is overdue.

The concept came from mixing industry veterans with leaders who have worked outside deathcare. John Smith and Thomas Matthews—who came from healthcare—brought a perspective shaped by service environments where children are expected and accommodated.

"You think about when you go to a doctor's office or dentist's office," John says. "We have four kids. They're older now, but when they're 2, 3, 4—and you're trying to do something—all they need is a little distraction so you can handle the business you need to handle."

It's a simple observation with profound implications: families do not stop being families because they are grieving.

A Pet Chapel for Love

If the children's space reflects the realities of parenting, the pet-focused memorial area reflects something equally modern and equally universal: the deep emotional role animals play in our lives.

"There are a lot of pet lovers," John says. "We're a dog family. We've probably had four or five dogs over our life with our kids—and we cremated three of them."

At Anderson-McQueen, families can spend intimate time with a pet at the end of life, in a space designed to feel warm and dignified—not "a sterile room," as John recalls.

"We have that for us as humans," he says. "When we lose a loved one—why not have that area for your pet, or your fur baby, as we call them."

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Care Center as Backbone

Many families never realize how much of funeral service happens outside the chapel they see. That's where the adjacent care center comes in—an operational hub designed not just for logistics, but for dignity.

John explains that the Anderson-McQueen care center supports approximately 10 funeral homes in the Tampa–St. Petersburg market, operating as part of a hub-and-spoke system.

"If you are witnessing a cremation," he says, "it's really similar to witnessing a burial … we redesigned this to be conducive to families who wanted to come and pay their last respects."

Educating Without 'Selling'

As the conversation deepened, John addressed a topic many funeral directors wrestle with privately: the tension between providing options and being perceived as upselling.

"I don't want to sell," he says. "The family's in a vulnerable spot." Instead, he frames the funeral director's role as educator and counselor.

"You have a responsibility to educate them. To counsel them … to ask all the right questions about their loved one … to help them understand what's possible."

"Six months later," John says, "someone might say, 'Why didn't you tell me I could have an embalming? Why didn't you tell me I could turn my mom's ashes into jewelry? I never knew that. And now it's gone. I can't change it.' If you believe you're educating and counseling and showing them what's possible, and you're listening to the family—where they end up is the right place."

One Team, One Standard

John stepped into the CEO role following an intense growth period. His focus has been cultural alignment. "We've launched the FPG Way," he says, "to understand how do we serve families—but we do it as one team versus just an amalgamation of a bunch of brands."

The phrase he repeats is simple: "One team, one standard—exceptional care for every family."

"Teams that win championships—what are their ingredients?" he asks. "Everybody understands what the shared purpose and goal is … people know the role they need to play."

"Imagine the coach standing on the sideline just staring at the scoreboard and wondering how come we're not winning," he says. "That's like a leader looking at the finances all the time just saying, 'We've got to make more money.'"

That's how John approaches business. "How do I get the team in place and understand how to win … so when they actually go to take care of families, they have all the tools, and they feel good because they're free to do what they love to do."

The Experience Carried Forever

"I would hope they feel heard," John says of future families. "They feel respected. They feel trust. That experience will stay with them forever. And here's the scary part: it will stay with them forever if it was bad … you can't undo that. You can't get another chance here."

In St. Petersburg, rebuilding after a hurricane became something larger: an upgraded environment for employees, a more supportive space for modern families, and a tangible model of what "one team, one standard" looks like on the ground—down to the lighting, the seating, the children's area, and the pet chapel that quietly acknowledges what so many families already know:

Love is love. Loss is loss. And dignity matters—every time. M

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Children's play area

Reception area and lobby