CREMATION/SERVICE TO FAMILIES

Bringing families into a bedroom setting rather than a prep room for identification viewings isn’t just a nice idea, it’s an idea that makes financial sense, according to this long-time funeral director.

This is the viewing room section of a lounge-visitation area at McDougald Funeral Home & Crematorium. Identification viewings are done here.

Home-like setting comforts families, benefits funeral home

McCDougald Funeral Home and Crematorium is in Laurinburg, a city of 16,000 in south central North Carolina, close to the South Carolina border. Think a small Southern city is probably a bastion of traditional ways, including traditional funerals? Guess again. The funeral home’s cremation rate is 44 percent, up from just 13 percent in 1997.

One of the ways owner Beacham McDougald has changed his operation is by turning part of what used to be his casket selection room into a lounge with a kitchen area, a flexible seating area and a bedroom area where family members can sit at bedside to identify their loved one before a cremation takes place.

It may not surprise you to hear that families prefer this set-up to being brought into a prep room for an identification viewing, but perhaps less expected is the way it has paid off financially as well as in terms of goodwill for the funeral home.

ICCFA Magazine talked to McDougald about the concept and how it’s been a win-win situation for families and for his business.

How did you come up with this idea?

Probably a year and a half ago I was talking to another North Carolina funeral director, Danny Jefferson at Pierce-Jefferson Funeral Home in Kernersville. He had put in a bedroom, and told me how they place the body, wearing clothes other than a hospital smock, on the bed for identifications, even before immediate cremations.

Since adopting his idea for my funeral home, I can see from my own experience that cremation families see this and think, “These guys are all right. These people are...
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What kind of additional services and merchandise are people buying?

Well, first let me give you the extreme case. The woman had nine children; seven of them were present when she died. When we picked her up at her residence, they said, “She will be cremated and all we want is to meet you at the cemetery for a graveside service.”

I said, “Is there anyone else in the family who may want to see her?”

“We have a brother and a sister in Virginia.”

“Do you think they would want to see their mother before the cremation?”

“I think so.”

“OK, if you have some clothes you’d like us to dress her in, we’ll prepare her—wash her and set her features and have her so they can see her when they come.’’

They said, “Thank you.”

The next day, that brother and sister came in and viewed their mother. The family started phoning other people; we had about 35 people in there viewing.

The brother and sister from Virginia asked to talk to us and said, “Could you possibly embalm Mama, and have you got some kind of casket we can use for a viewing and a funeral?” They handed me an insurance policy for several thousand dollars and said, “Can you do it for this?”

And I said, “Most definitely.”

So we ended up having a cremation casket, a visitation, a funeral following the visitation, placed her cremated remains in an urn and had graveside services.

That’s what I consider my extreme case. In other cases, I’ve had families who come in to identify their loved one and they sit in the bedroom and say, “We would like to have her body present for a service or a visitation.”

I find the consumer is more likely to choose additional services than additional...
them the walnut case for the service and thought it was part of the package.

merchandise. They’re viewing their loved one and thinking, “You know, I’m getting a lot of value out of this; maybe I can share this with the rest of the family and some friends.”

We’ll do usually a minimal amount of embalming, just whatever is necessary to set the features—with the family’s permission, of course—and then have a viewing before the cremation and then usually a memorial service of some sort.

Do you think some people don’t want to have a funeral or any other kind of service because they think it’s going to be depressing, but when they experience this identification viewing/mini-visitation they find that it’s comforting rather than depressing?

Yes, exactly. Usually you need the viewing for positive identification anyway. I think it’s important to ask the family, when you do the pick-up, if there’s anyone else who may want to see the deceased before cremation and also, in cases where the medical condition has caused some discoloration in the skin or something like that, I ask, “Could I do a minimal amount of preparation—at no additional charge to you—just to clear up the complexion?”

One hundred percent of the time, people say “yes.” And that then opens the door for more. With cremation, there are a lot of options; you’re not burdened by a lot of the things you’re burdened by with a traditional funeral.

The lounge/bedroom also can help in preneed sales. I had some people come in and tell me they didn’t know who they were going to use, they were just checking prices for cremation. I asked one of the women, who was from the Midwest, if she would want to be able to see her parent before cremation.

“You mean I could do that?” she said. So I showed them the bedroom, and before they left I had a preneed sale on the books.

I do think it’s just natural that when you extend yourself to do more for your client families, when you’re willing to give them a little bit more for their money, they’ll also be willing to buy more.

Basically what you’re doing is what they tell writers to do: Show, don’t tell. So you could “educate” people by telling them how a visitation would make them feel, would help them, but instead, you’re showing them and they’re realizing it themselves.

Exactly. Visualizing something is a lot easier for a family to grasp at a time like that than trying to picture something being described to them.

I will say one effect this has had, it has cost us the sale of cremation caskets, but those losses have been more than made up in the sale of extra services the families decide they want.

That’s what funeral directors have been told to do for at least the last decade: sell (and charge for) their services instead of relying on product mark-ups.

Exactly. Some people come in for the identification and ask if they can leave their mother in the bed for a viewing. The bedroom has curtains around it than can be opened up, and there’s a lounge area where we can add more seating.

People will come in and sit down, I might fix them a cup of coffee or a glass of iced tea, serve them a cookie or two and they’ll just stay for a couple of hours, with people coming in. I’ve had as much as 60 family members come in.

There’s a visitation right there, that I didn’t have, which for most funeral homes is probably several hundred extra dollars.