

THE THANA GRAM

New Year 2022

Official Publication of the Tennessee Funeral Directors Association, Inc.

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119TH
MEMORIAL
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REPRINTED FROM
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CALENDARS**

President's Message

Marc Sims • TFDA Board of Directors



Greetings,

I hope this finds you well and that your new year is off to a great start! I know that many are continuing to work thru trying times but please be assured that you are making a difference in people's lives every day in this great funeral service profession.

I look forward to seeing all my colleagues again at the Spring District Meetings. So, do not forget to mark your calendars for March 14th – 17th (details in this issue). I am pleased to announce that TFDA and Tennessee Donor Services will be presenting a seminar on the advantages of TFDA & TDS working together in addition to TDS sharing information about their new location. What an opportunity to be with your funeral service friends and make new ones as well!

Being a TFDA member has countless benefits, and your membership is important to the Association. For those of you that have paid your membership dues, I say "Thank You." If you have not paid your membership dues yet, let me encourage you to do so. It is of most importance to support our membership by attending the meetings and convention. Please remember to have your membership card available to present as you sign in at the district meetings, convention seminars or any other TFDA events.

I am excited to announce the 2022 TFDA/TFSSC 119TH Annual Convention coming up June 5-7th in Franklin, TN. The theme for the convention is "HATS OFF TO FUNERAL SERVICE." The Convention Committee has been hard at work planning an enjoyable convention. We are excited about our guest speakers and our exhibitors competing for the Best Decorated Booth Space. We have tons of fun lined up for all our attendees. There will be something for everyone from seminars and auction items to dancing and photo ops. We are especially excited about the Grand Banquet this year. Remember the olden days when you dressed your best...well, find your fancy dress, your tuxedo, and your hat because this year's banquet is going to be an "Evening of Elegance." We will be having a contest for the Best Women's Hat, Best Men's Hat, and Best Dressed Couple/Family. I look forward to seeing everyone dressed in their best.

As always, thank you for all you do every day for the families you serve. I am truly honored to serve as president of the great association. We are proud to lead this association into the future as well as showing the upcoming funeral service professionals how important TFDA is and what we do.

Respectfully,
Marc Sims
TFDA President



The Tennessee Funeral Directors Association Board of Directors and Staff are here for you.

Our Mission:

To be the Tennessee Funeral Professional leadership advocate, through communication, education and legislation, thereby empowering the licensed funeral professional the ability to serve at the highest level.



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2022 TFDA/TFSSC Memorial Service
Sunday, June 5, 2022
Embassy Suites Hotel, Franklin, TN

What a great honor for our association to participate in celebrating the lives of our deceased loved ones who have left us this past year.

Please contact the TFDA office if there is a loved one not listed that should be included.
Phone (615) 321-8792 or by email Rosemary Harrison, Memorial Service Chairperson rosemary.mc@gmail.com.

Loved ones we will be honoring at this year's 2022 TFDA/TFSSC 119th Annual Convention.

Clara E. Spann
Grover C. Brown
Terri Jane Buckner
Wendell Moore
Robert "Frank" Lockard
Dorothy Gray Sowell

Sheila Rose Scarborough
Jeanne Sue Brown
Bobby Dean Bowen
James Robert "J.R" Bass
Edith Whiteside Delk
Gus Barrett "Bart" White IV

Anyone that would like to participate in the TFDA Choir for the Memorial Service,
please contact Rosemary Harrison, rosemary.mc@gmail.com



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Shown: Montgomery casket with Butterfly decorative panel and Image medallion.

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TISSUE RECOVERIES



Tennessee Donor Services will start performing recoveries at the new building location. We expect to start using the new facilities in early January 2022. Our new facilities will allow us to better service our funeral service partners by shortening the overall time that we have donors in our care. Our new location is four miles north of our Patterson Street location and will also reduce some of the Midtown traffic congestion.

Tennessee Donor Services
Metro Center, Suite 150
566 Mainstream Drive, Nashville, TN 37228

Address is searchable on Google Maps and Onboard GPS.

Two possible approach routes, both off Rosa L. Parks Boulevard/ALT 41. Note: there are prominent street side signs marking the DCI building; there is a circle driveway around the back of the building, one is an entrance, the other is an exit.

1. Turn north off Rosa L. Parks Boulevard/ALT 41 onto Great Circle Road. From Great Circle Road turn left onto Mainstream Drive. On left side/Southside of Mainstream Drive, drive past first driveway to second driveway on west side of DCI building.

or

2. Turn north off Rosa L. Parks Boulevard onto Mainstream Drive; on right side/South side of Mainstream Drive, drive to first driveway on west side of building. THEN, drive through entrance gate at back of west side of the building. Announce yourself from the pushbutton call box. Drive to the middle of the back of the building to Door #6 (blue numbers are over the doors) with loading ramp and blue railings on both sides of ramp. TO EXIT, continue driving around back of building to automatic gate and exit opposite side from entrance.

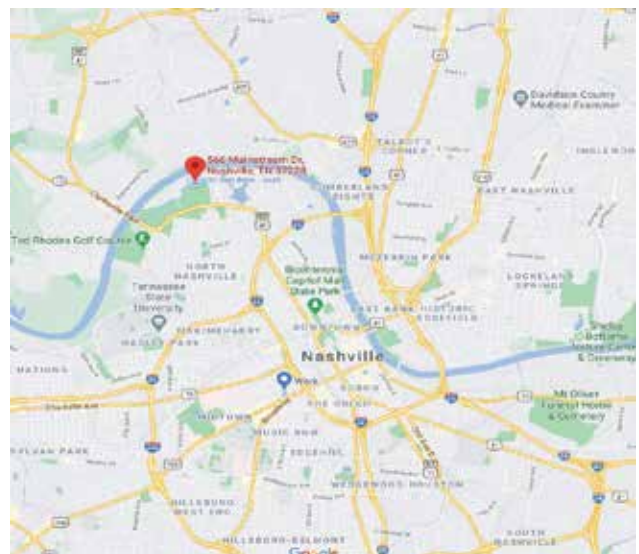


Red Arrows: Traffic Pattern.

Blue Lines: Entrance and Exit Gates.

Yellow Lines: Door 6 Ramp

- Stop at West Gate call box, push button to call techs and announce yourself.
- Back up or pull up ramp at Door 6
- Exit by using the automatic opening East Gate.



Any questions, please call Funeral Home
Liaison Line 866-757-6481.

Tennessee Donor Services
an extraordinary commitment to science, health and hope





**Hats off
to
Funeral
Service**

**TFDA & TFSSC
2022 Convention**



2022 TFDA/TFSSC 119TH Annual Convention June 5-7, 2022, Embassy Suites Hotel, Franklin, TN

(You must show your TFDA membership card to pay members prices)

“Hats Off to Funeral Service”

SUNDAY, JUNE 5, 2022

10:30 am – 11:30 am

Interfaith Service with Bro. John Coleman



12:00 pm – 2:00 pm

**SEMINAR Presented by
Scott Serafin** The 770 Group
“Principles of Investing”
TOPIC: The TN Master Trust
and how it works for the Pro-
posed Applicant, Funeral Home,
as well as the Association.
Sponsored by RBC

Pending State Approval for 2 CEUS

2:00 pm – 3:00 pm

SEMINAR – Mary Russell – Wow Them! With Service
They’ll Never Forget

Pending State Approval for 1 CEU



3:00 pm – 4:00 pm

SEMINAR – Mary Russell
– What Now? The Virtual
Reality of Funeral Service
Pending State Approval for 1
CEU

4:30 pm - Family Gathers for Memorial Service

5:00 pm – 6:00 pm

TFDA/TFSSC Memorial Service

6:00 pm – 8:30 pm

Grand Opening Exhibit Hall

Pending State Approval for 1 CEU

MONDAY, JUNE 6, 2022

9:00 am – 11:00 am

TFDA Business Meeting
Pending State Approval for 1 CEU

10:00 am – 11:00 am

TFSSC Business Meeting



11:00 am – 1:00 pm
JOINT LUNCHEON

Presented by Mike Squires
of Southern Calls magazine
Always Follow Your Pas-
sion “A Funeral Directors
Perspective”
Pending State Approval for
1 CEU

1:00 pm – 3:00 pm

Exhibit Hall open

5:00 pm – 8:00 pm

MONDAY NIGHT LIVE AND SILENT AUCTION
Comedian Killer Beaz

TUESDAY, JUNE 7, 2022

CONVENTION GOLF TOURNAMENT

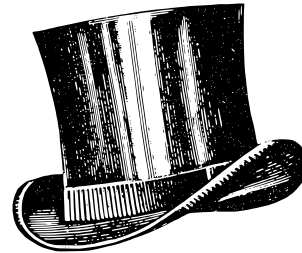


1:00 pm – 4:00 pm

**SEMINAR Presented by
Valerie Wages**
TOPIC: “Perception by Your
Community is Everything in
Determining If You will be
Selected or Not” Sponsored
by Heritage Family Services
Pending State Approval for 3
CEUS

5:00 pm – 6:00 pm

Past President’s Reception



6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

GRAND BANQUET – “An Evening of Elegance”

We are going back to the time of dressing up and wear your special hat)

Honoring One of Our Own

DJ (soft instrumental during meal) – Dance Music afterwards along with Photo Booth

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CONTEST!!!!!!

Going along with this year’s theme, there will be contest for all! There will be:

Best Men’s Hat, Prize of 1 Grand Banquet ticket for the 2023 Grand Banquet

Best Women’s Hat, Prize of 1 Grand Banquet ticket for the 2023 Grand Banquet

Best Dress Couple/Family, Prize 2 Free Convention Registrations for the 2023 Annual Convention

Best Decorated Exhibitor Booth Space, Prize of one free booth space for the 2023 Annual Convention

Alana Alberto
Murfreesboro, Tennessee

John Blade
Fairview, Tennessee

Tiffany Bowman
Cleveland, Tennessee

Jesse Byers
Loganville, Georgia
Lauren Callihan
Goodlettsville, Tennessee

Chadwick Casey
Marion, Mississippi

Kenneth Dunn
Erwin, Tennessee

Paisley Eads
Bristol, Tennessee

Shannon Harrison
Bradford, Tennessee

Stephanie Huser
Erin, Tennessee

Lyndsey Lowery
Hayti, Missouri

Brandy Massey
Brush Creek, Tennessee

Daniella McLellan
Nashville, Tennessee



John A. Gupton College
Top 10% from FALL 2021

Ricky McNeese
Mount Juliet, Tennessee

Daniel Morgan
Rockwood, Tennessee

John Musgrove
Soso, Mississippi

Faith Petree
Clinton, Tennessee

Heather Poston
Tullahoma, Tennessee

Calia Riden
Old Hickory, Tennessee





CONGRATULATIONS!

Christopher (Chris) Lea, a funeral director of Brownsville, has been appointed by Governor Bill Lee to the Board of Funeral Directors & Embalmers for a term of four years representing the Western Grand Division. Mr. Lea was nominated by the Tennessee Funeral Directors Association, Inc.

The appointment of Chris Lea is effective January 1, 2022. Mr. Lea replaces Robert Shackelford, III, of Selmer who completes his term on December 31, 2021.

Congratulations to Mr. Lea on his new role. We are grateful to Mr. Shackelford for his service to the Board of Funeral Directors & Embalmers and the citizens of Tennessee.



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American
Foundation
for Suicide
Prevention

Tennessee

PASSIONS

Written by Alice Adams

At first glance, John Willmott “Jack” Backer, III – age 16, tall, handsome, varsity tennis player and straight-A sophomore at Sayre School in Lexington, Kentucky – appears to be a typical teenager who enjoys tennis and playing guitar, especially Southern gospel and anything by Don Williams, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings or Johnny Cash.

But when you talk to Jack, you have to keep reminding yourself that you’re speaking to a 16-year-old who is mature beyond his years and not a seasoned adult.

If all goes as he plans, Jack will earn a business degree and then attend John A. Gupton College, the same mortuary school his late grandfather attended, and become a sixth-generation funeral director at Woodfin Funeral Chapels in Murfreesboro and Smyrna, Tennessee.

“Every time I pass his portrait hanging in the hall of our funeral home, I often wonder if my great-great-great grandfather, Luther Rice Jacobs, foresaw his great-great-great grandson following in his footsteps when he established his funeral parlor 130 years ago – or if he knew generations of his family would become undertakers as he had done in 1893,” Jack wondered aloud.

But to get the whole story, let’s look back to the beginning of this outstanding youngster’s journey. “I was 8 years old when I experienced death for the first time. Then, within a year or two, several of my favorite people died,” he remembered. “My dad’s best friend had a horse farm out in the country. Our phone rang. There had been an accident. I remember my mother leaving in a big hurry. It was pouring rain. As I was to learn later, when my mom arrived at the farm, she saw my dad, our friend Stuart, and then the coroner’s van.”

Jack’s godparent, Christine, had been killed in a horseback riding accident. “My grandfather, Bubba Woodfin, assisted the local funeral director with the service, held in the town’s small, country church. The visitation was held in the farmhouse,” Jack said. “My dad and Uncle Stuart rolled the casket out of the church and she was buried in the church cemetery.”

“I had been with Aunt Christine the week before,” he added. “Her death was difficult for all of us, but I think that’s when I first realized death can come at any time.”

“A year later, my grandmother, Julia Cowgill, died. My dad’s mom, she was the grandmother who put a pool in her backyard for her grandkids,” Jack explained. “I spent Saturday nights with her, and she was such a loving person. She and Aunt Christine taught us how to love and be kind.”

Because Julia had been diagnosed with lung cancer, Jack said he had more time to prepare for the grief he experienced after her death: “I was fortunate to have the opportunity to spend time with her before she died, but, even though you think you’re prepared, you never are.”

He described the day he knew without question that he wanted to become a funeral director: “I was about 13 when I went to ‘the chapel,’ as my grandfather always called it, to work with him and my Aunt Shannon. I had always wanted to grow up and be like my grandfather because everybody loved Bubba Woodfin. He was just a good man and showed





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compassion for everyone who walked through the door.”

“One thing we had done from the time I was very young was go out in the country or the cemetery and set traps for critters,” Jack continued. “We also did a lot of fishing, but, from those experiences, he always called me ‘Trapper Jack.’ So did many in the community.”

“I was at work one day – and I’ll admit I love working at the chapel as much as I can, even though I’m four hours away from Murfreesboro, in Lexington, Kentucky – and everybody felt it was going to be a slow day. Josh Brown, a director/embalmer and now co-manager who had worked at the chapel for over 20 years, brought a woman from the hospital who needed to be embalmed, and he asked me if I wanted to observe. I guess I never thought it would be possible, so I was at the same time excited, eager and had a few butterflies as well.

“But before I observed the procedure, Josh asked me to get permission from my mom and Aunt Shannon. With fingers crossed, they both said ‘yes.’ I remember walking through the hall into the embalming room. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a sign that said ‘Caution: formaldehyde can cause cancer.’ That made it even more real.”

“As Josh worked, I mainly just observed, noting the things he did out of respect for the dead – like keeping the body covered all the time. I’m sure my eyes were bigger than normal because I never knew so much had to be done to prepare a body so there could be a viewing.”

“I have always loved science in school, and I learned how much science you have to know,” Jack explained. “I also had seen a deceased, dressed in a casket, so I had seen the after but never the before. As Josh completed the case, he had to prepare the body for shipping, so I watched and learned as much as I could, although I realized the shipping process was a lot more complex than I thought.”

As Jack left the chapel after a visitation that evening, he was still processing what he had learned during the preparation of the deceased. He decided he would write about his experience that afternoon for a school assignment. “I made up my mind about my future in funeral service when I walked out of that observation experience, and my plans have snowballed from there,” Jack said.

“After that, I started going on removals – and then reconnecting with the family the next day when they came back to make arrangements. My first observation helped me make the decision to become the sixth generation in my family to be a funeral service professional.”

“I am definitely a people person, and I know that from being at the chapel, working with my family and the staff – all people I truly love who have taught me so much. My Uncle Chuck Ramsay, a funeral director for years, also has been a great role model for me,” Jack added.

“I realize there’s a downside to funeral service – it’s hard work, and the work is mentally and physically draining. My grandfather found the right wife because it’s hard to have a social life and hard to keep in touch with family and friends. Bottom line, you’re constantly being called away to help someone who just lost someone they love. Like my grandfather, I think it’s fulfilling to be able to help someone nobody else in town can help,” the teenager said.

“I think everybody needs a network like the Tennessee Funeral Directors Association,” Jack continued. “I went to a convention, and so many people came up and said, ‘I’ll bet you’re Bubba Woodfin’s grandson.’ People I had never met knew him and had great stories to tell.”

“I’ve been so fortunate to have several people contributing to my education, even before I get to mortuary school, like my Aunt Shannon, Richard Hightower, and Jerry Griffey. He’s my mentor and friend – I call him “Old Man Griffey” – and we talk every week. He’s someone you can learn from. He shares his experiences, stories about my grandfather and anything related to funeral service.

“I had always heard about Jerry Griffey of Gentry Griffey Funeral Chapel & Crematory in Knoxville and finally met him at my grandfather’s visitation. We made an instant connection, and we’ve talked weekly ever since. He shares his collection of funeral magazines, and he also urged me to subscribe to Southern Calls.” The best way to know someone is to know their friends and family, and Richard Hightower of Hightower Funeral Home in Bremen, Georgia, and Bubba Woodfin were lifelong friends, beginning when they met at mortuary college in Nashville, where they graduated in 1958.

“It was a rare friendship that lasted 62 years, until Bubba’s death,” the veteran funeral director said. “I had an apartment in Nashville during school, and Bubba was a commuter student – Murfreesboro is 30 miles from Nashville – so I spent a lot of weekends with the Woodfin family.”

“We both came from funeral service families, so neither of us were newcomers to the profession,” Hightower continued. “Bubba had this dynamic personality that enabled him to own every room he walked into, and he was one of the best funeral directors I’ve ever known. Definitely one of a kind... and he never met a stranger.”

“I’ve known Bubba’s youngest grandson, Jack, for three years, and, in my opinion, he’s one of the best young men I know. Last summer, he spent 10 days with us, working at our funeral home in Carrollton, and our secretaries didn’t want him to leave,” Hightower said. “I know Jack will have a great funeral service career, and I know Bubba would be very pleased.” “He’s followed his grandfather’s and his aunt’s high character,” the director continued. “He’s a clean-cut young man, dresses neatly and appropriately and thinks at a higher level than most others his age. He has a servant’s



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attitude, works to do it better, not just get it done, and has a strong work ethic.”

“Jack’s plan after high school in two years is focused on becoming licensed after college, and he is committed to funeral service. He got that from Bubba, and I am so proud of him. Jack wants to spend every free minute at the chapel in

Murfreesboro, where he has already gained the respect from the staff, and they – like me – are very impressed with the dignity and respect he gives to every family, regardless of their zip code or income.”

“He’s an inspiring young man, and you just want to be around him,” Hightower concluded. “Jack makes me hopeful for the future. Jack will do great things.” Jack Backer, at age 16, is fortunate to have found his passion so early, and he’s not waiting around for opportunity to knock. “I’m going to be speaking with our pastor next week to serve as a volunteer funeral coordinator at our church,” he said. “I’m ready to help.”

And he’s also ready to be part of the sixth generation of his

family in the funeral business. Shannon Woodfin Parsons is now president of the company and the fifth generation of the family to carry on the family-owned firm’s legacy.

Graduating from Auburn University with a degree in counseling, a lunch with dad helped Shannon find the first steps she needed to take, working as a volunteer in Atlanta and then taking a job as a flight attendant and moving to Atlanta to diversify her skills as well as her life experience.

“In 2000, our Murfreesboro chapel burned. Dad was 65, and I knew rebuilding would be difficult. I was ready to be home and the timing was right,” she said.

That first summer, Shannon was answering the phone to help out: “Dad asked me to deliver a basket of his special recipe of cornbread to a lady who lived way out in the country, but I didn’t mind driving. This dear lady shared her life with me for two hours. When I got back in the car and headed home, I realized where I should be, doing what was in my heart. Such a blessing.”

“Not only was Dad charismatic, but he also was a great role model for all of us,” Shannon explained. “People would come here in such pain and grief, and, in 10 minutes, Dad would have them calmed down.” She’s confident that Jack will follow in his grandfather’s footsteps. “When two banker friends came in last summer, one of them said, ‘I don’t know the young man who greeted us, but you can tell he’s been tutored on how to look you in the eyes when he shook hands and said, ‘Jack Backer. Nice to meet you.’”

“We’ve not met, Jack,” the banker said, “but I can tell he’s just like his grandfather, and Bubba would be so proud of him.”



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MARK YOUR CALENDAR

2022

(TFDA Members, you will be asked to show your Membership Card)

March 14, 2022

TFDA Spring District Meeting & Seminar, East District

Rothchilds Catering, Knoxville, TN

(Seminar TN State Approved for 3 CEUS, District meeting TN State Approved for 2 CEUS)

3:00 pm – 6:00 pm TFDA and TDS Working Together

6:30 pm – 8:30 pm Jay Bucy, Legislative Updates

March 15, 2022

TFDA Spring District Meeting & Seminar, Middle District

Farm Bureau Expo, Lebanon, TN

(Seminar TN State Approved for 3 CEUS, District meeting TN State Approved for 2 CEUS)

3:00 pm – 6:00 pm TFDA and TDS Working Together

6:30 pm – 8:30 pm Jay Bucy, Legislative Updates

March 17, 2022

TFDA Spring District Meeting & Seminar, West District

Jackson Country Club, Jackson, TN

(Seminar TN State Approved for 3 CEUS, District meeting TN State Approved for 2 CEUS)

3:00 pm – 6:00 pm TFDA and TDS Working Together

6:30 pm – 8:30 pm Jay Bucy, Legislative Updates



June 5 – 7, 2022

TFDA/TFSSC 119th Annual Convention

Details included in this issue.

50 YEARS OF SERVICE

If you or someone you know has 50 years of service, please contact the TFDA Office (615) 321-8792 or Dawn@tnfda.org.

We would like to honor you at the 2022 TFDA/TFSSC 119th Annual Convention,

Monday, June 6, 2022 at the TFDA Business Meeting.

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PLACES

Written by Todd Harra, CFSP

Stevens Mortuary occupies the historic Cedar Grove estate nestled in north Knoxville, Tennessee. When one arrives at the mortuary, surrounded by flowering dogwood trees, the stately antebellum era house, with wide, inviting porches, is reminiscent of a simpler time when friends came to call on Sundays after church and death calls were sent via messenger.

Keeping with their longstanding hospitality tradition, all guests and families are greeted in the foyer by staff. The first thing guests notice when entering is a massive, sweeping staircase. Carved by hand, it's one of the many prominent features of the historic house.

But Stevens Mortuary isn't merely an attractive facility, it holds the distinction of being operated by perhaps the oldest working embalmer in America, Mary Evelyn Cantwell. When Mike Squires first reached out to Cantwell, who is ninety-one, to see if Southern Calls could do a piece on her mortuary, she told him she'd have to think about it as she was very busy. That day she was out on her tractor mowing the grass on the 322 acre family farm. To trot out an old adage: Mary Evelyn Cantwell literally and figuratively doesn't let any grass grow under her feet.

Cantwell became the president and CEO of Stevens Mortuary in 2018, at the ripe age of eighty-eight following the death of her sister, the co-founder, Bernice Cantwell Stevens. Even the use of a walker, from a fall in 2012 that broke her hip, doesn't slow Cantwell down. She has the energy of someone half her age. "I've embalmed fifty-two bodies so far this year," she tells me in her clear, strong voice when we finally get a chance to talk. It's early October. That means by the end of the year, the spry Cantwell will likely do upwards of seventy preps.

That's a decent caseload for a young embalmer, not to mention a nonagenarian. Though it's clear as we talk, Cantwell has a passion for funeral service, one would be hard pressed to find a recent mortuary school grad who can match her vim and vigor. Cantwell, with amazing recall and attention to detail, walks me through the history of Stevens Mortuary and the storied property it sits upon.

Stevens Mortuary was founded in 1958 by Thomas and Bernice Stevens. Tommy, as he was called, began driving ambulances for Rose Mortuary in Knoxville at the age of sixteen. He worked briefly as an electrician for Standard Knitting Mill, but the funeral bug had bitten him. Tommy enrolled at the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science, graduating in 1948, and continued working for Rose Mortuary and Berry Funeral Homes. He and Bernice opened their mortuary at 3701 N. Broadway on July 21, 1958, with a dedication by Rev. Ralph L. Murray from Smithwood Baptist Church. The announcement in the Knoxville Journal read, "All services rendered with sympathy, understanding and dignity." Three years later they purchased a vacant property called Cedar Grove. Built in 1833 by Colonel James Scott, Jr. for his wife Eliza Jane Ramsey Scott, the original eight room house was built with bricks made on-site and featured Parisian wallpaper (thought to be the second oldest in Tennessee) and a hand-carved staircase. After Eliza Scott's death in 1858, the property was purchased by Union officer Colonel W.L. Ledgerwood who offered it as a field hospital during the war. Cedar Grove treated casualties from both sides after the Union forces took Knoxville in September of 1863 and later that autumn during the siege of Fort Sanders. (Ledgerwood would later serve as a pallbearer for President Andrew Johnson.) After the war, prominent Knoxville families occupied Cedar Grove for the next seventy-five years before Oglewood Baptist Church—a mission of Broadway Baptist—purchased the property, worshiping there for about a decade before abandoning it. When the Stevens' looked at the vacant property they saw Oglewood Baptist had turned an apartment behind the living room into a chapel, making it perfect for a future mortuary.

When Tommy and Bernice Stevens opened Stevens Mortuary, they had a dream. "Our unofficial motto is: 'Service like it





used to be,’” says Cantwell, speaking to the pathos of the firm. Tommy and Bernice had been married in 1940 when Bernice was only sixteen, and by the time they came into the dilapidated property had two children, Evelyn and Brenda. They immediately got to work fixing up and rehabilitating Cedar Grove and adding a small addition for the show and prep rooms, opening for business in early February of 1961. In a photo taken at the grand opening Bernice and Tommy embrace in front of one of the many antique pianos, Bernice in a blue gown, hair swept up in a fashionable beehive hairdo gazing into Tommy’s eyes. They continued to serve the community as a husband—wife team until Tommy’s death in 1978. Tommy made the arrangements, managed the services and embalmed. Bernice worked as a hostess offering hospitality to the bereaved and attending funerals.

A prominent feature on the Stevens property is the antique hearse sitting in a custom built, glass-walled enclosure. Lovingly restored by Amish craftsmen from Muddy Pond, the white eight-column,

mosque deck horse-drawn hearse with a gooseneck coachman’s seat was built in 1877 by an unknown coachbuilder. The hearse was discovered behind a gas station in rural Indiana by Evelyn Stevens Grindstaff and her husband while travelling home from vacation. She told her father about the hearse, and Tommy purchased it, styling the mortuary’s logo after it.

Mary Evelyn Cantwell, Bernice’s sister, joined the firm in 1972 as a bookkeeper (and still does the books to this day, in addition to all her other duties). A graduate of Ward Belmont College, East Tennessee Baptist Hospital Medical Technology School and the University of Tennessee (UT), Cantwell had retired from her position as the chief medical technologist at UT’s School of Medical Technology to look after her father, who was alone on the family farm in Rutledge following her mother’s death in 1968. Shortly after Cantwell started, Tommy became ill with cancer. “He said, ‘You have to go to mortuary school so the family business will continue to be family owned and operated.’” Cantwell adds, “That was very important to Tommy.”

Cantwell enrolled in Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science, graduating summa cum laude in 1978. She was one of two women in a class of thirty-three. Cantwell was forty-eight years old, the other woman, eighteen. The year she graduated is the year Tommy succumbed to cancer, and Mary says of the transition, “We got by with some good help.” Bernice took the helm of the company, and Mary served her apprenticeship, earning her embalmers license in 1979. For many years, the firm has employed three embalmers, but lately there are two servicing the roughly hundred call-per-year firm (that Mary says has a twenty-two percent cremation rate, of which two-thirds are full-service cremations). When asked how she compares funeral service to the medical field, Cantwell responds in her usual spare manner, “I like funeral work better.” She pauses and adds, “I love embalming and if you are doing something that you love it is not work but a labor of love.”

Cantwell was born to Lon and Ethel Dalton Cantwell in Rutledge, TN on March 4, 1930. As a child on the family farm, she drove mule teams to cut the hay. When the family bought a gasoline powered tractor, she thought she’d died and gone to heaven, doing all the work a farm demands like plowing fields, cutting grass, and hauling hay. Cantwell also raised shorthorn cattle for fat cattle shows in the 4-H club at Rutledge High School and won eight blue ribbons. In addition to her chores on the farm, Cantwell was a star basketball player for the high school team. Outside of funeral service, Cantwell’s favorite thing to do is ride her tractor. When she joined Stevens, she cut all five acres, but has scaled back in recent years. She still mows three rental properties at the farm, a chore that takes upwards of six hours even with help from her two assistants Chip Leaner and Steve Vandergiff. Her current tractor is a red sixteen horsepower Gravely that she’s owned for forty years.

Cantwell recounts a recent story when she was cutting the mortuary property. “There’s a flower room where some of the staff gather. Two EMT’s came in and asked the people there, “Is there a ninety-year-old woman who has fallen and cannot get up?” The assembled group confirmed there was a ninety-year-old woman who worked here. One of the EMTs said, ‘Her Lifeline necklace has gone off.’ So, I’m out on my tractor and three employees and the EMTs come running across the yard waving their arms and I stop the tractor. ‘Are you



OK?’ one asked. ‘Of course, I am,’ I replied. ‘Why?’ ‘Your Lifeline alerted us that you’d fallen.’” Cantwell explains to me, “The tractor hit a bump and set the necklace off. We all had a good laugh over that.”

Cantwell is not one to sit idle in her leisure time either. One of her passions is travelling. She’s travelled to forty-four states and the District of Columbia (but not Alaska or the New England states), six Canadian Provinces, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Athens, Greece, and Israel. Prior to graduating from the University of Tennessee in the summer of 1953 Ms. Cantwell worked at Yellowstone National Park for three months at the Ole Faithful Basin. In 1958 she went on a Caribbean cruise with a stop in Havana, Cuba. Cantwell recalls hearing gunfire in the hills as Fidel Castro and his guerillas clashed with the embattled General Fulgencio Batista’s army. However, the highlight of the trip was seeing Nat King Cole perform in a Havana nightclub. When asked her favorite travel destination, Cantwell doesn’t hesitate. “Israel. [It’s] seeing the Bible come alive for you.” And Cantwell hasn’t traveled everywhere on commercial flights. She earned her private pilot’s license, flying her first solo in 1962, complete with the time-honored tradition of having her instructor cut off her shirt tail. Then she signed it, dated it and pinned it to the wall.

In 1977 Cantwell was commissioned as a Kentucky Colonel and is a member of the Kentucky Colonel Silver Eagle Society. Bernice began the tradition of hosting an Easter Sunrise Service in the mortuary’s gardens in 1979, an annual event that attracts upwards of two hundred guests. The service, celebrated by a different invited clergyperson each year, has been put on hold due to the pandemic, but Cantwell has faith they will be able to resume and continue the tradition for many years to come.

Keeping with Tommy’s dying wish, Stevens Mortuary is still very much a family affair. In addition to Cantwell, the Stevens’ daughter, Evelyn Stevens Grindstaff, returned to Knoxville in 1999 after a lengthy career as a corporate marketing executive to join the family firm.

Don Haynes, CFSP, CPC, MBIE, who originally started with the firm in 1978, and after leaving to work with the Champion Company, returned in 2006. Says Haynes of the Stevens difference, “We’re funeral service oriented, not funeral business oriented.” Asked about her secret, Cantwell replies, “I have a personal relationship with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who is a contributing factor to my long life and good health.” She adds, “I have taken very little medication over the years, and at ninetyone years and nine months I don’t currently take any medication.” So, what does the future of Stevens Mortuary hold? Cantwell remains indefatigable, saying, “I love serving our families, and I look forward to many more years of serving our community.”

865.524.0331

marycantwell11@comcast.net



An aerial photograph of a lush green forest with a stream winding through it. The water is dark and reflects the surrounding trees. The sky is visible through the canopy in some areas.

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TFDA is pleased to announce the Tennessee Preneed Funeral Trust Fund is now operational. TFDA members now have a funding option when preneed opportunities arise, Investors Life for insurance funding, and TFDA Preneed Trust to fulfill trusting needs.

The Tennessee Preneed Funeral Trust Fund is a secure pooled trust comprised from TFDA member funeral establishments. Any TFDA member firm may participate in the Trust. Participation in the trust allows TFDA members the ability to deposit funds for an intended funeral beneficiary's preneed arrangement ensuring compliance with all preneed laws and regulations. Those funds earn competitive rates of interest and can be accessed quickly when a funeral becomes at-need.

The Tennessee Preneed Funeral Trust a service available to all TFDA members in good standing, and:

- Meets all state and federal requirements
- 2% Minimum Crediting Rate or market value whichever is greater
- No Minimum Deposit Requirements, Age Restrictions or Chargebacks
- Online Quarterly Reports and Account Balances through Administrative Systems Inc. provides monthly preneed reports,
- Affords access to online account balance information, summary statements and monthly activity reports

Tennessee Preneed Funeral Trust funds are pooled with many other accounts in secure investments earning the highest possible rate of return. The return earned over time will assist offsetting rising costs should the price of the future funeral increase. One hundred percent of the principal and interest accrues to the benefit of the intended funeral recipient. All Tennessee Preneed Funeral Trust accounts are fully portable, meaning you may transfer your account to another funeral home at any time. Some traditional saving accounts may close or become inaccessible at your time of death. Tennessee Preneed Funeral Trust accounts will be available immediately to apply toward or pay for final funeral expenses.

We would also like to remind everyone of our recommendation of Investors Heritage Life Insurance Company for all your preneed insurance needs. TFDA, through Tennessee Funeral Security, Inc. began this affiliation in 2017 and it has been an absolute delight working with these fine folks. We hope this relationship will remain for many years,

Investors Heritage has been assisting funeral professionals with insurance funded preneed since the 1980's. And, Investors Heritage has not stopped increasing products and compounding services since. their products, and compounded services been compounding and increasing their product offering since then.

Here are some of the many benefits provided by Investors Heritage Director of Tennessee's preneed division Jay Slatton.

- Service Based Support
- Field Management Team
- Home Office Team
- Marketing Team
- Multiple products on same application
- Multiple tax-free growth levels with corresponding commission schedules
- Industry Leading Premium Rates
- Dedicated home office and field team to funeral homes
- Open communication with Upper Management Team
- Claims paid within 24-48 hours
- Attainable company convention for top producers
- Multiple faceted Marketing Program
- Facebook, Online Ads, Direct Mail, etc
- Points earned for every dollar submitted
- Successful Seminar Program
- Unfunded Preneed Conversion Program



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Membership Development

**Contact the TFDA Office if you have any questions.
Why do I need to be a TFDA Member?**

Professional Educational Seminars

TFDA Education Committee annually provides TFDA members the opportunity of learning from nationally and internationally funeral professionals and providing additional continuing educational opportunities in more technical areas.

Leadership Opportunities

As a member of the Tennessee Funeral Directors Association, you are presented several opportunities to enhance your leadership abilities.

- Committee Involvement
- Leadership Training Seminars through the National Funeral Directors Association
- Advocacy Summit in Washington
- NFDA Leadership Summit
- Board of Director Opportunities
- President's Retreats
- Speaker Opportunities

TFDA Master Preneed Trust

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Meets all state and federal requirements

2% Minimum Crediting Rate or market value whichever is greater

No Minimum Deposit Requirements, Age Restrictions or Chargebacks

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Government Affairs

The Tennessee Funeral Directors Association is Tennessee's largest funeral organization for legislation that is introduced for the success of funeral service. TFDA also serves as a regulator for legislation introduced potentially adverse to funeral service.

Professional Website

TFDA now offers vital information for members all at the touch of a button. TFDA membership entitles you to everything from government compliance forms to dues structures when you want it. This website is also designed to update you on the latest information concerning the funeral profession. Our website also offers members state approved forms for all your preneed requirements. Please visit us at www.tnfda.org.

Educational Opportunities

Continuing education credits are available throughout the year with various opportunities to achieve the credits required. In addition to CEU's, it is a time to learn from your colleagues as well.

Professional and Ethical Practices

Identifying that you are affiliated with an association that has a common goal for best practices of professionalism and ethical practices for families that we serve.

Professional Communication

Anytime events unfold in the funeral profession TFDA members are instantly informed. Information on breaking news, updates on coming events, or even the death of TFDA members are all immediately conveyed via broadcast email from the TFDA office.

The Thanagram

The official bi-monthly TFDA magazine. The Thanagram is designed to keep you updated on the most current information in funeral service.

TFDA/TFSSC Annual Convention

The TFDA/TFSSC Annual Convention with exhibits is held in June of each year. The Annual Convention is designed to advance the funeral profession through educational opportunities and recognizing both funeral and funeral supply providers. The exhibits are created with state-of-the-art information regarding funeral service. The Tennessee convention has been recognized as one of the nation's best.

District Meetings

Held twice annually in West, Middle, and East districts for the advancement of Association business. Each District Meeting also offers CEU approved educational seminars as well as networking opportunities.

Legal Advice

TFDA annually retains legal services for any funeral related issue requiring legal consultation.

What has TFDA Done for Me?

TFDA has been in existence as an association of professionals for over 100 years. You don't stay in business that long without accomplishments beneficial to the survival of the profession. Most of these accomplishments, although subtle, make a huge impact on allowing funeral professionals the freedom to care for giving families with the least amount of outside interference.

There are too many achievements to list in such a short space; listed below are just a few of the most recent actions.

TFDA sponsored legislation:

Reduction of legal liability—Funeral directors cannot be sued, criminally or civilly, when following instructions from someone acting as next of kin, when there is no reason to believe otherwise.

Majority of legal next of kin— Now cremation can be performed with the majority of next of kin, i.e., siblings, as opposed to permission from every next of kin, with no legal backlash.

Disposition of unclaimed cremains—Funeral establishments are responsible for 180 days, and a standardized procedure of disposal, for unclaimed human cremains where before there was no time limit on possession.

Increase of Available Funds for Funeral Expenses— Increased the amount from \$10,000 to \$15,000 that a bank may pay for funeral expenses when no executor or administrator qualifies, and from \$7500.00 to \$15000.00 for insurance claims with a copy of death certificate and funeral director statement.

Reinstatement Insurance Assignment to Funeral Establishment— At one time TN law prohibited the assignment of proceeds from a life insurance policy to any funeral establishment; TFDA was responsible for removing this prohibition.



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