

THE UVALDE
MASSACRE

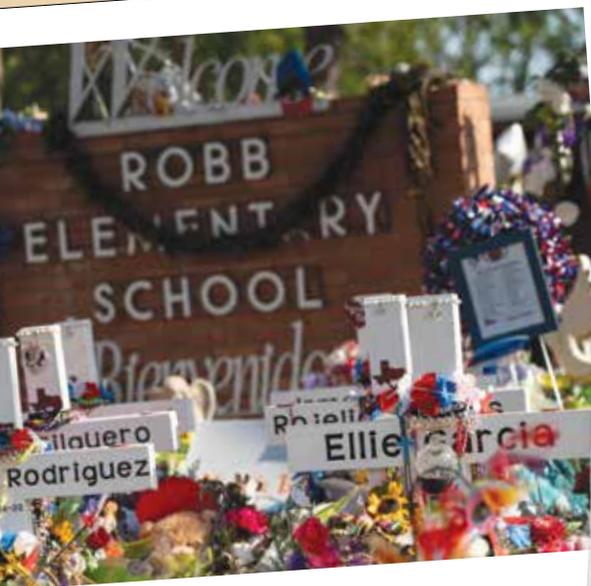
LAST RESPONDERS

When the Best of the Best
Join Forces After a
Tragedy Strikes

BY ALICE ADAMS



PERRI SOPER, 18, a rising senior at Houston's St. Thomas High School, volunteered to travel to Uvalde, TX, to help wherever he was needed. Several weeks later, on Father's Day, Perri wrote the following note to his dad, Michael:



Starting it off, it's been a crazy couple of weeks for our family. May 24, 2022, the news spread of the Uvalde massacre.

For the past 16 years, our family business has owned Rushing-Estes-Knowles Mortuary in Uvalde. It was an honor to be there, working beside my dad, to help care for the families of Uvalde and assist the funeral directors this past month.

Even though this was an ugly time of grief and chaos, it was beautiful seeing how the Legacy Team was able to personalize each funeral service and care for these families, one family at a time. After three weeks and 17 funerals, the Legacy team laid to rest the last victim.

I could not be more appreciative and proud of our family and the countless individuals who went out of their way to help in this horrible time, not to mention how proud I am of my dad.

His generosity and care for the families of Uvalde did not go unseen; he truly took a horrible circumstance and created a beautiful outcome from it.

While Christ might not stop horrible things from happening, He will place the most fit individuals in that position to provide healing, and I believe that is exactly what happened during this circumstance.

The Father is a merciful God, who always gives us comfort. He comforts us when we are in trouble, so that we can share this same comfort with others in trouble.

— 2 Corinthians 1:3-4



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This high school senior’s analysis about all he saw and experienced is profound in its thoughtfulness and wisdom.

Uvalde, TX, located 50 miles east of the Texas/Mexico border, has a population of 15,200 (2020 Census). 74.46 % of the population is Hispanic; 19.17% is white; 0.82% is Asian and 0.33% is African American. Some 32% of the population is under 18. The median age is 31 and the median income is \$25,000 annually. Approximately 29% live below poverty level. While livestock raising, historically, has been Uvalde’s primary industry, the city’s major employers, today, are Wal-Mart and HEB Food Stores.

Tuesday, May 24, 2022, was, traditionally, a big day for students at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde. The end of school was just around the corner and this was the day of the annual awards assembly, where parents were invited to watch as students received awards for perfect attendance, academic performance and excellence in sports, academics, music, art, and citizenship. Even after the morning’s awards program, the single-story brick building reverberated with the excitement and joy generated by the annual event.

Unfortunately, the brightness of this day would be erased by the darkness of tragedy and death.

Taylor Massey, general manager of Uvalde’s Rushing-Es-tes-Knowles Funeral Home (REK), said one of her employees was a volunteer fire fighter and had an emergency radio. “That’s how we first heard about the shooter,” she said.

As Legacy Funeral Group’s management listened to the early reports, a similar message — the first mentions of the school’s lock-down and gunman on premises — were being broadcast by the media.

“With that first message came a lot of confusion,” admitted Bill Wimberly, Legacy Funeral Group’s vice-president and COO.

“They only knew a shooter was in the school and the school was on lock-down.”

By this time, Michael Soper, Legacy’s president and CEO, and a veteran of the Las Vegas mass shootings, was in minute-to-minute communications with Massey at REK and began assembling his core response teams. “By the time we all began arriving in Uvalde, and as the death count rose, we began calling in our employees geographically close enough to help,” he said.

The Agonizing Wait

Knowing REK held the contract for removals with the City of Uvalde, REK general manager and funeral director Taylor Massey, and Kacey Jones, a director from nearby Schertz Funeral Home, were preparing to make removals of the multiple victims late that afternoon. “We had to wait until local DPS allowed us to enter the crime scene,” she said. “We stayed in the shadows until DPS gave us the okay to make the removals.”

“It was a difficult job—for all of us—but what surprised us all was the relentlessly aggressive media crews,” Jones said. “They were not allowed in the school, but they were at every window with their cameras. Before we began making removals, we took some of the cotton sheets we had and, borrowing tape from posters taped to the hall walls, we taped the sheets to cover the windows. Then we began placing victims on carriers provided by government and law enforcement. From there, they would be driven to the medical examiner’s office in San Antonio,” Jones said.

In the interim, families looked to the two funeral homes in Uvalde for help. REK is the oldest of the two and received 17 of the victims; five families went to Hillcrest Funeral Home.



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Until they accepted their mission in the aftermath of the massacre, none of the funeral directors on the Legacy team had experienced a tragedy of such dimensions. However, they brought close to 90 years of combined experience in funeral service and never doubted their ability to succeed.

“With so many law enforcement agencies involved and the massive media presence, we began seeing families who weren’t sure where their kids were. They also were confused, overwhelmed and frightened, being confronted by law enforcement and reporters,” said Wimberly, in the midst of his first mass shooting experience.

“We began getting calls from families on Wednesday, May 25, and immediately began meeting with them at REK or in their homes, wherever was most comfortable for them.”

The culture of Legacy Funeral Group immediately came into play. “Personalization of each service is our goal, individually and as a group,” Soper explained. “Our leadership model and throughout the Legacy family, communication is a priority skill for every employee, as is caring about, and giving our best, to each family we serve.”

Another Legacy hallmark is the regular care given to employees’ emotional and mental health and, in each of the mass murder tragedies—in Las Vegas, 2017, and now Uvalde—there has been immediate attention paid to the mental health, not only for employees but also for the families. This attention includes the services of teams of veteran psychologists and grief and loss specialist Dr. Alan Wolfelt, a long-time Legacy partner.

As a long-standing Legacy policy, no employee spoke with the media during the two weeks of funerals that followed the mass murders. “In mass casualty situations, we have work to do and it’s important to protect the confidentiality we are entrusted with. We also want to respect the families’ privacy and prevent interruptions for our employees,” Soper explained.

Once again, communication between teams and team members is essential and the various teams also must be aware that goals will change every step of the way.”

Staying on Task

In Uvalde, as an example, the first goal was to make removals and transport victims to the medical examiner in San Antonio. The second, to begin establishing a two-way communication with families. Third, the goal became receiving the victims for preparation as arrangements were being made at the funeral home and, ultimately, to make certain to

professionally, and with dignity, celebrate each of these short lives in the most meaningful way possible.

To accomplish this efficiently, Legacy selected a top-notch administrative team, “and each member was given a specific job, *i.e.*, one typed register books, another collected pictures, one REK employee volunteered to take care of her fellow employees (including doing laundry for out-of-towns), and still another followed up with vendors, etc.,” Wimberly explained. “In every area, our teams—sometimes total strangers—came together and everyone pitched in, finding the niche where they had the most expertise.”

By Friday, May 27, the Legacy teams were in place in Uvalde, along with the REK employees who lived there...and for the next two weeks, a team of well-tested directors would arrange and direct 17 funerals—all personalized to reflect the lives of the young victims.

Deathcare’s Camaraderie

Members of the embalming team were: James Allemond of Pellerin Funeral Home, Breaux Bridge, LA; Kevin Combest and Rex Johnson of Combest Family Funeral Homes, Lubbock, TX; and Jaime Trevino of Charlie Marshall Funeral Homes, Aransas Pass, TX. These embalmers represented some of the best in their specialties and had a combined experience of 117 years. Trevino brought the most years of experience (34). Johnson also had been anatomical donation manager for Texas Tech University Medical School. Allemond, in addition to mortuary school, received specialized training in post-mortem reconstructive surgery at the Fountain National Academy in 2007.

Serving as arranging directors were: Norman Gonzalez, regional manager; Ryan Stephens, regional manager; Taylor Massey, FDIC and general manager, REK and Grimes Bandera Chapel; Kacey Jones, funeral director and embalmer, Schertz Funeral Home, Schertz and Texas; and Bryan Hicks, general manager at Elmwood Funeral Home, Abilene, TX.

Three native Uvalde directors from REK Funeral Home, who make their homes in Uvalde, offered special support to their neighbors and community: David Gonzalez, Paul Stephens, and June Ybara, REK’s assistant manager.



“We all had been trained to provide the care for the families, but going in, you think about the babies murdered, you think about the devastated town, the school, the families—especially the parents—who would live this day the rest of their lives.”

—Norman Gonzalez

The embalming team, after meeting—all for the first time—found immediate coordination of their individual skills; and with deserved pride, they were able to say each victim was viewable. Each family was able to say a final goodbye, despite the horrific damage caused by the murderer’s automatic weapon and its high-velocity bullets.

Embalming team member Kevin Combest, the newest member of the Legacy family, said this: “I had a lot of things happening that Tuesday, including getting things ready for the closing for the purchase of our funeral home on Friday by Legacy. When Michael [Soper] called, saying he didn’t think we could close on Friday and told me the reason, we shared an emotional conversation in which I said, ‘If you need me, I’m available.’ It all happened quickly, but the next thing I knew, I was flying into Uvalde...and when I looked out and saw the city limits coming into view, I realized this could happen in any town, and began focusing on the job we were there to do—to try and prepare these babies.”

Allemond’s reaction to being called to Uvalde was similar. “I worked in the recovery of bodies after Hurricane Katrina, but the shootings in Uvalde was my first mass casualty after a shooting,” he said. “When I was leaving home for Uvalde, my wife hugged me and said, ‘Don’t worry about us. You’ve been given an important task. Go do God’s work.’”

“Like everyone else on the team, I didn’t know what to expect, but once the embalmers met, that’s when our experience started kicking in,” said Johnson. “We all knew what to do—we’re about the same age, same experience—and we all wanted to get the victims back to their families.”

Driving into Uvalde, Trevino said he kept asking himself, “Why would this happen? and then I felt anxious because I didn’t want to let those parents down. I must have prayed the rosary three or four times.”

As soon as all 17 cases were complete, the embalmers went into a room where each victim reposed. One case had required 14 hours of restorative work. Others had extensive damage to other parts of their bodies requiring impeccable technique. Only the best and most experienced embalmers could achieve the goal of every case being viewable. This had been achieved.

As the embalmers, these once-strangers shared this unforgettable moment, they also experienced the strengthening of the unspoken bond, linking them for the rest of their lives to the Uvalde tragedy.

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Taylor Massey saw some of the aftermath of the killings at the Sutherland Springs Church in 2017, and Norman Gonzales,

Legacy’s regional manager for South Texas, had been a Navy mortician when the USS Cole was bombed in 2000 during his assignment in Dover, MD. To the rest of the team, the experience was new.

Indelible Memories

As they remembered the day this horrific incident occurred, the experience seemed surreal and, initially, as they prepared to make the removals, several admit to relying on their emotional auto-pilots. Those directors with children of the same age as the victims remember distinct emotional reactions upon hearing about the murders, although all knew they would have to be the best of the best as they began getting calls from families.

Director Norman Gonzalez put the team’s feelings into words: “We all had been trained to provide the care for the families, but going in, you think about the babies murdered, you think about the devastated town, the school, the families—especially the parents—who would live this day the rest of their lives.”

Massey, who has lived in Uvalde, said the most difficult time, professionally, was to walk parents to see their babies for the first time, after the awards assembly the morning of the murders and then closing caskets for the last time. It’s not over yet for this town,” she added. “I can’t go anywhere without getting a million hugs. I ran into seven of the parents or relatives at the courthouse when I registered a vehicle.”

The entire team had only praise and gratitude for Michael Soper and his management team. “We couldn’t have done it without all the hugs, words of encouragement and caring about us as individuals,” Massey said. “We had support from management who genuinely wanted us to do anything we could for these families. They positioned us to succeed.”

Every member of the team also expressed gratitude that they had the opportunity to help. “It’s not important to be recognized,” Gonzalez repeated. “We were just grateful we were able to walk with these families, and to do the right thing for each of them.”

“It’s not about any of us,” Ryan Stephens explained. “It was about 19 kids, two teachers and their families. All were able to say proper goodbyes at the end of beautifully personalized and meaningful services—and at the end of the day, I wouldn’t have wanted to do it with any other people.

“In the aftermath of the unthinkable losses incurred by the families, classmates, first responders—the entire city of Uvalde, I am eternally grateful and thankful to have had the opportunity to serve the families in Uvalde—and now I just pray for their healing and for peace” said Bryan Hicks. ❏

Alice Adams is a regular contributor to *Memento Mori* magazine.