



October 2023

To: Smith Family Funeral Homes

RE: Nomination Letter for Willow Award

We can not think of anyone more deserving of this honor than Chris Straschinske for her dedication and selflessness.

Chris took on the role of caring for our niece, Cass in her hour of need without hesitation. This was a horrific tragedy that most of us hear about on the news never expecting it to be your family or co-worker.

We met Chris when we arrived in Arkansas. She took time by explaining her role in these extreme circumstances and what life was like for Cass and her son. We soon learned that Chris was more than a compassionate co-worker and friend, but was more like a mother figure to our niece.

Most would feel lost in this chaotic scenario, but this was the world they shared. Unfortunately, 911 does not stop for anything or a coworker. She made sure that Cass was allowed to continue doing her job saving lives this time as an organ donor. Chris not only stepped up to the challenge she crushed it!

We hope you will consider our nomination.

Thank you,

The Family of Cassandra Frederickson Peña-Romero



September 12, 2023

Dear Smith Funeral Home,

I want to nominate Chris Straschinske for the Willow Award. Chris serves as the Communications Manager for MEMS. Her staff is responsible for answering 911 calls and dispatching over 100,000 ambulance calls annually. In our industry, we use a saying that helps us hold things in perspective: "It is not our emergency."

August of this year, this saying no longer fit us because, on August 19th, one of our dispatch staff was shot by her estranged husband in our own parking lot. Cassandra (Cass) had set up Chris as her emergency contact in her phone, so when she fell to the ground, her phone sent an SOS to Chris, who was at home at the time. This quick notice allowed Chris to alert the on-duty supervisor that Cass had an emergency and where she was located. This information allowed a team of Paramedics to respond quickly and keep Cass alive. The fact that Cass had already set up Chris as her emergency contact indicated how much she trusted her. At the hospital, we soon discovered that Cass had no family to speak of, and here we saw Chris move into an arena that I don't think any of us ever see ourselves in especially as coworkers.

When Cass's brother and uncle were located, they deferred end-of-life decisions to Chris. How Chris took on this responsibility is a model of how I would want my end-of-life decisions made. Chris spoke with the doctors and nurses and poured through the charts, wanting to make the most informed decision possible. She also handled coordinating visits, the honor walk, funeral arrangements, working with family, and even being present at the cremation. Chris was not expected to fill this role; it is not a part of her job description but simply her being who she is. When Cass had no one, Chris stepped up and said, "You will not be alone."

It is interesting to me that a few years ago, a young lady sat across from Chris to be interviewed, never knowing the impact of how their lives intertwine. I have worked with Chris for many years, and I still find days when she surprises me once again with her compassion, care, and calm. I am grateful to have the privilege to work with Chris and much more to call her friend. I don't believe you will find a more deserving honoree.

Sincerely,

Greg Thompson

Executive Director MEMS