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Reflecting on A Moment in History

HOUSTON, TEXAS – The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted life on every front, and in this country, it has taken almost 150,000 lives. While living through this current time in history, the funeral homes and staff that served the family of George Floyd have also touched history. Floyd's tragic death May 25 in Minneapolis touched off a wave of empathy for his family and anger over his death, and caused many to see this incident as a tipping point in race relations in the United States.

Planning and executing a funeral under these conditions pulled all hands on deck to create a three-state memorial under the magnifying glass of today's media.

The Floyd family selected Fort Bend Memorial Planning Center in Rosharon, Texas, to handle the



arrangements. With planned memorials in Minneapolis; Raeford, North Carolina (where Floyd was born); and Houston, Texas (where he previously lived), the planning logistics were immense, added to by riots and protests in cities across the country, including Minneapolis and Houston.

Ten days after Floyd's death, the first of the memorials was held in Minneapolis June 4. "A service of this magnitude is not an everyday occurrence, and with the climate and attention surrounding this case, I believe that everything was done in a very high-level way," said Bobby Swearington, owner of Fort Bend Memorial Planning Center, whose firm oversaw the services in the three states.

Lavarvia Jones from Fort Bend Memorial was the funeral director in charge. In Minneapolis, Jones

teamed with Estes Funeral Home for the local memorial service, which was held in the Frank J. Lindquist Sanctuary at North Central University. The Rev. Al Sharpton delivered a eulogy, and several members of Floyd's extended family also spoke, sharing a number of personal stories, as did Benjamin Crump, the attorney representing the Floyd family. Other notables in attendance were Martin Luther King III and his family, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey and St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter.

"We didn't have any issues. At the same time, we were dealing with multiple entities and there were many moving parts to the service, but the point goes back to making sure we are doing exactly what the family wants," said Swearington.

Eagle's Wings Air (EWA) was called on to assist the funeral home with travel logistics. "It all started with a call to Bobby," said David McComb, chairman of Eagle's Wings Air. "I told him we were here to assist to help ship Mr. Floyd home for ceremonies."

McComb asked Swearington if he could put him in touch with Frank Kaiser, president of Eagle's Wings.

"I had a conversation with Bobby for about 15 or 20 minutes," McComb said. "He was telling me that he was being inundated with calls from the media and the family. It was a very complex, in-depth case for them, and for us as well."

Kaiser shared that this was not the first high-profile case for EWA. "We could certainly relate to what that funeral home owner was going through managing the client family but also the ceremony and the logistics associated with the situation," he said, noting that EWA assisted in the case of the Las Vegas shooting victims, using different airline partners to bring them home for ceremony, as well as in the Sandy Hook school and Pulse nightclub shootings – all very complicated situations.

Kaiser admitted that this was the most complicated case EWA has been involved in its 12-year history. "We have managed over 150,000 transfers in that time," he said.

The reason it was so complicated is because EWA had to move Floyd from Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport to Fayetteville, North Carolina, and then from Fayetteville to Houston. "While on the surface this might not sound too difficult," said Kaiser, "there were easily a half-dozen conference calls behind the scenes in managing the logistics and all the challenges we had to anticipate that could disrupt the process for the three funeral homes involved in support of the client family."

EWA chose to partner with Delta, and the airline offered dedicated management attention and resources to help in the process. "The funeral directing staff in Minneapolis handled multiple services and then had to make arrangements to bring Mr. Floyd to the airport," said Kaiser. "There were considerations on the procession, media and security. That was more from a funeral service perspective, but they were considerations."

One of the challenges handled by Eagle's Wings Air was arranging for the large number of escorts accompanying Floyd, which Kaiser said was more than 20 people, including some family members, funeral home staff, an attorney and security personnel.

Logistically, at Minneapolis-St. Paul International, Floyd's body was sent to one end of the airport while the escorts had to go to a different part, with security for both areas. "Delta was very supportive handling the details on the passenger side, and then we were able to be approved to tender Mr. Floyd plane side, which is not typical," said Kaiser. "There were a number of considerations from a security perspective to be able to deliver that higher level of attention and dignity as Mr. Floyd was tendered to the aircraft."

There wasn't a lot of time, but a lot of planning went in to putting this together," confirmed Swearington. "Mr. Kaiser did a phenomenal job helping us to make sure Mr. Floyd was transported in a dignified way. We didn't have any hiccups that I was aware of, everything was smooth, and I was very grateful to them for that."

Both Kaiser and Swearington said there were dis-

cussions about the media on the conference calls, as well as concerns about security. While a number of protests immediately after Floyd's death resulted in violence, by the time of his memorial service in Minneapolis, the protests were, for the most part, peaceful.

"From a logistics perspective, we did not have a lot of challenges, whether they were demonstrators or other media," Kaiser said. "Everything went very well. Credit the entire team – the funeral directing staff and Delta. We planned for potential curveballs, we identified some areas that had to be outlined some more, and we were happy that we didn't have any, so to speak."

At Fayetteville Regional Airport, Kaiser noted, there were police and firefighters serving as honorary pall bearers as Floyd arrived.

In Raeford, North Carolina, Jones, Swearington and the rest of the Fort Bend Memorial team worked with Buie Funeral Home for the memorial held June 6. Floyd was born in nearby Fayetteville.

Thousands of mourners traveled to Raeford for the memorial held at Cape Fear Conference B. The seemingly never-ending procession of cars was led by Hoke County Sheriff Hubert Peterkin. The day included a public viewing in the morning, followed by a private ceremony for family. The Rev. Dr. Christopher Stackhouse of Lewis Chapel Missionary Baptist Church offered a eulogy, and Jeremy Collins, a representative from the office of North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper, presented a flag to the family.

That evening, Floyd's remains, the funeral staff and escorts departed for the flight from Fayetteville to Houston.

Kaiser said he was not focused on the public and media focus on the event. "We were focused on what we needed to do to serve the client family," he said. "Our involvement was to solve logistical challenges.

"Two flights like that might seem straightforward, but it was all the details surrounding it," he added. "The flight was the easy part. Security was a new

consideration. Typically, we are not all that concerned with media. From an Eagle's Wing's perspective, all the cases we manage, we manage the exact same way to the exact same standards. This just had the extenuating circumstances of being a high-profile media event."

In Houston on June 8, thousands streamed to Fountain of Praise Church for a public visitation for Floyd. Attendees included Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner and Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, as well as Sharpton and the family's attorney. Crowd estimates were placed at 7,000 to 10,000. Former Vice President Joe Biden flew to Houston to meet with the Floyd family privately. Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo proclaimed the day of the funeral, Tuesday, June 9, as George Perry Floyd Jr. Day.

Following the service, Floyd was taken to the cemetery in Pearland to be entombed next to his mother. Throngs of people lined the route in 90+ degree heat. Just prior to arriving at the cemetery, Floyd's casket was transferred to a carriage that was led into the cemetery by two white horses.

La'Torria Lemon, publicist and owner of Lemon-Lime Light Media, based in Houston and Atlanta, worked with Fort Bend Memorial in coordinating the multi-state, multi-venue services and all media relations.

"We executed the vision of the family, and not just the vision, but we were able to assist the family through the entire process," said Lemon. "Bobby and I spent nine or 10 days planning and executing the plan. This was not a typical situation; it was very unique – four different services in three different locations. There were tons of media and tons of grieving people across the country. At the end of the day, it was executed to the best of our abilities, not only from our perspective, but from the family's. And for us, that's the most important thing – making sure the family was served.

"We had our moments, but I will say this: Fort Bend Memorial Planning Center is a well trusted company in Houston, and the primary focus is to

make sure families are served,” added Lemon. “Of course, in this case, there were a lot of different people we ended up having to service as well, which is fine, but our focus was on the family to make sure they were on the right track to heal. If you take any high-profile case as a whole, something with not only national attention but international attention as well, with more than 600 media outlets around the world and grieving people around the world... I think it was very well executed from many angles.”

The planning and executing did take its toll. “We probably didn’t sleep much those nine or 10 days we were traveling and making sure that all the services ran smoothly and that the family was being serviced.”

Swearington agreed, adding that a service of this magnitude is not an everyday occurrence, and the climate and attention surrounding this case created an extra layer of anxiety. “I believe that everything was done in a very high-level way. We didn’t have any issues. At the same time we were dealing with multiple entities and... many moving parts... the point goes back to making sure we are doing exactly what the family wants. We were in constant communication with them throughout the process. For all that to be going on, I believe we did a very good job.”

Lemon freely admitted that the planning and executing did take its toll. “We probably didn’t sleep much those nine or 10 days that we were traveling and making sure that all services ran smoothly and that the family was serviced,” she said. “We were very passionate about illustrating the vision of the family and making sure that all services were beautifully

done and that Mr. Floyd received a proper home-going celebration. In addition to working with the family and security, we also worked with multiple entities: attorneys, municipal officials, the former vice president, national recording artists. We had a pleased family, and that was our biggest concern.”

Plus, doing all of this under a COVID-19 umbrella created its own challenges. “All of our attendees would say that we were not putting anyone in harm’s way at Fountain of Praise Church,” said Swearington. “[The staff] went above and beyond to make sure that we were operating in a safe environment – everything from the requirement of masks to taking the temperature [of all attendees] before anyone entered the sanctuary to the labels on the floor indicating safe distancing. It took a humongous team to push 7,000 people through that building that day and making sure everything went smoothly. And we had to put all that together in nine days.

“It was not easy, as you can imagine, having to limit the attendance of a service of someone who seemingly had connected with the world, and it took a massive team to execute,” he added. “And in the midst of doing all that, having multiple media outlets watching our every move about 100 yards from everything that was going on. So, a lot was on us.”

All hands were on deck at Fort Bend Memorial, a three-year-old funeral home. Swearington estimated that he had a team of about 20 staff members from the funeral home alone, adding in Lemon and her team, as well as securing private police services.

“It was a massive team we put together...” he said.

Looking back now on her involvement in this historic service, Lemon said that when she looks at photos, she still has “wow” moments. “I am so very proud of Bobby and Fort Bend Memorial and all of our team because literally, if we tried to explain what those nine days looked like for us, we would probably sound crazy,” she said. “We were on flights throughout the day, going from one funeral home to another and making sure all details were properly executed and everybody was safe and healthy.

“So, when I look back on those days, I am super grateful to have been part of the process and also part of serving history,” Lemon continued. “We literally had a hand in the service of a person who really is changing the world. That is something I will always remember. It was a huge moment in our careers, it was a huge moment in our lives, and we were part of a change, a movement that has impacted so many people.”

Swearington shared that when he received the call for this service, he was taken aback. “I am super proud of our team and what we did – to execute something on this level,” he said. “For us to take on a service where we directed 15,000 attendees, worked with other great funeral homes and built great relationships... I’m proud of the process that went on because multiple funeral homes were involved in this and there were no egos. It was all about serving the Floyd family, all about making sure that they were taken care of.”

Swearington was told by someone in the Floyd camp that the program from the funeral service will be put in the Smithsonian.

“I believe Mr. Floyd’s death has not been in vain,” said Swearington. “His death has now changed the trajectory of race relations to where we are now having a large conversation about it that may prompt change. We are forever grateful for the life and legacy of Mr. Floyd, and we are grateful to the family, as well as to LaTorria and all of the things her team did.”

And in some way, perhaps, George Floyd’s funeral will speak to the value of memorialization in a time when more families are opting for minimal services and even direct disposition with no service.

Swearington said he has that conversation about

the diminishing of funeral services almost on a weekly basis. “We’ve done away with so much,” he said. “We hear people all the time saying, ‘You don’t have to do that much.’”

“The death culture in the United States has changed so much,” he added. “We see other cultures in other countries that celebrate the dead in a great way with multi-day services, and I feel what we want to do is not only service families but also educate them about insurance and preplanning. We know this is not an everyday thing for families. We want them to think about being remembered in a great way. I am all for bringing back the pomp and circumstance in funeral service. I lost my brother a year ago, totally unexpected. Within the first years of opening our funeral home I lost my grandmother and my brother. In our mind at the funeral home, we can’t expect people to do what we do. We brought back all of the pomp and circumstance for both of those services, and we are seeing a trend with our families wanting to do that. They see the services we have done, and they come in wanting those all-out types of services.”

Swearington lamented the fact that people spend thousands and thousands of dollars on baby showers, birthday parties and anniversary parties, and then for some reason when it comes to the point when we get to the death situation, it’s “just throw me in a box.” They want something so minimal.

“It’s the old adage: Funerals are not for the dead person. They are a representation about how a family deals with death,” said Swearington. “We’re trying to change that perception. We want them to see what they are spending their money on, and we want them to feel good about all the special things we did for the family.”

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NFDA Adds Multi-State COVID-19 Panel Discussion to Virtual Leadership Conference Agenda

BROOKFIELD, WISCONSIN – NFDA has added a COVID-19 Panel Discussion to the agenda for its virtual Leadership Conference August 3-5.

Scheduled for Tuesday, August 4, at noon CST, the discussion includes Gary Burr, immediate past president of the Ohio Funeral Directors Association; Melissa Sullivan, executive director of the Ohio Funeral Directors Association; Richard Campana, president of the New Jersey State Funeral Directors Association; Phil Douma, executive director of the Michigan Funeral Directors Association; and Richard Goff, executive director of the Washington State Funeral Directors Association.

WASHINGTON

Noting that Washington was an early epicenter of COVID-19 in the country, Goff says that the state has not been as affected by the virus as many people predicted it would.

“Washington state has been very proactive in attempting to flatten the curve,” Goff says. “In this spirit, a proclamation was ordered at the beginning of the pandemic stating that Washingtonians could not hold funerals, weddings or religious services.”

With the ban on funeral services since lifted, Goff says funeral providers are able to serve families again, albeit with different strategies for public attendance, social distancing and sanitation. “A second wave of COVID-19 is currently moving through the state,” he adds, “and we have seen an uptick in positive cases.”

At press time, the number of deaths with positive COVID-19 testing has remained flat, at 1,465 Washingtonians.

“Washington state funeral providers know the value of serving families,” says Goff. “We have made the necessary changes in our approach that have

allowed us to continue in this long tradition of service. Embracing mandatory mask mandates and Zoom arrangements; livestreaming funeral, graveside and memorial services; limits on attendance; and social distancing have allowed Washington funeral providers to continue serving the public.”

OHIO

Burr reports that the Ohio Funeral Directors Association has worked in tandem with state agencies, including the Ohio Department of Health, Emergency Management Agency, Department of Commerce, Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors, Coroner’s Association and National Guard in developing the state’s fatality management plan.

“Subject matter experts have been able to contribute by advising planners on real-world scenarios encountered by funeral service professionals,” says Burr, “and this collaboration has resulted in the development of best practices guidelines for funeral homes, hospitals and nursing homes in dealing with COVID-19-positive decedents, along with a plan to deal with a surge amount of deaths, if necessary.”

MICHIGAN

Douma is looking forward to sharing with association leaders how Michigan, which has experienced more than 3,000 COVID-19 deaths to date, addressed the crisis that reached its peak in metro Detroit in April. “In particular, I’ll be discussing the state association’s role as support to the front-line funeral directors who courageously and tirelessly navigated the crisis,” he says.

The panel discussion will be moderated by Lowell Apelbaum, CEO of Vista Cova, a company that partners with organizations on strategic visioning and planning, creating stronger stakeholder connections and re-imagining value and engagement.

Apelbaum will steer panelists through a discussion

of the impact that COVID-19 had on their respective businesses, their state associations and their communities, with a emphasis on lessons learned and what each panelist sees moving forward.

Apelbaum has two other presentations on the agenda as well: "Directions in Disruption: Trends Shaping the Association Landscape" (Tuesday) and "Governance Excellence: A Self Assessment" (Wednesday).

Attendees will be invited to partake in a question-and-answer session as part of this program.

NFDA's Virtual Leadership Conference offers attendees seven CE credits.

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Florida to Allow Out-of-State Funeral Directors To Assist as COVID-19 Numbers Spike

TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA – With the recent surge in deaths related to COVID-19, Jimmy Patronis, CFO of Florida Funeral, Cemetery and Consumer Services, issued Order 2020-12, which allows out-of-state funeral directors to serve in Florida during the pandemic.

According to the Florida Cemetery, Cremation & Funeral Association (FCCFA), the order authorizes funeral establishments, direct disposal establishments and centralized embalming facilities to use funeral directors and/or embalmers licensed in any U.S. state as long as they are in good standing and have held their license for at least five years.

It requires that out-of-state volunteers work under the supervision of a licensed Florida funeral director and/or embalmer. It also requires licensed facilities to maintain documentation with specific details regarding the eligibility of out-of-state volunteers, including license numbers, affirmation of good standing, etc.

The out-of-state volunteers may:

- Make funeral arrangements
- Sign arrangement forms, contracts and death certificates
- Sell at-need funeral goods and services
- Oversee final disposition of human bodies
- Conduct services
- Embalm bodies (if allowed by out-of-state-issued license).

FCCFA, which is working with NFDA to coordinate volunteers, if needed, was instrumental in crafting the order in conjunction with the CFO's office and has continued working with state officials and other stakeholders throughout the pandemic. The most immediate needs are in southeast Florida, but many other parts of the state are beginning to experience COVID-19-related stressors as well.

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The Notebook

PRECOA has announced a strategic partnership with Funeral Directors Life. Beginning in August, their combined offering will initially be limited to a small number of funeral homes so each organization has time to learn from each other. By partnering with Funeral Directors Life, Precoa can reach funeral homes in new markets. *precoa.com*

FRANK KAPR has been installed as 2020-21 president of the **PENNSYLVANIA FUNERAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION**. A lifelong native of Scottdale, Kapr is a graduate of Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science; he received his associate degree from Point Park University in Pittsburgh. He is president and owner of Frank Kapr Funeral Home, which is a five-time recipient of NFDA's Eagle Award and was recently awarded the Golden Eagle for outstanding services by the funeral home and staff. Kapr is a member, past president and board member of the Westmoreland, Indiana and Armstrong counties' funeral directors associations. He is also a member of the Pennsylvania State and National funeral directors associations. Kapr was recipient of the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review's* "Quest for the Best" in funeral homes in the Scottdale and Mt. Pleasant areas and was recently awarded the "Silver and Bronze" awards for the best funeral home in Westmoreland County through its subscribers. Kapr assisted in the recovery and identification process of the devastating crash of USAir Flight #427 in Hopewell Township, near Pittsburgh International Airport, September 8, 1994, and the terrorist crash of United Airlines Flight #93 in Shanksville in Somerset County on September 11, 2001. He has been a member of the Glenn Gelder Foundation for Mass Fatality Preparedness since June 2003. *pfda.org*

ROOSEVELT INVESTMENTS, a boutique advisory firm with more than 30 years of experience working with funeral and cemetery professionals, will host its next live video call Tuesday, July 28, at 12 p.m. (ET). CFA John Roscoe, chief investment officer and senior portfolio manager, will discuss Roosevelt's thoughts on the financial markets and the evolving impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and answer questions live. The video call will be moderated by Nicki Price Adams, marketing manager of Private Client Group, and will be hosted on the Zoom platform. [Click here to register](#). Can't attend live? Register anyway, and Roosevelt will send you an email with the video recording. *rooseveltinvestments.com*

CALIFORNIA GOV. GAVIN NEWSOM last week updated directives for 30 counties in California due to an increase in coronavirus-related deaths and hospitalizations. According to Newsom, parishes must discontinue indoor Masses and other liturgical services, effective immediately. Outdoor Masses and other liturgical services such as adoration and prayer services are allowed and encouraged. Parishes may continue to celebrate confessions, first communions, confirmations, funerals and weddings outdoors on parish grounds. Parishioners must wear face coverings and practice social distancing, even outdoors.

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From the Editor's Desk

Rule Changes

So, tonight is opening night for the 2020 Major League Baseball season. As big a baseball fan as I am, I just don't feel the same as I normally would on opening day. I'm sure many fans share this view. Both fans and players are filled with trepidation about beginning a season now, under these conditions. But since I'm getting to the end of the list of movies made about Marvel comic book characters, I welcome the distraction.

Much like every profession and occupation these days, MLB has instituted some new rules as part of its health and safety protocols. This year, the designated hitter will be used in both leagues, there will be no restrictions on allowing position players to pitch, and if weather forces a game to be cut short before it is official, it will be continued from the point of interruption rather than started over. Players and managers are expected to maintain physical distance from all umpires, meaning no in-your-face arguments without facing disciplinary measures. Pitchers will be allowed to carry a wet rag in their back pocket rather than licking their fingers to improve grip. And here's one I actively dislike in an attempt to limit those extra-inning marathon games: In extra innings, every half-inning will begin with a runner on second base.

Without the benefit of a spring training to get used to their new circumstances and new rules, funeral directors have been forced to adjust on the fly – from gatherings limited to 50 people to no gatherings at all outside immediate family, mandatory closed caskets, no graveside committals and using Zoom, holding virtual arrangements and collecting e-signatures. The list is extensive. ([NFDA's COVID-19 Information Hub](#))

Allow me to quote from an article written by NFDA President Bryant Hightower for *Newsweek*. He said: "Some of the decisions people made during the pandemic are going to be lasting decisions. They may have had to do a private family visitation and a graveside service for their granddad, but they felt good about that and so choose to do that for another family member in the future."

As we've been saying throughout the pandemic, every challenge presents an opportunity, and necessity leads to solutions. Over the past several months, a number of funeral directors have accepted this challenge and have made it an opportunity. A year ago, if someone asked you to project what the future of funeral service holds, you could have made an argument based on statistics and the reality of the moment. Asking that question now? We're all still absorbing and adjusting, and it's that posture that may be more telling of what the future holds.

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