

# Nine Days

*In June, in the midst of a pandemic and unrest in the streets, a team of dedicated funeral service professionals brought to fruition*

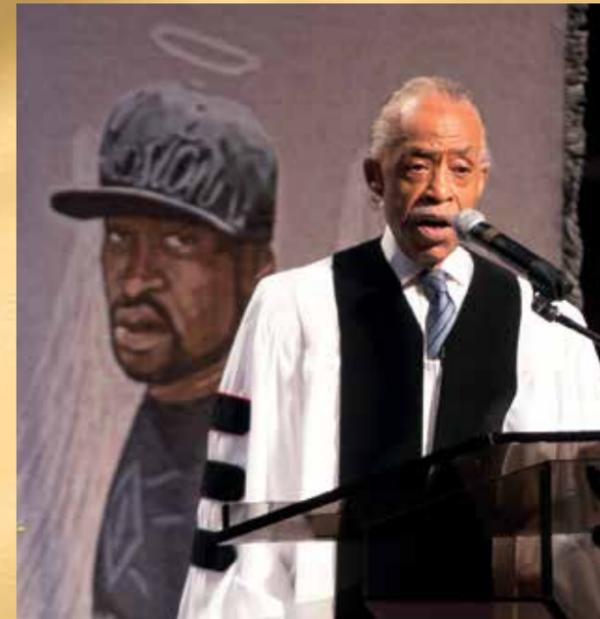
**GEORGE FLOYD**  
*memorials in three states.*



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDRE KELLY

*By Edward J. Defort*

The pandemic has disrupted life on every front, and in this country, COVID-19 has taken an estimated 162,000 lives. While living through this current period 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 the incident as a tipping point in race relations in the United States.



*Scenes from the memorials.*

Taking to fruition 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 (where he previously lived), the logistics were immense, added to by riots and protests in cities across the country, including Minneapolis and Houston.

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### Minneapolis, Minnesota

On June 4, 10 days after Floyd's death, the first memorial was held in Minneapolis. "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 all three services.

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 shared 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," said Swearington. "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."

### Managing Travel Logistics

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 Chairman David McComb. "I told him we were here to assist to ship Mr. Floyd

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

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

This wasn't EWA's first high-profile case, Kaiser shared. "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 had also 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.

But Kaiser admitted that the George Floyd case was the most complicated EWA has been involved with in its 12-year history. "And we have managed over 150,000 transfers in that time," he said.

Moving Floyd from Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport to Fayetteville, North Carolina, and then from Fayetteville to Houston was a very involved process. "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 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, which offered dedicated management attention and resources. "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 challenge 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 family members, funeral home staff, an attorney and security personnel.

Logistically, said Kaiser, at Minneapolis-St. Paul International, Floyd's body was sent to one end of the airport while the escorts were required to go to a different part, with security for both areas. "Delta was very supportive in 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 into 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 was discussion about the media on the conference calls, as well as concerns about security. While a number of protests erupting immediately following 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 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."

### Raeford, North Carolina

As the plane carrying Floyd's remains landed at Fayetteville Regional Airport in North Carolina, Kaiser noted, police and firefighters stood ready to serve as honorary pall bearers. In Raeford, Jones, Swearington and the rest of the Fort Bend Memorial team worked with Bui's 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 to Houston.

Kaiser said he wasn't focused on the public and media attention. "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."

### Houston, Texas

In Houston on June 8, thousands streamed to The Fountain of Praise 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.

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### Coordinating Multistate Services and Media Relations

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."

"We had our moments, but I will say this: Fort Bend Memorial Planning Center is a well-trusted company in Houston, and its 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 serving 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-pro-

file 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."

Lemon freely admitted that the planning and executing took 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 homegoing celebration. In addition to working with the family and security, we also worked with multiple other entities: attorneys, municipal officials, the former vice president, national recording artists. We had a pleased family, and that was our biggest concern."

On top of the inherent challenges involved in planning these memorials was completing it all under the umbrella of COVID-19. "All of our attendees would say that we were not putting anyone in harm's way at The Fountain of Praise church," said Swearington. "[The staff] went above and beyond to make sure we were operating in a safe environment, everything from requiring masks and taking temperatures before anyone entered the sanctuary to labels on the floor indicating safe distancing. It took a humongous team to push 7,000 people through that building that day and make sure everything went smoothly. And we had to put all that together in nine days.

"It was not easy, as you can imagine, to have 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 away. So, a lot was on us."

All staff were on deck at Fort Bend Memorial, a 3-year-old funeral home. Swearington estimated he had about 20 staff members from the funeral home alone, plus Lemon and her team, as well as private police services. "It was a massive team we put together..." he said.

Looking back now on her involvement in the 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.

"When I look back, 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 requesting 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 they were taken care of."

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

"I believe Mr. Floyd's death has not been in vain," said Swearington. "His death has 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 La'Torria and her team."

### **Looking to the Future**

It is also hoped that in some way, perhaps, Floyd's funerals will speak to the value of memorialization at a time when more families seem to opt for minimal services or even direct disposition with no service at all.

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.'"

"Death culture in the United States has changed so much," he added. "We see other cultures 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 pre-planning. 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... 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. But we brought back all the pomp and circumstance for both of those services, and we are seeing a trend with families wanting to do that. They see the services we have done and come in wanting those all-out types of services."

Swearington lamented the fact that people spend 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.'

"It's the old adage that funerals are not for the dead person. They are a representation of how a family deals with death," commented 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." ☰

## **A New and Challenging Environment**

*Managing the transport of a loved one in the face of a pandemic.*

In serving the family of George Floyd, especially during a pandemic, given limited flight options and tighter restrictions, both Frank Kaiser, president of Eagle's Wings Air, and David McComb, chairman, said they were very satisfied with what they were able to achieve. "It was really very well done; a lot of teamwork was involved with it," said McComb.

"We're in an environment right now due to COVID-19 that we have reduced capacity with domestic airline schedules and very much reduced capacity with international schedules. We've also experienced recently [having] to rebook flights. There is probably no time more important to have an experienced crew working on behalf of the funeral director since many of these flights will get rebooked and directors will be put on hold for a long time when they should be focused on the details of the funeral."

Neither Kaiser, who has been in the airline cargo business for more than 25 years, nor McComb, who has been with the company for 12 years, has ever seen a more challenging environment in which to try to manage the transportation of a loved one.

"The good news is that as time is going by, airlines are beginning to add more flights. But it [will] take a number of months or even years to get back where we were," said Kaiser.

"At Eagle's Wings Air, 85% of our people are working remotely; we expected to have to do that, and it is working out well," he added. "Our service model is stronger than ever because we have more flexibility with our team; we're actually adding staff because we're seeing higher demand on our domestic requests. Of course, airlines are taking a little longer."

Some of the changes to their business brought on by the pandemic might become part of long-term operations, shared McComb. "We have a number of people who work offsite," he said. "We have great tech support, and I think we are going to continue to have people working offsite." Kaiser added that the EWA service model is more flexible and stronger under the remote model.

"Another thing clients are learning is that you can't call to request a same-day flight, as you used to," he said. "If funeral directors have the flexibility for a ship-out of 48 to 72 hours in advance, don't wait until last minute.

"The current reality is really difficult, and I don't see it getting easier any time soon."

*Ed Defort is editor of NFDA Publications, which includes the monthly Director print magazine and digital issue, the weekly online Memorial Business Journal and the quarterly online Director.edu, written for funeral service students.*