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◆ FUNERAL DIRECTOR ◆

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Eagle's Wings Air: Soaring Amid Uncertainty

Since its onset in the United States in February, the global COVID-19 pandemic has impacted us all both personally and professionally. Indeed, every industry has been affected by COVID-19 in some way – and some have been affected in profound and long-term ways.

Take the airline industry, for example. One of those rare and hardest hit industries that felt the impact both very early and very intensely, airline capacity has seen reductions as high as 91 percent over the past several months. This, in turn, has seen airlines reduce flights and furlough staff to reflect this drop in demand.

Which has all combined to make the air transportation of human remains more difficult than ever. Established in 2007, Eagle's Wings Air (EWA) is the nation's leading provider of transportation management services to North American funeral homes and shipping services. So you'd think that, after 12 years and successfully managing more than 160,00 transfers of human remains, the team at EWA had seen it all. But even they admit they weren't initially prepared for the scale and scope of COVID-19 and its impact on their ability to do their job.

With all of this in mind, we thought it would be a good (and certainly unique) time to sit down with EWA co-owners Dave McComb and Frank Kaiser to learn more about how they've adjusted and adapted to these historic times – and what long-term lessons they're taking away for their team and their business moving forward.

Southern Funeral Director: Start by providing an overview of Eagle's Wings Air and the role you play in the funeral service industry.

Dave McComb: At a basic level, we partner with funeral homes and families to manage and ensure the safe air transportation of human remains. More specifically, our experienced customer service team leverages our proprietary software and our expert knowledge of airline operations to find the best flight itinerary, make the reservation and proactively monitor status of



transport from start to finish. This enables us to deliver time-savings and peace-of-mind to our funeral service clients throughout North America.

Frank Kaiser: And, as you can imagine, the past few months have never made it more challenging for our team – or more important for our funeral service customers.

SFD: Let's talk about that next – how has COVID-19 impacted EWA?

Dave McComb: "First and foremost for us was ensuring the health and safety of our team. We are fortunate that, as the realities of the pandemic came into view for us in early March, we were able to transition 90 percent of our team to work-from-home in less than a week with no interruptions to service or availability. It was a true team effort – and an example of the service mentality of EWA.

"At the same time, we can't do our job without the cargo teams for all the major airlines – they are our true partners. So we had to work closely and consistently with them as they were dealing with the impact to their industry, which was obviously one of the industries hardest hit. It wasn't easy – and it still isn't – but it's reflective of the relationships and mutual trust we've built over the past 12-plus years."

Frank Kaiser: "From an operational perspective, the past 120 days have been the toughest and most challenging environment I've seen in my 25 years of experience in the air cargo space – much worse than the aftermath of 9/11. In addition to the huge reduction in capacity (with international flights being reduced to almost zero), our team has simultaneously had to deal with confirmed bookings being cancelled multiple times – and often at the last minute as passenger airlines

have fought to operate their networks. At the peak (or bottom, depending on how you look at it), we were having to rebook 45 percent of our flights.

While all of this was impacting our operations, we were also having to adjust to a drastic reduction in employees at the airlines' cargo-reservation centers as the airlines tried to reduce overhead and lower operating costs everywhere they could. This, as you can imagine, led to extremely long hold times for our team. As Dave mentioned, however, the long-standing relationships we've built with our airline partners over the past 12-plus years have never been more valuable than they are now – they've been crucial in helping us secure access to their customer service teams when we – and our funeral home clients – need it most.

SFD: How do you see the impact on our industry unfolding over the next six months? The next year?

Dave McComb: "If nothing else, the past three months have certainly taught us that none of us should be in the prediction business any more. Now more than ever, we are literally operating day to day and figuring this

out as we go along.

That being said, it seems reasonable at this point – and based on what we hear from our airline partners – to expect the turmoil within the airline industry to continue for the foreseeable future. Until we can get the virus under control here in the U.S., it's hard to see anything changing in terms of the impact on our industry and our lives.

The damage has been done over the short term – people are not traveling and aircraft has been parked in the desert – and the risk now is that it becomes long-term damage. Recent news reports have mentioned it taking at least two years for airline capacity to return to previous levels. Less capacity is bad news for the funeral service profession, obviously, and will ultimately make it more challenging for funeral directors across the country to find flights to bring loved ones home safely and on time.

At the same time, moments like these are exactly why Frank and I formed EWA – to provide our funeral service



Be their knight in shining armor.

When families need to transport a loved one, it's up to you to make sure the ship-out goes as planned. That's why there's EWA — your one-call airline resource. Our transportation experts search all available flights, handle the reservation, pre-pay the charges and proactively monitor the status through the entire process. And you? With one call, you're the family's hero — earning their loyalty for generations to come.

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Your One-Call Solution for Airline
Reservations & Proactive Monitoring

clients with a one-call customer service model, with 18 team members focused 100 percent on serving the funeral service profession when they need to manage the air transportation of a decedent. We consider ourselves fortunate to be in a position to leverage our leadership position and offer our assistance at a time of their greatest need.”

Frank Kaiser: “I agree with Dave. Less flights equals less capacity, and equals more time and resources needed by a funeral home to dedicate to managing the air transportation process for their ship-outs.

Another challenge for a funeral director involved in managing the air transportation process is that the airlines are experiencing a higher percentage of failures as flight schedules or cargo stations continue to be negatively impacted by changes seemingly happening by the minute. More failures to load, missed transfers or misroutes all mean more headaches for our profession and our team. October will bring another significant blow as the airlines are poised to layoff tens of thousands of employees. As Dave mentioned, the danger in this is moving the impact from short-term to long-term – the airline ‘brain-drain’ in losing fully trained and highly experienced people in handling human remains segment is going to hurt everyone in the funeral service industry.”

SFD: With all this in mind, what advice do you have for any funeral director or funeral home owner as they seek to manage the air transportation of human remains going forward?

Dave McComb: “It’s a great question, and one I’m not sure that there’s an easy or obvious answer to. Certainly, it’s more important than ever for them to be a source of empathy, strength and resiliency for the families they’re serving – and for them to effectively manage expectations through honesty and transparency. There’s a lot that’s beyond their control in these trying times, so helping families understand that is key.”

Frank Kaiser: “I completely agree. And – we’re biased, obviously – but having partners you can trust to work with the airlines and navigate their increasingly complex networks is more important than ever as well. We’re all dealing with bigger and more complex challenges right now, and the funeral service industry is no exception. Having a partner who can still successfully manage the safe, reliable and efficient transportation of human

remains is invaluable for those funeral directors and funeral homes having to do so during these trying times – which, as we’ve mentioned, doesn’t show any sign of reverting back to ‘normal’ any time soon.

After managing over 160,000 flights over the past 12 years, we have seen a thing or two. And while we may have never seen anything like this, the relationships and trust we’ve built over that time is more important to our funeral service clients than it’s ever been.

Dave McComb: There’s so much going on right now that feels out of our control – and for good reason, obviously. For us – and for all of us in our industry – that should serve as reminder to really focus on those things we can control. Focus on your team, your service, your operations – focus on those things that you can control and that can keep your business moving forward in these trying times.”

Established in 2007, Eagle’s Wings Air (EWA) is the nation’s leading provider of transportation management services to North American funeral homes and shipping services. Through a centralized customer service center, EWA leverages proprietary software and their knowledge of airline operations to find the best flight itinerary, make the reservation and proactively monitor status of transport from start to finish, delivering time-savings and peace-of-mind to its funeral service clients throughout North America. To date, EWA has proactively managed more than 160,000 transports. Learn more at www.EWAcare.com or by calling 866-550-1EWA (1392).

Frank Kaiser and David McComb

