



funeral service insider

INDEPENDENT NEWS FOR THE FUNERAL PROFESSIONAL

Event Funerals Without the Event Center

By Tony Russo

If you look at the Roberts Family Funeral Home Facebook page, it's clear they push boundaries. For example, on the Facebook page, [Roberts Family Life Celebration Home, Forest Lake Life Celebration Home](#), if you scroll down far enough, you'll see a video of four people dancing to a [three-piece band at a funeral](#).

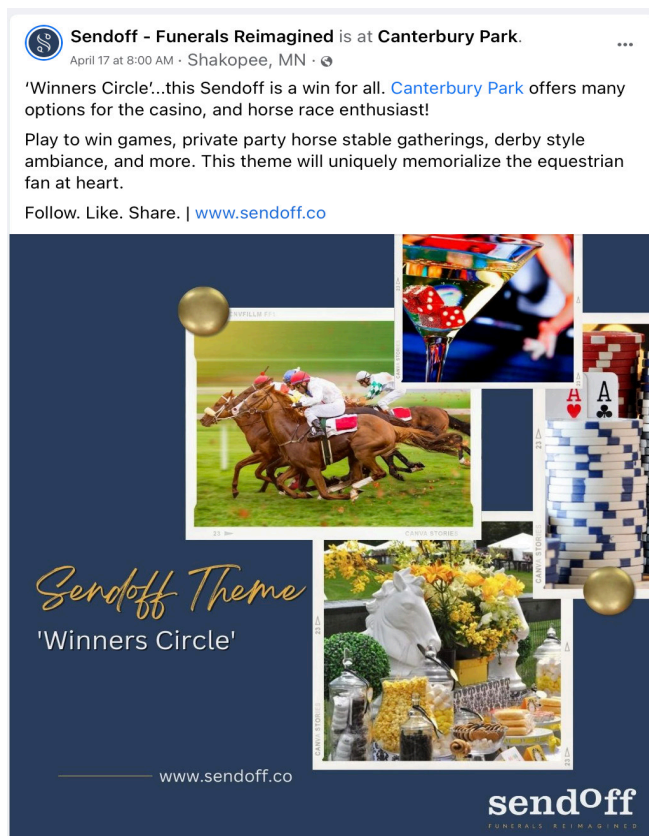
Funeral director and founder Kelly Roberts knows how close they may sometimes come to the line, but he also understands it's critical not to cross it. Over the last 18 years since he opened his business, Roberts has been sensitive to the changing

perceptions of what a funeral can be, and he's tried to deliver.

"We've always been on the forefront as far as offering different and unique services, and even our facilities ... we've got a bar in our funeral home," he said. "Over time, just looking at other industry trends, such as the wedding industry, where it's evolved quite significantly over the years, and the funeral industry really hasn't."

More than a year ago, Roberts thought about the next phase for his funeral business. Event funerals continued to be popular at his funeral home and, especially as cremation families were more open to events, he considered the possibilities of a larger event center.

As we mentioned in [last week's issue](#), funeral homes increasingly access new revenue streams by opening event centers for families and hosting other celebrations such as weddings and business



A typical partner post on the Sendoff Facebook page invites people to imagine the celebration-of-life party they want and to begin planning for it.

meetings. It was an option open to Roberts (and, indeed, any funeral home owner).

The difficulty is you have to get into the event-planning business and all that entails, including finding waitstaff and a reliable catering service you can trust. These

were all considerations Roberts evaluated as he was contemplating ways he could expand.

"Just based on looking at other industries, consumer trends and consumer feedback, we thought we would start a new funeral brand called

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Editor's Desk

What Secrets Are You Keeping?

Last month, Kates-Boylston held its Technology Think Tank event. One pair of speakers Wendy Wiener, managing member, WRW Legal, and Bill Williams, president, Funeral Service Inc., an Argent company, discussed ways to build the funeral people want by encouraging them to think about what kind of celebration they want rather than whether they want a burial or a cremation.



Tony Russo

The disposition is secondary in this scenario.

You can find a summary of the talk [here](#), but one of the points they kept returning to was that funeral directors should suggest an end-of-life celebration as a way of helping people connect with the idea of preneed. One of the takeaway quotes was from Williams, “We as an industry have not really embraced that as yet. We don’t know how to do event planning.”

This week’s feature is about a funeral director who took a different approach to the problem. He agreed with Wiener and Williams that putting the celebration front and center was critical, then he took the additional step of hiring an event planner to help people turn their grand visions for an end-of-life celebration into reality.

As soon as I heard the funeral director’s story, I knew I wanted to share it here. The reason I knew his story was because he got a bunch of local press recently and one of the stories came to my attention when I was researching the ICYMI section.

By coincidence, we’re kicking off a new recurring feature this week as part of the ICYMI section called Earned Media. It’s a topic we’re going to return to frequently in the coming months, and as a result we’re paying even closer attention to the ways that funeral homes get featured in the local media.

It can take a long time but make sure you’re telling people what’s going on in your funeral home. New hires, promotions, new equipment or some piece of industry news that effects the larger community are excellent opportunities. Highlighting these stories is our way of showcasing the different ideas and approaches out there.

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Sendoff,” he said. “The essence of the brand is to curate these memorial experiences outside of the church and funeral home settings.”

New Funeral Backdrops

Forest Lake, Minnesota, where Roberts Funeral Home is based, is just outside of the Twin Cities, which doesn't lack diversions. Roberts approached some of them and proposed partnerships, or at least working relationships. Restaurants and country clubs are no strangers to repast meals, but holding funeral celebrations wasn't something many had considered in the past.

Roberts went beyond country clubs, though. He spoke with people in hospitality venues throughout the Twin Cities metro area – wineries, breweries, bowling alleys, outdoor spaces – anywhere someone might want to have an epic sendoff.

“The idea is to fill their spaces during non-peak times, during the week, Monday through Thursday, typically, especially during the wedding season,” he said. “Weekends we knew were going to be a barrier (in the) spring, summer and fall, but during the non-peak times, we just wanted to get people in their spaces.”

Roberts also realized it was critical not to become too caught up in the outward-facing funeral business, which is why he inaugurated a second company. Many of these ideas still might seem a little out there for more traditional families and in the

“It seems like once a week we get an inquiry from a media outlet, so that has been kind of fun to share our story. We feel we have a compelling story because no one else in the market is doing this.”

– **Kelly Roberts**, funeral director and founder of Sendoff and Roberts Family Funeral Home

excitement to be able to provide this additional service, Roberts didn't want to lose sight of his true calling, which is serving families.

The most difficult thing about transitioning was actually doing it. Roberts said he understands how hard it can be, especially for generational funeral directors, to break out of their comfort zone.

“The phone continues to ring, right? They continue to serve families. Families keep on coming back because they're served well, and so why change that?” he said. “Everything out there sounds good. ‘Oh, yeah, that's a great idea. We should do that!’ But then the next thing you know, the phone rings three more times in one day.”

Setting up a second business was a challenge, but Roberts' vision, which took the funeral home expansion part out, allowed it to be a manageable one. He made sure he pursued it even as the phone kept ringing.

“Building the website, building the team, looking at marketing, there's been just a lot to it,” Roberts said. “And getting out in the media was more challenging than we thought it was going to be.”

Outsourcing Events

In November 2022, after six months of planning, Roberts launched [Sendoff - Funerals Reimagined](#) as a completely separate entity. It's based in St. Paul but really could be anywhere because it's an event-center-less event center.

“We built our funeral home in back in 2005 from scratch, and with that comes a lot of overhead, of course, heavy mortgage, high property taxes you know, all the above,” Roberts said. “With this model, we're just renting office space. We don't have that heavy overhead from a facility standpoint. We're using the existing different structures out there to host these events; that's really appealing to us from a business standpoint.”

One thing the event centers we covered in last week's issue had in common is funeral directors did not run them, event planners did.

When he was first starting the business, Roberts tried hiring a funeral director to run it. He spoke with several who agreed it was a good idea but weren't ready to make the leap. Roberts said that reticence sometimes can feel built in to the industry, and it makes sense.

Many funeral directors thrive on projecting tradition. It's a significant part of what makes them a comforting presence. Roberts was looking for someone who was willing to be a little uncomfortable.

"We looked outside of the industry and looked into the event space. So, we looked at an event planner as being kind of the lead person, to really take this and run with it," Roberts said.

They posted the position on Indeed.com: "We're an innovative funeral services company that produces beautiful, uplifting and unexpected memorials, and we're searching for a talented full-time event planner to lead our team."

They had more than 125 applications after two weeks and eventually hired Julie Gilmer as their "Event Curator." She started well before the launch, helping to build the marketing plan.

Roberts and his team front-loaded the work, opting to be overprepared in case the idea took off right away. A significant part of Gilmer's job was coordinating social media. Again, Roberts wanted to push boundaries



Kelly Roberts

without crossing lines. He said Gilmer met the challenge, getting out in the community and establishing partnerships.

"There's a fine line when someone's passed away, and we need to be sensitive to that. We're in a category that no one wants to really even think about, but we want to be unlike the traditional funeral home marketing," Roberts said. "So, we feel that we can be a little clever, a little witty, a little edgy with it, but we can't be goofy with it. We can't cross that line. So far, we've done a nice job with that."

Gilmer also started running the social media accounts for both businesses at first and that's where she solidified special relationships with hospitality venues. Whenever they reached an agreement with a venue, she highlighted that venue, extolling its everyday virtues and then describing how a person might choose to have their final celebration there.

"We're continuing to add more partners every week," Roberts said. "Now that we've got some attention, we've got hospitality venues that are reaching out to us, wanting to be a part of the Sendoff model. So that's been kind of exciting too."

Earned Media

Earned media is when a journalist contacts a business to do a story. Sometimes it's a product or service, sometimes it's a special employee, sometimes it's an attempt to make a national story local.

It takes work and isn't always successful, but when it is it can be a game-changer for a business. In fact, we've inaugurated an "Earned Media" section in this week's ICYMI column on page 6.

In Sendoff's case, it resulted from a coordinated social media promotion, a couple of billboards and a Google ad campaign. Eventually, it broke as a story, and it appears to be a story with legs. It came to our attention as a TV interview with funeral director Colby Voigt on [KSTP's Minnesota Live](#), but the last several months have been media-heavy for Sendoff.

"With this model, we're just renting office space. We don't have that heavy overhead from a facility standpoint. We're using the existing different structures out there to host these events; that's really appealing to us from a business standpoint."

– Kelly Roberts, funeral director and founder of Sendoff and Roberts Family Funeral Home

“We’ve got some engagement. You saw the Colby interview and then we were on Care 11, so that’s another local media station here in the Minneapolis market,” Roberts said, “It seems like once a week we get an inquiry from a media outlet, so that has been kind of fun to share our story. We feel we have a compelling story because no one else in the market is doing this.”

Roberts said they’ve also done some more traditional salesperson-based marketing, visiting with elder law and estate planning attorneys to spread the word. He said there have already been many preneed inquiries based on the media attention they’ve received, and they want to continue that.

“And so other areas too, like visiting senior care communities and making sure that they know that there’s something else out there that’s unique and different than what people usually know,” Roberts said. “Shelley Beckman is our community relations director, and she’s been getting them engaged with our brand to plant the seed with their clients that preplanning your send-off is really an important part of the overall estate plan.”

The Price of Success

Roberts and his team have been meticulous and enthusiastic. As the event funeral requests started, they were excited to execute their plans. After five funerals, they’re ready to make some tweaks and implement lessons learned.

“There has been a lot of time

‘FSI: The Podcast’ Launches May 8

By Tony Russo

I am so excited to announce that after several months of development, we’re ready to launch the FSI podcast. The show will be an extension of this newsletter, American Funeral Director and American Cemetery & Cremation. Each episode will feature a deep-dive interview with people we’ve spoken with for stories.

Our first episode will feature Tanya Scotece, program coordinator for the Funeral Service Education Program at Miami Dade College, kicking off what I hope will be a continuing dialogue about mortuary school education, licensure and what it will take to help the funeral directors of the future succeed.

If there are topics you’d like to see covered or people you would like to hear from, [please email me](#).

Meanwhile, listen to the podcast trailer now and [subscribe here](#).



and energy put into these, much more than the traditional funeral because there’s so many more elements out there,” Roberts said. “Setting up the venues, finding the perfect time, as far as pricing this out, we started at this point, and we’re going to need to modify and pivot here along the way because there’s just a lot to it.”

They’re still doing everything they would do if the funeral was at a church or in the Roberts Family Funeral Home chapel. They’re there to do the simple things like making sure people sign the guest book and managing all the logistics. They also work with the venues so the family just has to be present and greet people and honor their loved one.

With several event funerals under their belt, Roberts said

they’re going to put packages together with a little more detail and along more traditional themes, like a golf theme or patriotic-themed events. He sees it as something that absolutely can open nontraditional event funerals to where that’s what people preplan for. Lots of people say they want a party. His hope is to make that a real and likely possibility.

“These events are meant to bring hope and healing, joy, even inspiration along the way. That’s our main goal when people walk out of these events,” Roberts said. “They should turn around and say, that’s exactly what we needed to honor and celebrate our loved one. And that’s what I want. I want to have a send-off. I don’t want to have a funeral.”

ICYMI: Stories About Death Care from Around the Internet

Earned Media

Getting the word out about your funeral home is a perennial challenge. So is educating the public. Earned media is a marketing term aimed at capturing the phenomenon where news outlets write about your funeral home or quote you as a source in a story. As a recurring feature of ICYMI, we'll be sharing stories wherein funeral directors' comment on industry trends or find another useful way to reach out to families through earned media.

Several [South Carolina funeral homes](#) were interviewed for this story about the coming employment gap as more funeral directors retire than are graduating from mortuary school. These trend stories are popular and can help people better understand funeral service as a small business with particular challenges.

Four Massachusetts funeral homes were featured in [this report](#) on how COVID changed funerals. They were able to speak about memorialization options, streaming and the fact that they provide nontraditional and nonreligious funerals regularly.

Announcing the opening of a [new location](#), or the hiring or promotion of an employee are also excellent ways of getting extra coverage.

Titan Casket, for example, has gotten a lot of earned media since Taylor Swift used their casket in a video. They were featured in [this report](#) from CBS recently and have become the go-to soundbite provider for stories about how to save money on a funeral, like [this one in Entrepreneur](#).

Making Room for Natural Burial

A [recent report by WBUR](#) said that since 2015 the number of cemeteries in Vermont that offer natural burial has gone from five to more than 70. It's a consumer-driven phenomenon cemeterians there are just starting to get a handle on. In Vermont, state law was a factor because until 2017, all graves had to be at least 5-feet deep, but natural burial requires a shallower grave to aid in decomposition, something closer to three-and-a-half feet. Some municipalities, like Burlington still require a vault. As legislatures continue removing impediments to natural burial, it may continue to rise in popularity.

Maybe there was something in the air, because

just two days after that story ran, a similar one ran on [Florida public radio station, WUSF](#). Florida, though, only has seven cemeteries that perform natural burials, though it has been accepting green burials since 2001, according to the report.

Found Remains

Michael J. O'Brien died in 1996 but his cremated remains [recently turned up](#) at a Detroit cemetery. According to a story in the Detroit Free Press, a person walking through the cemetery found the remains and contacted the police, who now are trying to find the next of kin. In an upcoming issue we'll be sharing the story of a journalist who publicizes and catalogues all the unclaimed remains from the local morgues and publishes them. So far, she's had a lot of success getting remains returned to their respective families.

Banner Quarter for Carriage

Calling it "a financial force to be reckoned with," [BestStocks.com](#) touted Carriage's recent revenue and earnings per share beat. In addition to beating the eps consensus estimate by more than 4%, Carriage will pay a 0.1125 cent per share dividend.

Ugly Accusations in Florida

Several Florida funeral directors have written to the state protesting the way the [Escambia County medical examiner](#) deals with bodies. According to several letters the process at the medical examiner's office is slipshod at best. Autopsied bodies appear to have been "mutilated" in some cases, with gloves and other trash left inside the bodies. While the list of complaints is long and detailed, one local county commissioner suspects that the complaints are tied to medical examiner Dr. Deanna Oleske's [decision to build a new facility](#) and institute new practices.

"Even though I may disagree with her approach to getting a new facility, even though I disagree with some of the plans put forward for such a new space – I DO NOT believe she would allow these things to occur on her watch. I believe she is a professional," Escambia County Commissioner Jeff Bergosh wrote in a post, according to the Pensacola News Journal.

ICCFA's Government and Legal Committee Visits Capitol Hill

The International Cemetery, Cremation, and Funeral Association's Government and Legal Committee returned to Capitol Hill March 21-23 after a few years of virtual meetings. During the visit, the committee met with the offices of several senators and representatives, as well as representatives from the Federal Trade Commission, to speak on the pressing issues within death care and advance ICCFA's legislative agenda.

Committee members and ICCFA staff met in-person with representatives from the Senate Finance Committee, Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, the House Ways and Means Committee and the House Energy and Commerce Committee to discuss the association's legislative and regulatory priorities.

ICCFA's representatives discussed the Funeral and Cemetery Trust Modernization Act, the consensual Donation Research and Integrity Act, the Funeral Rule, and the newly



Members of the ICCFA Washington delegation, Allen Dave Jr., Micah Singerman, Poul Lemasters, Esq., John Gouch Jr., Tim Birch, Nadira Baddeliyanage, Sam Mazzu, Kyle Nikola, Kirsten Kase, Steve Schacht, Blair Nelsen, Tom Daly.

(Photo Credit: ICCFA)

proposed Non-Compete Clause Rule. The visit provided an important opportunity for key legislators and regulators to see and hear from the ICCFA on federal policy issues impacting the profession.

"It was a fantastic opportunity to meet with our nation's representatives in-person again," Poul Lemasters, ICCFA's general

counsel, said. "At the moment, there are a number of pieces of legislation and FTC rulings that will have a significant impact on death-care professionals. These meetings have allowed us to share our expertise and help shape the future of legislation for our profession in an impactful way. It was a packed two days that I know made an impression on everyone we met."

We would like to invite you to participate in the 10th annual **Kates-Boylston Compensation Survey.**

Each year since 2013 we have collected data on industry salary, bonus and benefit trends.

Using the information you provide, we're able to give a snapshot revealing the range of compensation among funeral professionals. To participate in this year's survey, [click here](#). For a copy of last year's survey and analysis [click here](#).

Jessi Booker Promoted to Regional Vice President, Sales at NGL

Jessi Booker has been promoted to regional vice president, sales at National Guardian Life Insurance Co. Booker joined NGL in 2006 as a new business representative and during her tenure with NGL has held various roles, advancing her way to regional vice president.

In her new role Booker will focus on developing and enhancing preneed business development opportunities with NGL's marketing organizations, independent agents and agencies. She will work closely with Judy Olson, regional vice president, sales, as she assists NGL's marketing partners in growing their preneed sales.

"Jessi is an extremely knowledgeable and valuable resource for everyone she works with both in the field and at NGL," Olson said. "I



have been fortunate to work closely with her for over 15 years. I look forward to continuing to work with her in her new role as regional vice president on the sales team as we help support our customers' goals through connection, collaboration and compassion.

"I look forward to moving into my new role as regional vice president and

strengthening existing and building new relationships. I believe in providing our customers with reliability, trust and success as they serve families. Working in various departments at NGL throughout my career, including new business, customer service and agent support has uniquely positioned me to understand the multifaceted needs of policyholders, agents and marketing partners," Booker said.

"The preneed industry is important because it gives families peace of mind and helps to alleviate some of the stress during one of life's most challenging moments. I am passionate about preplanning because I've witnessed the benefits to families who know what to expect when their loved one passes away."

the last word

“(Natural Organic Reduction) was something we don't often think about. I'm of that mindset that I spend a lot of my time and my days trying to figure out what we can do to promote good environmental policy and live my life in a way that is friendly to our environment.”

– Rhode Island Rep. **Michelle McGaw**, who is trying to get [NOR legalized](#) in the Ocean State.

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