



ICCFA Magazine subject spotlight

► Beacham McDougald, mcdougald@aol.com, is a fourth-generation funeral director and president of McDougald Funeral Home and Crematorium, Laurinburg, North Carolina.

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► He attended East Carolina University, St. Andrews Presbyterian College and Gupton-Jones College of Mortuary Science and has been employed at the funeral home since 1973.

CREMATION/SERVICE TO FAMILIES

Bringing families into a bedroom setting rather than a prep room for identification viewings isn't just a nice idea, it's an idea that makes financial sense, according to this long-time funeral director.



This is the viewing room section of a lounge-visitation area at McDougald Funeral Home & Crematorium. Identification viewings are done here.

Home-like setting comforts families, benefits funeral home

McDougald Funeral Home and Crematorium is in Laurinburg, a city of 16,000 in south central North Carolina, close to the South Carolina border. Think a small Southern city is probably a bastion of traditional ways, including traditional funerals? Guess again. The funeral home's cremation rate is 44 percent, up from just 13 percent in 1997.

One of the ways owner Beacham McDougald has changed his operation is by turning part of what used to be his casket selection room into a lounge with a kitchen area, a flexible seating area and a bedroom area where family members can sit at bedside to identify their loved one before a cremation takes place.

It may not surprise you to hear that families prefer this set-up to being brought into a prep room for an identification

viewing, but perhaps less expected is the way it has paid off financially as well as in terms of goodwill for the funeral home.

ICCFA Magazine talked to McDougald about the concept and how it's been a win-win situation for families and for his business.

How did you come up with this idea?

Probably a year and a half ago I was talking to another North Carolina funeral director, Danny Jefferson at Pierce-Jefferson Funeral Home in Kernersville. He had put in a bedroom, and told me how they place the body, wearing clothes other than a hospital smock, on the bed for identifications, even before immediate cremations.

Since adopting his idea for my funeral home, I can see from my own experience that cremation families see this and think, "These guys are all right. These people are

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Above, the lounge has a viewing area that can be curtained off from the rest of the room. Also, the tables can easily be moved and more chairs added as needed. The edge of the kitchen counter can be seen at right. **Below**, the kitchen side of the lounge and viewing room: a K-cup coffee maker, dispensers for iced tea or lemonade and an oven in which to bake Otis Spunkmeyer cookies. People don't associate coffee brewing and cookies baking as smells you expect in a funeral home.



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And without any sales pitch whatsoever, a little over 60 percent of the families who use that room end up deciding to use additional services or merchandise. When I was having them view their loved one on a gurney or something like that, that wasn't the case.

What kind of additional services and merchandise are people buying?

Well, first let me give you the extreme case. The woman had nine children; seven of them were present when she died. When we picked her up at her residence, they said, “She will be cremated and all we want is to meet you at the cemetery for a graveside service.”

I said, “Is there anyone else in the family who may want to see her?”

“We have a brother and a sister in Virginia.”

“Do you think they would want to see their mother before the cremation?”

“I think so.”

“OK, if you have some clothes you'd like us to dress her in, we'll prepare her—wash her and set her features and have her so they can see her when they come.”

They said, “Thank you.”

The next day, that brother and sister came in and viewed their mother. The family started phoning other people; we had about 35 people in there viewing.

The brother and sister from Virginia asked to talk to us and said, “Could you possibly embalm Mama, and have you got some kind of casket we can use for a viewing and a funeral?” They handed me an insurance policy for several thousand dollars and said, “Can you do it for this?” And I said, “Most definitely.”

So we ended up having a cremation casket, a visitation, a funeral following the visitation, placed her cremated remains in an urn and had graveside services.

That's what I consider my extreme case. In other cases, I've had families who come in to identify their loved one and they sit in the bedroom and say, “We would like to have her body present for a service or a visitation.”

I find the consumer is more likely to choose additional services than additional



Our reusable urn, another little gift that pays off big in public relations value. When the family cannot afford an urn and wants a memorial service with the urn present we use this one along with the table it's sitting on. Inside is of course the basic plastic urn used by so many. The wooden case adds dignity to the service. We felt the need to have the urn engraved with our logo because one family forgot we had loaned

them the walnut case for the service and thought it was part of the package.

merchandise. They're viewing their loved one and thinking, "You know, I'm getting a lot of value out of this; maybe I can share this with the rest of the family and some friends."

We'll do usually a minimal amount of embalming, just whatever is necessary to set the features—with the family's permission, of course—and then have a viewing before the cremation and then usually a memorial service of some sort.

Do you think some people don't want to have a funeral or any other kind of service because they think it's going to be depressing, but when they experience this identification viewing/mini-visitation they find that it's comforting rather than depressing?

Yes, exactly. Usually you need the viewing for positive identification anyway. I think it's important to ask the family, when you do the pick-up, if there's anyone else who may want to see the deceased before cremation and also, in cases where the medical condition has caused some discoloration in the skin or something like that, I ask, "Could I do a minimal amount of preparation—at no additional charge to you—just to clear up the complexion?"

One hundred percent of the time, people say "yes." And that then opens the door for more. With cremation, there are a lot of options; you're not burdened by a lot of the things you're burdened by with a traditional funeral.

The lounge/bedroom also can help in preneed sales. I had some people come in and tell me they didn't know who they were going to use, they were just checking prices for cremation. I asked one of the women, who was from the Midwest, if she would want to be able to see her parent before cremation.

"You mean I could do that?" she said. So I showed them the bedroom, and before they left I had a preneed sale on the books.

I do think it's just natural that when you extend yourself to do more for your client families, when you're willing to give them a little bit more for their money, they'll also be willing to buy more.

Basically what you're doing is what they tell writers to do: Show, don't tell. So you could "educate" people by telling them how a visitation would make them feel, would help them, but instead, you're showing them and they're realizing it themselves.

Exactly. Visualizing something is a lot easier for a family to grasp at a time like that than trying to picture something being described to them.

I will say one effect this has had, it has cost us the sale of cremation caskets, but those losses have been more than made up in the sale of extra services the families decide they want.

That's what funeral directors have been told to do for at least the last decade: sell (and charge for) their services instead of relying on product mark-ups.

Exactly. Some people come in for the identification and ask if they can leave their mother in the bed for a viewing. The bedroom has curtains around it than can be opened up, and there's a lounge area where we can add more seating.

People will come in and sit down, I might fix them a cup of coffee or a glass of iced tea, serve them a cookie or two and they'll just stay for a couple of hours, with people coming in. I've had as much as 60 family members come in.

There's a visitation right there, that I didn't have, which for most funeral homes is probably several hundred extra dollars.

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And that's money we took in that we weren't going to get, and because we used the bedroom, we didn't have to buy and carry a cremation casket in inventory.

If you really stop and think about how it works, it does make good sense.

It was hard for me to convince myself it would work, but I thought about it and said to myself, "I've been taught since I got into funeral service, the difference between a \$5,000 funeral and an \$8,000 funeral was the merchandise that was sold." But the public's not looking at it that way. The public's looking at a funeral from the service aspect and the funeral director is looking at it from the merchandise aspect.

Now I believe we've got to focus mainly on what kinds of services we can offer. The top professionals—attorneys, physicians, CPAs—don't sell products, just service. People will pay for services.

I would think bedrooms harken back to the days of home funerals.

Right. I remember my dad telling me the last body he embalmed in a home was in 1938. The body stayed in the home, in the bed, and just before the funeral, they moved the body from the bed into the casket. I still have the portable embalming table he would take to the home.

A gurney is institutional. People see a gurney and think, "I saw one of those going down the hall at the hospital." A bedroom is like a room at a hospice home that's furnished and equipped like a bedroom in a home. It's softer and more comfortable. You're using the physical environment to enhance the experience.

Did you take one of your visitation rooms and just change it?

No, I was changing my selection room. I had gone from a regular casket display room to a modular one where you use cut-corners and so forth. I had found that during arrangements, if I gave people a choice between looking through a book or going into the selection room, almost 85 percent of them wanted to pick a casket out of the book.

So I turned all that newly unused square footage into the lounge, kitchenette, bedroom. I did it about 18 months ago and it's been wonderful.

It may be like anything else; it may play out in several years. Then it'll be, "What's next? What's the next great idea?"