



funeral service insider

INDEPENDENT NEWS FOR THE FUNERAL PROFESSIONAL

Expanding Into Event Centers Is a Challenge Worth Taking Up

By Tony Russo

As celebrations of life and other alternative ways of approaching the rituals of death become more prevalent, many funeral homes are expanding to include event centers and providing services beyond those traditionally considered funerary. In this week's issue, the first of a two-part report, we're going to consider one funeral event center that has been in operation for more than four decades and another one that transitioned from funeral home to funeral-centric event center. The next issue will consider outsourcing an event center as part of a marketing campaign.

Maureen Lindley, vice president of marketing for the Buchanan Group, oversees life events from weddings and baby showers to after-family gatherings for funerals. While she's been in the position for the last 13 years, hosting non-funeral events isn't new to Indianapolis-based Flanner Buchanan. The company's welcomed church groups and community events since the mid-1980s.

Bookings in the early days were as much part of a community service initiative as they were a community outreach project. The company had the space and saw no reason not to

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](#).



share it with groups that might not have been large or wealthy enough to rent out hotel ballrooms.

An unexpected upside was that the business also made a name for itself beyond funeral service and, by the late 1990s, set its sights on something very rare, an event center built in a cemetery.

"The weddings and the other life events came more in 1995, when we opened the community center at our Speedway (Indiana) location and at our Washington Park North (Indianapolis)

location," Lindley said.

For Flanner Buchanan, opening new funeral homes included plans to accommodate both after-service repasts and other, smaller occasions.

"And then we built what was considered our flagship, our Community Life Center in 2001," she added.

Making More Space

By the turn of the century, it was clear they would have to be leaders in the industry, and so it was

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important to the company to do it the right way.

After all, their main business was running a funeral home and they had to meet all the expectations that entails. As funerals shifted to include more elements, Flanner Buchanan already had entered the event business.

“We can have food. We have our liquor license. So, we can provide bars at after family gatherings. They can have a meal,” Lindley said. “They can also have a bar even at the visitation, which might sound a little out there, but we see a lot more of that.”

Having a mixed-use event center in a cemetery still was not very common, but the community responded positively, and Flanner Buchanan grew its business beyond funerals and weddings to include pretty much any function that could take place in a hotel or other private banquet hall.

The Community Life Center has a ballroom with a dance floor and seats 300 people. Before COVID, they were performing 70 to 80 weddings a year. Lindley said that as COVID concerns have waned, the business is growing again.

In the fall of 2022, Flanner Buchanan opened the Prairie Waters event facility at their



The Flanner Buchanan Prairie Waters Event Center is an expansion constructed with event funerals specifically in mind.

(Photo credit: Flanner Buchanan)

Hamilton Memorial Park location, focusing primarily on weddings and funerals. The space seats around 240, and it's on the other side of town from the Community Life Center, opening another segment of the Indianapolis market to the company.

Few, if any, people interested in holding life events at the Community Life center are concerned that it's in the middle of a cemetery.

“I think that most people are aware that our Community Life Center is a campus,” Lindley said. “We actually have had brides who like that it's on the grounds of a cemetery and want to do pictures

on the grounds of a cemetery, or they have maybe a gothic theme.”

It's also an operation that recommends itself. That is, once people attend a wedding or other event at the Community Life Center, they see the possibilities for using it for their own parties.

“Our goal is to get people in the door at a time where there's not a funeral going on, and it's a happy event so that when they have to walk back through those doors, maybe for a funeral, that they're more comfortable in that setting because they've been there before and they know that they're going to be well taken care of,” Lindley said.

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](#).

More Space, More Opportunities

Hosting life events as a sideline means communication is more critical than if the facility was just for non-funeral events. People often book weddings or large events at least one year in advance. Keeping an eye on the calendar helps when a funeral family comes in.

Oftentimes, it is easiest to direct a family to the next day or the day before if there's a scheduling conflict. Alternatively, they can send a family to a different Flanner Buchanan location, most of which can accommodate funerals of any size.

When you have that much space, you have that much flexibility.

Staffing can be an issue. Lindley has two event managers handling all the events and as many as 60 people who are on call. People with event experience rotate whenever they're able to for various events.

Hiring is the biggest issue right now. You just must be competitive in what you pay.

"We have had a lot of success, and we're fortunate in the Indianapolis area we have a lot of colleges, so we do recruit from a lot of colleges," Lindley said. "Before COVID, we specifically had one fraternity house



Holley Sowards

that we got several of the guys to come and bartend, and then they went back and told their fraternity brothers. We probably had a good majority of their house that worked for us. So, it's a great job for a college student."

She said their primary concern is to focus on providing a top-notch facility. They leave the food to the professionals, which is a popular choice among the people booking the space.

Whether for a wedding or a wake, choosing a caterer you're comfortable with is both preferable and empowering for choosing price and service levels consistent with your vision for the event.

Beyond that, places that don't allow outside catering tend to be more expensive.

"That's a big selling point because with so many venues you have to use their caterer," Lindley said. "We have preferred caters, but if they want to bring in their own caterer for an additional fee, they absolutely can."

While it would be a mischaracterization to think of the event centers as merely public relations, the benefit of having thousands of people come through the doors each year for non-funeral related celebrations provides Flanner Buchanan the opportunity to show off its staff, service and attention to detail when people are in the mood to notice such things.

"I think it sets you apart from your competition in the community because it's one more thing you have to offer," Lindley said. "Especially if you have a funeral center that's on the grounds of a cemetery. You become a one-stop shop. You can have your visitation, funeral, burial and meal afterwards, all on the grounds of the cemetery, and you don't ever have to leave. So I think it is a differentiator for funeral homes to look at."

A Different Approach

Holley Sowards, director of funeral operations for Einan's at Sunset Funeral Home in Richland, Washington, was there when the company opened its event center in 2009. "Einan's" is the event center connected with the Sunset Funeral Home. They're two separate buildings that work as one entity.

"Our visionaries designed it with the mindset of it being the future of

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— Maureen Lindley, vice president of marketing for the Buchanan Group

funeral service. They believed that that's what families of the future would want when they would gather and celebrate life, a more modern event than you typically experience," she said. "But also, they envisioned being able to accommodate outside events that were not funeral related. And to be honest, back in 2009, this was all very new. Event centers were not popping up in cemeteries everywhere affiliated with funeral homes. So, we really did not know how to do it or how it was going to work or how to implement it."

She said they didn't know what they didn't know when they conceived of and executed the plan. They were breaking new ground, by embracing the event center concept.

They learned a lot the hard way in the early days, but Sowards said the team pushed through their challenges as they tried to reimagine funerals while also learning to accommodate weddings a step at a time.

She said they hedged their bets, starting small. They topped out at about 20 weddings a year so they could keep their focus on providing the funeral experience they wanted.

One of the first unexpected changes was they started seeing families who selected a different funeral home for disposition book with them as they sought a life celebration location.

That Einan's became a go-to place for families from other funeral homes helped broaden their profile as a celebration of life center even more. It also pushed their facilities to the max.

For example, they installed residential quality electric and



William Reed, Oscar Monroe, Oliver Levesque, Bee Morgan, Anastasia Egelie and Heather Gatto, students from the St. Petersburg College funeral services degree program, were Kates-Boyleston's guests for this year's Technology Think Tank in Celebration, Florida. See "Think Tank" page 7 for the story.

(Photo credit: Tony Russo)

HVAC equipment as a cost-saving measure. It didn't take long to realize it wasn't sufficient for the crowds they were drawing, so they invested in commercial equipment.

Everyone didn't have the same vision for how the new operation would look, which became a serious sticking point. Without all employees on board, service could be inconsistent.

"When you have a funeral home cemetery combo and you're trying to build an event center and not everybody really knew how to talk about the event center or why it was there or what we wanted to share with the community about it," she said. "That was one of my first jobs when I was hired (in 2013), to help everybody understand why we built this and how we want to use it."

The vision was for the event center to hold non-funerals and the funeral home to accommodate funerals and celebrations of life. Since that wasn't clear, there were

early booking inconsistencies.

"We had a couple of staff members over at our event center who helped open the facility, and, because there wasn't a shared vision, they just went out and started hitting the pavement and started trying to get any kind of event so that they could generate revenue," she said. "What we found was that it became a very popular place (and) we were running into issues with funeral families wanting to be located there for their service."

One problem was that the new facility made the old facility look like a "second best" option for funeral families. Rather than fight that perception, the company invested in a \$2 million renovation of the funeral home and its event facility to make it look more like Einan's.

Raising the profile of the entire complex allowed them to better separate the funeral events from the non-funeral events, so there weren't booking conflicts or families feeling

as if they were being given the lesser of the two spaces.

“We’ve done high school class reunions, we’ve done wedding/ anniversary-type events, baby showers, birthday parties, business events,” she said. “We’ve done private trainings for businesses throughout town, because one of the nice things about training is you can bring your staff on-site to our location, and it’s exclusive to that company, so you don’t have to worry about having meetings with a bunch of other things happening, like a hotel, for example.”

The fact that it’s in a cemetery was never a real hindrance, though they thought it might be at first. As with Flanner Buchanan, though, the serenity and well-maintained grounds outweigh any “creep” factors that could prevent people from choosing a cemetery venue.

In fact, Christmas parties are a big part of their business, as is another tradition started by a local theater company.

“There’s a theater group that has been booking with us for the last three years to do an ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ play around Christmas time. They basically book every weekend in November and December to have a play that sells out,” Sowards said. “We’ve even done escape rooms. A couple of escape room organizations around here were so busy with their location that in order to book more events, they need an off-site location, so they approached us.”

Keeping It All Straight

Using a universal calendar system is critical because there are so many moving parts and so many

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– Holley Sowards, director of funeral operations for Einan’s at Sunset Funeral Home

people with different needs.

“Our team is trained that the second you book an event, it has to get on our calendar instantly because if we don’t do that, we run the risk of double booking ourselves, which is not fun,” Sowards said. “In the beginning, the way that it used to work was you have an arrangement with a family, you decide everything, and then after your two-hour arrangement, you go and update your schedule. And we learned very quickly that does not work. You cannot do that because we meet with two to three non-funeral related families a day, and oftentimes they’re happening simultaneously.”

That understanding that booking a busy place is the same, whether it’s a hotel conference room or a funeral home, was one thing Sowards brought to the table as someone coming in from outside the funeral business.

As event centers become more attractive and diverse, funeral homes that expand will increasingly have to deal with this disconnect. For a company considering expanding into events, hiring someone with no funeral service experience might

make more sense than trying to hire a funeral director to cross train as an event coordinator. It’s something Sowards counsels people on when they call for advice.

“When I was hired here, I had zero funeral home experience; I was not a funeral director. I have a degree in business, HR and finance, and I grew up in a manufacturing business,” she said, “So when they were looking for a new funeral home manager because things went awry, they had decided to look for somebody outside of the profession that could run the business and learn the funeral end. Back then, that was not very common.”

While it was challenging to come in with no experience, it was also invigorating to come in to a new project. She said the premise was so exciting that getting on board with the funeral service aspect was easy.

“I guess the biggest thing I would recommend for people looking to get into this is just to make sure that communication is clear, and that a shared vision is there, because that is what I think will hurt the most when you’re trying to execute the mission,” she said.