

R^{unner-up} 2015 FD of the Year Award



Frank Lewis

Owner

Jackson, Lytle and Lewis Life Celebration Center, Springfield, Ohio

Frank Lewis says the key to success in funeral service is saying “Yes.”

The traditions and notions of what a funeral or memorial service “should be” don’t bind him – and he doesn’t want the families he serves to feel that way.

Heavy metal music played loud at a service: *Yes.*

Hanging a family tree on the wall during a viewing: *Yes.*

A memorial celebration without the body present: *Yes.*

“Whatever you want for your family, we can do that for you,” Lewis said. “We are looking for ways to say ‘yes’ to families and to help them engage in the environment they find themselves in, not in ways to say ‘no.’”

Lewis says he’s different than many tradition-bound funeral home operators – a difference he attributes to coming to funeral service from the world of business.

And while the 52-year-old owner of Jackson, Lytle and Lewis Life Celebration Center in Springfield, Ohio, has embraced funeral service’s

commitment to providing grieving families the support and personal experience they need, he still maintains a businessman’s drive to seek continuous improvement and innovation.

By marrying these two touchstones into a single business plan, Lewis has turned his 430-call per year business into a model of what a forward-looking funeral home can be.

“I believe our industry is at a critical point in time. (It) has not changed to adequately serve our customers,” Lewis said. “We have continued to deliver what we want and not what the consumer values.”

Lewis said he knows this because he spent many years serving as a funeral home mystery shopper while working for Service Corporation International.

Finding his Calling

Lewis hadn’t intended on a career in funeral service. He majored in accounting, thinking he would have a career helping business owners reach their financial goals.

“I grew up in a small town and went into it thinking I was going to help somebody,” he said. But, employed in accounting and then banking, Lewis discovered that wasn’t how things worked. “I found we were a necessary evil for most people,” he said.

A friend knew of an opening at SCI. Unfamiliar with funeral service, Lewis went in to talk about the job. He spent the next decade in acquisitions for the company and then spent three years in operations, responsible for 150 locations in eight states.

Those were good times for Lewis, as he discovered in funeral service the kind of connection he’d been looking for as an accountant.

“I found out the people in it are really awesome. They are caring for people and helping people,” Lewis said.

After 13 years at SCI, Lewis left to purchase his own funeral homes. Jackson, Lytle and Lewis owns four funeral homes and has six full-time and about 25 part-time employees.

Most of the funeral homes are open on an as-needed basis. But the Jackson, Lytle and Lewis Life Celebration Center, which is the company’s main location, demonstrates Lewis’ commitment to continuous improvement and includes a banquet room, kids’ room, video screens, Wi-Fi and digital register book.

Thinking in New Ways

The facility even includes a massage chair and an on-premises florist shop. Having the florist shop in the building is a result of Lewis’ desire to have a positive impact on his community.

About a year ago, a local florist called to say she was closing her business.

“Our staff loved her, our families loved her, but she was in a not-so-great location,” Lewis recalled. “I said ‘Come speak to me.’”

Lewis offered her a spot in his building in return for a discount on flowers. “It’s working great,” he said. “She gets to do what she loves doing every day, and we get the benefit of having a florist on site, which has its own advantages.”

Cremations make up about 28 percent of Lewis’ annual calls. He was long interested in owning his own cremation facility, but he was not doing enough cremations to make owning the facility financially worthwhile. He attempted to partner with other local funeral homes but had a tough time finding anyone interested.

He found his former association with SCI put off some funeral home operators while others said, “It makes sense, but that’s for the next generation.”