

Funeral Monitor

News and Commentary about Deathcare and Funerals

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VFC: It's all about the caring

"I wish I could tell you that I planned Veterans' Funeral Care, I did not, it kind of happened," says Florida Funeral director Jim Rudolph, 51.

We started spending a lot of time trying to find funeral directors, out of love for veterans and wanted to help them. Although not a veteran, Rudolph notes: "I was raised in a military family. I'm the son of a peacetime paratrooper and my grandfather was a World War II vet. Rudolph says he's a proud member of the Sons of the American Legion.

"I started Veterans Funeral Care in 2000. We really are the first funeral home built to serve the veterans community. Based in Clearwater, Rudolph recalls: "Almost immediately, I started having people hit the website from all over the country saying 'my dad's a veteran, we're in San Diego. Is there anybody out here that does what you do?'"

"We would actually stop what we were doing if somebody had a death and start calling funeral homes until we found somebody that said: 'I'm a Vietnam vet, or yeah, my dad's a World War II vet, you betcha I'll help them.'"

In a time of major economic crisis that's given a double whammy to funeral homes already experiencing a contraction of revenues due to the growing cremation trend, Veterans Funeral Care is thriving. Since opening its doors nine years ago, Rudolph has built his business to the point where he's averaging 700 funerals per year. He's not alone. David Ring, an Indianapolis funeral director and owner of

Harry W. Moore Funeral Services & Crematory and Indiana Funeral Care says he services 300 calls per year, up from 100 when he bought the Moore operation in 2001. A year later Ring opened Indiana Funeral Care, and says his annual growth rate is in double digits. Ring serves as liaison to the nearby American Legion headquarters.

According to Rudolph, his affiliated funeral homes average about 25 veterans' funerals per year. That significantly offsets the annual cost for full participation and training.

Currently there are 98 locations participating at an annual cost of \$3,100 and "one funeral pays for membership, according to VFC's sales director, Russ Cable. There are some 42 other funeral homes that pay \$1,000 to be listed as VFC providers, but Cable says: "We're going to phase that out as we grow and add more value to our licensees."

"I am a chaplain at the Bay Pines VA Healthcare System, Bay Pines, Fla.," says Chaplain Dan Hummer. "I always feel confident when I know Veterans Funeral Care is involved, as I know firsthand of their commitment, their compassion, their competence. On many occasions they have kindly accommodated families of veterans whose resources are very limited, and never refusing to do a funeral to my knowledge. They serve with excellence, in my opinion, treating veterans and families with genuine respect and recognition of service previously given to America .

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Ray Visotski, president and founder of the South Carolina Cremation & Burial Society, said in an e-mail: "I believe I was one of the first funeral homes to be affiliated with VFC and my firm was only the second firm in the country to receive an endorsement from a State Department of The American Legion (SC). In the years I have worked with VFC, not a week has gone by that we have not assisted a veteran, often times after they were already using another funeral home that was not meeting their needs. We like to think of ourselves as a "Make a Wish Funeral Home" for Veterans. As I answer this, my firm is handling two funeral services for Veterans. One is over 120 miles away from my rooftop and the other is 65 miles away. That is not typical for most funeral homes. VFC is not typical.

"Lower cost funerals are surely attractive, but veterans and their families are more concerned about getting the honors they are entitled to. We have become very good problem solvers and more than happy to take people by the hand and to guide them through all the logistics. One case is that of a

veteran who survived the Battle of The Bulge. One of his dying requests was to have a "real bugler" play taps at his interment. The local funeral home and Veterans Cemetery in his community, prior to his death, told his wife and daughter that real buglers weren't available and that taps would be played over a PA system. They called us in tears and with a few telephone calls; we were able to arrange for a bugler. At the time of his death, we handled the arrangements and the bugler was there. We are also able to use our network to assist families in multiple cities, knowing that we have a firm we can depend on to continue the care we started."

Asked if there had been any problems working with VFC, Visotski wrote: "The only challenges I have experienced are those who are skeptical about us and our commitment to veterans. I often hear that other funeral homes and companies promised to take extra good care of veterans and they failed miserably.

"I have heard some sad stories about how some veterans have not been buried with the honors they are entitled to or how some funeral directors refused to assist survivors with benefits information. That being said, whenever I work with Jim Rudolph or any VFC provider, I know that everything is going

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to exceed my expectations and more importantly, the expectations of our client families.

"My experience with the members of VFC is that we are concerned about the veteran more than we are concerned about getting the call. Often times, we are nothing more than a sympathetic ear, listening to a hurting and/or confused person who used or is using a different funeral home that is not supporting them," Visotski said. "Sometimes we are able to have a direct impact and to guide them through the grief dulled maze of burying a loved one. A few of the VFC providers have created military museums in their firms with memorabilia provided by visitors and families. Other veterans come in and see those items and enter into discussions. They bond with us as they see we are really concerned about them and that Veterans Funeral Care is not just an attractive logo.

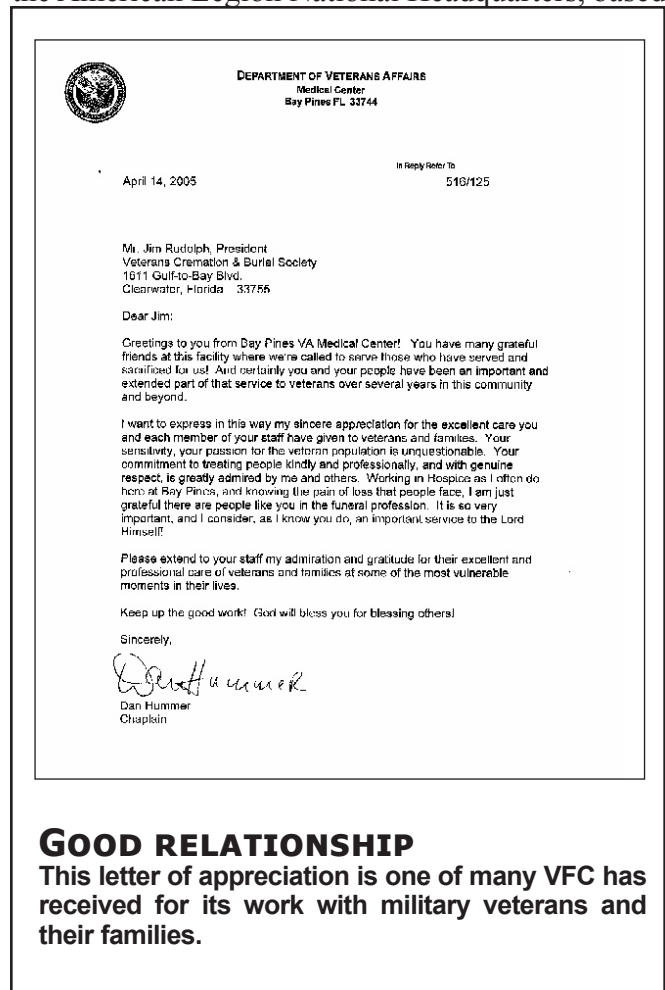
Without conscious planning, how does one start a successful veterans funeral networking operation? "I remember looking at the Aetna insurance plan for my business and seeing its provider network of doctors and it occurred to me that I could do the same thing," says Rudolph. "We could create a provider network of funeral directors around the country who want to help veterans. And that kind of morphed. We quickly grew and began to get the attention, not only of the Veterans Administration but of service organizations like the American Legion, like the VFW."

Rudolph said Veterans Funeral Care, originally known as the Veterans Cremation and Burial Society, began to develop a reputation as being "all about the veterans."

In his earlier career "I worked for Service Corporation (SCI) for nine years and when I left them I started a company called Cremation Consulting.com. I have built some of the finest cremation societies around the country for good funeral directors. What I started to do was put my buddies into this provider network. I started recruiting people like David Ring and I just believe in the birds of a feather rule that good guys want to hang out with good guys. We've been able to find other funeral direc-

tors who are all about veterans. We have developed this network and visibility to help veterans all over the country. A breakthrough came with development of a relationship with the American Legion Department of Indiana.

Ring says he started a casual relationship with the American Legion National Headquarters, based



in Indianapolis, in 2005, and then it became a more formal arrangement. "Then the Department of Indiana endorsed us exclusively in 2006. Then Department of South Carolina came on in '08, and there are now quite a few around the country looking to do the same."

Rudolph says: What stands out to me is that when the legion finally said hey, can you come up, we'd like to meet you and we went to see them. One of the things that they confessed is they had a fair amount of widows that would call up distraught that they were being mistreated by a cemetery or a

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funeral home. The offer that we made was: every time you had that happen, you call us, we will intervene and report in writing what we did to help the veteran's and why."

One of Rudolph's first experiences was a telephone call from Texas. He said it was the family of a Silver Star and Purple Heart winner from Dallas who had called the legion. "They didn't have enough money, they had \$5,000 and the funeral home wanted to charge them \$14,000. I called the funeral home and said 'couldn't you just give the guy a 20-gauge casket. The national cemetery's just four or five miles away.'

"The funeral home said, 'young man, we don't promote the national cemetery, we have our own cemetery.' So, we moved the body to a private funeral home, and made that report back to the Legion. When we did that, the Legion said it wanted to talk again, because we did what we said we could produce. That's when Maryann Bergamo, director of member benefits for the legion, got real interested in sitting us in front of the powers -- the board, and started talking about an endorsement. They're all about veterans and unapologetic about it. They provide endorsements, but scrutinize their partners very heavily.

There are some other funeral concerns that have approached the American Legion and they have been rejected.

Rudolph's goal is to continue growing VFC us-

ing quality funeral directors, especially those with veterans on staff. "For instance, in Richmond, Va., we're represented by Nelson Funeral Home. Blair Nelson is a 50-year-old former Air Force pilot. His father was a full bird-colonel. At Nelson Funeral Home the issue of a properly conducted military funeral is a huge deal and woe to anyone who does a bad job. Blair Nelson is a veteran first and a funeral director second. This is what we are trying to affiliate ourselves with.

The Boston suburb of Quincy is another affiliate location Rudolph cites: "At Hamel Wickens & Troupe Funeral Home, Roger Hamel is a former Marine. His son Scott, if I recall correctly, drove tanks for the army in the first Gulf War. To those guys, if an old veteran walks in, they'll throw somebody out of a seat and give him a cup of coffee. To us they're a big deal. We're not looking just for someone who wants to write a check so they can market to veterans.

Ring sums up VFC's goals saying: "We're all business men," but he stresses that being sincere, "on the up-and-up and providing legitimate services" while properly caring for veterans regardless of financial condition, is "helping us build our businesses."

"We're getting personal gratification out of doing so because we're taking care of guys who made it possible for us to be here in business."

READER VIEWPOINT

WE WELCOME YOUR COMMENTS ON OUR STORIES AND VIEWPOINTS. PLEASE E-MAIL THEM TO FUNERALMONITOR@YAHOO.COM OR FAX TO 908-859-8574

Neither "new" nor "weird"

Hi Larry,

Thanks for the continuing coverage of the Bibb County green burial ban. It was amusing (and depressing) to see Mr. Bryant shovel the same horse manure toward you that he's given the mainstream

press.

I'm copying Bob Fells on this, as a courtesy, since I want to respond to a few of his comments. First, Bob, thanks for the kind words about FCA's efforts. You're absolutely right that junk science and ideology hold sway in this issue.

You said, Bob: ". . . it is ironic to see [FCA], a well-known industry critic, going to bat for tradi-