

An article appearing in the Anderson Herald-Bulletin, November 2001:

Michael W. Owens knew at age eight that he wanted to be a funeral director. He had witnessed firsthand the respect and reverence his family felt toward their local mortician who handled a family funeral. "I didn't know exactly what it was all about, but I knew I wanted to be a part of it. He could do no wrong in my grandparent's eyes. They spoke of him in hushed, reverent tones." Owens said.

Now after a saga of ownership that has been ongoing since August 1994 and had more twists and turns than a soap opera. Owens is finally once again the owner and funeral director of Owens/Noffze Funeral Homes in Summitville and Alexandria.

At his side for 28 years is his wife, Connie, who initially said she wanted "absolutely no part of the funeral business."

According to Mike, she was so opposed to his line of work that she tried to avoid meeting him in 1972 when a mutual friend tried to introduce them.

However, seven months later they were engaged, married shortly after, and in 1978 Connie left what she called her "greatest passion in life," nursing, to become a funeral director's wife. She brought with her experience as a registered nurse and a strong desire to serve others. "I saw ministry in serving the broken hearted people here. No one was doing that at the time."

Connie went to the University of Louisville and took classes at their American Grief Academy, being dually certified as one of only 125 death educators and grief counselors in the U.S. in 1989. "I knew there was more I could do for these hurting, heartbroken families." Connie said. "Now this is how I serve the Lord."

Finding his great passion earlier in life, Mike had grown up working at the local funeral home in downtown Alexandria. First he mowed lawns and washed the cars. Then as a teenager he was hired to “stand at the front door.”

Initially Mike admits he was attracted by the excitement of the ambulance runs, then provided by the local funeral homes. “We had \$15 ambulance runs, and for \$22 we would transport you to Indianapolis. We used to have to stand by to assist at basketball and football games. We even loaned out crutches, wheelchairs, card tables and chairs, all free of charge.” Mike said.

Then Vietnam became a reality. “We buried four or five local kids who were killed in Vietnam. I knew them all. That was really hard. But I saw the heartbreak and then the healing that went on behind these doors.” Both Owens’ wanted to be part of that healing process.

They brought Kyle Funeral Home in July, 1978. But being full-time owners of an established mortuary business was an all-consuming job.

They moved into the apartment above the mortuary. That meant no pets or noisy toys for their two children, Chris and Jennie. It also meant their menus had to be based on the times of services downstairs. No one wanted to smell strong cooking odors when they came to services. There was no privacy and they were on call 24 hours a day with no time off for vacations.

Connie remembers, “We bought a funeral home, I had a baby, and we did five funerals in one week. But owning this funeral home was Mike’s dream.”

Over the years Owens knew they had made the right decision. “The trust, the loyalty, and closeness we feel here in Alexandria is overwhelming. It is such an honor to know these

people bring us their loved ones. They trust us to be with them during some of the most difficult moments of their lives. We know their heritage, their lineage, and that is priceless. Sometimes we will finish a service and later find jars of homemade jelly or a full meal at our back door. You don't see this in larger cities-the closeness, freedom and ability to serve our families.”

Still there were other considerations for the growing family. Connie was working alongside Mike without drawing a salary. Working a second job in nursing, her nursing paycheck was going directly to make payments on the funeral home. There was no extra money for college educations for their children or for their retirement.

So in August 1994 when a Canadian organization offered to purchase the funeral home and provide Connie and Mike with a salary for running the business, it seemed like a “logical solution.”

“It was wonderful for the first few years,” Mike said. “They were family and service oriented. We had retirement, health insurance, money for the kids' education and we could still continue to serve our friends in Alexandria as we always had.”

But by July 1999, the Canadian company was in Chapter 11 bankruptcy and the Owens were facing major decisions. Neither wanted to leave Alexandria, but tempting job offers were coming in from Indianapolis and other areas.

Connie was becoming well-known for her counseling skills. She had penned a book and was in demand as a speaker. She wrote newspaper columns and began private counseling. One job offer would provide a new grief resource room and counseling center for Connie and regular hours and good benefits for Mike.

Still, they felt compelled to stay in Alexandria. “We chose to stay.” Connie said.

“Alexandria was home.”

Mike added, “We knew who had lost a child or husband. We had formed a Desert storm support group; we held the hands of a mother who found her son’s name on the Vietnam wall. That heritage was invaluable.”

Connie added, “What we do is take care of people and let them know they are not helpless when death strikes. We give them tools to cope. The funeral is the vehicle that starts the healing. Of course, some choose not to recover, but I still hand out hugs and kisses.”

Also important were the promises made by the Owens to continue the business and heritage for those concerned about pre-arranged services, about 60 percent of their business. “These were our people in our community and they had been so good to us.”

Mike said.

So the Owens began the nerve-wracking process of attempting to buy back the business they had already built and sold. They knew they were older and basically starting over from scratch. Negotiations were complicated, involving international law firms, bankruptcy courts and auctions and more twists and turns than imagined.

“Since July 1999 it has been a roller coaster,” Mike said, “and I don’t like roller coasters.”

Finally off the roller coaster, the purchase is now complete and the Owens are relieved they can go back to running the business that they once again solely own. “It is an emotional as well as financial investment for us. Alexandria Memorial Services is Owens Funeral Home and Noffze Funeral Home on Harrison Street in Alexandria and the Noffze

Summitville Chapel in Summitville. They are all 100 percent owned by Connie and Mike Owens,” Mike said.

With four full-time and 10 part-time employees, they will have to help. Says Mike, “The staff is our strength. They are our friends, our neighbors, the little league coaches, the lodge brother. We are committed to this community and won’t compromise the level of service or violate the trust relationship we have with Alexandria. We are passionate about what we do. This is where we should be and what we are called to do.”