



By Laurie D. Willis

Special to *The Fayetteville Press*

Losing a loved one is never easy, and planning funeral arrangements can add to the stress families experience during times of bereavement.

At Unity Funeral Services, officials do what's necessary to ensure families are treated with dignity, handled with sensitivity and offered nice, yet affordable packages.

Sure it's the right, Christian thing to do. But President and Owner J. Vernon Peterson also recognizes families have choices when it comes to funeral homes.

He wants people to feel comfortable entrusting their loved ones to Unity Funeral Services. The Corporate Office is located at 594 S. Reilly Road in the Glenreilly Village Shopping Center. Arrangements are made there and at the business' chapel, Unity Chapel at Cliffdale, located at 1037 71st School Road.

Sadly, Peterson lost a sister in January 2009. He said the "extremely poor service" his family received from the funeral home to which they'd entrusted her body prompted him "to move more expeditiously in opening the doors at Unity Funeral Services."

To that end, Unity Funeral Services offers an inviting atmosphere to families and usually has prayer at the outset before any arrangements are made.

"Anytime we prepare to serve a family we go into prayer asking The Lord to give us strength to do what we need to do," Peterson said in a recent telephone interview. "As long as the family is amenable to it, we have a word or prayer with them before we even get into the business of what they've come for. We do recognize that people are of different faiths so you have to gauge that, but for our own strength we ask The Lord to help us do what we need to do."

Unity Funeral Services was officially incorporated in 2006 and began operating full-scale just over a year ago in July 2009. But Peterson is quick to point out that he and several other employees at Unity Funeral Services are hardly new to the funeral home business.

"Oftentimes people think that if you're a new funeral home you're just getting started, just getting your feet wet," Peterson said. "I worked as funeral director and assistant manager at Lea Funeral Home on Poole Road in Raleigh before starting this business. I've also been on the staff of Carlton L. Gray Funeral & Cremation Services in Raleigh."

Likewise, James E. Smith, chief mortician at Unity Funeral Services, was formerly chief mortician at Lea Funeral Home. And Smith has worked at funeral homes in Georgia where he is also licensed. Also working closely with Peterson and Smith are Daron R. Holland, coordinator of military and veterans' affairs, and Shelton L. Melvin,



President and Owner J. Vernon Peterson

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facility manager and Peterson's brother.

In fact, among licensed staff at Unity Funeral Services, there is a combined 40 years of funeral home experience.

And suffice it to say, Peterson has been "around" the funeral home business since his childhood days. That's because his cousin, Louise, and her husband, Stephen Rodgers, owned a funeral home when Peterson was a kid.

"I can't even remember the first funeral I attended or the first deceased person I saw," Peterson recalled. "You have to understand we spent a lot of time at that funeral home. It didn't bother me to be around funeral homes."

The motto at Unity Funeral Services is "When Caring and Cost Matter."

It's catchy to say the least, but what's more important is at Unity Funeral Services officials don't just talk the talk. In other words, the business strives to provide a quality service without breaking people's banks.

It appears customers have been pleased.

"I would like to thank you for all your help and support and services," Yvonne Bynoe expressed in a card to the funeral home after losing her son, Derrick Monroe Lowe. "We will continue to share and spread the good news about your company."

Another note read: "The family of Lisa Keen would like to thank the entire staff of Unity Funeral Services for the kindness and compassion that was shown to us during our loss. As tragic as this has been, you each made it a little more bearable in your own special way. And most of all the grace that was used in the handling of someone that was very special to each of us was more than we could have ever asked for. Once again, thank you so very much."

Peterson and his staff take great pride in their work and are appreciative when customers send notes expressing gratitude.

Even though Peterson, a Fayetteville native and 1969 E.E. Smith graduate, earned a bachelor's degree in human services from Lincoln University in Lincoln University, Pa., and an MBA from the University of Maryland University College, he has held firm to his North Carolina

ties. Likewise, even though Peterson retired from working in human resources for Hewlett Packard, a Fortune 100 company, he also knew he would eventually enter the funeral home profession.

As was aforementioned he worked at two funeral homes in Raleigh before opening Unity Funeral Services.

It seems owning a business was always in the cards for Peterson.

"I knew that I was going to go into business in some way because my father had his own business," Peterson said. "When I grew up we had a grocery store in Fayetteville on the corner of Robeson and Whitfield. There's a car wash there now. We had a little community grocery store called Annie Mae's. I had to work there as a child, running the cash register, cleaning up, stocking groceries. Also, my father was a plasterer and I used to help him on his truck."

Over the years Peterson has become a savvy businessman. And he realizes in today's economic climate he has to offer a quality service at reasonable rates.

Nowadays, the average cost of a funeral is more than \$8,000. At Unity Funeral Services, officials offer a complete service ranging from \$2,895 to \$4,395.

For families that can't afford a funeral, Unity Funeral Service offers cremation for \$765. Cremation with a memorial service at the chapel costs \$1,160.

"When a loved one passes the emotional burden can be quite unsettling," Peterson said. "During tough economic times it can be even more challenging. At Unity Funeral Services we will work with you to design a tribute tailored to meet your specific need and budget."

Especially important, Peterson said he hopes people realize Unity Funeral Services is "here for all families" and doesn't cater solely to the black community.

Thanks to technology, the funeral home offers families the ability to make arrangements in the comfort of their own homes, though Peterson said most people still prefer to stop by the Glenreilly Village Shopping Center or the chapel for that. *Unity Funeral Services also offers families the chance to have their repasts catered for a fee through Margie's Catering Service, a business owned by Peterson's brother and sister-in-law.*

"That's a benefit families don't always get from a church," Peterson said.

Additionally, Unity Funeral Services' staff consists of ministers, transportation specialists who have the capability to provide domestic and international shipping of human remains, musicians, a professional event planner and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. "The ministers and psychologist will be central to our after-care referrals," Peterson said.

Eventually he plans to offer a way for people to write condolences via the business' Web site, and further down the road Peterson hopes to offer Web cast services.

Check out Unity Funeral Services at www.unityfuneralservices.com. * Call the funeral home at (910) 860-3900 for more information.

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