

# Community

By Patti Martin Bartsche



Thielen Funeral Home in Burlington, Iowa, hosts an annual Memorial Day weekend Remembrance Butterfly Release program.

*(Photo courtesy of Thielen Funeral Home)*

## Reaching Out to the Community

**Funeral service professionals understand the importance of reaching out to their communities and creating memorable relationships. Establishing that connection is as simple as identifying a need and finding a solution... whether it's setting up a Santa's senior workshop, offering a pet loss workshop, hosting a Valentine's Day luncheon or rewarding academic success.**

As the grandson of a funeral director, Adam Thielen understood early on about the importance of being part of the community. So when he took over operations of Thielen Funeral Home in Burlington, Iowa, in 2004, he knew that he wanted to make a difference.

He started in 2003 with a holiday remembrance service, and all families who had a loved one die between Nov. 15 of the previous year to that November were given a hand-blown glass ornament from Frazer Consultants. "We gave away 200 and prob-

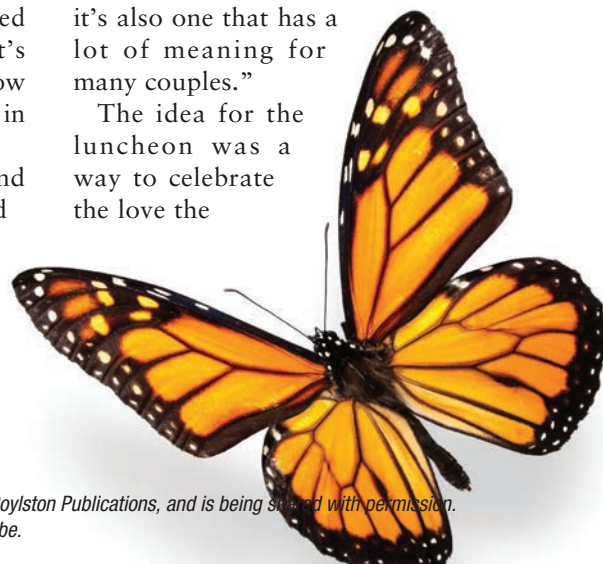
ably sold another 400," Thielen said. "It's something that has resonated within the community ... and it's just one way to let our families know we care about them, that they are in our thoughts."

In 2010, soon after Thielen and his wife, Theresa, broke ground on a state-of-the-art funeral home, they came up with another way to connect with the community – host a widow's Valentine's Day luncheon.

"Valentine's Day is one of those Hallmark holidays,"

Thielen laughed, "but it's also one that has a lot of meaning for many couples."

The idea for the luncheon was a way to celebrate the love the



widows had for their spouses. "From the start, we opened it to the entire community," Thielen said. "You didn't need to be served by us to attend."

Seventy-one widows attended that first luncheon. There was entertainment, food, and, of course, flowers and candy. "The funeral home staff dressed up in black pants, white shirts, pink aprons and pink ties," Thielen said. "We just wanted to have fun."

The event has become a must-attend event for widows in the community, and even a February snowstorm couldn't deter guests from this year's event. "We had about 100 women signed up ... and then we had the big snow," Thielen said. "Even so, more than half the guests were able to make it to celebrate Valentine's Day with us."

The event has grown year after year, primarily through word of mouth. "Now when we start getting phone calls, we are getting three other names beside the caller's," Thielen said. "Friends are telling other friends, they're talking about it at their club meetings ... it's been a real hit."

It's a labor of love for Thielen, his family and staff. "We get so much more than we give," Thielen said. "To see the women laughing, smiling and enjoying themselves is why we do it. It's just our way of giving back."

While the Valentine's Luncheon is for widows, the Memorial Day weekend Remembrance Butterfly Release is for everyone. The idea was borne out of a trip to Disney World the Thielens took with their young daughters. "Disney World has the greatest ideas," Thielen said. "They have this flowering garden with butterflies and I have little girls ... and it was, 'We have to do this at the funeral home.'"

The event, Thielen said, is open to everyone, regardless of how long ago a person experienced loss or what funeral care provider was chosen. "We release our spirits, through beautiful butterflies, following a short remembrance



Attendees to the Widows' Valentine's Day Luncheon at Thielen Funeral Home are given sweets and treats during the event. (Photo courtesy of Thielen Funeral Home)

service in our chapel," Thielen said. "It's a truly beautiful celebration of life."

The event is publicized in a number of ways, and guests are asked to RSVP to make sure there are enough butterflies. The event attracts upward of 250 people. "I think people like what the butterflies represent," Thielen pointed out.

Attendees are encouraged to wear bright, butterfly-friendly colors, and, following the release, refreshments are served. "There are butterflies all around; they're so friendly they'll stay on your hand," Thielen said.

To be a part of the community they serve, to be able to give back is something the firm takes seriously. "It is because of our families that we are successful," Thielen said, "and we will continue to do what we do because we are committed to our families."

### **Ride, Ride, Ride**

Robert Davis is keenly aware of the ideals on which Thatcher's Funeral Home in Kansas City, Kan., was founded.

It was in 1912 that Nathan W. Thatcher Sr. established Thatcher's to serve the black community with a

first-class mortuary. During the past 100-plus years, the firm has been passed down from family member to family member, and is now being run by Thatcher Sr.'s great-grandson, Robert Davis.

"Times may have changed, but we continue to provide first-class mortuary service," Davis explained. "Our presence in the community remains as strong today as it did 100 years ago."

Over the years, though, the neighborhood has changed. "We're now located in an urban core," Davis said. "It's a socio-economically depressed area ... there isn't a lot."

Thatcher's has always been actively involved in the community, but it was a chance observation by Davis that brought the firm's outreach efforts to a more personal level. "My family lives in a suburban area, and I drop off my kids at school every morning," Davis said, "and one of the things I noticed at my children's school is all the corporate partnerships they have. It got me thinking ... I wanted to do something more tangible because kids are so special with me."

So Davis approached the elementary school near the funeral home. "I walked into the school and asked to





**Above:** Students at Grant Elementary School in Kansas City, Kan., are rewarded for their hard work with certificates and bicycles from Thatcher's Funeral Home. **Below:** Ray Davis, general manager of Thatcher's Funeral Home, poses with a young winner during the 2013 Grant Elementary School Bike Giveaway. (Photo credit: Stacey Artis)



see the principal (Janice McConnell Miller)," Davis recalled. "I wanted to know what the process was to become a corporate sponsor."

Miller was receptive to the idea of corporate sponsorship but shocked Davis when she said that Thatcher's would be Grant Elementary School's first (and only) sponsor. "I was surprised because in my area there was many business partnerships, yet in an area where there was a demonstrated need, there was nothing."

Initially, the principal suggested that there was a great need for volunteers to come into the school. It was an idea that was quickly embraced by Davis and the staff of Thatcher's who volunteer on a regular basis at the school, which houses kindergarteners through fifth graders.

"We've developed a good relationship, but a couple of years ago I talked to Principal Miller and told her, 'I think we can do a little more.'"

When Davis asked Miller about where some help could be given, the principal explained about the end-of-the-year program that recognized



student achievement. "They gave a gift certificate to a child in each grade level that showed the greatest achievement in reading."

Instead of a gift certificate, Davis said, what if Thatcher's gave that most improved student a bicycle instead? "Principal Miller nearly started crying," Davis said. "That someone would do something for her kids ... she couldn't believe it."

This June will mark the fourth year Thatcher's will be awarding bicycles. "The first year, the bicycles were on the stage and the kids didn't know what was going on," Davis said. "And when the principal told the kids what was going on, you should have seen their faces. It was an amazing thing ... and now I'm known as the bike man."

The program has evolved with the times, with Thatcher's now including helmets with the bicycles and, beginning in 2014, awarding bicycles to the students who make the biggest gain in mathematics.

"Last year they started recognizing the math students," Davis said. "But the principal didn't tell me that in advance, so on the day of the event the reading kids got bikes and the math kids got gift certificates. She felt we were doing more than enough, and didn't want to ask me. This year, all the most improved students will be getting bicycles."

Davis could not be more pleased by the program. "We're sending a message that there are rewards for hard work," he said. "If we can provide a little incentive for students to work harder, then that's what we're going to do."

Davis said Thatcher's is committed to the annual bike giveaway, but there is another project that he wants to get off the ground – but it's going to take a lot of help. "The school doesn't have a playground, a place for the kids to play," Davis said "I want to help them get that playground."

It's not something he can fund on his own, Davis said, so he's looking at ways to help the dream become a reality. "There's not a lot of money around here, and there's no money in

the school budget ... so we have to find a way."

Davis is in the early fundraising planning stages for this next big project. "Some of these kids' stories would break your heart," he said. "We in funeral service know about the sadness in death, but there's also a lot of sadness in life. I want to take away a little of that sadness."

### Helping Children Say Goodbye

Since its founding, the physical and psychological well-being of children has been important to the owners of the Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home in Hammond, La.

After several members of the Thompson team's children lost beloved family pets, a conversation was started among the funeral home staff about the best way to help the youngsters deal with the passing of a beloved friend.

"For many children, the death of a pet is the first loss they experience," explained Martha McKneely Thompson, co-owner of the firm with her husband, Brandon. "It's a real pain. I lost my first dog when I was 7 or 8; and I can still recall that pain all these years later."

To help the youngsters through their grief, Thompson and the staff came up with a unique solution – the "Furever in Our Hearts" pet loss workshop. Designed for children ages four and up, the goal was simple: educate children about the physiological and psychological aspects of death in a casual, accepting and even fun environment.

The inaugural event on May 4, 2013, was held outdoors under bright blue skies at the funeral home. The funeral home was brightly decorated to resemble a birthday party. As the children arrived, they played with sidewalk chalk, hula-hoops and participated in the beanbag toss.

Lindsey Hornsby, the funeral home's grief counselor, shared the story of losing her pet and then read the children's book, "Saying Goodbye to Lulu." Youngsters were then invited to

share their stories of their pets' deaths. "It was a way for the children to talk about their feelings," Thompson said. "They were very heartfelt in what they were saying. And with other children sharing, they realized they were not alone."

A local art studio then assisted the children in creating one-of-a-kind keepsake photo frames.

"Each child left with a keepsake frame, a stuffed animal, animal crackers, and, most importantly, a better understanding of death," Thompson said. "The parents were appreciative of our concern for their children and felt much more confident in their abilities to help their children cope with their grief."

While there was a great response from the parents and children, Thompson said support also came from local veterinarians and pet grooming businesses as well. "They hung up the signs on their bulletin boards and told their patients and



Children did arts and crafts projects (above) and took pictures with Teddy Tenderheart, the Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home mascot (below) during the "Furever in Our Hearts" pet loss workshop.

(Photos courtesy of Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home)





customers about the event,” Thompson said. “That surprised me, and it also encouraged me ... now we’re considering offering pet loss support groups. There’s a need, and we want to be able to fill the void.”

While the firm sponsors a variety of events, Thompson said she, her husband and the funeral home staff really like to be hands on. “I think it’s even more important than just writing a check,” she said. “Our community has reached out and trusted us, and it’s our way of giving back.”

To Thompson, it’s quite simple: “There’s no doubt we’ve made our community a better place to die; we want to make it a better place to live, too.”

It was that philosophy that led Thompson to launch the Santa’s Senior Workshop in 2011.

“My dear, sweet grandmother, who is (now) 85 years old, was stressing out about the holidays,”



Martha McKneely Thompson (third from left) gathers with some of her elves during the annual Santa's Senior Workshop. (Photo courtesy of Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home)

Thompson explained. “Although presents (from her) were not expected she wanted to do it. Being involved with the (local) council on aging, I knew many seniors didn’t have a big budget for shopping.”

Thompson came up with the idea of the Santa’s Senior Workshop as

a way for seniors to give gifts to people on their lists without the stress of going out and buying them.

The inaugural event was held Dec. 8, 2011, with the Thompsons, their children, the funeral home staff and local high school Key Club members transforming a local community center into a winter wonderland, complete with decorations, Christmas music, a gift wrap station and a gift shop.

“Each of the senior citizens is given pretend money to shop with,” Thompson explained. “The items are reasonably priced (\$1, \$3, \$5, \$10), so they can get something for everyone on their list. Just as importantly, they could have their gift wrapped there, either by themselves or one of the volunteers.”

Santa’s Senior Workshop has become one of the most looked-forward-to events of the year, not only by the seniors but also the Thompsons, the funeral home staff and community volunteers. Donations and sponsorships, along with Thompson’s ability to find great bargains, make sure there are a variety of gifts each shopping season.

“Seeing the joy on the senior citizens’ faces is a great reminder of what the Christmas season is all about,” Thompson said. “It’s true that it is better to give than receive, but we’ve also realized that helping others give is even better.” •



Children decorated photo frames as part of the “Forever in Our Hearts” activities. (Photo courtesy of Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home)