

# Ask The Expert

[Industry leader]

## Q&A with Jay Dodds

### ■ Summary

While he has been at the helm of some of the leading companies in funeral service, Jay Dodds is also the person who grew up in a funeral home and has done – and can still do – almost every job in a funeral home and cemetery. He’s held some of the top management positions at Stewart Enterprises and Carriage Services, struck out on his own (with J. Bradley Green) to form The Signature Group, and later sold his company to Park Lawn Corp., becoming that company’s chief operating officer. Dodds shows no signs of slowing down. In fact, he’s taking on a new role ... 2019-20 president of the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association. We recently had a chance to chat with Dodds about his career path, the challenges facing death care and his advice to the next generation of funeral professionals and cemeterians. *Patti Martin Bartsche reports*

### How did you find your way into death care?

Like many others before me, I was born into this profession. I started very young in my father’s rural funeral home in Nebraska making first calls and washing cars. I later advanced to mowing the city cemetery in addition to my funeral home duties. I am one of those “lifers,” so I have been participating in this business for many years. I went to college seeking a marketing degree but managed to end up back in the profession and became licensed in 1984. Most of my formative years were spent in a large combination operation, so my experience has involved all areas of funeral service, preneed, cremation and cemetery work.

### Where does your passion for death care come from?

My passion is rooted in the compelling need to help people at one of the most vulnerable times of their life. I have spent my career focused on this issue. Grief, and more specifically, unresolved grief is a big issue in our country today. The entire body of funeral service helps people deal



Jay Dodds

with this critically important issue. Funeral directors and cemeterians must understand how important their work is to those that grieve.

**You previously held top management positions at Stewart Enterprises and Carriage Services before striking out on your own in 2012 with The Signature Group.**

### What was it like going from publicly traded companies to a private funeral and cemetery organization?

When you personally guarantee that you will be successful by putting your entire world on the dotted line, you pay attention. It also gave me the opportunity to do the things that I felt were right and build the company according to my values and the things I felt were important. We didn’t try to be anything more than what we were, and we focused on being the best we could be.

### In April 2018, you and J. Bradley Green sold your company to Park Lawn Corp. What has the past year been like?

It has been a great year. Brad and I could not have scripted a better transition or “fit” with an organization. We do not feel as if we sold our company but rather joined together with other great people to create a super company called Park Lawn.

### What do you hope to accomplish during your tenure as ICCFA president?



My plans are really focused on three things that I would like to accomplish. First, I think it is important to grow membership and continue to help the ICCFA be the most inclusive association in the profession, representing all aspects of funeral, cemetery and cremation services. Second, I would like to increase the benefits that are part of being a member of the ICCFA. Specifically, the educational and personal development growth opportunities, benefits that help you run your business as well as enhancing opportunities to connect and network with other like-minded professionals. Third, I want to focus on the permanent placement of cremated remains. I believe that this is a huge issue around our profession, and I want to help cemeteries get the word out to the public regarding all their options for placement. I had a friend say, "cremated remains are not convenient." We need to make permanent placement with memorialization a norm and not an exception.

**What does the ICCFA provide its members that they don't get anywhere else?**

At ICCFA, we are very proud that we have such a broad member base representing all facets of funeral, cemetery and cremation services. We are the "one-stop shop" where you can receive quality educational opportunities, business resources, meetings and conferences that reflects the diversity of our profession. Our ICCFA programming is second to none, the sales and marketing conference, our annual convention, the unparalleled ICCFA University and our Fall Management Conference. We have an incredible staff that is well equipped to assist our members in their service to their families. One of the most valuable benefits is that we provide our members with networking opportunities that enable them to build relationships with people who are willing to share and are progressive. You end up making friends

with colleagues that you can go to with any questions about your business, and these friendships last a lifetime. At ICCFA, we are proud to be the choice for the progressive funeral, cemetery and crematory professional.

**What are the biggest challenges facing death care today?**

The biggest challenge facing funeral and cemetery service is to stay relevant despite the ever-changing social norms and rules in our society. While there are many great firms doing many progressive things, there are still many that do not recognize the ever-evolving customer. As a profession, we need to be able to provide services that are meaningful to people, no matter whether their loved one was buried or cremated. Services need to be more than the form of disposition selected. Many in the profession say that a lack of talent is a major challenge. I believe that there is talent in the profession, but we just need to do a better job of developing it. All businesses have talent and skill needs, it is just a matter of perspective on whether the talent is out there or not.

**What does the future of the death-care industry look like to death-care professionals?**

The future looks great for those that are willing to do what it takes to stay relevant. I always say, "you create your own world," so we must focus on things we control and not worry about things outside of our control. We as human beings must grieve. This grief can come in a lot of different forms, but we are human, so we do not have a choice, we must grieve. The funeral and cemetery profession help people walk through the grief process – we are critical to helping others take that walk. As long as our customers are human, we have a product that is needed!

**What is the greatest opportunity in death care, from your perspective?**

Technology offers the single greatest opportunity for enhancing the service we bring to our client families. Often people think that technology would depersonalize the process, but that just isn't true. If used properly, technology puts tools in the



hands of passionate, caring, service-oriented people that will allow them to truly take our profession to the next level. Webcasting, social venues for sharing, video and tools to help us simplify the emotional processes that each family endures are but a few advancements we have seen over just the last several years.

**Individuals are becoming more involved consumers in planning funerals. What opportunities do you see in response to the growing attention to consumerism in funeral service?**

I love that aspect of our business. Every loved one we serve is a blank canvas that we can portray as a special life with a unique celebration. So, with that said, everyone that calls upon us to serve should be treated as individuals, and every service should be different. The opportunities for us to do unique things are boundless.

**We've reached the tipping point where cremation is more than 50 percent nationally. Where does funeral service go from here?**

We as a profession need to focus on the service and memorialization aspect in both the funeral home and cemetery. Focusing on the life lived, rather than only on the deceased's remains, is an important piece to understand. Yet, I am a big advocate on viewing and visitations as it allows the family to bridge from a relationship with the person alive and a new relationship with the person deceased. We need to focus on the service aspect and value we create in providing permanent placement and memorialization. The kind of disposition of the person is inconsequential to our true value.

**What challenges does the increasing cremation rate pose to cemeteries – and are they doing any better navigating this change than funeral homes?**

There are many cemeteries doing a great job of addressing the rise in cremation and many that are not, so I would say it is probably about the

same between cemeteries and funeral homes. I am seeing many cremation urn gardens being designed and placed in many progressive cemeteries. I am also seeing a number of these gardens selling out quickly. As mentioned above, families that do not permanently place their loved ones are just putting off an inevitable situation. I think there are huge opportunities in the cemetery business when it comes to cremation and the options they can sell, especially through preneed. Cemeteries can sell preplanning in advance and create the demand for urn gardens and cremation options. We must have the professional courage to have the difficult conversations with our families and help them understand the long-term consequences of not placing their loved one permanently in an appropriate place.

**What is the message death-care professionals should be delivering to families?**

Funeral and cemetery professionals should be delivering the message that what we do really matters. Study after study reflects that the ceremony and permanent placement are critical components in a family's mental health following a death. Programs like "Youth and Funerals" have specific research attached to the messaging that shows the impact of correctly communicating to youth about death and allowing them to participate in all the rituals. I think we just scratch the surface with our communities regarding the true value of funeral and cemetery services.

**What will be the biggest challenge for the next generation of funeral professionals and cemeterians?**

The next generation of funeral and cemetery professionals will need to remain focused on the value that we deliver. It is too easy to get carried away with the next fad or the next big thing. We are in the people business and people need to grieve. A big challenge for the next generation will also be preneed and the work it takes to be

successful. Often it is not fun work or happy work, but rather tough grind it out, put in the time work. That is not always appealing to everyone, so they must be focused on the goal and not the work it takes to achieve it.

**What do you wish you knew at the start of your career that took you years to understand?**

The power of the funeral directors/preneed counselors' recommendations. Many times, we offer to comply with the family's wishes when we know that it may not be the best thing for their grief walk. I have learned that the best funeral directors and preneed counselors walk their families into decisions that are best for the family because these professionals are experienced in helping people begin to heal. This is reflected by the strong family surveys and family feedback on these top professionals.

**What do you believe are your greatest strengths?**

I would say my greatest strength is that I don't think I have an overriding strength. That concept makes me have to work hard every day. Being able to do many things at the same time and able to complete projects timely is something that I work on every day and feel I have been successful.

**Who in funeral service do you admire? Why?**

There are so many great people in this profession, it is too hard to narrow the list. I most admire the everyday funeral director that still takes calls, that arranges with families each day, that embalms, that wakes up in the middle of the night and acts like they were awake the whole time, that stands at the graveside in freezing cold or boiling heat. I admire the preneed cemetery counselor that spends their days and nights trying to sell cemetery property, knocking on doors, asking everyone they meet if they own property, constantly being told no, but after all this they persist because owning cemetery property ahead of time is the right and proper thing to do! •