

Testimonials

After unexpectedly finding my mother peacefully passed away in her favorite comfortable chair, covered in her warm quilt late one evening, we called Brian seeking direction. He immediately responded with who to contact and what to expect. The following day, Brian guided us through the planning process focusing on a “simple and elegant” celebration of mom’s life with cost efficiencies in mind. He escorted us to the funeral home where he handled the tedious issues and necessary paperwork for the arrangements, allowing us to focus on our family during this difficult time. In short, Brian was an angel of mercy.

Mark & Holly G.

Brian is one of the most “connected” people I know – especially in the Catholic community – and one reason for this is his “off-the-chart” interpersonal skills. If you think Brian’s services would help a client, friend or family member, don’t hesitate to give him a call. I can guarantee that if you or your clients meet or work with Brian, you will like him instantly. What Brian does is unique and is a service many folks could definitely use at one of the toughest times in their lives.

Jim Cramer, Partner, Payne & Jones Law Firm

There are no words to express the comfort you brought to us as a family at a time we were the most vulnerable. Thank you for taking us by the hand and showing us the way. You were guardian angels sent to guide us and make the final journey for Jesse both amazing and bearable. We are forever grateful. God Bless you in your ministry.

Bea G. & family

Brian, words fail me. From the outrageous serendipity of how I came to know of you just in time, to the good humor and compassion and, yes, economy in how you did what was asked of you – you’ve got a friend here, pal, if you ever need one.

Mark R.

I have used the services of Funeral Advocates for my patients as well as a family member. Each family I referred to them has come back to me thanking me profusely. They are compassionate, caring and handle situations when families are the most vulnerable. I wish someone had come up with this concept when I first started working with hospice 13 years ago. Their services save families so much time, money and stress. I think they are amazing and invaluable!

Mary Schowengerdt, RN Continua Hospice

I thank you for all of the help and “hand holding” that you gave to us during the past few weeks when our heads were not “screwed on straight” due to grief. We felt safe with you and reassured. Simply having your presence at the flower selection, the visitation, graveside service and memorial service was a steady form of reassurance when the rest of my world seemed to be crumbling apart. Thank you for being a friend at our time of need.

Rebecca S.

We want to thank you again for guiding us through this very difficult process of planning our son’s funeral. While we certainly wish there hadn’t been a “need” to meet you, we are so happy we did. You made a horrible time in our life easier to get through, and for that, we will always be grateful. Thanks again and God Bless.

Ralph & Linda H.

Not quite a week since mom’s service, I continue to be comforted and inspired by the care and compassion shown to our family by both of you. Brian, it seemed a long time in the making, but when the time came, you were such a reliable, confident, reassuring and calming support. You handled our family dynamics beautifully. Three daughters with three different ways of handling things, and yet it all worked.

Katy M.

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The Funeral Advocate

By Jill Ragar Esfeld

PRAIRIE VILLAGE — St. Ann parishioner Brian O’Laughlin thrives on what most of us dread: the unexpected phone call that throws a peaceful life into chaos.

Not long ago, he got that call from a longtime fellow parishioner and friend, John Masterson, who had moved to Indiana with his wife, Susan.

“Suzie got cancer and died out there,” said O’Laughlin. “John called me up and said, ‘Brian, what do I do?’”

O’Laughlin’s response was simple.

“What do you *want* to have happen?”

It’s a question he’s used over and over again in his newfound vocation as funeral advocate.

In this role, O’Laughlin’s primary goal is to protect his clients emotionally and financially, while helping them honor their loved ones in any way they choose.

Masterson, for example, now a parishioner of St. Simon the Apostle in Indianapolis, wanted to bury his wife back home in Kansas. O’Laughlin knew how to make that happen.

“He was a godsend,” said Masterson. “He was my one-point contact person. He did everything from handling the logistics of transporting the body, to helping me get pictures together for the wake.



Brian O’Laughlin has found a vocation as a funeral advocate. He helps people make informed decisions during their darkest hours.

“I was able to get it all done while he was out of town,” said O’Laughlin. “And then he flew into town and we finished up the details.”

“From a cost standpoint,” said Masterson. “He did a tremendous job for me.”

Born To Advocate

A native of Kansas City, O’Laughlin is a Registered representative by profession, and he has plenty of experience helping families navigate the financial side of life.

But he had never navigated the maze of decisions surrounding the death of a loved one until his

father died suddenly in 1999. With his four siblings living out of town, O’Laughlin had sole responsibility for helping their mother through the ordeal.

“I took Mom over to the funeral home and sat with the funeral guy,” O’Laughlin recalled. “I was kind of propping her up and trying to advocate for her.”

O’Laughlin listened and asked several questions, but came away feeling like he didn’t get straight answers.

“He’d give me an answer that was the truth, but wasn’t the whole truth,” he said. “And if he’d told me the whole truth, I would have made other choices — other choices that would have been less expensive.”

Later that year, O’Laughlin’s uncle died, and his cousin, who lived in Minnesota, called asking for help planning a funeral here.

With experience now on his side, O’Laughlin was eager to revisit the process, and make more cost-effective choices.

The cousin was so pleased with the outcome that he sent O’Laughlin a generous gift certificate. That gesture of gratitude started O’Laughlin thinking that maybe this was a service that had some marketable value to it.

Now with a clear picture in mind of how he wanted to advocate for people, O’Laughlin went to the Kauffman Foundation for Entrepreneurialism and took some courses to help him formalize

a business plan.

While there, a professor whose father-in-law had died asked O’Laughlin to help his wife purchase a grave marker.

“She was absolutely going to buy the wrong thing and pay three times what she should have been paying,” said O’Laughlin. “So I took her down to a manufacturer of markers.”

O’Laughlin brokered a good bargain, and the professor was so impressed he exclaimed, “Brian, this is genius!”

It wasn’t long before O’Laughlin was getting word-of-mouth referrals and a feeling that God was steering him along this path.

He also introduced himself the close-knit community that provides funeral and burial services.

“Brian came to us so that we’d understand what it was he was doing,” said Bob Chenoweth, executive director of Catholic Cemeteries in Kansas.

Chenoweth thought O’Laughlin had hit on an important, but unaddressed need.

“There are people who come to us to make their [burial] arrangements, and they’ll ask about funeral home arrangements,” he said. “And we’ll say we don’t do that. But it’s obvious that they are looking for some guidance.”

“I know Brian is looking out for the welfare of his clients,” said Charlie Passantino, owner of Passantino Brothers Funeral Home in Kansas City, Mo.

“I think with his knowledge and expertise, he can do a lot of the legwork that, to be quite honest, families don’t take the time to do,” he added.

“It was always weird how I’d get referred into situations,” he said. “They were all divinely inspired.”

Two years ago, he launched his Web site.

Take A Moment To Help Your Family

Funeral advocate, Brian O’Laughlin, doesn’t recommend everyone pre-purchase funeral services, but he does think everyone should pre-plan.

From his experience dealing with families after losing a loved one, O’Laughlin has put together a single-page form called Personal Wishes and Desires.

He described it as a “simple one-pager that, if Mom died yesterday, you’d want to wake her up and ask her these questions, to give you some direction.”

O’Laughlin suggests everyone fill out the form and make it easily accessible to family members.

If you’d like a copy, e-mail a request to: Brian@FuneralAdvocates.com or call Brian at (913) 341-3313.

It’s Not A Job; It’s An Adventure

O’Laughlin continues to work in the finance industry, but finds the two pursuits very compatible. On the one hand, clients of his financial planning business learn of his funeral services for future reference, and funeral clients often need help after the funeral with the financial affairs of their loved one.

As a funeral advocate, O’Laughlin charges only for his time.

His only job is to clarify what the client wants, and make it happen at the lowest cost.

“I don’t sell anything,” he said. “I coach people through the process. I have a pretty good planning mind, and so I recognize things other

people don’t recognize.”

His efforts always lead the client, as efficiently as possible, to the threshold of the funeral service.

“My philosophy is whatever happens inside the church is the responsibility of the church itself,” he said. “I don’t get involved in the service, I just help the family get to the service.”

O’Laughlin’s clients will be the first to tell you the road to that end isn’t always predictable.

Masterson learned that lesson the night he found himself helping O’Laughlin carry his wife’s handmade oak casket up from the basement of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Kansas City, Mo.

“There is a priest there named [Father] Paddy Power,” said O’Laughlin. “An old Irishman — and he makes caskets. When he sells you one, he gives the money to an orphanage run by the Redemptorists.”

“That kind of hit home,” said Masterson. “Because my wife was adopted and I thought she’d love that.”

To avoid the cost of having the casket delivered, O’Laughlin suggested he and Masterson pick it up themselves.

“John wrote a check for it,” said O’Laughlin. “We jammed it in the back of my car, and we took it over to the funeral home.

“As we carried it across the street, John said, ‘Suzie is laughing at us right this minute.’”

Another client’s deceased wife loved gardening. Her favorite flowers were Black-eyed Susans and Zinnias.

While helping with funeral arrangements, O’Laughlin decided to forgo the conventional florist and visit a garden center instead. Zinnias and black-eyed Susans just happened to be on sale that day.

“I told them to fill my truck with them,” said O’Laughlin.

Guests at Betsy’s service found a meadow of her favorite flowers

at the base of the altar. The pots were transported to a luncheon afterwards, where they decorated tables.

Each guest was invited to take a pot home and plant the flowers in memory of Betsy.

Surviving The Maze

When St. Ann parishioner Jeannine Herrera’s mother entered hospice care, she ordered information from a funeral home and tried to do some preplanning.

“It was like going through a maze” she said. “So I called Brian.”

Herrera’s mother passed away in a nursing home, and O’Laughlin was there immediately.

“We literally picked the casket out online at the nursing home,” said Herrera.

She continued to be amazed at how O’Laughlin streamlined the process of arranging the funeral.

“Brian understands the business of it,” she said. “He coaches you through the process in a way that makes you feel like you’ve got a friend, and there is no pressure to buy anything.”

Herrera and her sister had buried their father 10 years earlier. They were shocked at the cost difference that O’Laughlin’s involvement made.

“I think we spent, for our mother’s whole funeral, what we spent on my dad’s casket,” she said.

Christ the King, Kansas City, Mo., parishioner Michael Coughlin had a similar experience.

When his wife died a year ago, he arranged the funeral himself, refusing the funeral-home packages and trying to piecemeal the process. For all the work, he saved only a few hundred dollars.

Eight months later, he lost his mother. This time, he called O’Laughlin.

“I just felt like I was going to get nailed all the way through again,” he said. “And I didn’t want to do that twice if I could keep from it.”

Indeed, O’Laughlin managed to put together a package very similar to what Coughlin had for his wife, but at half the cost.

“And he was very compassionate,” said Coughlin. “He gave me his personal cell phone number. He encouraged me to call him directly any time anything came up.”

A Friend In Need

O’Laughlin’s compassion comes from his real desire to protect the well-being of his clients.

“Someone once asked how I can deal with all this grief,” he recalled. “And I said, ‘Sometimes I cry. It’s part of life. Emoting is a good thing. If I didn’t care, it wouldn’t bother me.’”

O’Laughlin’s success stems from his knowledge of the business, his financial savvy, and a natural gift for networking.

“Brian is just so personable,” said Masterson. “He’s one of these guys who knows everybody and everybody is a friend. He has so many contacts and connections.”

Most importantly, O’Laughlin takes advantage of his position as a neutral party, negotiating prices when his clients are emotionally incapable of doing so.

“It’s a guilty thing,” said Herrera “[The funeral homes] have got you in a position where you don’t want to slight your loved one.”

Coughlin agreed.

“Once you have your loved one in a funeral home, you’re not going to pick them up and say, ‘We’re out of here, you’re too expensive,’” he said.

But don’t put it past O’Laughlin to do just that.

“He negotiated the prices, he even negotiated the extras — the limousines and stuff like that,” said Coughlin. “Brian goes piece by piece and figures out what you need. He explains the options. He’s very motivated to save people money and protect them from

overcharges.”

“I’m there to make sure that the client is paying the right price and not what someone else wants to charge,” said O’Laughlin.

Divinely Inspired

When it comes to the funeral services community, O’Laughlin has been pleased with the acceptance he’s received.

“The funeral directors that I work with and the people at cemeteries have been very accommodating,” he said. “Because they, too, are in the business of helping people”

“I’ve known Brian for two or three years,” said Passantino. “He’s upfront, he’s honest, [and] his word is good.”

“I’ve met him on several occasions and thoroughly understand what he’s doing, and it’s good work,” said Chenoweth, who is especially appreciative of O’Laughlin’s advocacy of pre-need planning.

As he advocates for families facing one of their most difficult times, O’Laughlin is constantly amazed by what he calls “inspired moments” — like the sun bursting through a church window and shining brightly on loved ones, or a flock of geese flying in perfect formation over the graveside service of an Air Force veteran.

But most often, he just sees things working out perfectly for the people he represents. And he never believes it’s a coincidence.

“Things don’t just fall together because of happenstance or chance,” he said. “I think it is divinely inspired.

“And I think God takes care of those who take care of others,” he added. “So I’d just as well be the guy taking care of other people.”

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Jill Ragar Esfeld*