

## Frank Lewis

### Owner

Jackson, Lytle and Lewis Life Celebration Center, Springfield, Ohio

**F**rank Lewis says the key to success in funeral service is saying “Yes.”

The traditions and notions of what a funeral or memorial service “should be” don’t bind him – and he doesn’t want the families he serves to feel that way.

Heavy metal music played loud at a service: *Yes.*

Hanging a family tree on the wall during a viewing: *Yes.*

A memorial celebration without the body present: *Yes.*

“Whatever you want for your family, we can do that for you,” Lewis said. “We are looking for ways to say ‘yes’ to families and to help them engage in the environment they find themselves in, not in ways to say ‘no.’”

Lewis says he’s different than many tradition-bound funeral home operators – a difference he attributes to coming to funeral service from the world of business.

And while the 52-year-old owner of Jackson, Lytle and Lewis Life Celebration Center in Springfield, Ohio, has embraced funeral service’s

commitment to providing grieving families the support and personal experience they need, he still maintains a businessman’s drive to seek continuous improvement and innovation.

By marrying these two touchstones into a single business plan, Lewis has turned his 430-call per year business into a model of what a forward-looking funeral home can be.

“I believe our industry is at a critical point in time. (It) has not changed to adequately serve our customers,” Lewis said. “We have continued to deliver what we want and not what the consumer values.”

Lewis said he knows this because he spent many years serving as a funeral home mystery shopper while working for Service Corporation International.

### Finding his Calling

Lewis hadn’t intended on a career in funeral service. He majored in accounting, thinking he would have a career helping business owners reach their financial goals.

“I grew up in a small town and went into it thinking I was going to help somebody,” he said. But, employed in accounting and then banking, Lewis discovered that wasn’t how things worked. “I found we were a necessary evil for most people,” he said.

A friend knew of an opening at SCI. Unfamiliar with funeral service, Lewis went in to talk about the job. He spent the next decade in acquisitions for the company and then spent three years in operations, responsible for 150 locations in eight states.

Those were good times for Lewis, as he discovered in funeral service the kind of connection he’d been looking for as an accountant.

“I found out the people in it are really awesome. They are caring for people and helping people,” Lewis said.

After 13 years at SCI, Lewis left to purchase his own funeral homes. Jackson, Lytle and Lewis owns four funeral homes and has six full-time and about 25 part-time employees.

Most of the funeral homes are open on an as-needed basis. But the Jackson, Lytle and Lewis Life Celebration Center, which is the company’s main location, demonstrates Lewis’ commitment to continuous improvement and includes a banquet room, kids’ room, video screens, Wi-Fi and digital register book.

### Thinking in New Ways

The facility even includes a massage chair and an on-premises florist shop. Having the florist shop in the building is a result of Lewis’ desire to have a positive impact on his community.

About a year ago, a local florist called to say she was closing her business.

“Our staff loved her, our families loved her, but she was in a not-so-great location,” Lewis recalled. “I said ‘Come speak to me.’”

Lewis offered her a spot in his building in return for a discount on flowers. “It’s working great,” he said. “She gets to do what she loves doing every day, and we get the benefit of having a florist on site, which has its own advantages.”

Cremations make up about 28 percent of Lewis’ annual calls. He was long interested in owning his own cremation facility, but he was not doing enough cremations to make owning the facility financially worthwhile. He attempted to partner with other local funeral homes but had a tough time finding anyone interested.

He found his former association with SCI put off some funeral home operators while others said, “It makes sense, but that’s for the next generation.”

Lewis was disappointed, but he wasn't discouraged. He kept pushing the idea until a fellow funeral home owner agreed to partner with him.

"Relationships take time to build and mature," Lewis said. "You have to be persistent and flexible and creative. Everything you want to do is not going to happen. But if you quit, none of them will happen."

Lewis' desire to take a new approach to funeral service doesn't just extend to buildings and technology.

He's one of the rare funeral home operators who believes a casket shouldn't be at a life celebration. He doesn't like the way the casket anchors the family to the front of the room and makes visitors stand in line to pay their respects and speak to the family.

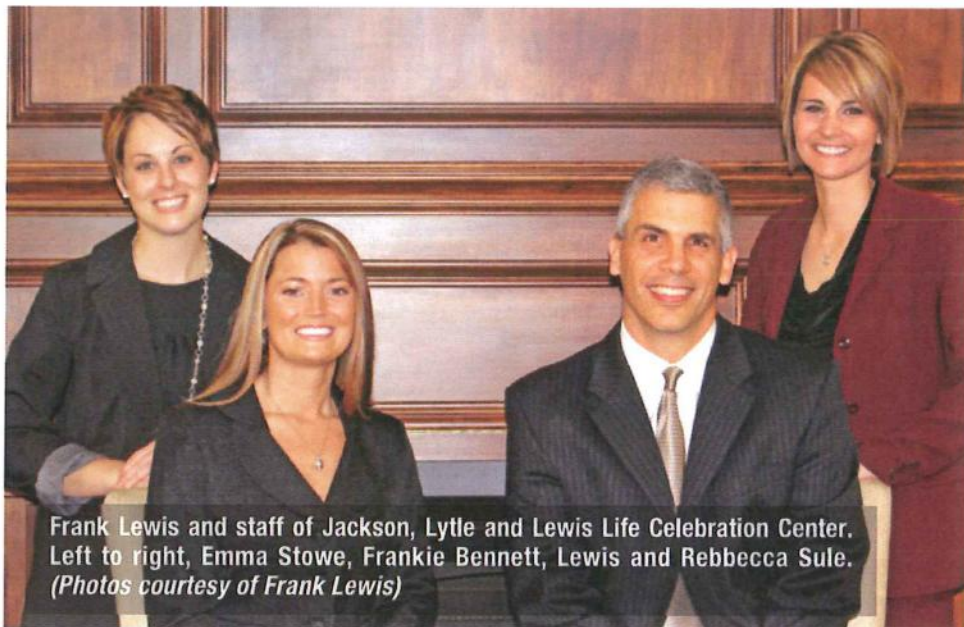
But while Lewis envisions his own life celebration involving "ice cream and a beverage of choice," he acknowledges not all see things as he does. That's fine, as long as the family isn't settling for something they think is the only option. In those cases, the funeral home operator is not doing his or her job, he said.

"Ninety-nine out of 100 times the family doesn't know what they can do and what they want," he said. "People want help. They want someone to guide them and give them options and give them ideas."

This desire to give families what they want doesn't end after the arrangement conference.

Lewis tells the story of a family who was holding a service for a man who loved rock music. The wife approached him during the service and said she'd like to play heavy metal music, but she thought guests wouldn't approve. Lewis said, "This is your service," so they played the music. When the wife said her husband liked the music loud, Lewis turned up the volume for the last 20 minutes of the event.

Being a business owner gives Lewis the chance to make the kind of community impact he'd envisioned as a young accountant. He and his funeral home are involved in a variety of civic causes, including those benefiting seniors, veterans and



Frank Lewis and staff of Jackson, Lytle and Lewis Life Celebration Center. Left to right, Emma Stowe, Frankie Bennett, Lewis and Rebecca Sule. (Photos courtesy of Frank Lewis)

active military.

"He's one of the leaders in the Springfield community," said Michele Hemphill, who has been involved in various community service programs with Lewis in her capacities as the marketing representative for a local rehabilitation center and a hospital.

Hemphill has known Lewis for a decade, and was at first surprised that a funeral director was taking such an active role in the community.

"I remember at the first meeting, I was like: 'What in the world?' But then you hear him speak and see what he does – he's kind of quiet and doesn't tell people what he is doing – and you realize he does a lot."

Hemphill also got to see Lewis' staff in action during a memorial service for a rehab center employee who died of a heart attack following a shooting at a local Wal-Mart.

"It was devastating for everyone, and Frank and his crew helped us through it," she said. "The person (who had died) was optimistic and fun. They really made that come through. It was a celebration of her life. They listened to everything everyone said and used it in the service."

At 52, Lewis is still young for a funeral home owner. His mantra about continuous improvement springs in part from a desire to be the best he can, but it is also firmly

rooted in the challenges he sees facing what he considers a complacent funeral service industry.

"The industry is in a challenging time," he said. "There is going to be continuing consolidation – as cremations increase, the number of funeral homes will decrease."

With more people choosing to be cremated, funeral homes will face increased competition from event planners and venues seeking to capture a portion of the memorial service business. Funeral homes have to be open to this, and be willing to arrange services in venues other than the funeral home if that's what customers want, which is why Lewis' funeral directors are already reaching out to local hotels so they will be prepared if a family comes in and wants to hold a service off site.

This kind of advance preparation in all areas is what Lewis thinks will be key to helping funeral businesses stay financially healthy in the coming decades. It's one of the things that keeps him from settling into habit at his funeral home.

"There's no silver bullet to anybody's situation, no shortcuts to success," he said. "You have to work hard, and you have to keep focused on the long-term goal and realize it's a journey or process. You can't just snap your fingers. You have to realize this and stay the course."