

More and more funeral directors across the country aren't complacent with traditional ways of helping families. Instead, many funeral professionals are reaching out to their communities and going beyond the walls of their funeral homes to care for their neighborhoods in meaningful ways. This became evident as we considered the nominations for our annual Funeral Director of the Year award.

The many entries we received told stories of death-care professionals' tireless community involvement, dedication to families and a passion for the industry. We chose three runners-up to the winner, who will be announced next month.

These individuals come from different parts of the country and are all managing funeral directors, with one being the owner of a family firm.

Each individual, though, strives to bring something new to his or her funeral home and neighborhoods, serving as an integral part of their communities.

American Funeral Director's



A W A R D

2018

2018 *Runner-up* FD of the Year Award

To Andrea L. Brookins, a funeral home is as much for the living as it is for the dead.

The 58-year-old funeral director and owner of Brookins Funeral Home in Chicago strives to make her hobbies an integral part of the business to connect with the community that saw her grow up.

“I love music and art ... I love gardening,” Brookins said, and she’s all about bringing “spirit and dimension” to the profession, the community and the families that she serves.

As a result, the parking lot at Brookins Funeral Home has many times served as a place to gather to learn about staying healthy, eat good food and dance to jazz, R&B and classical music, all while keeping the community beautiful by hosting beautification contests – where an award is given to a residence or business whose landscaping and property is kept clean and exemplary.

With a passion for youth and local talents, the funeral home is proud to have awarded about \$14,000 in scholarships for college students and organizations whose purpose is to help young people.

According to Brookins’ sister, Ronda Williams, marketing and communications director at Brookins Funeral Home, “(Andrea) brings a different way of thinking (to the profession) ... in place of the connotations of sadness and dying ... she’s bringing life and engagement.”

It’s because of the innovations in community outreach that Brookins brings to the profession that she was chosen as a runner-up for American Funeral Director’s Funeral Director of the Year.

Brookins was raised on a foundation of giving back to the

community in every way. Her father, Howard B. Brookins Sr., founded the funeral home in 1970, and has a background as a police officer, state representative and member of the Illinois Senate.

“I didn’t know anything else,” Brookins said, adding that she grew up in the funeral home from the time she was 10 years old. “We are in the community ... we have been in the community as a family for 48 years,” she added. “My siblings and I were encouraged since childhood (to be active in the community) ... that’s the understanding that my parents instilled in us.”

Although Williams decided to help the funeral home in aspects of communications and marketing, the third sibling, Howard Brookins Jr., followed in the footsteps of his father by going to mortuary school and also serving as 21st ward alderman in Chicago.

Brookins, though, took a sole interest in the business and decided to go to mortuary school, graduating in 1981 with a dual bachelor’s in psychology and mortuary science from Southern Illinois University, while obtaining her funeral director and embalmer’s license.

“After mortuary school, I went into managing the business while my father served in political office,” she said. It was a given, she added, that she would go on to continue the Brookins family legacy of serving the community.

The wife and mother of five, though, is no stranger to struggles.

“I’m a female ... an African-American female,” she said. “When my father went away ... I had to



Andrea L. Brookins

Funeral Director/Owner
Brookins Funeral Home
Chicago

rely on a predominately male staff ... there were less than five females at the time,” she added. “Male colleagues were not always supportive.”

The passion and drive to learn were Brookins’ way of coping as a then-minority in funeral service.

“I studied trade journals and attended conferences and workshops to meet other women (in the profession)” and enrolled in Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses, a program for small businesses that teaches practical skills in negotiating, managing and marketing, she explained.

“I would drive by other funeral homes ... and got excited if I found out a woman ran it,” she added.

Couple getaways with her husband would often provide learning opportunities about the

customs and practices of the industry in other countries. During a trip to Barcelona, for example, Brookins took an interest in photographing funeral homes and cemeteries, because “I think we should all grow and evolve,” she said.

Even though none of her children have taken an interest in the funeral profession, they help the community in other ways, she said. “When they’re in the funeral home, they all help,” she said. “Two of them have careers in education ... in essence, it’s giving back.”

Through the funeral home, Brookins aims to bring businesses

together to improve the community and create a family-like atmosphere throughout Chicago.

“I go and try to meet other business owners and encourage them to do the right thing,” she said. “I tell them that we have to be responsible for our community.”

Networking with local businesses has made it possible for the funeral home’s parking lot and Audrey’s Garden location – named after Brookin’s mother who also helped at the funeral home before retiring – to be filled with about 40 vendors during annual health fairs.

Having partnered with Home Depot, Lowes, McDonald’s and

Walgreens among many other businesses, the funeral home has been able to provide health screenings, including diabetes and hearing tests, as well as gift cards and discounts for the community.

“Funeral service is about relationships with the people living here,” Brookins said. “How can you *not* care about the community that you belong to?”

She hopes to one day expand the funeral home in order to dedicate an indoor space for community service and partner with Chicago’s Musical Arts Institute to provide voice, instrument and music lessons to children.

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