FROM COVID-19 TO UNIFICATION, STEVEN REYNOLDS DEMONSTRATES TRUE LEADERSHIP AT OACFP
When Steven Reynolds agreed to allow his name to stand for Ontario Association of Cemetery and Funeral Professionals (OACFP) president last fall, he knew the job would involve many challenges. With a number of important tasks already on the table including a larger role in continuing education and unification talks with the Ontario Funeral Service Association (OFSA), Reynolds and the entire bereavement sector were thrown an unexpected curve ball early in 2020 when COVID-19 vastly altered all aspects of life, including the death-care landscape.

Like all good leaders, Reynolds has risen to the challenges – both predicted and unpredicted – leading OACFP through uncertain times. Placing himself in a position of leadership was a deliberate decision, knowing he wanted to play a role in the evolution of death care.

"While helping people continues to motivate me, I also like the business and education side of the profession," says Reynolds. "Instead of being a funeral director in the field, I knew I wanted to be part of the change that will shape our future."
It was during high school when Reynolds responded to his first funeral service challenge. While working at Blockbuster Video, a friend’s father, manager of Comstock Funeral Home, encouraged him to spend some time at the funeral home. Not one to back down, Reynolds decided to give it a try and was immediately drawn to the profession. After completing a three-year business program in his hometown of Peterborough, Ontario, he enrolled in Humber College’s class one funeral director program and apprenticed at Rosar-Morrison Funeral Home in Toronto. Upon graduation, he remained with the firm for five years before making the move to Ward Funeral Homes in 2000. He joined Arbor Memorial’s Oakview Funeral Home in 2005 and in 2008 was named manager, a position he continues to hold today.

Through the years, he has risen to many challenges including assisting in the early days of Glen Oaks Funeral Home, one of Ontario’s first funeral home facilities to operate on a cemetery property. The experience gave Reynolds a better understanding of the challenges that funeral directors, cemetery operators and crematorium operators all face. This, combined with his expertise with independent and corporate funeral homes, as well as several years instructing and tutoring Humber students, made him a perfect candidate for association work – first with the Toronto & District Funeral Directors Inc. (2013-16) before he joined OACFP in 2016. With an ability to adapt to change and push for results, Reynolds was fast-tracked through the second vice-president and first vice-president roles and elected president in October 2019.

“Working with OFSA to develop a joint Bereavement Education Committee (BEC) that is responsible for approving third-party education offerings.”

OACFP has also added education coordinator Kate McMaster to its team roster. McMaster now works alongside executive director Darren Denomme and is tasked with helping to develop and coordinate – along with OACFP’s many committees – in-person offerings, such as the crematorium operator certification program and front-line cemetery training. McMaster also helps coordinate all online offerings – which have proved to be the backbone of education in 2020 with the emergence of COVID-19 and social-distancing protocols.

“OACFP has also garnered a role at the table when it comes to developing new emergency transfer procedures from long-term care facilities and hospitals. "OACFP and OFSA both have had representation on what is called the Death Surge Committee that has worked in conjunction with the Office of the Chief Coroner and the BAO in terms of making sure our profession is ready to serve the needs of the health-care profession while also protecting our staff,” explains Reynolds.

"In addition, the profession obviously has its challenges in helping families. Currently in Ontario, there can only be 10
people at a funeral or burial which has definitely changed the way funeral homes and cemeteries are operating.

“The worst-case scenario for us is to have a backlog like what is happening in New York or Italy where the military is taking the decedents down the road to the cemetery as the bereavement sector has lost all control. I can tell you from sitting on the Death Surge Committee that the priority is to move deceased individuals to their final resting place as soon as possible. We are not going to outwait the pandemic and stockpile bodies – but communicating that to the family is often a challenge as many think they can just wait until this passes. While we encourage final disposition as soon as possible, we still encourage people to plan something when the restrictions lift as people need their communities around them to grieve.

“So, our role as bereavement sector professionals is to operate with the same care and compassion that we always do while bringing these circumstances and challenges to families in a delicate way. We still want what is best for families but that is a difficult message to take forward.”

Knowing the importance of community, Reynolds is committed to giving back as a board member of the Halton Catholic Children’s Education Foundation, a member of the Knights of Columbus and a former minor hockey coach. When the COVID-19 crisis lessens, he looks forward to engaging in many of his favourite activities – crossing the border to cheer on his Buffalo Sabres, golfing and spending time at the family cottage in Haliburton with his partner, Sonia, and his son, Sean.

For now, Reynolds will continue to serve families at Oakview Funeral Home while leading OACFP through unprecedented times.

“Despite the obstacles, there is a lot we have accomplished,” states Reynolds. “I’m proud to be the president who put in place an education coordinator and who helped establish a mental health program for our professionals. Our membership growth has also been substantial and much of this goes back to our strategic plan.

“It is not that I thought the year would be easy but I definitely did not foresee all that would be coming,” concludes Reynolds. “I am happy with the way OACFP has responded and heartened to hear that members are pleased with the work being done. Knowing we have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and served our profession to the best of our ability is very rewarding.”

Many people across the country have stepped into leadership roles in 2020. Steven Reynolds might have already been in such a position but he continues to prove he is deserving of the title.