

News

A First for New York State



Kathleen Lowes Sanvidge Displays the WBE Certificate for the Townley & Wheeler Funeral Home - the First Such Designation for a Funeral Home in New York State

After more than 20 years serving families as a funeral director, Kathleen Lowes Sanvidge is well versed in age-old funeral home traditions.

But the energetic businesswoman isn't shying away from modern tools available to increase the number of families she serves.

She's reaching out to her community using Social Media and now making her funeral home's services available for contract work in New York State.

In August, Kathleen earned NY State certification as a Women Business Enterprise for her Townley & Wheeler Funeral Home (<http://www.townleywheelerfh.com/>) in Ballston Lake.

It's a distinction that sets her apart among more than 7,000 businesses certified as Women or Minority Business Enterprises – she's currently the only funeral director on that list.

Hers is the only name to be found in a search for WBE or MBE-certified companies that provide monuments and tombstones, grave markers, transporting the deceased and funeral directing in New York State.

It's a small niche inside the massive world of New York's state contracts. But state parks need monuments and prisons and other facilities need funeral services.

And funeral directors are among a select few individuals allowed by law to move the deceased anywhere in the state.

When she purchased the Townley & Wheeler Funeral Home in 2013, Kathleen answered about 40 calls for service in the first year.

Those calls grew to 50 the next year, 65 the year after and the funeral home was on track to serve 100 families by year's end in 2016.

Noteworthy is the fact that none of this growth involves the funeral home's new WBE Certification.

After a bit of remodeling, immersion in her community and consistent outreach on Social Media, Kathleen has already cemented her place in the tiny town of Ballston Lake.

"I'm mindful of my customers ... they're like my family," Kathleen said.

PATHOLOGIST'S ASSISTANT

Kathleen was first introduced to funeral service in high school while serving as an assistant to the head pathologist at Ellis Hospital as part of the Shenendehowa School District's Unique Placement Program.

In addition to participating in autopsies once a week, she'd often interact with funeral directors - a career choice that drew her interest.

She graduated from the Hudson Valley Community College's Mortuary Science program and went into service as a funeral director working for other funeral directors before finding the opportunity in Ballston Lake.

Part of her philosophy is sharing her success with others - so the 44 year-old businesswoman is a frequent contributor to local causes.

Churches and cemeteries, the Make-A-Wish Foundation, Alzheimer's organizations, YMCA, school district events and the Burnt Hills Oratorio Society are among those she finds important to support whenever they ask.

And good, she says, begets good.

"I believe that when you give, you get back tenfold," Kathleen said.

Kathleen is a member of the New York State Funeral Directors Association, the National Funeral Directors Association and the Burnt Hills – Ballston Lake Business & Professional Association.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Kathleen said she didn't bother much with Social Media on a personal level.

She got involved after buying the funeral home so she could let folks know where she was and highlight her new status as a business owner.

Now, she has more than 560 connections on Linked In with over 280 recommendations for "Top Skills" including community outreach, customer service, event planning, ceremonies and strategic planning.

Her funeral home's Facebook Page (<https://www.facebook.com/TownleyWheelerFH>) has more than 850 followers – roughly 10 percent of the town of Ballston Lake's population of 8,700. The funeral home currently serves families in Ballston Lake, Burnt Hills, Clifton Park, Jonesville and Glenville.

She's received numerous inquiries about funeral services, an immediate need call for service and a request about transferring funeral prearrangements to her funeral home - all via Facebook Messenger.

People are interacting with her funeral home Social Media posts - she reached more than 400 individuals with a photo of her funeral home's illuminated Nativity holiday decoration.

In her Facebook page's public reviews, a family member describes the call to Kathleen after the death of a loved one as "the last phone call we had to make."

They've described feeling confident that "everything would be taken care of professionally and compassionately."

Another described their experience after a death saying "No pressure just good information and assistance. I'm at the time in my life were I have to have her on speed dial."

The firm is rated by customers with five stars out of a possible five stars.

"I really see the value that Social Media has brought to my business ... it's been proven to be effective," Kathleen said.

FUNERAL HOME UPGRADES

Kathleen purchased the funeral home after meeting with Harold Townley during an OSHA training event coordinated by the New York State Funeral Directors Association.

She learned the Townleys were looking to retire. She was looking for a change.

"It was divine intervention," Kathleen said.

Kathleen made some changes to the decades-old funeral home building not long after she arrived.

These include expanding the size of the main viewing room and brightening up the atmosphere.

Family members are now greeted with the aroma of essential oils when they enter as opposed to the often-experienced scent of over-abundant flowers.

And family members now meet with her to arrange services in a window-filled arrangement room with views of her bird feeder in the window – a "subtle reminder," she said, of life continuing outside.

"It creates a sense of peace and calming. It's a sanctuary where they can make decisions," Kathleen said.

Family members aren't walked through a library of caskets and urns, either. Instead, they get to view ideas for their loved one's funeral service on a large, flat screen television.

A local craftsman who makes cremation urns for Kathleen built a display stand to help highlight the urns during services.

The handmade display case, made of solid black walnut, directs light upwards through an opaque glass base, channeling the focus to the person being memorialized.

FUTURE PLANS

Kathleen is planning more upgrades. She's expecting to break ground on a new front porch in the spring, and she envisions further expansion for the funeral home's chapel, and then the office.

A more-immediate consideration will be arranging to provide more comfort to family members she serves – with the introduction of foods and beverages to be allowed in New York in mid-January of 2017.

In her experience, foods and beverages "go hand in hand with any social gathering."

Being a mom of three children while operating a funeral home keeps Kathleen busy, but she's making time for one of her hobbies – running. She brings her Italian heritage to her kitchen and enjoys traveling and family activities.

As business continues, she'll be keeping her eye on one of her biggest competitors, in a sense – herself.

"I'm outdoing myself each time. My mind doesn't quit, I'm always looking for ways to one-up myself."

