

# News

By Steve Cronin

# Lessons from the Las Vegas Massacre

An extraordinary disaster prompted an extraordinary effort from the funeral homes and death-care professionals called to respond when a gunman killed scores of concertgoers in Las Vegas on Oct. 1, 2017.

“I would give them an ‘A,’” Philip Smith, general manager of Davis Funeral Homes & Memorial Park, said of his staff’s efforts following the shootings. “Everybody was willing and able. They were saying ‘I’ll work late’ and ‘I’ll do whatever needs to happen to help out at this time.’”

Davis cared for 32 of the 58 people killed by gunman Stephen Craig Paddock. The funeral home received assistance from other Las Vegas-area funeral homes, the National Funeral Directors Association and staff from other Legacy Funeral Group funeral homes who flew into Nevada City the day after the shootings, Smith said.

“A lot of things came into place, and it really worked well,” Smith said of the effort. “We were definitely figuring it out as we went

along. With the additional help, we were able to manage it. It wasn’t easy, but we were able to do it.”

Davis is one of two area funeral homes that have contracts with the Clark County coroner’s office to do removals, with the businesses alternating which days they are on call. Davis was the funeral home on call the night Paddock began shooting into the crowd of music lovers from his room on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino, Smith said.

Teams from the funeral home responded both to the site of the Route 91 Harvest Festival as well as local hospitals, where they coordinated with the coroner’s office, identifying the slain and then bringing their bodies to the coroner’s facility, Smith said.

Las Vegas authorities already had

a plan in place for responding to a mass casualty event, Smith said, and that plan was put into action and worked well in the hours and days following the shootings.

After the bodies were transported to the coroner’s office, they were either released to families or released to the funeral home, which held them until they could be released to families. While this system works well in most instances, the number of fatalities at the concert shooting did cause some problems.

“The one thing we had to ask for help was with cooler space,” Smith said.

While Davis was responding to the concert fatalities, it also had to conduct its regular business and handle arrangements for local residents who had died of causes unrelated to the shootings.

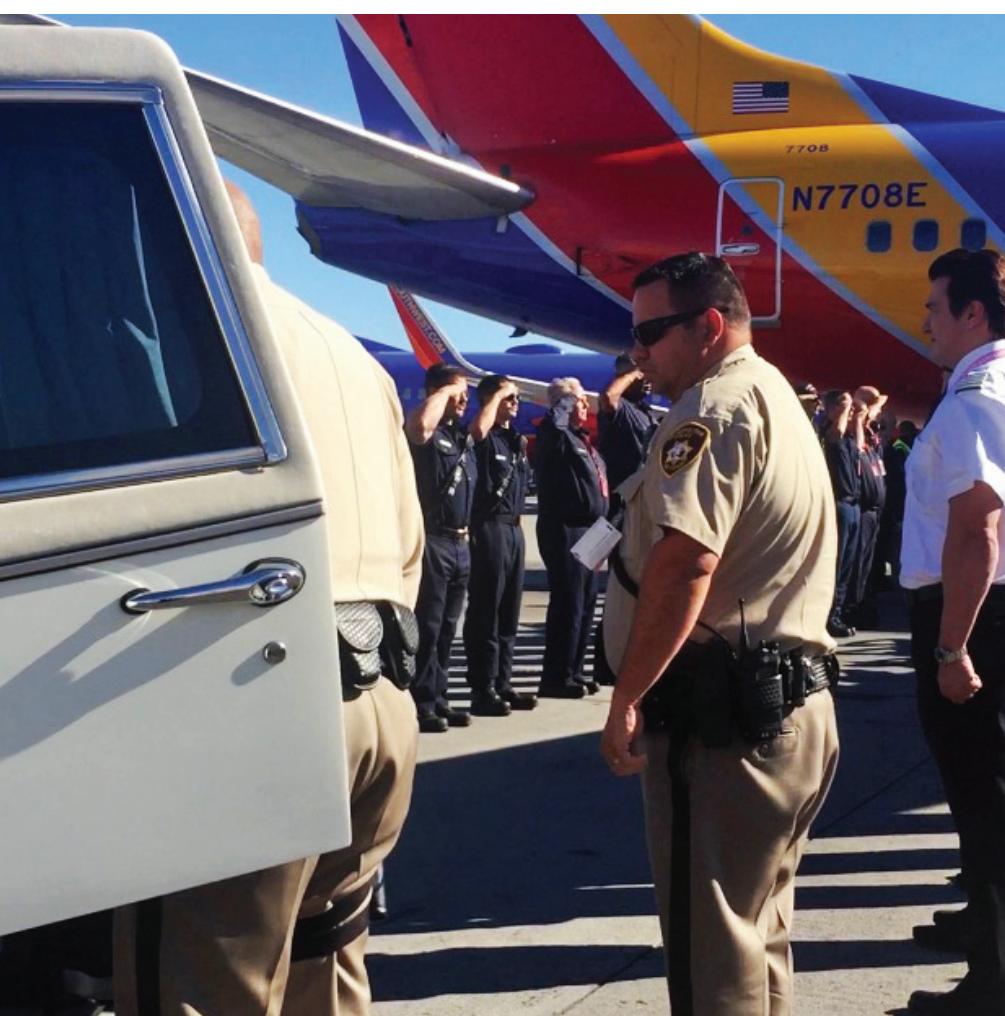


Several Las Vegas funeral homes were called on to assist families after 58 people were killed when a gunman opened fire on a country music concert there in October. (Photo credit: Rmvisuals, via Wikimedia Commons)



An area pastor conducted a prayer service for one of the victims of the Las Vegas shooting outside Davis Funeral Homes & Memorial Park. The service was attended by local law enforcement. Below: Local law enforcement and TSA personnel were among those at an area airport who paid their respects to a Navy veteran who was among those killed in the Las Vegas shooting.

*Photo credit: Bill Vallie/West Texas Regional Manager, Legacy Funeral Group)*



Staff was able to use coolers at other facilities for those bodies while consolidating all the concert victims in a cooler at one of Davis' three locations, which, together, serve about 2,750 families per year, Smith said.

The funeral director credits Legacy Funeral Group with its quick efforts to provide help so Davis could handle the large number of cases. The shootings occurred Sunday night, and "by Monday afternoon we had people from out of state here," Smith said.

Corporate officials at Legacy contacted Nevada authorities early Monday and had license requirements put on hold for a month so these out-of-state funeral professionals could lend their assistance.

Legacy Funeral Group President and CEO Michael Soper flew from company headquarters in Houston to Las Vegas the day after the shootings.

"It was important for me to be there," Soper said.

It was also important to Soper that no family member would pay for services provided by Davis Funeral Homes. "We could collect money from the county and state victims compensation fund to help with payments and I was willing to discount off anything that wasn't paid by the funds," he said. "I made it clear to my staff that the families were not to pay for anything."

Allowing families to spend time with loved ones and making it as personal as possible were also priorities, Soper explained.

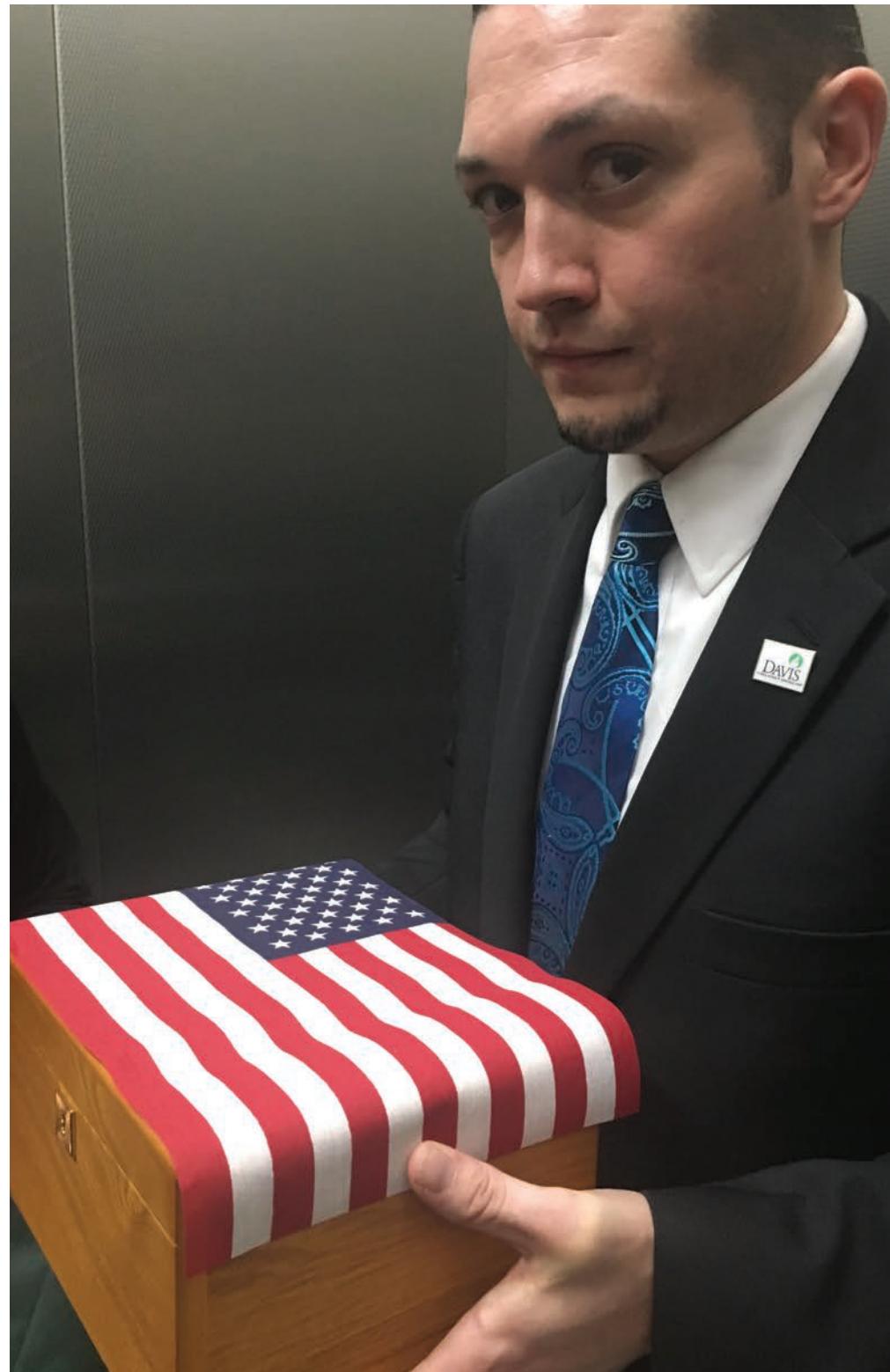
"I wanted each and every family to view their loved one, spend as much time with their loved as they needed," Soper said. "To be able to view that loved one, spend time with that loved one, was a huge part of the healing process. That's why it's so important for our industry to encourage families to spend time with a loved one in a funeral home, even if they are opting for cremation. We were able to do that with the families we served ... and that made a big difference."

Whether a family opted for a simple cremation or a casket transfer home, it was important for the Davis staff to make things as personal as possible.

In one case, Soper explained, a husband was making arrangements for his wife, who the staff learned was a teacher and volleyball coach. "So we went down to the local middle school that is located down the road from the funeral home, and got the school's volleyball players to sign a ball. That husband was able to take the volleyball – and his wife's casket – home with him."

Soper said he was gratified by the support of the Las Vegas community.

"They came out in masses after word got out on social media that we were caring for most of the



**Matthew D'Orio, a funeral arranger with Davis Funeral Homes & Memorial Park, returned the cremated remains of an individual killed in the Oct. 1 shooting in Las Vegas to the victim's family. (Photo courtesy of: Bill Vallie/West Texas Regional Manager, Legacy Funeral Group)**



**Davis Funeral Homes & Memorial Park received an outpouring of community support in the days following the Las Vegas shooting. Top: Allen Kopp (second from right), Davis Funeral Homes manager, and Michael Soper, Legacy Funeral Group president and CEO, with area teachers. Middle: Soper and Legacy Funeral Group Vice President Brian Nichols, with a local church group. Bottom: Soper and Shar Peters, sales manager, Davis Funeral Homes (second from right), received donuts from an area church group. (Bill Vallie/West Texas Regional Manager, Legacy Funeral Group)**



families,” he said. “They brought food, gift cards ... it was overwhelming. People don’t think of Las Vegas as a small town, but in this setting, Vegas was just like Mayberry. I was so proud of Las Vegas.”

The 60-person staff at Davis’ funeral homes and cemetery, like others in Las Vegas, were shocked by the carnage that struck their city. At the outset, they put their personal feelings aside, realizing their responsibility to help the grieving, Smith said.

“At the time, the adrenaline was going, and we all performed really well. I know we did an outstanding job. People worked tirelessly to assist those families,” he said.

**Kevin Ferm, center, is managing partner at Bunkers Mortuaries, Cemeteries & Crematory, which assisted two families whose loved ones had been killed in the Las Vegas shooting. (Photo courtesy of Bunkers Mortuaries, Cemeteries & Crematory)**



Most of the victims handled by Davis were from out of state. Their shocked survivors came to Las Vegas to locate their loved ones and arrange to get their bodies home. Davis' staff realized this and worked hard to make that happen as quickly as possible.

"Our biggest goal was trying to reunite loved ones with their families," Smith said. "Most of the families didn't want to leave until their loved one could leave with them. Because of this, we tried to do everything as quickly as possible."

The funeral home has two chaplains who regularly visit its sites. The chaplains were on-site during the time and assisted staff as much as possible, meeting with families and even greeting people at the door when everyone else was busy, Smith said.

It took about a week for Davis' staff to care for its cases from the mass shooting. Smith, who has worked in the profession since taking a job washing cars at a funeral home in 1998, said he learned several lessons from responding to the tragedy.

The first was to recognize he and his staff needed help – and to ask for it. Smith also learned that communication is key, knowing who the point person is for each call and who is assigned what task.

"It's also good to sit down and have meetings through the day with key staff so everyone is working together and everyone is informed about what is going on," he said. "There are a lot of things going on, and new information is always arriving."

About halfway through the week, Smith and his staff recognized a need to pause, examine their operations and get themselves reorganized so they could better serve the families, he said.

By the time all of the cases had been handled, the funeral home staff were exhausted and wrung out. To help them decompress, Smith made sure each staff member met with one of the chaplains for about 30 minutes to talk about their experiences and discuss if they needed help.

"We recognized the fact that people needed to talk through these

things. We made it mandatory that everyone sit down with the chaplain," Smith said. "We wanted to make sure that was available."

Staff also learned that people in Las Vegas appreciated their efforts.

"One of the biggest surprises was the community bringing us food and beverages. Anything and everything you could imagine," Smith said. "We would have a line out the door, and we had to have one employee just do the intake for the food."

One local church presented every employee with a \$50 gift card while the NFDA provided staff with lunch for at least two days and gift cards to a local day spa. The funeral home also received numerous thank you cards from people, telling staff they recognized their efforts.

"That was the nicest part. Our community and our industry really made sure we knew they were thinking of us and looking out for us," Smith said. "Sometimes you think people don't really care, but then you realize the community understands what we go through and that we are caring for families."

The large number of people killed at the concert meant that victims' families also reached out to other Las Vegas-area funeral homes for help. Bunkers Mortuaries, Cemeteries & Crematory in Las Vegas assisted two families from California whose loved ones had been killed.

Like their counterparts at Davis, staff at Bunker had to assist these families while also dealing with their own reactions to what had happened, said Kevin Ferm, managing partner at the mortuary.

"Our reaction was, 'This is horrible' and we were in shock. But then we talked as a team and said, 'We stand as funeral directors, helping people through the most difficult times of their lives,'" said Ferm, a 28-year veteran of funeral service. "Then the families came in and shared their stories, and they were moving and horrific. We talked a lot and encouraged each other. That helped us understand even more how we had to act as funeral directors and help families through this horrible experience."

Ferm gave the Clark County coroner's office high marks for its handling of the situation.

Like Smith, Ferm said one take-away lesson from his staff's efforts was the need to keep up good communication throughout the process.

"Fortunately, we have an experienced staff. We have daily meetings, but in this case, those meetings were lengthier as we offered each other emotional support and discussed what we could do as a team to help the families," Ferm said.

While the week of responding to the crisis has left its mark, Smith said that for him and many on his staff, it has also reaffirmed their commitment to funeral service.

"Sometimes, in this industry, you can get hard on certain issues – you just go through the daily tasks," he said. "Some of the stories that came out through this event kind of reaf-

firmed why we chose this profession. On someone's worst day of their life, we can be there with them and assist them in a real and meaningful way."

At Kraft-Sussman Funeral & Cremation Services, staff served the families of four shooting victims, said co-owner Laura Sussman.

While the number of cases was not a problem for the funeral home, which services about 450 calls annually, the deaths carried an emotional impact different than other calls the funeral home normally handles, Sussman said.

"It was a lot more emotional, dealing with the families," she said. "These kids weren't sick. It wasn't an anticipated death. They just went to a concert ..."

The four families the firm served were from out-of-state, and had come to Kraft-Sussman after reading online reviews or receiving recommendations from their hometown funeral directors, Sussman said. The funeral home is a member of Selected Independent Funeral Homes, the Order of the Golden Rule and the NFDA. Sussman believes these connections helped lead to the recommendations.

Staff at Kraft-Sussman understood that while dealing with the shock of the death, families were also trying to navigate the bureaucracy and red tape that came with an out-of-town death and in the wake of a mass-casualty event, she said.

Her staff worked to help reunite families with their lost loved ones as quickly as possible, Sussman said.

"The fact we were able to get (victims) onto a plane the day that we got them into our care really provided a lot of comfort for our families," she said.

Kraft-Sussman staff members talked among themselves to help deal with the emotions that came with helping families following the



**Laura Sussman is co-owner of Kraft-Sussman Funeral & Cremation Services, which served four families after the massacre. (Photo courtesy of Kraft-Sussman Funeral & Cremation Services)**

shooting. If there was a lesson staff learned, it was that the most stress-filled times require providing the most caring service to families as possible, Sussman said.

"I would imagine that most funeral directors provide a compassionate, caring service for everyone they work with, but the emotional part of a mass-fatality event adds a lot more stress," Sussman said. "Families will push you and push you because they don't understand why it takes so long. Providing as much patience and kindness that you can really goes a long way."

That staff succeeded was apparent in the ways family reacted and those that stopped back to express their thanks in person, she said.

"I was extremely proud (of the staff)," Sussman said. "We did what we do every day, which is to serve the families to the best of our ability." •