



funeral service **insider**

independent news & guidance for funeral home owners and operators

Funeral Professionals Reveal Lessons From Some of Their Greatest Failures

If you spend time on social media, you already know the only thing better than success is failure.

Confused?

Consider some of the oft-repeated quotes you'll find scrolling through Facebook, Twitter and elsewhere:

- *There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work and learning from failure.* – Colin Powell

- *Think like a queen. A queen is not afraid to fail. Failure is another steppingstone to greatness.* – Oprah Winfrey

- *Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently.* – Henry Ford

- *Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.* – Winston Churchill

You've probably even had a run-in or two with Will Smith – yes, the actor and “Fresh Prince” – who in between his music and Hollywood block-

busters has become a guru of sorts, opining on why it's so important to fail – in bite-sized two-minute videos, of course.

There's even a popular saying – that the word “fail” is really just an acronym that stands for “first attempt in learning.”

But if failure is so good, why do we only hear about failure in catchy quotes, YouTube snippets or in business books that we may never get around to reading? Why don't we ever hear about *actual* failures from our peers?

To find out if failure is as important as it's made out to be – and to learn if it's contributed to the success of death-care professionals – we did something shocking: We asked.

So, whether or not you're reeling from a recent failure, thinking of trying something new and afraid to take the plunge or enjoying success after many years of hard work, we invite you to sit back and learn from these stories of failure.

They may just get you

Carriage Services Buys Covenant Funeral Homes

Carriage Services has completed the acquisition of Covenant Funeral Homes in Fredericksburg and Stafford, both of which are in a strategic growth market in Virginia southwest of Washington, D.C., along the I-95 corridor, according to a news release.

The Mullins family, a highly regarded funeral service family in Northern Virginia for over 60 years, constructed a Covenant Funeral Home facility in Fredericksburg in 2001 and expanded with a second Covenant facility in Stafford in 2008.

“The two Covenant Funeral Homes are known in Northern Virginia as elite businesses that have top-quality reputations, which is the hallmark of the Mullins family,” says Mel Payne, chairman and CEO of Carriage Services. “Speaking for the entire Carriage family of elite businesses, as well as the senior leadership of our company, we are indeed honored to have been selected by the Mullins family as the new home for Covenant Funeral Homes.”

David Mullins says, “Our standards of service and expectations of our team members have led us to become one of the area's most trusted providers. In partnering with the Carriage Services Family, our daily mission to be the best will continue.”

Johnson Consulting Group brokered the deal.



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thinking, and at your next networking event, you may find yourself asking someone about the last time they failed.

Own Your Mistakes

Ted Hopkins, general manager of Wilkerson Funeral Home in Reidsville, North Carolina, found his firm understaffed early in his career.



Ted Hopkins

“I was called on to step up to the plate with limited experience,” he says. “We were in recovery mode, with systems, facilities, staffing and just plain transition from the past to the present. We have a great legacy in our community, but there was great concern from some of our closest allies about our future. One precious couple actually called to meet with me to thank me for our efforts – and warned me to continue to be careful as we moved forward.”

One of Hopkins’ greatest fears was burying jewelry that this family wanted returned. “We had systems in place to remind each other about the jewelry, and wouldn’t you know, we were serving the precious couple I mentioned earlier (her mom) and we missed it!”

One of the family’s main concerns was getting back their loved one’s jewelry, which had sentimental value. The funeral home told the daughter of the deceased

that it was no problem, and Hopkins reminded his father-in-law about the jewelry before leaving the church to get the family. “We even had a note under the overlay to be seen when closing the casket,” he says.

Later that evening, Hopkins was having dinner when he realized he’d never gotten the jewelry back from the service. “I knew the jewelry had been buried,” he says. “I dropped my fork and confessed my mistake to my wife and the visiting minister and said, ‘I’ve got to go see the family!’”

A family member was resting on the front porch when Hopkins arrived. “He was pleased to see me, and I went right to it. I said, ‘I made a mistake.’ I explained, and he looked at me and said, ‘Hmmm, let’s go tell Mama!’”

Feeling as though he had an upset stomach, Hopkins went inside and found the man’s mother-in-law – who was the daughter of the deceased. “She was so pleased. She jumped up and hugged me for the fine service that we had provided. After, the sweet hug, I owned the next few minutes by explaining what had happened. I didn’t blame anyone; I took the heat and with tears, I apologized and offered to disinter her mom to get the jewelry,” Hopkins says.

She looked at him through her tears and said, “Is that all? This is why we love you! You told me the truth and took responsibility for the mistake. It was costume jewelry. I

just wanted it because it was hers. I'm happy for her to keep it!"

Hopkins learned a valuable lesson: "We are human, and we will make mistakes," he says. "Owning your mistakes will win more friends than dancing and blaming someone else. The family we served that day has been one of our greatest allies."

Keep Going No Matter What

Some of the best failures can come out of the worst circumstances.

That's what Beverly Brown-Kaplan, director of community outreach at StoneMor Partners, has learned over the years.

"In early 2004, defeat was all around me," she shares. "Two years and nearly \$300,000 worth of medical efforts to save my



Beverly Brown-Kaplan

daughter's life had failed; she died of cancer on Jan. 13. The once Fortune 500 private company that I worked for in the waterworks industry, with locations stretching across 20 U.S. states and Canada, was preparing for a downsizing; consequently my job of 19 years was coming to an end. Besides all that, my mother's health was failing fast; I was her caregiver, and I was single. Life was heavy and harsh. I needed to figure out my next steps, rally the strength to get up, brush myself off and start over."

Brown-Kaplan continues, "Ultimately those life failures pushed me onto a path that led to a professional career and success I would have never imagined. I would not want to unwind the clock and do it all over again, but I would not change the growth, new opportunities and valuable perspective that those failing times brought me. Those failures guided me through a transforming process, molding me into someone new."

Her professional growth kicked into overdrive, when toward the end of 2009, while in an administrative role for a funeral home in north central Florida, she was offered the chance to be the community care director for five funeral homes and a memorial park.

"The owners invited me to step into the newly opened position, which involved developing an altruistic-style outreach program where there was none before," she says. "I accepted the offer. Because I knew the pain of loss of a child, and loss of parents, I could relate to and help people at a critical stage in life. While I did not know it at the time, this was the beginning of a new career for me, and one that would change my life completely. From there, everything happened so quickly."

A couple weeks later, she was on a plane to take part in an aftercare seminar given by Dan Isard, founder and president of The Foresight Companies in Phoenix. "Following the four-day seminar, I left Phoenix with inspiration, a notebook full of

ideas and a big job ahead of me," she says.

Back home, Brown-Kaplan began crafting outreach efforts, and "the program took on a 'business within a business' feel," she says. "It was a project that required a lot of time, effort and energy."

Over time, new opportunities opened up, including the chance to speak at industry events as an expert on aftercare.

"In 2015, I was given the amazing opportunity to become a part of StoneMor Partners, to serve as their director of community outreach," she says. "This new opportunity allowed me to expand my reach within the death-care industry. Continued growth and new successes followed. A definite rewarding journey it has been and continues to be."

Her success, Brown-Kaplan says, wouldn't have been possible without the heartache and failures that she went through.

"Reflecting back – life's failures created a new me," she says. "While my best failure was the result of circumstance more than anything, I believe it was God's transforming work in my life. Now I use it for inspiration to help others."

Fire the Jerks

Alan Creedy, a senior business adviser with Creedy & Co., says while he'd never encourage failing just for the sake of failing, we

should all strive to turn down times into good times. “Sometimes we do fail, and when we do, we should not let it define us but refine us,” he says.



Alan Creedy

Asked about his “best failure,” Creedy says his story may not sound like a failure since it ends well, but it felt like a failure at the time – a failure of leadership.

“As president of a company, I was responsible for the care and nurture of our customers and our staff,” he says. “We had a particularly abusive client who, initially, was fairly lucrative but eventually not so much. Nevertheless, I allowed him to abuse our staff for a couple of years thinking we couldn’t afford to lose him and also that he might damage our reputation if we resigned.”

But one day, Creedy attended a business seminar that changed his perspective. A speaker was talking about customer management and at one point made the following observation:

There are three types of customers: Good customers, heroes and jerks. Good customers like what you do and your product but if something interesting came along, they would look at it and might leave you. You make a reasonable profit on them. Heroes are customers who love you and your product and won’t ever leave you. Heroes are usually lucrative. Jerks are customers who

constantly complain, negotiate everything and who usually cost you money.

Then the speaker said:

Let me tell you how you spend your time. You spend 20 percent of your time on your good customers, 80 percent on your jerks and none on your heroes.

“When he said that I sat up – literally. I left the room and fired our jerk,” Creedy says.

“What was most interesting about that experience was that my greatest fear was the reaction of other clients who knew him and were supposedly his friend,” Creedy says. “It turns out they knew all about his nature, and when I fired him, it actually increased their respect for my company. And, I guess, me. But as a leader, the staff saw that I was willing to take risks to protect them and our dignity.”

In the end, a failure of leadership turned into a great life lesson for Creedy.

Be Willing to Change

Welton Hong, founder of Ring Ring Marketing, used to think failure was a four-letter word ... “that just, you know, happens to have three more letters,” he says.

“But now I know better,” he says. “Now I know there’s no such thing as success without failure. People who are afraid to fail never take

chances. They never put anything on the line. And that’s why they never succeed.”

Hong notes that before founding Ring Ring Marketing, he held key positions at some of Silicon Valley’s top tech firms. “My career was lucrative, rewarding and safe,” he says. “But I didn’t want to settle for ‘safe.’ I didn’t want to be an employee. I wanted to follow in the footsteps of my entrepreneur father, who taught me to follow my dreams and invest in myself.”

So, Hong threw himself into the online marketing world, leveraging the digital age to help local businesses, such as funeral homes.

“This is where you might be expecting the ‘failure’ part to show up — that I had missed something important, had misunderstood the market, had underbudgeted for the resources I needed,” he says. “But that didn’t happen. It worked. My extensive experience in engineering and in research and development had served me well. I accomplished exactly what I’d intended: My clients were generating massive traffic. Their phones were ringing off the hook with new business. Everything had gone exactly according to plan.”

That was wonderful ... until he suddenly needed a new plan.



Welton Hong

“A couple of years in, the website traffic was still flowing in smoothly, but my clients’ phones were not ringing as often,” he says. “And that’s a big problem, because traffic by itself is essentially meaningless: It has to turn into actual business.”

Hong realized that driving traffic to websites was not enough: Visitors needed to become customers.

“I had only delivered the first part: getting people in the door,” he says. “That was fine at first, but as consumers became more familiar with researching services online, they became more savvy ... their websites needed lots of excellent content, a great call to action, lots of ‘About Us’ details to convey credibility, and a plethora of positive reviews.”

That was not part of Hong’s original plan, and after a few years passed, one could argue that his business had *become* a failure. “And if I had obstinately stuck with it, it would have *remained* a failure,” he says.

“So, it was back to the drawing board. It was time for detective work: Where did the calls go? What are the obstacles? How do we remove them? How do we get the traffic once again flowing all the way from the search engine to the phone line?” Hong says.

Eventually, Hong determined his little company needed to get a lot bigger. He shifted his focus from delivering traffic to the entire user experience, from the first moment

someone searches for “funeral homes in Macon” all the way through to the actual phone call.

“And thank goodness for that initial failure, because it really helped reveal to me what I want my company to be,” Hong says. “I sleep well at night knowing that we’re doing everything we can to help our clients thrive. And I have my ‘best failure’ to thank for that.”

Stay Determined

“Getting your college degree is an exercise in perseverance, not intelligence.”

That was the wisdom that Leigh Klemencic, marketing manager at Physicians Mutual, learned from her stepmom, when she was 23 and still without a college degree after attending four different colleges and universities and earning “a less-than-stellar GPA,” she says.

In the years leading up to that, she’d moved back and forth from Nebraska to New York, always not quite sure what to do.



Leigh Klemencic

“Because of my hasty cross-country move, my college degree got put on the back burner once again,” she shares. “I was always able to get good jobs because of my experience in the customer service department at Physicians Mutual, but not having my degree still bothered me. I felt

stuck, unfinished and envious of my friends who had completed their educations. For the first time in my life, I felt like a true failure.”

The whole process taught Klemencic something she hadn’t realized about herself: “Doing something I’m not passionate about or committed to is like pulling teeth, but once I make the decision to do it, there’s no stopping me,” she says. When her stepmom shared her wisdom about college being an exercise in perseverance, “it was like a light bulb went on,” Klemencic says. “I could do this. I *would* do this. And I would do it *now*.”

Klemencic continues, “I spent the next three years working full time in Manhattan, living in far-flung Brooklyn, and going to school in a different, but no less far-flung, neighborhood in Brooklyn. Over three hours of every day was spent on a subway or bus. One semester I had to take five English classes to meet the requirements for my degree and ensure I would graduate on the new timeline I had established for myself. I learned to bring earplugs with me on the subway so I could do my hundreds of pages of reading in relative peace.”

She didn’t graduate college until age 26, but when she did, she did so with a 3.98 GPA, with established relationships with professors, and an appreciation for the process that she would have never gained had she taken a more traditional route.

“My failures and indecision and