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Honoring Fallen First Responders

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On The Road

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A Special Salute Honors Fallen First Responders

On one hand, Terry Whitlock wishes the program he administers for Wilbert Funeral Services Inc. wasn't so successful. *Steve Cronin reports*

Whitlock is Wilbert's vice president, licensee relations. As such, he's in charge of the company's Commemorating First Responders program, which donates burial vaults, urn vaults, urns and a graveside service for the funerals of law enforcement officers, firefighters and emergency medical personnel who die in the line of duty.

Last year, Wilbert and its licensees served 111 families in the United States and Canada through the program. Sometimes Wilbert doesn't hear about deaths in time to offer its help to families, other times families choose a mausoleum burial or have preneed arrangements and so decline the company's offer, he added.

But as Whitlock sees it, the 100-plus families helped are still too many – since each represents the unexpected death of a first responder.

Still, Whitlock also knows that each time Wilbert serves a family through the program, it represents a large help for the grieving and grief-stricken survivors.

"These officers and first responders are putting their lives on the line every day," Whitlock said. "We wish we could help more."

The program has been in existence since 2012. Before that, Wilbert had given the families of fallen police officers a personalized, framed



Wilbert Funeral Services' Commemorating First Responders program donates burial vaults, urn vaults, urns and a graveside service for the funerals of law enforcement officers, firefighters and emergency medical personnel who die in the line of duty. (Photo courtesy of Wilbert Funeral Services.)

lithograph. While that program was popular, the company felt it could do more to honor the first responders' sacrifices, Whitlock said.

"We felt like we had to do more for the families. We knew that many of our licensees did something for the families of officers and first responders who were killed in the line of duty, but it was never uniform. Everybody did their own thing," he said.

When Wilbert decided on the

Commemorating First Responders program, it approached its licensees, who embraced the idea.

Under the program, families of law enforcement officers, firefighters and emergency medical personnel who die in the line of duty can receive, at no charge, a Wilbert Stainless Steel Triune burial vault, if a burial is chosen. Cremation families are offered a choice of any urn in the company catalog or online at WilbertDirect.com. If the family

plans to bury the cremated remains, the company will provide a Stainless Steel Triune urn vault. Each vault can be customized with a Wilbert Legacy Series print that depicts the person's profession or a print personalized with photos. The prints are donated by Legacy Prints, while the nearly 200 Wilbert licensees shared in the contribution of the vaults and urns. The licensees also provide WilbertWay graveside setups where permitted.

Since starting five years ago, the program has helped the families of approximately 600 first responders. In 2016, those served included the families of 72 law enforcement officers, 36 firefighters and three emergency medical personnel. If they had to purchase the burial vault, each family would have had to spend about \$3,500, according to Whitlock. However, the program is about more than just saving grieving families money, he said.

"It helps the family. It is one less decision they have to make at a time when they really don't have the ability to make decisions," he said.

In order to ensure as many families as possible take advantage of the program, Wilbert has worked hard to get the word out among licensees, other funeral directors, those who support first responders and the community. Those efforts have been successful, Whitlock said.

"We have made some very good contacts in the community who know about our program. I will get phone calls from them saying 'We have a line of duty death,'" he said.

Wilbert is diligent about making families aware of the service. When a call comes in, Whitlock and Wilbert staff immediately tries to locate where the first responder lived and which funeral home is handling services.

"We do that because, if we didn't,



we would only service maybe 1/10th of the cases that we should be helping," he said. "We know that, so we are very proactive."

Most families are surprised by the company's offer but are happy to accept.

Wilbert follows up with a condolence letter 60 to 90 days after services.

However, the communication is usually two way. Whitlock said the company has received hundreds of thank you cards from grieving families and their relatives. The company has collected these heartfelt messages in a book.

"I work part time for a funeral home and the vault you provided for my brother was the nicest I've ever seen," wrote the brother of Georgia police officer killed in the line of duty in 2014.

"I would like to thank you for the beautiful burial vault you made for my husband. I truly appreciate you

honoring him this way," wrote the wife of a firefighter who was among 15 people killed in a fertilizer plant explosion in West, Texas, in April 2013.

Don Borgwardt knows just how much families appreciate the program. He's the owner of Borgwardt Funeral Home in Beltsville, Maryland, and has handled nine calls as part of the Wilbert program.

"Wilbert came up with the idea, and I think it is fantastic," Borgwardt said. "It is their way to give back to the community. The families really receive it well."

The program dovetails with his funeral home's program of providing free services in line-of-duty deaths and with cemetery programs that also provide free services, Borgwardt said.

Whitlock said he expects the program to grow as time goes on and the company provides free vaults and urns to more families. While funeral directors of communities might not initially be aware of the First Responders program, awareness grows each time a family benefits from it, he said.

"Once people hear about it, they remember it," Whitlock said.

That kind of good feeling among customers is priceless, Whitlock said, even though he suspects the First Responders program does not do much to help the Wilbert bottom line.

"It's hard to measure the benefit. Even if we do get some good public relations from it, I'm not sure what that means. Maybe, when another family member needs a burial vault, they might remember that a burial vault was donated ... but I don't know," he said. "I don't know if there really is a way to measure it. We just do it because it is the right thing to do – and we are happy to do it." •