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Gene McElroy stands near the sign in front of Miller Mortuary at 908 N. Lincoln in Liberal. McElroy recently purchased the funeral home from the Kauffman family. He also runs a Shelter Insurance agency in town, and he said he will remain active in both businesses. L&T photo/Robert Pierce

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times In 1917, S.A. Miller opened a funeral home in Liberal, and until 1982, the mortuary continued to operate under the family it was named after.

That year, Miller's grandson, Wayne Miller, would sell the business to Jim Kauffman. Kauffman continued to serve the community as the owner of Miller Mortuary until his death in 2012.

Kauffman's wife, Vicky, has kept the business since her husband's death with the help of Gene McElroy, and on April 1, with the purchase of Miller Mortuary, McElroy became the official owner.

The new owner graduated from Liberal High School and would later move to Dallas, where he would receive an associate of science degree in mortuary arts from the Dallas Institute of Funeral Service.

While in mortuary school, McElroy was a director's assistant at Restland Funeral Home in Dallas, one of the largest funeral homes in the nation, serving about 3,000 families a year.

McElroy would later serve his apprenticeship at Turrentine Jackson Morrow in McKinney, Texas, the largest family-owned funeral home in North Texas.

McElroy said serving at the larger funeral homes has given him the experience that most

small-town funeral directors rarely get to see.

“For the most part, it can be a lot slower paced,” he said of working in a smaller community such as Liberal. “With a small operation, we do it all. I’ll do anything from meeting with families to the preparation of the bodies to the dressing all the way out to mowing grass and pulling weeds.”

McElroy said larger funeral homes normally run a tighter ship than Miller, but many of them have a profit-driven mentality.

“They train you how to use emotions to sell a higher priced casket,” he said. “With a small funeral home, we try to work within their budget. There’s a little more flexibility when it comes to that.”

McElroy said many larger funeral homes would not perform a service unless the complete bill was paid up front.

“On two occasions, we actually held a funeral off for 30 minutes waiting for a payment,” he said. “Here in a smaller town, you have the ability to work with your clients a little more.”

McElroy, however, did say there are cons to owning a smaller operation.

“Working at a smaller funeral home such as this, we’re on call all the time, 24/7, 365 days a year, holidays, birthdays, Christmas, everything,” he said.

When Jim died, McElroy said he and Vicky used his funeral director license, and his assistance, to keep Miller Mortuary operating.

“In the state of Kansas, you have to have a licensed funeral director to hold a status of a license,” he said. “I started meeting with more families and helping her out.”

McElroy said being a mortician was something he chose to do in high school.

“I helped Tom Kitch out a little bit,” he said. “It’s a very fulfilling career. You’re helping people.”

After his time in Texas, McElroy would return to Liberal to work under the director of what was then known as Kitch Funeral Home, and in 2000, after that funeral home was sold to Rick and Melissa Brenneman, McElroy became an agent for Shelter Insurance.

Even though he was no longer employed as a full-time funeral director, his services were used on many occasions by funeral homes in and around Liberal between 2000 and 2012.

As for the services Miller Mortuary provides, McElroy said he works in an area where traditional services are a definite standard.

“You do embalming,” he said. “You have a viewing. You have the visitation. You have the service. You have communal at the graveside.”

McElroy said he would like to start being more individualized with funerals.

“It’s all about honoring the individual that lived,” he said. “If I’m going to try to do anything that’s a little bit different, I want to try to individualize.”

McElroy said he has adjusted prices just a bit.

“I dropped prices in some areas,” he said. “Ideally, I want to come in, and I would love to be able to slash prices on everything. Unfortunately, yes, a funeral can be very expensive, but on the other side of the coin, it’s all relative. It’s expensive to what.”

McElroy said obligations prevent him from lowering prices too much, though.

“Ultimately, I have bills to pay too,” he said. “I’ve got to pay my utilities. I’ve got to pay my overhead. I’ve got to pay for my caskets. I’ve got a large note to pay each month. I am trying to look at other avenues. If I could find the merchandise that is the same quality or a little bit better for a lower cost, I would love to do that.”

With tighter budgets seeming to be the norm in today’s day and age, McElroy said he will work with families on the costs of a funeral.

“I don’t care if a person’s making \$30,000 a year or \$130,00 a year,” he said. “Everybody’s budgets are tighter. If we’re dealing with tighter budgets, maybe there’s ways to see if we can cut costs a little bit.”

One price McElroy did drop was that of cremation.

“I think for the amount of work that’s done and what’s provided, I dropped our overall cremation price about \$400,” he said. “In this area, it’s a very fair rate.”

McElroy added that ultimately, funeral directors have to see a need in working with a consumer’s budget.

“If it costs this and all they can afford is that, we’ve got to work with that,” he said. “It’s not going to do me any good, it’s not going to do them any good to try to sell them everything else. We would approach each individual’s circumstance differently. It’s what you do in a small town.”

As for his insurance agency, McElroy said he will continue to be involved with Shelter as well as Miller Mortuary.

“The thing about the location here is it’s just right around the block,” he said. “I can walk from here to there in about two and a half minutes. I will still be active in the insurance agency.”

Since the purchase of the funeral home, McElroy said he has had much support from the Liberal community. He said he is humbled by that support, and many people tell him about

services the mortuary performed for their family and friends.

“It’s neat to hear the history,” he said. “That’s what is so unique about Miller’s.”

One thing McElroy will not be changing about the funeral home, though, is its name.

“It will still be Miller Mortuary,” he said. “In 2017, Miller Mortuary will celebrate its 100th anniversary in Liberal. I may update the name, but as long as I’m here, it’s still going to be Miller’s. There’s no way I can change that heritage. You can’t do that. As long as I’m at the helm, it’ll still be Miller’s.”

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