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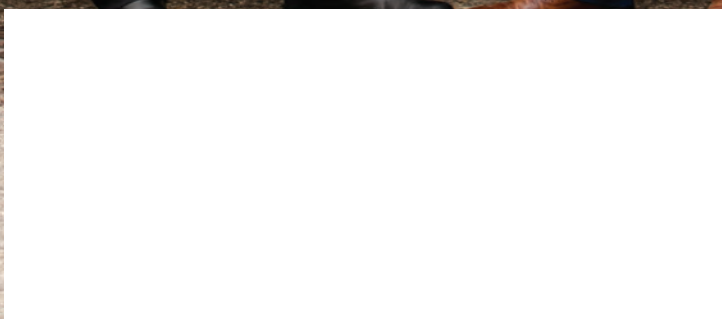
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Funeral Director

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Fathers
& Sons



Joseph Eugene Pray, Joseph Ernest Pray & Joseph Tyler Pray

Pray Funeral Home | Charlotte, Michigan

Joseph Eugene Pray was born to be a funeral director.

“My parents were funeral directors and I grew up in the funeral home,” the 91-year-old said. “From the time I could walk and talk and carry a chair, I was helping out, and the older I got, the more involved I got.”

There was never a question what Joe Sr., as he’s often called, was going to do with his life.

“I never thought about doing anything else but funeral service,” he said. “It’s what I was born to do ... it’s a really rewarding career.”

Pray Funeral Home traces its start in funeral service back to 1921 when the father-and-son team of Ernest G. and Myron E. Pray purchased an existing furniture store and “Undertaking” company in downtown Charlotte, Michigan. The partnership was built on the philosophy of “treating families we serve as if they were our own family.”

Times may have changed, but that philosophy continues on with his son and grandson, Joe Sr. is quick to point out. “Helping people is what we do, what we’ve always done and what we will continue to do. We try to make things as easy for families as possible, helping them every step of the way ... including afterward. We’ve never looked at it as aftercare ... it’s more helping people who are part of our community, our friends.”

While Joe Sr. has taken a step back in recent years – although he can be found in the funeral home most mornings – he is proud of those who came before him – and the generations following in his footsteps.

Like many kids who grew up with funeral director parents, Joe Ernest Pray – Joe Sr.’s son – did a variety of jobs around the funeral home growing up.

“I mowed the lawn and washed the cars as a way to earn money,” Joe E., as he’s often referred to, said. “But in

the back of my mind, I really wanted to be a race car driver.”

While he didn’t become a race car driver, Joe E. did join the family business in 1979 after graduating from Wayne State University School of Mortuary Science.

“Although I checked out a couple of other majors for curiosity’s sake, I decided the funeral business was what I wanted to do,” he said.

At no time, Joe E. is quick to add, did he feel pressured to become the fourth generation of Prays to work at the firm.

“It was my decision to become a funeral director,” he said. “My parents gave me the freedom to choose ... but I can tell you they were proud when I chose funeral service.”

Working with his father is a gift, Joe E. said.

“The best part of working with my dad is seeing him every day,” he said. “My dad’s a great person, he has a great outlook on life and he’s a great funeral director.”

It’s equally wonderful, Joe E. adds, to be able to work side-by-side with his son, Joseph Tyler Pray, aka Tyler.

“It’s a gift being able to work with Tyler,” Joe E. said. “He really understands the business, is open to trying new things and has great compassion for the families we serve. He makes a father proud.”

Father and son see eye-to-eye on most things, Joe E. said, and when there are differing opinions, Tyler will express his point of view and give examples of “why this is the best way.”

It’s a family trait, Joe E. said with a laugh.

“When I came up with an idea that was different than my dad’s, he would always say, ‘Go ahead and do it, it’s your future,’” Joe E. said. “And I think I’ve probably said that exact thing to my son a time or two.”

Unlike his grandfather, Tyler didn’t have that certainty that he would one

day become a funeral director.

“Growing up around the funeral home was completely normal for me,” the 37-year-old said. So normal, in fact, that Tyler wrote an essay about embalming as part of a high school English assignment. “I read it to the class and everyone was interested in what my family did,” he said. “I even submitted it to the NFDA magazine ... and they published it.”

While he didn’t know what his career path was going to be, Tyler did know he would not be going straight to mortuary school. Rather, he attended Kalamazoo College, where he obtained a bachelor’s degree in English, studied in Thailand for about a year and spent some time in New York.

It was then that Tyler made the decision to attend mortuary school, graduating from his grandfather and father’s alma mater in 2006. “I really enjoyed mortuary school, but I still wasn’t sure,” he said.

So, with his father’s blessing, Tyler headed to Florida, where he had long dreamed of making a career doing barefoot waterskiing. “My dad was like ‘go, try it,’” Tyler said. “He was so supportive. I never felt pressure to be in funeral service. It was more important for him that I did all the things I dreamed of doing.”

His dreams, though, eventually brought him back to Charlotte – and Pray Funeral Home.

“It was my decision ... I felt a sense of stewardship, not only to this business but also to my family and the community,” Tyler said. “I wanted to be a part of sustaining it.”

And while there can be struggles and differences of opinion, the good thing about working with family is “we can make things happen ... this is home base and it allows us a lot of freedom,” Tyler said.

For the Prays, those changes have included an emphasis of a funeral being the celebration of the treasured



The Pray family (from left) Joseph Ernest Pray, Joseph Tyler Pray, Joseph Anders Pray and Joseph Eugene Pray, in front of a 1930 Meteor Ambulance owned by Pray Funeral Home. (Photo credit: Amanda Lipsey/Henwood Studio)

memories of a person's life. Families are encouraged to bring in touchstone items, photos or mementos that have stories connected with them, to recall the memories of the deceased.

"We have developed our talents and the tools to create these meaningful experiences to help a family draw support from the community," Joe E. said. "What we're able to create is an inspirational – even transformational – celebration of life."

Joe E. points to a 2017 service that featured a full-sized pool table, putting green, and bowling balls and pins, to celebrate the life of Evan "Drew" Adams.

"The uniquely personal service provided guests the chance to remember and celebrate a one-of-a-kind man," Joe E. said. "Not all services are going

to be that elaborate, but all lives should be celebrated."

Watching his son and grandson grow the business makes Joe Sr. happy.

"Everybody has their own ideas ... and you have to keep things moving forward," he said. "My dad and my grandpa did, and I did things that I thought was improving the business. Tyler and Joe E. feel the same way."

And while those changes may come with some disagreements, "at the end of the day, we're family and it's going to stay that way," Joe Sr. pointed out.

It's a gift to work with family, especially his family, Tyler added. "I've been so lucky to learn from my father and grandfather," he said. "Many people have said, and I have to agree, is the he is the picture of a funeral

director should be. He lives every minute of his life to the fullest, and he's done exactly what he wanted to do being a funeral director."

With Joe Sr. still going strong at 91, the 61-year-old Joe E. isn't even thinking about retirement. "If I stay healthy, I plan on being here for a good long time," he said. "Where else would I go?"

Which is good news, considering there's a sixth generation of Prays, lurking in the wings, Tyler and Dana Pray's boys, Anders, 5, and Alden, 6 months.

"I would love it if either boy followed in my footsteps," Tyler said. "But it's going to be their decision, just like it was my father's decision and my decision. We're just going to have to wait and see." •

The Pray family (from left): Joseph Eugene Pray, Joseph Anders Pray, Joseph Tyler Pray and Joseph Ernest Pray.
(Photo credit: Amanda Lipsey/Henwood Studio)

