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## **Innovation, Inspiration and Impact: NFDA 2025 Convention Unites Funeral Professionals in Chicago**

Brookfield, Wis. – The 2025 National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) International Convention & Expo brought together funeral service professionals from around the world for four unforgettable days of learning, connection and inspiration. Held October 26–29 in Chicago, Illinois, the event invited attendees to explore new ideas, celebrate innovation and reaffirm the compassion at the heart of the profession.

From powerful keynote speakers and dynamic workshops to the world’s largest funeral service exposition, the NFDA Convention delivered an experience that blended education, creativity and community in equal measure. The atmosphere throughout McCormick Place reflected the energy and optimism of a profession dedicated to excellence and continuous growth.

As the funeral service profession’s premier gathering, the 2025 Convention once again set the standard for collaboration and leadership, proving that when funeral professionals come together, the result is transformation.

Total attendance for the 2025 Convention was 5,964 (3,625 participants and 2,339 exhibitor representatives). This included 393 international attendees from 39 countries and territories. The Expo Hall featured 357 exhibiting companies, filling 85,100 square feet of exhibit space.

### **Education and Inspiration**

The 2025 Convention offered more than 30 education sessions and five pre-convention seminars, each carefully curated by the NFDA Convention Education Task Force to address evolving consumer expectations, workforce challenges and the latest innovations shaping funeral service.

Participants explored topics such as new forms of disposition (including alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction), the integration of artificial intelligence, compassion fatigue, consumer communication, and strategies for strengthening business operations and marketing. Traditional subjects such as embalming, restorative art and cremation were also featured prominently.

During the Opening General Session on Monday, October 27, NFDA CEO Christine Pepper unveiled [“When Words Matter: A Funeral Director’s Guide to Clear and Compassionate Communication,”](#) a guidebook based on groundbreaking NFDA research designed to help funeral professionals bridge the language gap between themselves and the families they serve.

Based on research with more than 1,100 consumers, the study revealed stark differences in how families understand and use terms commonly used by funeral directors, such as funeral, memorial service and celebration of life. The guide invites funeral service professionals to reflect on how they communicate with grieving families and offers practical strategies to strengthen trust and clarity. Pepper announced that “When Words Matter” is available free of charge to funeral professionals at [NFDA.org/Research](https://www.nfda.org/research).

That same spirit of reflection and growth continued throughout the week as attendees were inspired by two powerful keynote speakers who reminded them of the importance of passion and curiosity in their work. Felipe Gomez, sponsored by National Guardian Life, opened the convention with “Virtuoso: Living the Virtuoso Life,” an engaging experience blending live piano music with lessons on leadership, innovation and excellence. Gomez cautioned against becoming too comfortable or dispassionate in daily work, urging attendees to “play with passion,” because other people will respond to your energy. He invited participants to reflect on their work and consider whether they are simply playing the notes or truly playing with heart.

On Wednesday, October 29, Crystal Washington, sponsored by Carriage, echoed that theme in her closing keynote, “Futureproof Yourself: Innovate and Thrive in Times of Uncertainty.” She encouraged attendees to approach their work and the world with renewed curiosity, to cultivate a childlike sense of wonder, and to never stop asking, “What’s that?” and “Why?”. In doing so, she reminded funeral professionals that curiosity and passion are the keys to embracing change with creativity and confidence.

## **The Expo Hall: Innovation in Action**

The 2025 NFDA Expo Hall once again served as the global hub of innovation in funeral service. Attendees explored the latest products and technologies from exhibitors worldwide, networked with industry leaders and experienced firsthand how innovation is shaping the future of care for grieving families.

Among the most celebrated moments was the announcement of the 2025 NFDA Innovation Award during Monday’s Opening General Session. [This year’s winner was Grace by Afterword](#), the profession’s first AI assistant designed specifically for funeral homes. Grace automates routine administrative tasks, supports personalized communication and helps funeral directors focus on serving families with compassion and efficiency.

Healing Path Cemetery, a grief-focused engagement system, earned second place, while Passare – AI Scanner, a handwriting-recognition tool that digitizes vital forms, took third. NFDA extends its gratitude to ASD – Answering Service for Directors for sponsoring the award and the distinguished panel of judges who selected this year’s winners.

## **Artistry and Excellence**

A major highlight of the convention was NFDA’s first-ever Restorative Art Technical Showcase, where eight talented practitioners demonstrated advanced reconstructive techniques on practice models before a live audience in the Expo Hall. The competition’s winner, Hannah Bugos of Spearfish, South Dakota, was honored for her exceptional skill, artistry and technical precision.

NFDA thanks judges Glyn Tallon, Vernie Fountain and Karl Wenzel for their expertise and the competition sponsor, Post Mortem Restorative Cosmetics, for helping showcase the craft, care and creativity that define restorative art in funeral service. NFDA also thanks The Dodge Co., Frigid Fluid and Kelco for additional product and supply support.

NFDA’s fourth annual Funeral Face-Off trivia challenge, sponsored by Precoa, once again brought high-energy competition and plenty of laughs to the Expo Hall. Before the Convention, teams from across the country competed in preliminary rounds of funeral service trivia, leading to three finalists: “Return Homies” (Katey Houston, Mandy Stafford and Travis Locke); “Grave Expectations” (Kevin O’Connell, Jacob Wittrock and Amy Hart); and “Team Steve” (Steve Reynolds, Melany Artajo and Audrey Fictum).

In the end, the “Return Homies” reclaimed the 2025 Precoa Cup, followed by “Grave Expectations” in second place and “Team Steve” in third. This fan-favorite event once again proved that a little friendly

competition is the perfect way to celebrate knowledge, teamwork and fun in funeral service. In addition to the support from Precoa, NFDA thanks Tuesday Evening Publications for providing prizes for Funeral Face-off.

## **Celebrating Service, Connection and Community**

The 2025 NFDA International Convention & Expo offered countless opportunities to celebrate the people, passion and purpose that define funeral service.

The week began on Sunday, October 26, in unforgettable style with NFDA's Welcome Party, sponsored by Batesville and Legacy. Held at Chicago's iconic House of Blues, the roaring 1920s-themed event transported guests to the Prohibition era, complete with live jazz, tarot readers, typewriter poets, whiskey tastings and high-energy dance performances. Attendees enjoyed small bites, cocktails and Charleston dance lessons as they connected with colleagues from throughout the country and around the globe. With glittering flapper dresses, pinstripes and fedoras filling the room, it was truly the party of the decade and a joyful start to the week.

The celebration of excellence continued Monday, October 27, with the NFDA All-Star Recognition Ceremony, honoring funeral professionals who exemplify leadership, innovation and dedication to serving families and their communities. The ceremony recognized: the 2025 NFDA Pursuit of Excellence Award recipients; NFDA Green Funeral Practice Certificate holders; NFDA Cremation Certification designees; NFDA Certified Preplanning Consultants; Funeral Service Foundation scholarship recipients; 2025–26 NFDA National Emerging Leaders Program participants; 2025 Meet the Mentors participants; the 2025 NFDA Inspiration Award recipient; and Academy of Professional Funeral Service Practice Certified Funeral Service Practitioners. From emerging leaders to seasoned professionals, the ceremony shone a spotlight on the passion and commitment that elevates the profession and inspires others to pursue excellence.

One of the week's most moving moments came on Tuesday, October 28, during the Service of Remembrance, sponsored by Messenger and Tukios, and featuring Chicago's historic Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Choir. The service honored funeral service professionals and loved ones who died during the past year, celebrating their lives and legacies with music and reflection.

The sermon, delivered by Pastor Darryl Person of Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church, drew inspiration from the hymn "Peace in the Valley" and the city's distinction as the birthplace of gospel music. Person, the son of a funeral director, spoke eloquently about grieving families "walking through the valley," and reminded attendees that they are called to walk with them — to offer comfort and companionship on the journey toward healing.

As the final hymn during the Service of Remembrance faded, attendees gave generously, raising \$5,000 for Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church, a fitting reflection of the care and kindness that define funeral service.

On Tuesday evening, the spotlight turned to the next generation of professionals during the Young and New Funeral Professionals Networking Event at Lucky Strike Chicago. This energetic gathering combined bowling, arcade games, billiards, food and conversation in a relaxed atmosphere, giving newcomers to the profession the opportunity to connect, share experiences and build lasting relationships.

## **Compassion in Action: The NFDA Impact Zone**

The new NFDA Impact Zone, which was supported by the Funeral Service Foundation, provided meaningful opportunities for attendees to give back to Chicago.

On Monday, October 27, volunteers assembled 1,000 hygiene kits for individuals and families in need. The kits will be distributed through Bright Star, a local organization serving Chicago's most impoverished neighborhoods, with coordination from Chicago Cares.

Throughout the week, attendees also wrote letters of appreciation to veterans participating in upcoming Honor Flights to Washington, D.C. These heartfelt notes were sent to Honor Flight chapters in Chicago, Peoria and Southern Illinois and will be delivered to veterans during "Mail Call," a cherished moment on their journey home from visiting national memorials.

Funeral directors are among the most community-minded professionals in the world, and the Impact Zone reflects that enduring spirit of service. Whether building kits or writing letters, NFDA members once again demonstrated that compassion and care for communities are at the heart of everything they do.

## Memories of Chicago

Professional photographers were on hand to capture the spirit and excitement of the 2025 NFDA Convention. Photos can be viewed online at [NFDA.org/ChicagoPics](https://www.nfda.org/ChicagoPics); attendees may download as many photos as they like at no charge.

Additionally, the All-Star Recognition and Installation of the 2025-26 NFDA Board of Directors were livestreamed on the association's Facebook page. Recordings of these events can be found online, [Facebook.com/NationalFuneralDirectorsAssociation/Live Videos](https://www.facebook.com/NationalFuneralDirectorsAssociation/Live_Videos).

## Looking Ahead: Charlotte 2026

The 145th NFDA International Convention & Expo will take place October 25 through 28, 2026, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Home to the NASCAR Hall of Fame and known for its warm hospitality and dynamic blend of Southern charm and modern innovation, Charlotte promises another unforgettable experience of learning, networking and inspiration.

## Sponsors

NFDA thanks its 2025 International Convention & Expo sponsors for their generous support:

- **Medallion:** National Guardian Life
- **Black Diamond:** Homesteaders Life Company
- **Platinum:** Carriage Services, Federated Insurance
- **Titanium:** Tribute Technology
- **Gold:** Batesville; Inman Shipping/Travel Plan by Inman; Legacy; Love Urns; Physicians Mutual; Precoa; TruStage;
- **Silver:** ASD – Answering Service for Directors; C&J Financial; Foundation Partners; Heartland; Implant Recycling; Johnson Consulting Group; The Messenger Company; Post Mortem Restorative Cosmetics; Ring Ring Marketing; Tukios; Ultimate Canine
- **Bronze:** Argent Trust; Aurora Payments, CareCredit; ClearPoint; International Injury Lawyers; Doric; Eagle's Wings Air; Fortitude; funeral365; Funeral Service Credit Union; Global Atlantic; Keith Merrick Co.; Madelyn Co.; Matthews; Nomis Publications Inc.; Passare; PlotBox; Sympathy Brands; Trigard; USA Today Networks

## About NFDA

NFDA is the world's leading and largest funeral service association, with 20,000 individual members who represent more than 11,000 funeral homes in the United States and 49 countries around the world. NFDA is the trusted leader, beacon for ethics and the strongest advocate for the profession. NFDA is the association of choice because it offers funeral professionals comprehensive educational

resources, tools to manage successful businesses, guidance to become pillars in their communities and the expertise to foster future generations of funeral professionals. NFDA is headquartered in Brookfield, Wis., and has an office in Washington, D.C. For more information, visit [NFDA.org](https://www.nfda.org).

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*Editor's Note: High-resolution photos from the 2025 NFDA Convention can be downloaded at no charge at [NFDA.org/ChicagoPics](https://www.nfda.org/ChicagoPics). Please credit the International Center for Documentary Arts as the source of the photos.*