



## FD Chat #004 - Pet Loss with Thomas A. Parmalee

**Nancy Burban:** Hi. I'm Nancy Burban, your host for "Funeral Directors Chat," a podcast providing funeral professionals with insight to current industry topics, news, and trends. Today we'll be discussing pet funeral services and the outlook that it has on the funeral services industry. I'd like to welcome our esteemed guest, Thomas Parmalee. He's the executive editor at Kates-Boylston Publications, which is a division of UCG, and it's focused on reporting news and providing analysis to funeral service professionals.

Thomas also oversees the "Funeral Service Insider," and that's the most popular newsletter in the country for funeral professionals. He's also a marketing copywriter at "iUniverse," and he's an award-winning journalist, and he has written many articles on pet funeral services. Welcome, Thomas.

**Thomas A. Parmalee:** Thank you, Nancy, for having me.

**Nancy:** Well, thank you for being with us. First, Thomas, I guess our listeners would like to know a little bit about your background, and what led you to write for the funeral services industry?

**Thomas:** Well, I first started working with funeral homes as an obituary column writer at "The Times of Trenton." I was working a bunch of different jobs to pay my way through school, and that was one of them. I sort of took a break from funeral service [laughs] after that. I worked as a teacher. I worked for Bloomberg News on the financial journalism side, and several years later, I

ended up getting a job at Kates-Boylston Publications. It brought me full-circle back to reporting on funeral service again, and I've been here about four years now.

Nancy. Wow, that's great. So you write for the publications as well as edit them, is that right?

**Thomas:** Yes, that's correct. I was initially hired to work with "American Funeral Director," and "American Cemetery" magazines. Those are two national publications that we do, and then I was given the opportunity to take over "Funeral Service Insider," which is a weekly newsletter that goes out nationwide to funeral professionals across the country. I've been in that role for about two years now, and I still help out with the magazines, so I have my hand in a lot of different things.

**Nancy:** Yes, you do. I was reading a copy, I think from 2007, and being a pet lover, I was very interested in the pet funeral services industry, and I read a really great article that you had written. It was about how a funeral director was trying to expand their services and they were actually building a doggie park. They had a little pet cemetery, and they were offering actually pet wellness services. Do you remember that article?

**Thomas:** Yes, I do. That was Hillcrest-Flynn in Pennsylvania, and Thomas Flynn is one of the leaders of that company, and they've actually opened up an entire consulting firm called Pet Service Advisers, which basically helps funeral homes and others interested in getting in this field to sort of brain storm and develop a business plan. He's done a really great job in coordinating his human business and pet business so that both sort of feed off each other. From my talks with Thomas and the other people at his company, he really sees this as a really growing business, and it's really helping him drive his human business well.

That's a really interesting dynamic if you can get it going. It's sort of like the Holy Grail, I guess, for funeral homes as far as on the human side is. Can this pet service business actually supplement their human business and help that grow? So, a lot of people are trying to figure out how to do that, and Hillcrest-Flynn is one of the businesses that seems to have figured out that riddle.

**Nancy:** Well, I think it's very interesting, and, of course, man's best friend, why wouldn't you want to be buried with man's best friend? I think it's very important to spend as much care and attention on your pets, because they are members of your family, as you do on the human members of your family who pass on. So, that brings us into a segue. Let's chat about pet funeral services, Thomas. Do death care professionals really take this niche seriously?

**Thomas:** I think it depends on who you ask, and it might also depend on what part of the country you work in. In some rural parts, where maybe animals are more working dogs and outside-type animals, maybe there isn't that sort of mindset to have these funerals for them, or these big memorial services. People might just end up burying them in the back yard, and it doesn't mean that they don't mean as much to them. But I think particularly in the cities where there's a shortage of land, where people really aren't allowed to bury their pets in their backyard because of zoning regulations, and maybe where it's just a little less taboo, pet funerals seems to be growing more in those areas.

It also depends on the funeral home and their mindset to this as well. Some people I talk to see this as a little bit of something that families might take the wrong way, if you also serve pets, and they think that might be a detriment to the business and a pitfall, because they don't want to be seen treating pets on par with humans. I think that's a really valid concern.

But there are other businesses that really have this as part of their business in the same building, and they've reported no lash back at all, and the families that they serve might really appreciate this, that they're serving all members of the family.

So, I don't think there really is a right answer. It just might depend on where you are, how your customers and families feel about it, and how you position the business and everyone... These are answers that each funeral home or each business sort of looking to get into this has to answer for themselves.

**Nancy:** You're right about that, and I think you're right about a community that cares...if your community cares about their pets then that will resonate, I guess, with the people who work for the funeral home, and they'll convey that to their clients as well. How significant might this be to funeral home's potential earnings?

**Thomas:** It can be very significant, regardless of whether or not you open it up as a stand-alone business or as part of an existing funeral home. There are different ways you can go about it. You can open up a separate business, a separate location, a pet crematory, and so forth, or you could have it as part of your existing business. But some of these businesses are literally handling memorial services or cremations at the very least for thousands of pets, sometimes 1,000-2,000 pets, and normally for a human business, the norm for a small firm is maybe 200 calls. Because there are so many more pets, there are so many more potential families out there to serve.

On the downside, however, the average revenue per call is going to be a lot less for a pet. You can have a simple cremation and something like that for maybe \$300 or so, but if you multiply that times 1,000 or 2,000, you see that can be a significant revenue stream there. And also there really is no limit to the amount that you can spend.

I think I read something a while ago about Leona Helmsley, when she died, building a mausoleum for her pet and doing all sorts of grandiose things. Now, a normal person probably wouldn't do that, but you do have people who are very attached to their pets and rightfully so.

They're not hesitant to spend \$1,000, \$2,000, maybe even \$3,000 to memorialize their pet in the way that they feel is right, and that respects the relationship that they had. It could be significant.

The other part that is sometimes hard to quantify is if you're also a human funeral home, and that's not always the case, but if you have a human business serving these pet families you can promote a lot of goodwill, and they're more willing to pre-plan with you in some cases.

You're also sometimes opening up some new areas since you're serving a larger geographic area if you serve the pet family in an area that you normally don't serve, they might think about you when it comes time to take care of a human member of their family.

It really depends on your business model and how you run it, but it can be quite significant. It's nothing to not take seriously.

**Nancy:** Very good point, Thomas, and I really appreciate the part about the goodwill, because I know if my pet passed away and I used the pet funeral services and they took care and attention to that service, I certainly would consider if I had a human loss in my family going back to that same provider, or possibly asking them for a referral. So it's also a good networking service, wouldn't you say?

**Thomas:** Absolutely, and I think you asked me about Hillcrest-Flynn earlier in Pennsylvania, and the things they're doing are just amazing, with the dog park, pet wellness classes. And any business can do this; a number of them do. Just as we have other types of services for human families, be it grief support groups and that kind of thing, a business that gets involved in the pet side can do all those types of things as well.

And it really does generate a lot of good will. It shows that you care about serving all members of their family if that's the type of model you decide to pursue.

**Nancy:** You spend a great deal of your life with your pet, and when they do pass on, you want to memorialize them in the same way that you would memorialize any member of your family.

**Thomas:** Absolutely. United Priority Distributors, they make a number of products, and they're well respected, and then a number of other companies do as well. If you just go to any trade convention, NFDA, ICCFA, CANA, and you walk the floor, you will see booth after booth featuring pet products that serve bereaved pet parents. You'll also see a number of educational sessions that seem to be increasing as the business as a whole recognizes the potential on the business side to make money and to also to do good things for your community. Just look around and you'll see how important this is, how much of a growing field this is.

**Nancy:** You're absolutely right, especially for children. Children need to have that kind of closure, and not that their pet and member of their family is gone, where did they go? They need to have the same kind of closure that they would have if any other member passed on.

**Thomas:** Yes, that is true. It's interesting, because as a side project of mine I'm working with Coleen Ellis. She opened the first stand-alone pet funeral home in the country and operates Two Hearts Pet Loss Center, and we're actually working on a book together about pets and bereavement and all the various options open to people. It's interesting because the majority of books out there right now actually do focus on just what you said, how the deaths of pets most often affect children. But they also affect everybody else too. There are older people, adults, people whose children who have left home. Normal people who just get so torn and upset over the loss of a pet.

In many cases, maybe they're not married, maybe they don't have kids, and the type of emotional support and friendship that they get from their pet or pets is very real. It's something that people are recognizing more and more. They don't feel maybe ashamed about that anymore.

They really feel, as society has come to accept pets more as members of the family, that they want to grieve and mourn their deaths just as they would a human friend. So it is an interesting development.

**Nancy:** How are the National Death Care Associations, like the NFDA and the ICCFA, how are they responding to this growing niche in death care?

**Thomas:** The ICCFA just created a subdivision of its association called the Pet Loss Professionals Alliance, and that's actually headed by Coleen, who I just mentioned.. and Bill Remkus is also helping out with that as well. The NFDA, it has regular sessions, and webinars, and that type of thing about how to get involved in this.

And then CANA, the Cremation Association of North America recently announced a partnership with the International Association of Pet Cemeteries, and they are now going to be working together to try to bring forth this mission to a larger audience and to try to get the word out as to how to best serve pet owners and that kind of thing.

Regardless of what association you're allied with, what group you feel most comfortable working with, the point is, is that there are a number of death care associations getting involved with this. There's a number of resources out there where people can go to for information.

One is not necessarily better than the other, but just find a group that you're comfortable working with and seek them out for information.

**Nancy:** Do you see any obstacles or any push-back to funeral homes for other death care professionals who are serving pets?

**Thomas:** There is. There are some funeral homes that really don't want to get involved in this, and that's not necessarily a wrong thing. As I said before, it might be based on your market, on your business, on your community. But some people really feel like it would almost denigrate their existing human business if they were to start serving pets, because they feel like that would be putting pets on a par with people and they feel like that would be a bad thing, that that's not something they really want to promote.

On the other hand, like I said, there are a number of people and a number of communities where this really hasn't been a problem and where people actually appreciate their funeral homes being more inclusive of pet family members and so forth. It just really depends on your viewpoint, I think.

**Nancy:** Yes. So it depends on the community that you're serving. And I think it would actually make funeral homes stand out from other funeral homes in the community. I know in my town, I live in a small town, and there are eight funeral homes and there aren't that many deaths. I think if one had an adjunct service that serviced pets, I think that would be the funeral service of my choice.

**Thomas:** That's a good point, and as I noted previously, a lot of this is about developing relationships with people. Serving pets can be a great way for a funeral home or a business to get to people and develop a relationship with them when they're in their 20's and their 30's and their

40's before they're really thinking about pre-planning, before they might typically be having to arrange the services for their parents.

Because, as you know, a lot of younger people really love their pets and really cherish their pets. It's a way to not only make some money on the pet side, but to develop those kinds of relationships early on so that you might be the first funeral home that they think of when they do have an at-need situation on the human side.

**Nancy:** Now, let's talk about the costs. What type of costs are typical for these types of services for the consumer?

**Thomas:** It can vary greatly. Just a simple pet cremation, if you want an individual pet cremation with the cremated remains returned to you, you're probably looking at a couple of hundred; a few hundred dollars. But there's just such a wide range because, for instance, someone who goes to a veterinarian, they might not really choose to have an individual cremation. They might not choose to get an urn, but they still might opt for some kind of service, maybe a group cremation or something where they at least know that the remains of their pet were treated honorably and with respect, but they might not opt for a full service.

And there might be another person, who you know, chooses a product from a supplier, an urn; maybe a stone with an image of their pet engraved onto it; maybe they choose to bring the pet back in an urn and keep it on their mantle, or maybe they want the pet buried at a pet cemetery.

So then you have, not only the cost of the cremation, maybe the cost of a container, but then also space in a pet cemetery. Another interesting thing is, a lot of people these days actually want to be buried with their pets. It depends on the state where you're in.

Some states have rules against it, other states don't. Some states they don't really say one way or the other, but you can, for instance, depending where you are actually be buried with your pet and have your pet's remains interred with you, and that's another option that's really important to some people.

**Nancy:** Mm-hmm. What states, I mean you're in New Jersey, I'm in the New York metro area, so I know that on Long Island there's a big pet cemetery and I'm not quite sure about the laws. Do you know what the laws are in our area of the woods?

**Thomas:** I know in Pennsylvania you can be buried with your pet, but it really varies. It's something that I think is probably going to become more prevalent as people bring this up. In a lot of places, I don't think they've ever really thought about this before so. I couldn't really tick off a state by state list, but that's something that a national association, if you went to them, you could seek guidance from them on. If you were, for instance, maybe a cemetery owner who was interested in marketing a people and pet section.

Where people could be buried together with their pets in the same section, which you know that is something that some cemeteries are doing. So you just, you've really just got to make sure that your state allows that and do some investigation beforehand.

**Nancy:** So it's an excellent source of additional revenue for cemeteries as well.

**Thomas:** Oh absolutely, absolutely. You know, some human cemeteries are opening up pet sections or sections where people could be buried with their pets. Yeah, it's a new business dynamic for multiple businesses.

**Nancy:** Now, you know in the industry that we're in, you have pre-need and you have at-need. And of course, you know, a lot of funeral directors try to get increased business in the at-need section. Will we be seeing more advanced planning arrangements to handle deaths of pets, especially as they get older? I know I have a friend whose pet is eighteen years old and she actually is starting right now to look for arrangements for her pet because the end is near. Will we be seeing more of that?

**Thomas:** I think you will. I think you will. I actually, one of my friends is Quinn Egan, with Pre-Need Funeral Program. They're a very big pre-need marketing company out there and I was talking to him recently about this very issue. I don't think anyone would know better than Quinn as to the viability of pet pre-need. He seems to think that this will be a developing niche, not on the par with the human side, obviously, but he does think there's a niche to be played in that and I would agree with that. People spend huge amounts of money on their pets, to treat them for cancer, people are buying pet insurance.

People put their pets up at pet hotels and spend large amounts of money, so I think a lot of people would want to have the peace of mind to know that their pet is going to be taken care of in death beforehand.

Especially if, you never know if something happens to you and your pet outlives you, I mean a lot of people would like to know that there were arrangements made. So that the pet is going to be taken care of in the way they wanted the pet to be remembered and memorialized.

**Nancy:** What other types of products memorialize the death of a beloved pet? Because you see a lot in the other side of the industry, people have jewelry, and pieces of art, and all types of biodegradable urns, and all kinds of things. What other products help memorialize the death of a beloved pet?

**Thomas:** I think a rule of thumb would basically be to take whatever you see on the human side, and virtually you see all of that on the pet side as well. Maybe not as much of it, maybe not as many companies competing on the same space. You can get the cremated remains of a pet memorialized in a piece of jewelry that you wear around your neck or as earrings. You can get all different types of urn options for your pet. There's a big market for art memorializing a pet, so you can remember your pet.

I think there's some companies where they'll even use the cremated remains in the paint that they use to create a piece of art, so that you can actually have a piece of art with the cremated remains as part of the piece of art.

So people, there's so much creativity out there, there's so many ways to memorialize the pet beyond just the marker and the urn options, which are probably the two biggest things, but there are just so many options out there.

**Nancy:** No, that's pretty exciting. I didn't realize that the industry had grown that vastly. Now, there's such a huge increase in cremation on the human side. Is that also conveyed on the pet side? Do we see an increase in cremation for pets as well?

**Thomas:** Yeah, for pets you're talking, it's pretty much strictly cremation. I don't think anyone has a percentage breakdown but some people will bury the full bodies of their pets and put the pets in caskets and so forth. By and large most people choose to remember their pets by cremating them and that's just the vast majority so it's really, heavily cremation as far as pets.

**Nancy:** Mm-hmm. Now, what's the role of veterinarians in all of this? I mean they take care of pets while they're well and they help them on their journey through life and at end of life do veterinarians serve any part of this?

**Thomas:** Well, the best way to explain that would be to maybe give you an analogy. As hospices might be on the human side of the business, veterinarians are probably serving the same role on the pet side of the business, or even more so. They are the point of contact whereby funeral homes really get introduced to families or get referrals. A lot of funeral homes will just strictly work with veterinarians, more so than individuals.

They'll serve that veterinarian and do group cremations and really be the veterinarians go-to person to cremate the pets, and to dispose of the remains properly, and to work one-on-one with those families that do request something a little bit more.

Veterinarians are really the key factor in all of this for many communities. Funeral homes are just trying to figure out how this whole dynamic works and whether or not they want to focus on volume and work with the veterinarians, or if they want to focus more on the specialized service working with individuals, or a combination of both.

**Nancy:** So Thomas, should there be any legal concerns? For instance, what if you return the cremated remains of the wrong pet, can you actually be sued?

**Thomas:** That's a great question, Nancy. I actually wrote an article recently about that in Funeral Service Insider, and anyone is welcome to email me if they want to get a free copy of that. You just go to our website, [funeralserviceinsider.com](http://funeralserviceinsider.com) and click on the contact us page. Different states are handling that differently. Some states have had decisions on the books where they are actually awarding pain and suffering losses, punitive damage type of losses, for pet owners who have lost a pet wrongly.

These decisions might not always pertain directly to funeral service; some of them do. They are establishing the precedent that pet owners can pursue those types of damages when they are wronged, by a business or an individual, that affects their pet and that relationship.

So, just to be prudent, the same type of precautions that a business, a funeral home, takes on the human side, they really should think about taking the same types of precautions on the pet side as well.

We're talking about authorization forms, making sure that the right pet is cremated, and that the right remains are returned to a family. If you're really taking this as a serious part of your

business and it's an important part of your business, you really need to be thinking about all these things.

**Nancy:** Now, we discussed that you could actually, a funeral home, can open up as a stand-alone facility to serve only pets, or they can also do it as a part of their business of funeral home serving the general public. How does that work? Do they have a separate room for pet caskets, urns, and things like that? How does that work?

**Thomas:** Yeah, it really depends on the funeral home getting involved. You see different types of models. Some businesses are opening up, as you said, a pet branch of their service, with maybe a separate defined room to handle those types of arrangements. There might be a pet cremator unit within that same facility. Obviously, that unit would be used just for pets, but it might be alongside a unit that handles humans, and it's all maybe under the same roof.

Another business might go about it a different way and open up a separate off-site pet crematory. Maybe there's an attached office on that where they handle arrangements, if someone wants to actually hold a service.

So there really is no right answer. I can't tell you that this is the way you do it. Different people are pursuing different things depending on what makes the most sense for their business.

**Nancy:** So there are different business models, essentially?

**Thomas:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

**Nancy:** Now Thomas, where do you see all this headed in the future?

**Thomas:** In the future, I think this is still on the way up, as a short answer. I don't think that it has hit a ceiling, by any means. I think just looking at the fact that various associations are creating subdivisions to focus on this, is a testament to the fact that this is a growing business. Also, when you look at suppliers coming up with different products that serve this space, that also shows you that not just funeral homes, but funeral home suppliers also think that this is a business that has legs, that is going to keep growing.

So, by no means do I think that you'll ever see the majority of funeral homes having a pet operation. I'm talking more than 50 percent, but you might get to the point where you have maybe 20 percent of funeral homes that are involved in this.

I don't think anyone knows for sure right now, how many are actually involved, but it is growing. I think you can expect it to grow for probably another 10 years, at least, until you really hit that ceiling where you see it no longer increasing.

**Nancy:** Thomas, you and I have discussed this already about baby-boomers. They've kind of set the trend for personalization, everything has to be personalized. That's really been a huge trend on the human side of the business, and I would assume that when their pets pass away that the same kind of thinking would prevail.

**Thomas:** Yeah, I would agree with that. Boomers want things their way. They want it personalized. Another interesting thing to note, again, is that pets also are really popular and

really members of the family for even younger people. I just recently watched that movie Marley and Me, and if you've seen the movie, the characters in...

**Nancy:** I loved it.

**Thomas:** Yeah, it's a great movie, but the characters in the movie, they're young professionals in their 30's. Even people who are even younger than they are, pets can be such a big part of someone's life and it really doesn't matter how old you are. I think people who are getting involved in this business are typically pet lovers themselves. The funeral homes that are getting involved with this are owners that own a pet, or at least enjoy being with pets, and they realize, they know firsthand, how important a pet can be to somebody.

So, I think it's across all age groups, but you do make an important point, especially boomers, which is such a big part of the population. They really value getting things done the way they want.

**Nancy:** No, you make a great point, and it resonates with all age groups, and a lot of people are putting off having children to devote to their careers, because of the economy, obviously, and having to replace that need for nurturing within a family unit, obviously, a pet.

**Thomas:** Yes, yes. Pets can be... For instance, I think back when I went away to college and my mom all of a sudden got more attached to her dog, and every since the dog, whatever family dog she has, has been such a bigger part of her life then when I was there. I mean, we had dogs growing up, and pets, but I think she was more worried about taking care of the kids and the household. That's just an example. It sometimes depends on where you are in your life, and maybe as you get older, or you go to a different life stage, the pet can take a greater meaning in your life.

**Nancy:** Right.

**Thomas:** Who is anyone to scoff at that relationship or look down on it? The fact of the matter is that when a pet dies, for someone who really spends all their time with the pet and values the pet, it can be just a tremendous loss. These people, as part of the mourning process, it can really be beneficial for them to memorialize their pet, and to respect and pay tribute to that relationship that they had.

**Nancy:** Well, thank you, Thomas. I really enjoyed chatting with you about these pet funeral services. It's really opened up my mind to the new trends that are in the industry. I'm sure it's giving a lot of funeral directors listening to this podcast some ideas on how to increase their revenue, and also offer adjunct services to really brand their funeral home, and to extend the goodwill in their community. Is there anything else you'd like to add, or would you like to give the listeners some more information on how to contact you?

**Thomas:** Yeah, great, Nancy. Again, I just want to thank you for having me again. I really find this topic very interesting. If anyone wants to contact me, if they have any questions, or maybe want to learn a little bit more about Funeral Service Insider, or other publications, they're welcome to call me by phone at 732-730-2586. Anyone can visit the website, [funeralserviceinsider.com](http://funeralserviceinsider.com). If you go to the contact us page, you can send me an email. Again,

my name is Thomas Parmalee. I always enjoy discussing this topic with funeral service professionals, cemetery professionals, so anyone is welcome to contact me.

**Nancy:** Thanks so much Thomas. Have a great afternoon.

**Thomas:** Thank you. I appreciate it, Nancy.

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