

Ask The Expert

[Industry leader]

Billow: ‘Grow Things for Others’

Q&A with Charles M. “Chip” Billow, president and chief executive officer, Billow’s Funeral Homes & Crematory

It’s easy to understand why Charles M. “Chip” Billow, president and chief executive officer of Billow’s Funeral Homes & Crematory in Akron, Ohio, was recently named 2022 Ambassador of the Year – Funeral Service Professional by the Selected Educational Trust. While the fifth-generation funeral director had planned a career in education, “the more time I spent at the funeral home, I became acutely aware that funeral service was a very noble profession and almost sacred endeavor; as some clothed the naked, healed the sick, fed the hungry, there were those who needed to bury the dead.” We recently had the chance to talk with Billow about the Billow’s legacy, what it means to be a funeral director and his newly bestowed honor. *Patti Martin Bartsche reports*

Established in 2021, the Ambassador of the Year Awards Program honors individuals for their outstanding contributions to the mission and vision of the Selected Educational Trust, their personal and significant contributions to the independent funeral service profession, and their commitment to provide lifelong learning opportunities for all who work within the profession. Each year, two individuals, a funeral service professional and an industry partner leader (for 2022, it’s Kevin Czachor of ASD-Answering Service for Directors), are selected by the board of trustees to receive the award.



Charles M. “Chip” Billow

Billow’s Funeral Homes & Crematory has a long and storied history in the Akron area. What has contributed to the firm’s success?

I feel that among the most important contributions to our firm’s success has been the forward-thinking funeral directors in every era of ownership. It started with my great-great-grandfather. A memorial to “Captain George” is contained in an account of the 1893 annual meeting held by the Funeral Directors Association of Ohio. It

humorously reports that Billow entered the profession “upon the advice of some friends engaged in the undertaking business, which, in their opinion, required neither much worth, capital, nor brain, inasmuch as almost anyone could trim a coffin and back a hearse up to a house and from there drive to the cemetery.”

Billow, the report notes, did not like many of the practices he found

in the undertaking business and immediately began to push for new methods that became standards in the industry.

He is cited by the state’s organization as one of the “pioneers of a true and sensible funeral reform ... bringing him into favorable prominence and in a remarkably brief time to the head of his profession in Akron.” Credited as one of the organizers of the National Funeral Directors Association in 1882, he was also an early advocate of using the name “funeral director” instead of “undertaker.”

You are a fifth-generation funeral director; did you ever consider another career choice, or did you know early on that funeral service was your future?

Growing up in a “funeral family” always had benefits and challenges. Like many in my generation, there was always an opportunity to help out in some way. Whether that was pulling weeds and doing landscape work or being asked to put on a shirt, tie and suit and going to help on a service. I started working summers in high school and college and came to know many facets of

what funeral service was about.

I am an educator by choice. While attending the University of Akron I became interested in business and teaching and went on to get a degree in education, training to become an educational media specialist (a librarian). After doing student teaching and graduation, I became familiar with a career as a funeral director. The more time I spent at the funeral home I became acutely aware that funeral service was a very noble profession and almost sacred endeavor; as some clothed the naked, healed the sick, feed the hungry, there were those who needed to bury the dead.

Most of life's greatest lessons are learned from possessing a mind that thinks, having a heart that loves and

hands that serve others. Being among the dead teaches lessons about life that are unparalleled.

Billow's has always been a family-owned firm; what are the benefits of being independently owned?

There are many advantages to being a family owned and closely held business. As funny as it sounds, there are remarkable advantages to being your own boss and being able to surround yourself with trainable people who share a vision of excellence, embrace many mantras such as providing service to a standard that is unmatched. When you are independent you become responsible for your firm's collective success. You are your own nominating committee, governance committee,

operations committee, etc. It gives you an opportunity to embrace change for the betterment of the families we serve, not follow the recipe of an organization that might have a different reason for its existence.

When did Billow's join Selected Independent Funeral Homes?

We have been members since 1933. Membership in Selected Independent Funeral Homes is by invitation only, so it speaks to the point that "we" were deemed "worthy for consideration" by another top-tier funeral service organization.

What is Selected able to offer independently-owned funeral homes?



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I feel that among the greatest aspects of membership in Selected is the opportunity for dialog with our peers in small group settings such as our round table meetings and group and regional breakout sessions. My closest friends in funeral service are members of Selected; friendships grown and nurtured by gaining confidence that no problem is unique when you have a peer that has experienced a concern, worked through it, and has the ability to convey proper solutions that become best practices. Truly unique and invaluable to continued growth and improvement in serving families with unmatched focus on providing excellence.

You were elected as Selected's president in 2017. What did that mean for you?

I shouldn't have been elected president, but I was ... The Selected Board of Directors is composed of the most progressive, bright minded, forward-thinking peeps in the universe. It was an honor that I still wrestle with.

How has Selected evolved over time?

I feel that Selected has been remarkably fluid in its approach to all aspects of change in what funeral service is, what it was, and what it can/should be for the future. This is a tribute not only to the organization's employees and staff, but particularly its membership.

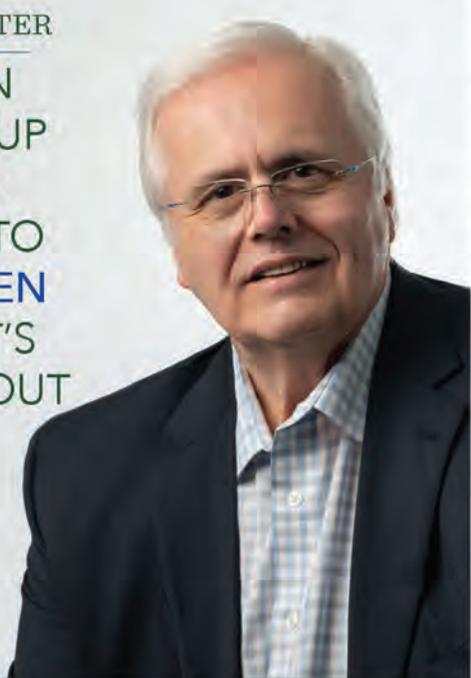
At one time Selected employed funeral directors and embraced leadership from the profession as an organization. That's not what Selected is now. It is a member-

driven organization that embraced association professionals to make things move forward in a new direction.

For Selected to continue to be relevant it is imperative that membership be more active in its activities and participation. Be a voice since you have a voice. Membership has responsibilities to do more than just pay dues and hold a spot. The organization is only as strong as the effort put forth by its membership since it is indeed a member-driven association.

Earlier this year it was announced that you had been chosen as Selected's 2022 Ambassador of the Year – Funeral Service Professional. What does that mean to you?

I'm quite frankly still wrestling with what this means. Other than



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being old and having been on the trail for a while, I guess it means that I've touched someone in a positive manner to be deemed worthy as an ambassador.

You are being honored as an individual who has “demonstrated an outstanding contribution to their profession and their communities.” Why has it been important for you to give back/contribute to the profession and community over the years?

The greatest influencers in my life have been funeral directors. Certainly, many family members, but as important have been the people in my study group – The Funeral Directors Symposium, which is composed of people who are all members of Selected Independent funeral homes. These people are all from the Tip O’Neil school of leadership ... All politics is local. Focus on your community and making it the best place to be, to come back to, or to be from if you live elsewhere.

It has always been my goal as an individual to plant seeds for trees under which you never want to seek the shade. Grow things for others. Do things for others. On a clear sunny day when you look out the window, don’t look at the reflection of yourself, look out at the horizon.

Your son and daughter are following in your footsteps ... what does the future of Billow’s and the funeral profession look like?

I’m counting my blessings by the bushel basket. I’m fortunate to be working with my two youngest children, my daughter, Stacy and my son, Nathanael. Stacy asked me upon graduation from The University of Akron if she could “shadow” some of the people from the funeral home to see if she might want to consider a career in funeral service. My heart was beating like a proud poppa as I said, YES. She is our youngest child

and the one who showed interest first. She was joined by her brother a couple years later after an initial job as a financial analyst at Ford Motor Co. They have been working side by side with our many wonderful funeral professionals for five years. Our firm’s future is bright and excelling with a zest and enthusiasm that is probably unmatched in its past.

What’s the best piece of advice you’ve received and from whom?

Oh my ... that’s a tough question. As a person who is running a 147-year-old business it’s very hard to not dwell upon the past with pride of those who have come before us. My grandpa used to say, “We’ve avoided hitting the icebergs, but we’ve encountered a lot of ice cubes that had the possibility of cooling our

progress.” Think for the future. Put the consumer first and treat everyone the same way when they ask, “What’s the most important funeral you’ve ever done? This one, Grandpa!”

If you could go back in time, what would you tell your novice funeral director self?

Slow down and enjoy the journey. Take life one day at a time. Take time for yourself and think about your own wellness while serving others.

Show empathy and kindness to others because they are probably having the worst day of their lives talking with you. (As a joke, one of my friends was asked what his definition of a good day was, and he said ‘You’re having a good day if Chip Billow is not tying your shoes for you.’) •



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