

**From the Triangle Business Journal:  
Caring in a Business of Caring  
Century-old company has acquired four funeral homes since  
1997**

**Premium content from Triangle Business Journal - by Dale  
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DURHAM – It's a business that's a curiosity to many. Some don't want to even talk about it. For others, it's the butt of jokes. But for **Mark Higgins**, it's "a calling, a mission."

Higgins is president of **Hall-Wynne** Funeral Service & Crematory, which operates funeral homes in Durham, Pittsboro, Franklinton and

Oxford. He purchased the Durham operation in 1992 from longtime owner **Shelton Ennis**, who continues to serve as a funeral director – something he's done for 60 years – when needed. It's a service business, says Ennis, but it's also a business that has changed over the years. Whereas Southern funerals once were pretty much cookie-cutter affairs, funerals today must meet the demands of a more diverse population and their cultural mores.

And cremations now comprise about 35 percent of funerals nationally, 30 percent at **Hall-Wynne**. "They've done an excellent job," Ennis says of Higgins and **Michael O'Connor**, who joined the company in 1999 and has since become a shareholder. O'Connor and Higgins say the business is in their blood, though they became practitioners somewhat later in

life. Higgins began in the business, but shifted to a job with a funeral industry trade organization. O'Connor's uncle owned a funeral home in Pittsburgh, and he wanted to follow him, but the uncle talked him out of it. After 16 years in the aerospace business, O'Connor found his funeral service job at **Hall-Wynne**.

They've since grown the company through acquisitions, buying operations in Pittsboro in 1997, in Franklinton in 2001 and in Oxford in 2006. "These are long-term, family-owned businesses," says O'Connor. That's important, says Higgins, who is intent on maintaining each operation's culture. "We're careful to maintain the character of each community," says Higgins. "We recognize that the traditions in Pittsboro may be very different than those in Oxford."

**Hall-Wynne** has developed into what the partners call a regional operation that they intend to grow further as opportunities arise. "We feel ... there are owners in pre-retirement who very much want to keep their firms independently owned who would like to affiliate with the likes of us," says Higgins. "We have our eyes out for quality acquisitions within 45 minutes of us." The company has eight full-time employees and about 20 part-timers and generates revenue in the range of \$2.5 million to \$3 million a year.

Higgins shuns the concept that the funeral business is recession-proof because, well, death is inevitable. "People always have a need because there are more choices, and in recessions people are more discerning," he says, and spend less. Cremations can offer a less costly alternative to burials, with the average cost of a **Hall-Wynne** burial at \$8,200 compared to \$4,500 for a cremation. But a family that chooses cremation may also want a ceremony, complete with rental of a casket. That would add to the cost. A simple cremation could cost less than the \$4,500 average. Higgins says having a crematory on site, which was opened in 2009 at the Durham location, offers peace of mind to families. "It's not

outsourced," he says. "All is done under our own care." Higgins has taken an active role in the community through speaking engagements at conferences and organizations such as hospice groups, churches and Duke Divinity School about end-of-life care, grief support and pre-planning.

**Hall-Wynne** helped a group of students at [Cardinal Gibbons High School](#) in Raleigh start a service in which the students are available to serve as pallbearers for families that for a variety of reasons cannot provide their own. Higgins says he encourages other funeral homes to avail themselves of the service.

To Higgins, the funeral business is not a curiosity at all, but it does require wearing a lot of hats. "You have to have the ability to connect with people who are in great need," he says. "You get to be a businessman, a little public relations, some theatrics, theology, science, psychology ... these are all different disciplines wrapped up in one profession."