

[FUNERAL DIRECTOR OF THE YEAR]

By Patti Martin Bartsche



Sam James, owner of
James Funeral Home,
in Huntersville, North Carolina,
is the 2025 Funeral Director
of the Year.

(All photos credit: Drew Carlisle)

The Winner

Sam James

James Funeral Home

Ask most 5-year-old boys what they want to be when they grow up, and you'll most likely hear a response like professional athlete, firefighter, police officer, and perhaps astronaut. It's unlikely that you'll hear *funeral director*.

Yet that's exactly what Sam James knew he wanted – needed – to be. Thirty-five years later, that determination, vision, and steadfast commitment are as strong as ever, making the owner of James Funeral Home in Huntersville, North Carolina, the perfect choice for American Funeral Director's 2025 Funeral Director of the Year.

In the Beginning

James was 5 years old when his grandmother died. Her funeral would be the first one the young boy would attend. At the time, Huntersville was a small town with a population of around 1,500 residents. Everybody knew everybody, and it was likely that many in the community would attend the funeral service.

Recognizing the funeral service could

be overwhelming for his son, James's father took time to explain what would be happening, what the next few days would look like ... there would be a visitation. The following day, a pastor would be present. There was talk about the casket, which James remembers his father calling a box, and about going to the cemetery where his grandmother's body would be buried.

"I've never even had a goldfish die, so this was my first experience with death," James said.

But instead of being afraid or confused, James was interested, not only in the funeral service, but also in the funeral director.

"I remember going into Raymer Funeral Home and meeting Johnny Raymer," James recalled. "He had a very effervescent personality; he was kind, caring, and compassionate, and I saw how he set my family's mind at ease."

Watching the man who would later become his mentor, a young James realized that he had found his passion, his purpose. "I walked away from that funeral seeing how my family was cared for, knowing that

my calling in life would be to serve God as a funeral director," James said. "I told my parents that when I grew up, I wanted to be just like Mr. Raymer ... and I never changed my mind."

Growing up, every time James passed by the funeral home, he would insist, "One day I'm going to work there."

The Journey Begins

When he turned 16, James headed to the Department of Motor Vehicles in Mooresville, obtained his license, and was on his way – straight to Raymer Funeral Home. "I stopped in and asked Mr. Raymer for a job. Lucky for me, he said yes."

While most teenagers were preoccupied with typical high school activities, James was doing what he had long planned – serving grieving families at a Raymer's. His dedication continued through his early 20s as he simultaneously attended – and graduated from – Erskine College with a Bachelor of Science degree and Piedmont Technical School with an associate's degree in funeral service.

"The plan was always to become a fu-

James Funeral Home is the only funeral home in North Carolina to be inducted into the National Funeral Directors Association Hall of Excellence.



neral director and come back to Huntersville,” James said. “I just wanted to be a hometown funeral director who served my community.”

Graduating from both schools in 2007, James returned to Huntersville – and Raymer – ready to begin the next chapter of his life. Having worked at the funeral home during summer breaks, James only had a few more months to finish his apprenticeship and become a licensed North Carolina funeral director and Raymer Funeral Home manager.

With a vision for his future, he set his sights on one day owning the funeral home where he began his career. He positioned himself financially and professionally to make this dream a reality.

“I learned so much of what it means to be a funeral director from Johnny Raymer,” James said. “The kindness, the compassion, the sacredness of caring for the dead and the community. That’s who Johnny was.”

The two men would go on to have long talks about the future, with James eventually buying the Raymer Funeral Home. In many ways, James one day buying the funeral home was one of the worst kept secrets in Huntersville.

Unfortunately, when Raymer died unexpectedly in 2009, his family ultimately chose not to honor the late owner’s promise to sell the business to James.

“After Johnny died, I told the family I’d manage it as long as they owned it, but then, when they’re ready to sell it, obviously, I would like the opportunity to buy it,” James recalled. “ Things got to that point in 2010; the family had the firm appraised, and we were in discussions when I was told that someone else was coming in to buy it.”

The family then asked James to sign a noncompete agreement, something the then 25-year-old declined to do. The next day, James was fired.

Where others might have walked away discouraged, James saw an opportunity.


Building a Funeral Home from the Ground Up

The day he declined to sign the noncompete agreement, James had a long talk with his wife, Elizabeth. The couple, high school sweethearts, married in 2008, and Liz had long known her husband’s passion for funeral service.


he following day, in late October



Sam James is committed to supporting the community in every way possible.




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It was always Sam James's dream to own his own funeral home in Huntersville.

2010, James received the call that he was officially fired. He called Liz to share the news with her. Her words touched James's heart: "Oh, I'm so sorry, babe ... whatever you need to do, let's do it."

James's next call was to the attorney he had been working with on the Raymer deal. "We need to start an S Corp and shift this thing over to a new business."

In what Matt Shannon, chief financial officer, executive vice president, and corporate secretary at Holman-Howe Funeral Homes in Missouri, described as a "rare example of courage and entrepreneurial spirit," in his nomination letter, James chose to start his own funeral home entirely from scratch. A challenge few in the industry would willingly undertake, Shannon pointed out.

Although the brick-and-mortar, built-from-the-ground-up James Funeral Home wouldn't open its doors until 2012, it went right to work.

Two weeks after he was let go by Raymer, James returned to work as a funeral service licensee, conducting services in churches, rented venues, and community spaces, while also working at a local funeral home.

"I just didn't see failure as an option," James said. "Looking back on it now, I go, 'Boy, that was some risk,' but in the moment it was like, 'We're doing what we're supposed to be doing.' I knew this was my calling and God work out the details."

James's commitment to excellence quickly earned him a loyal following. The calls started almost immediately, and in his very first year, James served nearly 150 families – a remarkable achievement for a brand-new business without a permanent location.

While James was working to build his business, he was also overseeing the construction of a state-of-the-art funeral facility. His vision was simple: create a modern,

welcoming space equipped with advanced technology, designed to meet the needs of today's families while honoring tradition.

"I didn't want to build a monstrosity," James explained. "The funeral home is under 10,000 square feet. It's a beautiful building, but it's not humongous. The community room and the chapel were both designed with families in mind. I like to think it's a warm and inviting spaces that welcomes families and the community."

James Funeral Home opened its doors in early 2012, and Sam James has never looked back.

"I am doing what I was always meant to do," he said.

Leadership and Community Impact

Since establishing his business, James has grown it into a market leader, serving the Huntersville community and surrounding areas with distinction. Under his leadership, the funeral home has become



James Funeral Home's community room is a great place to gather and remember the a loved one.

synonymous with dignity, compassion, and personalized service. His unwavering commitment to honoring each life individually is reflected in his firm's guiding principles:

- Dignity – Every life is unique, and every service reflects that truth.
- Guidance – Offering direction, comfort, and support to families navigating grief.
- Legacy – Helping families create lasting tributes that transcend generations.

"Sam James is a true-life example of the American Dream. He literally started at a funeral home he was going to buy was sold out from under him, he didn't give up ... he opened his own independent firm," said Kenneth Howe, president, CEO, and owner of Holman-Howe Funeral Homes.

In a first for Funeral Director of the Year recognition, Howe, the 2012 Funeral Director of the Year honoree, also nominated James. "He has that servant's heart that we often talk about," Howe said of James. "It's just who Sam James is ... compassion, passion, forward thinking, putting the needs of others first. If anyone deserves to be Funeral Director of the Year, it's Sam James."

For years, Howe has hosted a study group comprised of funeral professionals who are not satisfied with the status quo and want to grow, learn, and evolve to out-

perform their competitors. Attendees hail from 16 states and range in age from their 20s to their 80s. It is through the study group that Howe first met James.

"You could immediately tell that Sam was special," Howe said. "He wasn't content with the status quo. He's forward-thinking, he's a visible and active leader in his community. He's also engaged nationally and regionally in funeral service. His leadership extends to mentoring younger professionals and advocating for continuous improvement in funeral service standards."

Matt Bailey, owner of Bailey Family Funeral Homes in Connecticut, and the 2021 Funeral Director of the Year, agrees.

"Sam James represents the best of our profession. His steadfast optimism, unwavering belief in the value of our work, and commitment to excellence make him a model for both his peers and the next generation of funeral directors," Bailey said. "He reminds us that the future of funeral service is bright when led with purpose and conviction."

Growing the Business

Forward and focused has always been the way James has done business.

In 2013, he purchased an existing cemetery, NorthLake Memorial Gardens. The decision was met with some skepticism, at least initially. "A funeral director who's

not far from us saw me shortly after the purchase. The first thing he said to me was, 'What the hell were you thinking purchasing a cemetery in 2013 when no one is being buried?'" James laughed. "And you know what? The cemetery has grown every year. The cemetery does about 150 funerals a year, and we're doing tons of cremation memorialization."

The following year, James opened an on-site crematory, recognizing cremation wasn't a trend, and cremation families deserved the same care, compassion, and level of service long afforded to "traditional" burial families.

"That we're able to tell families that their loved one is never going to leave our care is so important to the families," James said. "That we have the opportunity to discuss all the options available is so important and meaningful. Families don't know everything available to them, and it's our job as funeral professionals to help them find what works best for them."

Beyond his funeral home's doors, James is also a visible and active leader in his Huntersville community – and beyond.

He's an active member of the Lake Norman Rotary Club, a board member for the Lake Norman Chamber of Commerce, and was chair of Huntersville's 150th Anniversary Celebration Committee. He also offers tours of the funeral home for local high school students taking anatomy class-

es. “I love bringing kids in and talking to them,” he said. “Without a funeral director paying attention to me as a 5-year-old, answering my questions, I don’t know where I’d be.”

The importance of mentorship cannot be overstated, James said. From his first contact with Johnny Raymer to being accepted into the NFDA’s Meet the Mentor program in 2013 as a mentee, to participating in Ken Howe’s study group, to becoming a Meet the Mentor mentor in 2022, the connections, insights, networking opportunities, skill-building, and more are invaluable.

“Mentors will shape the future of our profession,” James said. “They need to be supported like I was ... professional growth doesn’t just happen by accident.”

Professional Excellence and Recognition

James’s innovative approach, combined with his deep respect for tradition, has allowed him to bridge generational expectations in funeral service. His ability to incorporate modern amenities – such as multimedia memorials and flexible service spaces – while maintaining the dignity and solemnity of traditional rituals has set a benchmark in the industry.

Over the last 15 years, James has built a thriving business, served thousands of families, and established a standard of care that has become the model in his region. His story is not simply about professional success – it is about perseverance, integrity, and a calling to serve.

“Thanks to the support of my family, my team, and God, I am doing what I was meant to do,” he said. “Growing up, I’ve never really thought to myself, ‘I want to be an entrepreneur’ or ‘I want to be a businessman,’” James said. “All I ever wanted was to be a funeral director in Huntersville. And while there is obviously a business side to that, I don’t think of myself as a successful businessman. I think of myself as a funeral director who gets to go to work every day doing something that I love, that I was called to do.”

While he may be humble about what he was called to do, perhaps Shannon and Howe can sum up James’s impact best:

In the funeral service profession, there are individuals whose careers not only reflect professional excellence but also em-



James Funeral Home
has been serving the
Huntersville community
since 2010.

body resilience, innovation, and a deep devotion to the communities they serve. Sam James is one such individual.

From humble beginnings as a teenage assistant in a small funeral home to building one of North Carolina’s most respected funeral service providers from

the ground up, Sam’s story is one of determination, vision, and a steadfast commitment to service. At just 40 years of age, he has achieved what many in the profession spend a lifetime pursuing a legacy of leadership, community trust, and unmatched quality of care. KB

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