

# JOURNEY TO THE TOP



Meiko Whitfield, vice president of client services at Funeral Service Inc., recently reached 30 years in the deathcare industry, all with FSI. She rose from humble beginnings to serve as the second woman vice president in FSI history. Whitfield has played a large part in FSI growing its operations from just its headquarters in Florida to nearly half of the states across the country.

## Why did you decide to join the deathcare industry, and what made you want to stay?

With a degree in marketing, I have a keen interest in the statistics aspect of marketing and sales (e.g., questionnaires, surveys, data results). I started working for FSI because I wanted an office job where I could apply my skills and interests in data and statistics. As I learned more about deathcare, I became fascinated with the industry. I enjoy learning new things and am in awe of how much there is to learn about deathcare, particularly in Florida where there are many deathcare laws.

## You just reached 30 years with FSI. Why have you stayed with the company so long?

FSI has been a leader in deathcare for a long time. In the 30 years I've been here, there is always something new to learn, and you're never trapped doing the same thing. We are continually learning about other states' deathcare laws when we extend our services to funeral homes and cemeteries outside Florida. While FSI doesn't directly meet with families about the loss of a loved one and handling preneed contracts, I've always admired funeral home and cemetery operators who are on the frontlines interacting with families. That admiration is translated into my work as I strive to make recordkeeping and trust administration as seamless as possible for those who give their full attention to families during difficult times.

## How has your role evolved over the years, and what are your duties today?

I started as a fiscal assistant in the client services and preneed departments. In that role, I processed contracts and payments, sent out reports and pushed the paperwork through our clients. I had to learn the laws to be able to explain and answer questions clients would have about their contracts. When I'm learning the laws with the paperwork in front of me, it's easier to make the connections.

Then I was moved into a role in which I served the liaison between the IT and preneed departments; I helped relay programming changes to IT and handled the monthly reconciliations. It

was an interesting role as I learned more about the daily activities in IT department.

After six or seven years at FSI, I was promoted to preneed supervisor. This role was out of my comfort zone, but I was grateful for the opportunity to grow even further.

I currently serve as vice president of client services. The client services department grew and became closer to the IT department, working directly with the programmers. The best part of my job is going into the field, meeting with clients and training them on our eSolutions services for preneed contracts, as well as ensuring that we offer our best services and customer needs continue to be met.

## Did you have a female mentor growing up? How did she help you grow into the person, professional and leader you are today?

Harriet Irwin, FSI's first female vice president and president, inspired me greatly. She always showed by example, did not resist change – as deathcare, and particularly FSI, transitioned into utilizing more technological tools – and knew so much about the industry. Harriet was compassionate to all employees and was always professional when carrying herself in a room full of men.

## Were there any unique obstacles or barriers you faced as a woman in the industry? How did you overcome them?

I have been very fortunate not to face any obstacles or barriers in the deathcare industry, and that's primarily because of Harriet and how she stood up in an industry that has been and still is male dominated. Today, deathcare is still a man's world, but we are all respectful toward each other. Not only are there more women in deathcare, but there are more women who are taking leadership roles. Harriet helped pioneered the path for women in deathcare to succeed.

## What's one characteristic you think every leader should possess?

Compassion, and I am seeing more and more leaders exhibiting this important trait. It's vital for leaders to be compassionate if they want people to respect and follow them. Compassionate leaders can better understand their employees' needs and make them feel comfortable in a professional environment.

## How would you describe your leadership style?

I encourage employees to be self-sufficient, as I don't want to micromanage their work. If there's someone who doesn't understand the task at hand or makes a mistake, I want him or her to feel comfortable asking for support and advice. I hope to help our team members learn from their mistakes instead of not seeking help and then making errors that could have been avoided. I also enjoy doing little things to make our staff feel appreciated and valued because our staff works hard every day, and I want to make sure they know we appreciate them.

## What advice would you give to young women deathcare professionals?

For any young woman, I would advise taking advantage of as many opportunities in college as possible. Learn as many tools and skills that can come to use down the road. For instance, in deathcare, there are many new programs and software applications out there that tech-savvy professionals can better understand because they took a course on computer programming or attended a training seminar on different types of software. Anytime seminars, workshops or courses are offered that will build your skill set, take advantage of them. There is so much you can do that will make your life easier and help you succeed in your career if you learn the tools and skills.

Another important thing for women is to have confidence and faith in yourself. If you're seeking a promotion, a raise or a new career opportunity, you must be confident in your abilities and skills, and the people

around you will see you are capable of anything.

Lastly, stepping out of your comfort zone can be very scary, but it's worth it in the end.

## For young women professionals, how is entering the industry today different?

I certainly believe the industry is more welcoming of young female professionals today, especially since years ago, you never thought of females working in deathcare. That's not the case anymore. There's been a shift in that belief over the last few decades as more women are becoming funeral directors and taking on roles in not only a funeral home or cemetery but also in the business aspect (such as FSI). However, deathcare is still male dominated, and it's not because there aren't opportunities for women in deathcare but because women are not always aware of these opportunities. ☰

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