

AFD AWARDS

By Patti Martin Bartsche

2025 *Runners-up*



The funeral profession continues to evolve, and funeral directors across the nation are stepping up to meet this transformation. It was especially evident as we reviewed the nominations for the 2025 Funeral Director of the Year.

Every nominee this year brings passion and innovation to their work, continually finding new ways to serve families and strengthen their communities. They understand that their role doesn't end when a service concludes – their dedication to families, neighborhoods, and cities extends far beyond the funeral home and well after business hours.

With such an outstanding group of candidates, choosing a single recipient proved impossible. That's why we're recognizing four remarkable runners-up this month, with the overall winner to be announced in December.

These honored directors represent a broad cross-section of the country. Some serve in small, family-run homes, while others work with firms managing multiple locations.

Yet, each shares one defining quality: a steadfast commitment to delivering compassionate, meaningful service while pushing the boundaries of what funeral care can be.

We applaud every nominee – each of you is an innovator, finding new ways to meet the challenges and opportunities facing today's funeral professionals.

2025 ^{FD of the Year Award} Runner-up

Justin Keiper

Funeral director and supervisor
Cantelmi Funeral Home
Fountain Hill, Pennsylvania

For many first-generation funeral directors, the desire to become a part of the profession is borne out of personal experience.

Such was the way Justin Keiper, supervisor at Cantelmi Funeral Home in Fountain Hill, Pennsylvania.

He was 15 years old when his great-grandmother died, and her funeral was the first he had ever attended for someone close to him.

"We were driving to the cemetery, and I said to my parents, 'I think I want to be a funeral director,' and they were like, 'OK, sleep on that one,'" he recalled on the YMI Talking podcast.

Keiper did "sleep on it," but his desire for a career in funeral service didn't waver; not after speaking with several funeral directors or watching an embalming. "I wanted to get a little more experience, because all I knew was what the funeral director did for my family that day," he said. "I didn't know the behind-the-scenes part of it, and I just fell in love with it all."

Graduating from Liberty High School in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 2013, Keiper immediately enrolled in Northampton Community College, graduating with an associate degree in funeral service and mortuary science in 2015.

Since becoming a licensed funeral director in 2016, the 29-year-old Keiper has grown into his role as supervisor of Cantelmi Funeral Home in Fountain Hill, leading daily operations while ensuring every family served experiences dignity, respect, and thoughtful guidance.

As a supervisor, Keiper's responsibilities are diverse and comprehensive. "I manage the planning and execution of funeral services, coordinate with families to



customize ceremonies that truly reflect their loved ones' lives, and oversee all operational aspects of the funeral home, including staffing, scheduling, and compliance with state regulations."

Like many in funeral service, Justin Keiper's career has not been without challenges.

"Balancing the emotional demands of supporting grieving families with leadership responsibilities requires resilience and self-awareness," Keiper said. "Early in my career, I faced the steep learning curve of managing complex cases while maintaining high standards of care. Through mentorship, continuing education, and personal reflection, I developed the skills and emotional strength necessary to thrive."

On a personal level, the COVID-19 pandemic presented profound challenges for Keiper. During this difficult time, his grandfather suddenly passed away, deepening his empathy and

understanding of unexpected loss.

"In response to the restrictions and uncertainties caused by the pandemic, I worked closely with Cantelmi Funeral Home owner Dino Cantelmi to develop and implement drive-thru viewings and services," Keiper said. "This innovative approach allowed families to say goodbye safely and with dignity, adapting to unprecedented circumstances while maintaining the compassion and care our community deserved."

It's these types of experiences, Keiper says, that motivate him daily to be a source of comfort and strength for the families he serves.

Not surprisingly, community service is a cornerstone of Keiper's professional and personal life. Beyond his role at Cantelmi Funeral Home, he is committed to making a positive impact throughout the Lehigh Valley.

He currently serves as chair of the board of directors for the American Heart Association – Lehigh Valley/Berks Region. In this leadership role, he helps guide important initiatives focused on raising awareness about cardiovascular health, improving community wellness, and securing critical funding for lifesaving research.

In 2024, he was a Visionary of the Year candidate for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. The experience expanded his engagement in cancer awareness and fundraising efforts, and he now serves on the LLS Elite Leadership Committee, helping to shape strategies that support patients and families affected by blood cancers.

He also lends his leadership skills to Dream Come True, a local nonprofit dedicated to granting wishes to children

battling serious illnesses, and recently partnered with the Cancer Support Community of the Greater Lehigh Valley to start a grief support program.

Keiper also recently partnered with the Cancer Support Community of the

Greater Lehigh Valley to start a grief support program. This initiative, he says, offers vital emotional support and resources to individuals and families coping with loss.

Locally, he actively serves on the boards of the Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce and Fountain Hill Cemetery. These roles allow him to contribute to economic development, historic preservation, and community events, further strengthening the fabric of the region he calls home.

"I regularly volunteer my time and resources to support local charities, fundraisers, and educational programs," he said. "Whether it's organizing a heart health awareness event, leading a fundraiser for pediatric patients, or simply

lending a hand at community gatherings, I see my service as an extension of the compassion I bring to my work with families."

This breadth of involvement, he adds, reflects his belief that "being a funeral director means more than providing excellent care at the funeral home – it means being a visible, active leader dedicated to improving lives in every way possible.

Keiper's leadership and volunteer efforts have not gone unnoticed.

This year alone, the American Heart Association selected him as the recipient of its 2025 Exceptional Leadership Award, recognizing individuals who demonstrate outstanding leadership and a strong commitment to advancing the association's mission to improve heart health and save lives.

In addition, Lehigh Valley Business recently selected Keiper as a 2025 Forty Under 40 honoree. Chosen by the Lehigh Valley Business leadership team and a panel of previous winners, the honorees were chosen based on their professional accomplishments and strong civic commitment to the community.

Keiper is also an outspoken advocate for the funeral profession, appearing on podcasts and speaking to TV and news reporters to talk about the value of funeral service and the important role funeral directors play.

"I consider it a privilege to serve families during their most difficult moments and to represent the funeral profession with care, integrity, and a strong commitment to community leadership," he said.

Without question, the most rewarding aspect of his work is the trust families place in him.

"One memorable family shared that my support 'made a hard time easier to bear' and that I 'truly went above and beyond' to honor their loved one's memory. Another family praised the way I 'listened carefully and created a ceremony that reflected everything their father meant to them,'" Keiper said. "These relationships reflect the heart of funeral service – helping families heal through personalized care."



Unlock Your Value,
Plan Your Future

Clear, expert valuations to guide your next steps. Whether you're planning for growth, succession, or sale, understanding your business value is essential. Foresight's valuations give you the clarity and confidence to make smart decisions — protecting your legacy and unlocking future potential.

THEFORESIGHTCOMPANIES.COM | (800) 426-0165