

FULFILLING A VISION

MICHAEL

SOPER

HOUSTON,
TEXAS

ANSWERING A CALLING

Southern Calls

PEOPLE

by Alice Adams

Pillars

The office of Legacy Funeral Group, LLC President and CEO Michael Soper occupies the same building in Houston's Upper Kirby District that his father, Joseph Soper, used as offices and laboratories for his own business – Soper Brothers & Associates – which opened in 1948. Joseph Soper went on to build his business and a distinguished career as an internationally-respected and recognized pioneer, innovator and educator in the emerging field of contact lenses.

Michael, the youngest of the Soper's three sons, followed in his father's footsteps. "I've had one business or another since I was seven or eight," said the 49-year-old CEO. "I've always been an entrepreneur. It's something you can't teach, but, when my dad saw it in me, he supported and encouraged me.

"During a rare Houston drought in the 1980s, for example, homeowners could only water their yards between midnight and 4 in the morning. I charged \$5 a house to turn their sprinklers on at midnight and then turn them off at 4 a.m. My dad woke me at midnight and watched me work my way down the block. When I came home, I went to bed and Dad would wake me again at 4 a.m. to turn off the water."

At Fort Worth's Texas Christian University, the young entrepreneur used his Midas touch to build a successful T-shirt business while he earned a bachelor's degree.

It was during his college years that he was first introduced to funeral service. "I spent time hunting on a deer lease with my brother's father-in-law, Eddie Goodnight, who, with his wife, Mary Helen, owned Goodnight Funeral Home – a true mom-and-pop operation – in Bartlett, Texas.

"Eddie did it all. His wife kept the books and played the organ for services," Soper remembered, "and whenever Eddie would get a death call (before cell phones, funeral





Michael Soper, President & CEO
Legacy Funeral Group, LLC

directors carried beepers), even if we were out on the lease, we'd put on slacks and he'd take me with him. That's when I saw him transform from a fun guy on a hunting trip into a dignified, well-respected funeral service professional."

Completing his degree in 1989, Soper began his career in the field of finance, working in the trust business, where he became re-acquainted with funeral service. "At that point in my career, my goal was to own my own funeral home," Soper admitted. "Eventually, I bought three firms by mortgaging my home. That was in 1999."

The purchase of those first funeral homes marked the beginning of Legacy Funeral Group, which now numbers one hundred firms in Texas, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Kansas and Nevada. It is among the fastest-growing companies in the funeral service.

Initially, Soper saw his niche as rural funeral homes serving small towns. "After a while, we reached a size where we could buy middle-market firms. Now we have funeral homes in Baton Rouge, Las Vegas and Orlando, although we haven't gotten away from the small-town markets either. This week, we purchased a firm in Monahans, out in West Texas," he said.

"We're second in market share in Las Vegas, and, while it's a large city, we run our firms like rural firms, with personal service. It's like back to the basics," Soper explained.

Today he owns 100 percent of the business. "I rely on my financing partners Directors Investment Group and management team to help guide the ship, our growth and keep us on course," he continued. "All are funeral service professionals, and I think it is a mistake to have non industry outsiders making our decisions. My dad believed that if you run a good business for the right reasons, the money will come.

"Without a doubt, I feel God is working through me, my team and my family to help every employee reach their full potential. And yes, I have been so blessed from day one," the CEO said.


Building Legacy Funeral Group, LLC

When you meet Michael Soper, you're immediately struck by four characteristics: he's the real deal – no smoke and mirrors. What you see and what he says are totally authentic. He is committed to his vision and works hard to achieve it; he's a good listener and he puts faith and family first.

Soper uses the word "family" to describe his management team and his company. "We break bread together, pray together and together we develop strategies, make changes and share ideas," he said.

"Back when our organization was smaller, I surrounded myself with mentors who helped me stay true to my goal and held me accountable," he said. "That said, Legacy Funeral Group is run like a public company, with all the controls in place, although it is family-owned."

He speaks candidly about the challenges he faces as he fine-tunes his operations. "My biggest struggle is finding people who want to go above and beyond to make



funerals special," he began. "My challenge as owner is to find people who want to change, to empower people to do their best.

"In today's market, you have to find people who can go outside their comfort zone to make funerals personal and special. If we don't do this, we lose our relevance to the consumer."

"A good director gets outside the box," Soper continued. "Most want to simply check the boxes. Here's a great example: One of my guys, right now, is sending pictures and texting me. This is an old-school funeral director who directed a funeral for a child with a Mickey Mouse theme earlier today. He stepped outside the box, out of his comfort level. He's making it personal for that child's family."

You can sense the CEO's excitement about this giant step in the funeral director's growth. "These are 'the wins' in my business. It's not about how big we can get or how many funeral homes we own. It's making services personal for our families.

“In today's market, you have to find people who can go outside their comfort zone to make funerals personal and special. If we don't do this, we lose our relevance to the consumer.”

We advertise this. We've trademarked the phrase, 'We make it personal,' and, while the service is about the loved one who was lost, it's also about the people left behind.

"We have leaders, strong-but-soft-spoken, and we're blessed to have them, but that's not enough to get to the next level," Soper pointed out. "Today, you have to engage with the family – get scrappy."

"Don't start the arrangement conference by asking for the decedent's Social Security number," the CEO said. "I get sick to my stomach to think about the funeral director sitting down and immediately picking up his or her pen. Instead, I want them to start with, 'Tell me about your loved one.' 'How can we say a proper goodbye?'"

He recalled a funeral for a little boy who died of cancer and how the director made it personal for his parents and all who knew him. "That director took a horrible situation and made it all about the kid who loved Star Wars. She succeeded in making that funeral a memorable experience, and people left the funeral



The Soper Family
Michael, Madison (6), Andrea, Perri (12)

home saying, "That's how I want to go. That's the kind of funeral I'd like to have."

Soper said Legacy Funeral Group's core values and beliefs begin with the words, "Serve one family at a time. Put down your pen and listen."

"If we can't become number one in the market, we need to get out," he said. "We want our firms to be about trust and integrity, but our directors cannot be afraid of rolling up their sleeves and getting it done, whatever it takes."

Asked about the lessons he has learned over the past 17 years, Soper said, "As an entrepreneur, my most lesson-filled failure came when I didn't listen to a former owner, thinking I could change a business completely, including the mind-set of the former owner."

Then he added, "Acquiring a funeral firm is like getting married. If the owner will stay involved, I've got to make sure we can live together, work together, share the same values. Only one-third of our acquisitions are

institutional businesses. The rest have people who reside in businesses who can make or break them. So you have to invest in the people as well as bricks and mortar. Those kinds of businesses scare the big guys."

And, what keeps Michael Soper up at night?

"We have a couple clusters that aren't clicking – those bother me," he confessed. "You've got to have the right people in place, so I worry about the long-term. Sometimes it might be a better fit for the firm to be sold to someone smaller than us – a place that requires an Eddie Goodnight. On the other hand, I have plenty of places with the right butts in the seats."

Soper said he also worries about succession for Legacy's firms. "I'd say 80 percent of our firms have the right people. It's a common trend in the profession."

"I know in this calling, if we do the right thing, we'll all have a chance to succeed in a big way," Soper added. "My big hairy audacious goal (BHAG) is to build the most

respected funeral service company and a legacy business that can be handed down through the generations. "Legacy Funeral Group will be the most respected company only if every guest leaving a service is saying, "That's how I want to be remembered." It's not about growth or acquisitions. It's having people say, "That's how I want to be remembered."

Soper also takes a measured approach to acquiring firms. "It must be a win for everyone. I love the opportunity to make people better. I want them to be happier after they join us than before. I want them to be professionally happier and also watch their business grow."

Today, Legacy Funeral Group includes more than 700 employees. Soper realizes he cannot touch them all. "But if I can mix the right flavors of Kool-Aid (work environment, culture) so everybody enjoys drinking it, we can achieve our ultimate goals," he said.

The CEO's pride in the work culture he, his management team and his employees have created is palpable. "Our directors work together like a family, and I don't know of

anyone else doing this," he said, unabashedly. "We may have pulled a rabbit out of the hat, but we have grown without screwing up the culture."

Over the next five years, Soper said he would like to see Legacy double in size. He's confident he is financially positioned to achieve this goal, but there's a leisurely side to this fast-moving entrepreneur.

"I love spending time with my wife, Andrea, my 6-year-old daughter, Madison, and son, Perri, who is 12," he said. "I also like to hunt and fish – always have – and I love riding horses. Now I'm taking on cutting horses."

Then, after a long silence, he adds, "For whatever reason, God has used me in helping people grow in their careers. It's really a calling for me. A passion. I don't know many people running companies this size who can say they are called, but I know I have been, and I see God's hand in this business every day."

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Legacy Senior Management team
L to R: Steve Bassett, VP; Kris Seal, Legacy Board member; Michael Soper; Harry Drew, SrVP; Bill Wimberly, SrVP; Brian Nichols, VP

FUNERAL FOR A FALLEN BATON ROUGE POLICE OFFICER

Anytime a first responder is killed in the line of duty, funeral directors stand ready to work with larger visitations, larger groups of mourners and a longer procession ... and so it was in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in the wake of a madman's ambush that cost the life of three law enforcement officers.

The first of the funerals, for rookie officer Matthew Gerald, 41, was held on Friday, July 22, with arrangements provided by Resthaven Gardens of Memory, a Legacy Funeral Group firm.

Gerald, an 11-year military veteran who served with the U.S. Marine Corps and the U.S. Army for three tours in Iraq, left behind two young daughters and his wife.

On Thursday, hundreds of mourners paid their respects during a visitation at the funeral home. Another visitation was held prior to the funeral service at the nondenominational Healing Place, where the officer was a member.

"Our team got together and stayed up late because we wanted to make it special for the community," Soper said. "About 5,000 people attended, and Resthaven got so many thank you's from the law enforcement community 'for treating this family as your own.'"

"These comments brought all of us so much joy," the CEO said.

"One of our guys came in the next morning with the idea of lighting the funeral home with exterior blue lights, so we went all over East Baton Rouge Parish to find enough blue bulbs," he explained.

"The chief of police later said, "I know we picked the right funeral home for one of my boys."

"This was a tragic event where we helped, let people participate and got to know the family," Soper said. "We had people lined up from the highway, and standing in line more than two hours just to pay their respects to the widow."

Before the funeral began Gerald's wife and two daughters laid flowers atop his casket.

"We wanted to make it personal," Soper said.









A large American flag is being hoisted by a crane against a blue sky with white clouds. The flag is the central focus, with its red and white stripes and blue field with white stars clearly visible. The crane's metal structure and a person on a platform are visible on the right side. The background is a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds.

Legacy Funeral Group builds a proud tradition

Honoring local First Responders on 911



Even though fifteen years have passed,

Legacy Funeral Group's management and staff have committed themselves to never forget the heroism and sacrifice made by first responders in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack on New York City's Twin Towers and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and the passengers aboard the ill-fated Flight 93, which crashed in Pennsylvania.

After the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers:

- * 414 first responders – firefighters, police and emergency personnel – died;
- * 2,000 first responders were injured on 9/11;
- * 1,400 first responders have died of 9/11-related illnesses;
- * 2,518 first responders and rescue workers have 9/11-related cancers;
- * 60,000 to 70,000 first responders, rescue workers and victims were exposed to the toxic dust of the Twin Towers after they fell.

Taking time to honor the brave men and women who responded on 9/11, almost all of the group's 100 firms across the country will once again host lunch for local police, sheriffs, firefighters and emergency medical personnel on the anniversary of the attacks. Last year, staff and management across the country served 6,500 meals.

Many firms start the day before and make the barbecue themselves. Lunch includes all the fixings – like potato salad, coleslaw, barbecued beans and dessert. In Louisiana's Cajun tradition, the menu may also feature Boudin, seafood and dirty rice along with barbecued brisket, pork and sausage.

Around noon of Sept. 11, funeral home employees join hands with first responders and bow their heads to honor those who gave their lives 15 years ago.

Michael Soper, president and CEO of Legacy Funeral Group, reported overwhelming success in recognizing local first responders on last year's anniversary and expects this year's event to be even larger.

In Texas City, for example, the parking lot at Emken-Linton Funeral Home was alive with activity and the welcoming aroma of barbecue wafting through the air.

"In smaller communities, our funeral homes buy Subway sandwiches and pizzas and deliver them to police and sheriffs' departments and fire stations to show their gratitude for the first responders' service to their community," Soper said. "After the lunches are served, our employees deliver lunches left over to local hospital nurses, shelters or other community programs.

"I have attended these events in the years since we began this tradition, and I find myself needing to take a minute to myself because I have been so moved by the outpouring of appreciation from our staff members for these men and women who keep our communities safe."

Emken Linton, a third-generation funeral director who followed his grandfather and father into funeral service, said his staff wanted to make sure the 911 gathering would be meaningful to the first responders they invited.

"Going into it – remembering such a tragic day – we wanted to do something to remember the people who lost their lives, especially those who rushed to the aid of the 911 victims," said the 46-year veteran of funeral service. "We also wanted to thank our local responders and to combine these goals into one large event. In most cases, we don't always think about first responders until we need them."



Around noon of Sept. 11, funeral home employees join hands with first responders and bow their heads to honor those who gave their lives 15 years ago.







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Bill Wimberly, senior vice president of operations for Legacy Funeral Group, remembered the first gathering of police officers and firefighters in the parish, held 14 years ago, the first year anniversary of the 911 attack.

"Our little community is filled with people who had personal experiences with 911," Wimberly said. "We also have a whole lot of veterans whose lives were changed by the events of that day."

Wimberly said the menus for the 911 events this year are varied. "Some funeral homes set the bar pretty high. Here we had good barbecued pork steaks with beans, potato salad and all the fixin's – enough for 200-plus. The food's always good and the first responders seem to enjoy getting together," he said. "Plus we also invite our City Council, the mayor and local clergy."

Ardoin's Funeral Home - Ville Platte Manager Kim Fontenot is credited with the original idea of honoring local veterans with a barbecue on 911, the year after the terrorist attacks.

"After that first year, we started expanding the event to our other funeral homes," Wimberly said. "As the years have gone by, we almost have reached 100-percent participation."

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Funeral Director Doug Ray, general manager of Abilene's Elmwood Funeral Home & Memorial Park, Adams-Foster-Ray Funeral Home in Hamlin and Weathersby-Ray Funeral Home in Rotan, held his first 911 remembrance honoring the area's first responders in 2014.

"This has become an annual event for us," he said, "and we do our best to honor our local heroes. It gives us an opportunity to remember the sacrifices of those first responders in 2001, the victims and their families."

"Now, as a time of remembrance, 911 allows us time to pause, to think of those who were lost and their families, and it reminds us to hold our families a little closer as it helps us remember just how fragile life really is," he added.





Above – Scott Walker, Michael Soper, Police Chief Robert Burby, Fire Chief David Zacherl, Emken Linton
Opposite Page – Life Flight lands in funeral home parking lot to pick up a couple of barbecue sandwiches

After cooking barbecue through the night, Ray and his employees serve a menu of brisket and sausage, coleslaw, potato salad and beans, topped off with homemade brownies.

"Our employees just pitch in and make the food on their own. It is truly a team effort and one that gives all of us a chance to serve these men and women who serve us all, day in and day out," the director explained. "But what's most important to us is making sure every man and woman left knowing how much we appreciate them and what they do for us."

"When we joined the Legacy Funeral Group, my biggest fear was that we couldn't continue our community outreach because of what I had seen when other funeral homes were sold," Ray said. "But Legacy has allowed me to continue this ministry – and it is a ministry."

Soper said he has been touched by the effort the Legacy staff so readily gives to preparing for and hosting their local first responders.

"I have never had a prouder day in the years since Legacy Funeral Group was founded," he said. "Each year we take time out to remember and appreciate the many people who work so hard in the communities we serve and to pause and remember one of the most difficult days in our lifetimes."