



Dan Smith

Sherry Quinley: "My biggest concern is serving the community well."

DEATH'S EVOLUTION

By Dan Smith

An obituary website, founded by a hardware store executive, has a new owner and a new direction.

Sherry Quinley can attest that even death evolves. She has substantial evidence.

Quinley's background is mostly in communications and sales (The Roanoke Times, Blue Ridge Public TV, WSLS, WVTF Public Radio, WDBJ7, schoolteacher, and marketing executive for a national church organ company), so she was more than ready when the obituaries gig popped up recently.

In 2019, Charlie Overstreet, owner of Northwest Hardware (15 stores), rebelled against the high cost of newspaper

obituaries by starting his own website that ran obits for a fraction of the local daily newspaper's cost. FRONT had a story at the time about that startup. The new business was called Roanoke Obituaries, which with some growth became Regional Obituaries in 2020.

The business continued to grow and took on funeral home partners, which helped eliminate any cost to the family seeking an online obit. The funeral homes paid those costs.

But in the fourth year, the partners in

the enterprise began to feel the pressure of a growing business outside their normal careers and talked of shutting Regional Obituaries down. Quinley, with mutual agreement, bought out her three business partners and has expanded Regional Obituaries to the Shenandoah Valley and Central Virginia. Overstreet is "still very much involved," says Quinley, and developer John Garland has become something of a mentor. Both remain on the Advisory Board for Regional Obituaries.

"My biggest concern," says Quinley, "is serving the community well. We don't want to stretch too thin. We must do this in a mindful way. Technology has been a tremendous asset to help make this possible. That means you need an excellent software engineer."

The "mindful way" these days is stretching the geographic boundaries to Harrisonburg and Charlottesville. Quinley has teamed with Roanoke's WDBJ7, WHSV.com, NBC29.com and Cardinal News in recent days, expanding circulation exponentially (260,000 page views a month on the Regional Obituaries site and up to six million page views a month on WDBJ). Those new partners pay in-kind with banners and local commercials on their television stations. Cardinal News directs readers through its Newsletter and a substantial subscriber base. Many funeral homes have jumped on the wagon fully, but "some are holding out," Quinley says.

At the end of March, Quinley got calls from the Charlottesville TV station asking about the service. "They said, 'We have our own website; do we really need this?' Funeral directors said this, and NBC 29 wanted


to duplicate WHSV and WDBJ, both Grey stations, carrying obits on their websites to help fill the gap, as newspapers in both readership and circulation had created a gap for letting people know about obits. I said, 'Yes! People don't want to look at 15-20 websites'" to find the obituary they are interested in.

There are occasions when the family of the deceased pays for the obit (albeit a fraction of the newspaper cost). "If the body is donated and no funeral home is involved, for example, the family pays," says Quinley, "but if the family is strapped and can't afford the cost, we will do it [for free]."

The way the company works is to post full-length obits (no word limit) with as many as three photos on regionalobituaries.com and on the partners' sites (media and funeral homes) simultaneously. Obits are added or updated throughout the day and they are online indefinitely.

The business "is not making millions," smiles Quinley, but it is pulling in from \$160 to \$600 a month from the funeral homes taking part, depending on their size, and keeping her busy editing, posting and marketing the site.

She deems the enterprise a success because "everything is changing, and you have to be flexible. We ask, 'How can I help?' The goal is to make this as viable as possible so we can continue to grow. Slow and steady." We want regional obituaries to be the place people go to find out who has passed away in the community. With good media partners, this is a realistic goal."

Death, Quinley says unequivocally, "has become my life." 



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