

# Technology

By Troy Turner

Stephanie Watkins Turner, the wife of Troy Turner, senior vice president, sales and marketing at Batesville, died Nov. 2, 2015, after a valiant battle with cancer. She had lived life to its fullest and was remembered with a beautiful service attended by hundreds of friends and family members. In the weeks and months after her death, Turner reflected on his own planning process and realized there is so much more our industry can do with technology to improve a family's experience. He's sharing his story – and the lessons he has learned – with readers of American Funeral Director.

A man in a plaid suit jacket and glasses is shown in profile, looking out over a landscape. The background is a soft-focus view of a green field with trees and a white building in the distance under a bright sky.

Troy Turner, senior vice president,  
sales and marketing, Batesville.  
(Photo courtesy of Batesville)

# My Journey Through Loss

## *And What It Taught Me*

I knew it was coming, but nothing could prepare me for the toughest, most trying experience of my life. Up to that point, we had what would be considered a normal life for many adults. Two working spouses raising three busy children, balancing our personal lives and careers, while looking forward to the challenges and enjoyment of being empty-nesters after 21 years of marriage.

**M**y wife, Stephanie, had successfully fought breast cancer for five years. Because of her fighting spirit and positive attitude, her disease hadn't significantly altered how we went about living. A positive result from routine scans – and a seemingly innocent complication – led us back to the oncologist sooner than expected. We'd been there many times before, and while I wasn't sure what to expect that day, I don't think anyone is prepared to hear your wife has less than 30 days to live.

Yes, I had known this was a potential outcome, but as reality settled in, I began to realize how truly difficult this journey was going to be for all of us.

### **The Road Ahead**

As a former Marine, my first instinct was to remind myself I'd survived difficult situations before – boot camp, Officer Candidate School and the U.S. Naval Academy. I proudly served in the Marine Corps for 10 years before embarking on a business career, and had led marketing teams around the world. I knew how to face challenges.

We lost Stephanie Nov. 2, 2015. She had a great funeral and a celebration of her life that I will not forget. I wish I could capture all the

energy, emotions and stories people shared at her service – not just for myself, but for my children who had even less time to know their mother.

The next 30 days were indescribable, but it's something thousands of families experience every day. We were blessed with amazing support from our families, friends, the funeral home staff, and people I'd never met. I'll forever be grateful to my Batesville family, and to people across the industry I've come to know over the past eight years.

One of the things we had always told our children was that life teaches us through our experiences. Over the past three years, I've learned a lot about myself, about how precious life is and the importance of relationships. I've also had time to reflect on our experience with the funeral planning process – the things that helped us most, as well as opportunities to make the next family's journey better.

### **What I Learned**

One of the big takeaways was about the importance of communication, and specifically, the need to share information sooner in the process so families can prepare themselves and others who might participate in the planning. Even though I was more informed than

most, it wasn't easy.

Within the industry, we talk about the family's journey as a linear process that starts with the first call or the arrangement meeting. Our journey started much sooner and was anything but linear. We had created a cocoon of privacy, and suddenly things were coming at us from all directions, all at once. This added anxiety and took time away from what really needed our attention. I wasn't prepared for that.

Technology is commonplace in funeral service, so I was frustrated when a simple task like providing biographical data was still manual, and when routine paperwork distracted us from the thing that mattered most – planning Stephanie's service. There is so much more we can do with technology to improve the family's experience.

Losing Stephanie was hard; the grieving process was even more difficult. Having talked about what families experience so often in my work, I thought I understood. That was only partly true. As cliché as it sounds, my experience helped me see and appreciate some of the unique challenges families face, understand where we have gaps today, and provide a better vision for the broader role funeral directors can play throughout the entire journey.

## What were some of your biggest challenges?

Simple tasks like communicating became overly complex. Stephanie had kept her battle private, so how was I going to tell people, many who had no idea she was even sick? I never thought getting in touch with them, and then keeping them updated as plans evolved, would be so difficult.

I spent hours combing through address books, phones, emails, texts, Facebook accounts, etc., to ensure that I reached as many people as possible. While they were helping me manage a myriad of tasks, the funeral home was helpless to provide anything to lighten my load.

Existing technology tools are

often fragmented and not integrated, or they focus on the funeral director and not the family, or on just one part of the process. In the absence of a unified solution, I had to employ multiple channels to share information.

We often hear complaints that people don't participate in services like they used to. Maybe we don't give them enough time to adapt their schedules. It needs to be easier to share key components of the plan as things develop.

## Were there things from your experience that might help another family?

There were missed opportunities, especially in when and how information was shared or requested. I

had visited the funeral home the week before Stephanie's death, and looking back, we could have – and should have – accomplished more. It would have been helpful to get a checklist to tell us what to expect and how to prepare ourselves and other family members who might want to participate in the process.

Meeting face-to-face with the funeral director to plan Stephanie's service was immensely valuable. Filling out forms at the funeral home is not. There are technology tools that could have simplified the collection of data and minimized unnecessary phone calls and travel time. It may not be the case for others, but having paperwork I could have completed online at home would have been a welcome distraction from all the chaos around me.

**Troy Turner with his children (from left) John, Will and Lauren. (Photo courtesy of Troy Turner)**





**Troy Turner knows first-hand how important keepsakes are in the healing process. Pictured is the keepsake of his wife, Stephanie. (Photo courtesy of Troy Turner)**

Finally, stay connected with the family when the service is over. There are things you don't know you need until you're in that moment. I wish I'd been reminded of the grief services available to me and my family. (Yes, I was told up front, but my life was a blur at that point). Grief is different 30, 60, 90 days after the service, and my needs and understanding changed as time moved on. Quick reminders via email, text or some other form of communication at different stages are well worth the time.

### **From the consumer's perspective, how is technology changing things?**

Planning a funeral is an unfamiliar experience for most people. It takes time to build knowledge and trust, and earlier engagement is vital to both.

Technology has given us the ability to provide the right information in the right way at the right time. We know that families are doing all kinds of things to educate themselves, even before the death occurs, so we need a way to engage in that process earlier. Waiting until the arrangement conference could shortchange the funeral home and the family.

Technology provides a bridge to start sharing information, setting expectations, and providing resources before the family gets to the funeral home, and then throughout the selection and planning process. There are a variety of digital tools and systems that can help families make more informed choices about products and services, and ultimately, feel more confident in their decisions. As we know, that results in higher satisfaction with the overall experience.

### **Has your experience changed or influenced Batesville's technology vision?**

One of the hidden blessings of my experience is that it gave me a new perspective, and allowed me to see things in a different context. This hasn't changed our vision, but it validated the need for a more holistic approach in how we look at the family's journey.

From the start, our vision was to create an integrated system that covers the entire spectrum – from the first engagement with a funeral home via the website, through the funeral planning process, the service, and the journey through grief. Our solutions were built to

work together to provide a free flow of information between the funeral director, the family and their support network throughout the journey.

At every step, the funeral director is at the center of the conversation, with tools to simplify the experience and help families plan meaningful funerals, share information with friends and family, and remember a life well lived. As a trusted adviser and expert, we believe no one is better suited to help families through this process.

We've helped thousands of funeral homes implement technology into their business with innovative websites, e-commerce offerings, value-added content, digital selection tools, and business management software. But we are not done by any means. We're continuing to invest in solutions to address some of the challenges that occur outside the traditional planning process. This has been very rewarding to me, so I can't wait to share more in the coming months.

### **Finally, is there any advice you would offer to funeral directors?**

We talk about the importance of a funeral that honors the life of our loved one. That is the heart of Batesville's mission. The funeral provided an incredible opportunity to honor Stephanie for who she was – as a wife, mother, sister, daughter and a friend. But for my family, it was just as important to remember her.

I sometimes hear funeral directors refer to keepsakes as 'trinkets,' not worthy of the time. I can tell you first-hand how wrong that is. I carried a personalized, bronze keepsake medallion for two years. It was the most tangible thing I had to remember Stephanie, and all the wonderful experiences we shared. More than 100 were distributed to family and friends, and to this day, I still get requests. They've been an important part of our grief journey, and I would suggest the same is true for families you serve. •

## **There are still people who see technology as “cold or impersonal,” but you believe it’s one of the keys to improving the family’s experience. Can you explain?**

First, let me be clear. Technology cannot replace the valuable human connections that are the foundation of funeral service. But it can empower and enable the things we already do, and provide additional ways to help create a better experience for families. Here are five examples:

**1. Better communication.** Today’s digital tools make it easier to send and receive information to individuals or broad groups in a matter of seconds. It’s how we share news, send messages and photos about the important things in our lives – from birth to death and everything in-between.

**2. More convenient expressions of support.** Technology provides pathways for people to express support faster by sending a message, signing a guest book, making a donation, purchasing a card, or sending flowers using convenient tools located on the funeral home’s website.

**3. Time for the things that matter.** We can’t make more time, but technology can free up time by allowing us to do the things we need to do faster, and with less difficulty. Every minute saved by automating routine tasks or eliminating manual processes can be spent helping families deal with their loss.

**4. Personalization that adds value.** We’re able to honor our loved ones in highly personal ways that weren’t possible in the past – quickly, precisely and at a reasonable cost. Powerful video tributes, themed obituaries, customized programs and remembrance books, personal keepsakes, and memorial websites are just a few examples.

**5. Flexibility to meet consumers where they are.** In some cases, that means a physical location; in others, it represents a mindset or preference. Today’s digital tools provide the freedom to support families where and how they are most comfortable – at home, in a physical selection room or dynamically creating and viewing tailored products online.

The common elements of time, convenience, efficiency, value, and flexibility are far from cold and impersonal. And they don’t take away from what you do. Instead, they support you in providing richer, more satisfying experiences for families and their loved ones.