

# My Homesteaders



(L-R:) Mark Iles,  
Robin Walter  
and John Wild

**“We impact our client families in meaningful and powerful ways. It makes me feel proud contributing in a way that will mean something for a long time.”**

In 1960, Charles “Chuck” Iles opened his first funeral home location at Westover Chapel in Des Moines. During the next 50 years, he worked tirelessly to expand the business, leaving day-to-day operations to his sons upon his passing in 2011. Today, Iles Funeral Homes serve roughly 1,000 families each year out of five central Iowa locations.

Mark and Mike Iles oversee a staff of 120 full-time and part-time employees, including a general manager, three chapel managers and nine funeral directors as well as a staff of pre-need professionals working from an arrangement center in West Des Moines.

Dunn’s Chapel, the firm’s most historic funeral home, houses an on-site crematory and care center where the staff prepares each decedent. Due to rising cremation rates, the Iles management continues to invest in

creating meaningful experiences for families who choose cremation. At Dunn’s, this includes an environmentally safe and efficient crematory with a viewing room and external start. “The idea is to keep people involved as much as possible in the care of their own loved ones,” explained Chapel Manager Robin Walter. “We’ve found that it really benefits them as they move forward in the grief process.”

The Des Moines chapel also features a display floor where families can view caskets, vaults, cremation merchandise and even biodegradable urns and caskets. Their other four chapels include virtual selection rooms, and some of their rural locations feature smaller, modified display areas. “The word ‘investment’ really rings true for us,” noted General Manager John Wild. “We spend a lot of time investing in tools and staff to help us serve families in unique ways. Adopting virtual selection tools allows us to use the available space more efficiently and also offer refreshment and reception areas in the funeral homes.”

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## NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Thank you to everyone who stopped by our booth at the NFDA International Convention & Expo! I hope you took the time to visit with our very talented Tech Team and are already putting some of the online solutions to work for your funeral home. If you need a refresher on the many tools Homesteaders has available to make your job easier and giving you more time to spend with your families and your client families, simply [click here](#) or contact your account executive.

In our cover story this month, we are proud to share the success story of Mark and Mike Iles, owners of Iles Funeral Homes. You won't want to miss part three of Why do pre-need? In it, Director-Marketing Information Pam Kleese reveals how an active pre-need program can help grow your business.

The holidays are a difficult time for many, but especially for families who've suffered the loss of a loved one. See page six for a collection of grief support resources you can provide family members who may be in need of some additional guidance. On page 10, Marketing Communications Specialist Danielle Burmeister shares some wonderful ideas for creating meaningful holiday memorial services.

All of us at Homesteaders want to wish you and your families a very safe, relaxing and happy Thanksgiving holiday!

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myHomesteaders is a publication of Homesteaders Life Company,  
P.O. Box 1756, Des Moines, IA 50306-1756

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## Iles Funeral Homes (continued)

The Iles family also invests time in staff development and places a high premium on longevity and tenure. "Our goal is to have funeral directors who view this profession the way my dad did – as a calling. When you find these people, you cherish them, you want to take care of them and you want to retain them," Mark asserted, noting that it is not uncommon for his staff to have 20 or 30 years of experience with the firm. "We want our directors to feel comfortable making Iles their home for the duration of their career. We think it's good for them, it's good for us and, most importantly, it's good for the families we serve."



(L-R:) Brothers Mike and Mark Iles took over day-to-day operations of the business upon the passing of their dad, Chuck Iles, in 2011.

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The staff at Iles spends a great deal of time investing in resources and features which help them serve families in unique ways.

# Iles Funeral Homes (continued)

Because they support such a large staff, the management at Iles encourages their employees to specialize their skills and focus their time and energy on their passions.

“Since we allowed our staff to address their own interests and skill levels, our customer satisfaction has risen,” Robin observed. “Even our part-time staff have that sense of dedication, service and ownership. We see people who have the skills to work anywhere, but they choose to spend time assisting families during their time of need.”

The staff shares a commitment to providing exceptional experiences for their customers and ensures consistency by sending a follow-up survey to each client family at the conclusion of their services. More than 50 percent of families complete the survey, and the responses are overwhelmingly positive. “Our families go on and on about the care and commitment they receive from our funeral directors,” Mark reflected. “I am so proud of those comments that I send a personal message to our directors every time they are mentioned on a survey. It takes a great deal of my time because they are mentioned so frequently.”

Iles’ management is also firmly committed to finding creative ways to invest in the surrounding communities. “It’s important to us that we’re part of a vibrant community and support the things that we feel are important,” John affirmed, noting they approach their outreach with the same strategic lens they use when making other business decisions. “There are a lot of worthy causes to invest your time, talent and finances into. It’s something we don’t take lightly, and we try to be good stewards of all of our resources.”

One of the ways they strategically invest in their community is through seminars and tours designed to educate the area’s end-of-life caregivers on the importance of funeral services. “By training different caregivers, we can spread the word about our passion for helping people at the time of loss,” Robin explained. “We find that once these caregivers have gotten to know us, they have confidence in our services. Then they can turn around and say, ‘If you need some help, go to Iles.’”

A key part of their outreach efforts focuses on their active pre-need program. “Prearrangement counselors have a unique opportunity in a non-pressure setting to educate these

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# Iles Funeral Homes (continued)

families,” Robin observed. “You can sit with a family who may have walked in saying, ‘We want a direct cremation, no service.’ But they’re open to hearing what that means in terms of their families going forward. It gives them time to consider an alternate plan.”

“We have a dedicated team of prearrangement counselors who are trained with the same tools that our at-need funeral directors have,” Mark explained. “They are always available to help those families prepare something that’s meaningful, thorough, well thought out and, in many cases, pre-paid.”

John echoed this sentiment, noting that for many families the funding portion is a powerful motivator for finalizing end-of-life plans. “The funding part is huge for many families,” he affirmed. “When someone has set aside funds, we’re able to take a moment and show them what it would have cost out-of-pocket today if they had not chosen to prearrange. The value of that is eye-opening to many people.”

Since 1988, Iles has worked exclusively with Homesteaders to fund their pre-need contracts, due in large part to Chuck’s relationship with then-President Dan Voecks. “As time has gone on, it has become very apparent to all of us that the decision my dad made way back then has turned out to be a real blessing,” Mark observed, noting that Homesteaders’

long-term security and commitment to funeral service offers him peace of mind as he works with his client families to plan and fund their funerals. “Homesteaders has never failed to pay a claim in over 100 years. That kind of longevity and experience is invaluable to us.”

[ilesfuneralhomes.com](http://ilesfuneralhomes.com)



*Dunn’s Chapel, the firm’s most historic location, combines the elegance of the building’s original 1913 architecture with the amenities of a state-of-the-art funeral home.*



Click here to learn more about how Homesteaders is partnering with our funeral home customers to help grow their pre-need business.

