

a m e r i c a n
Funeral Director

December 2019

Mike Cook

FD
OF THE YEAR

AWARD
2019



AFD Award

By Stan Goldstein

American Funeral Director's

2019 the Winner

Mike Cook

Cavin-Cook Funeral Home & Crematory | Mooresville, North Carolina

As a child, Mike Cook was impressed by the service he saw at a funeral home.

"It was in 1962 and I was nine. My uncle died of a massive heart attack at 4 a.m.," Cook said. "There was a visitation that night. One of the funeral directors at the Cavin Funeral Home made an impression on me. It was also the first time I had been in a new car."

That funeral director, Worth Goodrum, had been with the Cavin Funeral Home in Mooresville, North Carolina, since 1935. Goodrum became a mentor to Cook.

"I had an opportunity to work with Mr. Goodrum. Still to this day I remember his demeanor," Cook said. "I remember him telling me how to walk down the aisle with the casket. He told me all the good funeral directors do it perfectly."

Doing things perfectly is a trademark for Cook, 67, the president/owner of the Cavin-Cook Funeral Home & Crematory in Mooresville, North Carolina, which has been serving families for more than 95 years. This month will mark Cook's 50th anniversary of starting in funeral service.

"Life is all about relationships. It's full of opportunities and building trust with each other through kindness, service and compassion," Cook said. "I hope our families know how much the Cavin-Cook team cares about their loved ones."

It's those relationships and opportunities that have made Cook stand out in Mooresville. He's known as one of those people who can always be counted on to be there for fundraisers, parades and other charitable events. He's a member of

numerous local organizations. His commitment to service and community played heavily in American Funeral Director's decision to name him its Funeral Director of the Year for 2019.

"I've known Mike for 40 years, and the thing that is special about him is that he is one of the people you can always depend on," said Kirk Ballard, president of the Mooresville-South Iredell Chamber of Commerce. "We get things done because of volunteers, and you're sometimes lucky if you have a handful of people who you can depend on and who are always there. With Mike, the answer is always, 'Yes.' He was named the 2009 'Citizen of the Year' by the chamber."

Cook's list of community involvement is extensive. He is a member of the Mooresville Masonic Lodge No. 496, the York and



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As a Shriner (and past potentate) Mike Cook assists with the Mooresville Christmas Parade among many other community activities. The Pet Pilgrimage Crematory and Memorials float is shown in the background. (Photo courtesy of Cavin-Cook Funeral Home & Crematory)



Scottish Rite organizations in Charlotte and is a past president (current member) of the Lake Norman Shrine Club and the Rotary Club of Mooresville. He is a member of the board of governors for the Shriners Hospitals for Children in Greenville, South Carolina; a board member for Iredell Memorial Hospital in Statesville, North Carolina, the Mooresville Museum and Serenity House in Mooresville.

Additionally, he is a member of the Board of Visitors and the Investment Committee for Mitchell Community College's Endowment for Excellence. Cook served as Potentate of the

Oasis Shriners in 2012 and is a past chairman of the Mooresville-South Iredell Chamber of Commerce and Hospice & Palliative Care of Iredell County.

"When it comes down to it, Mike is always there," said Ballard. "We have the Race City Festival each year in May on Main Street in downtown Mooresville with 300 booths. Mike always shows up at 3:30 a.m. to help set things up. There are not too many people who will show up at 3:30 a.m.

"There's an old saying that 'I no longer listen to what people say, I just watch what they do. Behavior never lies,'" Ballard added. "Mike is one of

those people who walks that talk."

In addition to the funeral home and crematory that serves 550 families per year, Cavin-Cook operates the Pet Pilgrimage Crematory and Memorials and the Heritage House event venue, both next to the funeral home. The firm recently opened a second pet facility in Denver, North Carolina.

50 Years Down the Road

Cook grew up in Mooresville. His father worked in a foundry and his mother in a textile mill. When he was 20, his father died of alcoholism at age 44. His mother, Doris, is 87 and remains active in Mooresville.

A 10-year-old Cook remembers watching John F. Kennedy's funeral. "I watched every step of that, all the pomp and circumstances of the ceremony," he said.

In his senior year of high school in December 1969, Cook started at the Cavin Funeral Home on Main Street in Mooresville.

"I went to high school with one of the sons of the owners of the funeral home. He talked to his dad and I got a job there," Cook said. "I lived in a one-room apartment with a bed and a bathroom there. I worked on visitations, I answered the phone after hours, went out on calls and helped out with funerals."

After high school, Cook attended Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina, while still working and living at the funeral home. Since no full-time position was available, he started looking for other opportunities.

"When I was 18, after graduating from high school, one of my teachers was contacted by a banker who was looking for a student to train as a loan officer," Cook said. "I interviewed with him, and they offered me a full-time job at the bank. I took that job, was going to Central Piedmont and still did work at the funeral home."

After working at the bank for three years, Cook became an assistant manager at a jewelry store in 1974. But funeral service was what he still really wanted to do.

“Milton Almond was the manager of the Cavin Funeral Home where I was still working,” Cook said. “He told me I could work my apprenticeship under him, but I needed to go to mortuary school.”

Cook began his studies at the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science in March 1975 and graduated a year later, earning his certification and diploma in mortuary science.

“I graduated magna cum laude from Cincinnati,” Cook said. “I was interested in being class president and someone told me that ‘it was reserved for funeral home owners’ sons.’ But I started campaigning and I was president both semesters I was there. I really enjoyed my time at Cincinnati. I wouldn’t take away anything from that experience.”

After college, Cook passed the North Carolina funeral director’s test and received his license in 1976. He began a full-time position with Cavin as a funeral director and an embalmer. He also moved back to his one-bedroom apartment with his wife, Cathy, at the funeral home.

At the start of 1977, Cavin was sold to Service Corporation International. “They bought four funeral homes that Cavin had,” Cook said. “We had new bosses. Milton stayed for a few months. They made him the manager and me an assistant manager, but I didn’t get overtime any more. I ended up leaving there in March of 1979.”

While at a Rotary Club meeting, a friend suggested to Cook that he would be good at selling cars. He began working at a small family-owned dealership in Mooresville. “That only lasted about nine months. I wasn’t making money selling cars,” he said.

Another friend suggested Cook try selling life insurance. He did that for three years. “That helped me in my funeral service career. It gave me an understanding of the types of coverage people have,” he said. “I had a detour in my career, and it was a plus for me today. It helped me see the value of planning ahead. Death can happen to anyone at any age.”

Opposite page: Mike Cook returns to the gravesite of the first funeral he worked when he was 17 in December 1969. Below: Cook and his son, Michael Cook Jr., vice president of operations at Cavin-Cook, in front of the Heritage House event venue. (Photos courtesy of Cavin-Cook Funeral Home & Crematory)



Back to Funeral Service

In March 1983, Cook had the opportunity to return to his passion, funeral service.

“I received a call from the Cumby Family Funeral Service in High Point, about an hour from Mooresville,” Cook said. “Their longtime embalmer manager had died and someone had recommended me to do the job. That gave me an opportunity to do what I wanted to do. I was one of the embalmers and funeral directors.”

Cook, along with his wife and two children, Courtney and Michael Jr., made the move to High Point. “It was a big change for us,” he said. “All our families were in Mooresville. Sixty miles doesn’t seem like a long distance, but it was. Mrs. Edith Cumby was good to work for. Her husband, Wade, had started the funeral home and she towed a hard line. She was very strict but very supportive also.”

At the start of 1988, Cook returned to Mooresville. “One of the former employees of the Cavin family had started the Neill Funeral Home and they had captured 45% of the market share from SCI,” Cook said. “He told me if I moved back to Mooresville, he would sell me part of the business. I did move back, but he never did sell me part of the business. It wasn’t the right time.”

Cook became the funeral director and embalmer at Neill.

A year later, Cook heard rumors that SCI might be looking to sell the Cavin Funeral Home, the place he began his career. He was interested in buying it but had a hard time getting a bank loan. “They don’t loan you money because you’re a nice guy. I didn’t have any collateral or equity,” he said.

Cook found a business partner, Jimmie Houston, and in February 1990, they were able to purchase

Cavin from SCI.

“That day was Friday, Feb. 16. I was meeting with a family at Neill. Mr. Houston called me and said I needed to meet him at the attorney’s office at 2 p.m. to complete the sale,” Cook said. “I was pinching myself. This can’t be true! We then met with the SCI staff who had already been notified that they would be transferred to another SCI location. It was hard to believe I was really doing this. This was my lifelong dream.”

At the time, Cavin was serving 125 families a year. Five years later, Cook bought out Houston and became the sole proprietor – although it wasn’t until 1997 that he added “Cook” to the name of the funeral home.

“I thought if I put my name on the funeral home, would it be ego driven? I didn’t know how people would react. Cavin has been in



business since 1925. I was just a poor kid who grew up on Cherry Street,” Cook said.

“But one day I was doing funeral arrangements with someone I knew from church. Her mother had died. She told me the only reason she was here was because I was here even though she still thought it was owned by a corporation,” he added. “She said, ‘You need to put your name on it because I go to church with you as do others. I didn’t know you owned the funeral home.’ And so I did change it.”

A Humble Man

It’s that humble attitude that has made Cook popular not only with his staff of 23 full-time and 10 part-time employees but also with the Mooresville community.

“My dad is a visionary. He has taken this funeral home to higher levels,” said Cook’s son, Michael Cook Jr., vice

president of operations at Cavin-Cook. “He is one of the hardest workers I know. He has been in the funeral industry for 50 years and has always instilled good ethical values.

“He tells myself, my sister, our employees and everyone that life is about relationships. Having a good relationship with folks is key. Treat everyone with the same amount of respect you want to be treated with. He strives to have the best of family life and work environment,” Cook Jr. added.

Gary Miller, owner of Clipper’s Flowers in Mooresville, has known Cook for 30 years and also has words of praise.

“Mike is always on point. Whenever you talk to him he is on top of everything, every minute detail. He wants it to be right,” Miller said. “I work with a church and the pastor takes note when Cavin-Cook handles a funeral.

They know everything will be top notch. Another woman I know from church said no one directs a funeral like Mike Cook. He gives clear direction to people so they feel comfortable at an uncomfortable time.”

Miller’s mother and then father died recently and Cook was at his side for support.

“He was very caring. When my mother passed away, he brought a family car to the funeral and he drove my father to the cemetery,” Miller said. “It’s those extra things that he did for me and others. It’s whatever he can do to make it as good as he possibly can.”

Staying involved in the community is a priority for Cook.

“That is very important to me,” he said. “It keeps me connected. I want to make things better for the people we serve. We keep coming up with ideas. Sometimes my ideas are kind-of



Opposite page: Several of Cook’s classic cars are available for funeral services. This hearse is affectionately named “Elvis.” It is reported to be the hearse used to transport Elvis Presley from the medical examiner’s office to the funeral home in Memphis, Tennessee. Above: Cook and his dog, Angus, at the Lu“Howl” fundraising event hosted by Pet Pilgrimage Crematory and Memorials. (Photos courtesy of Cavin-Cook Funeral Home & Crematory)

Mike and daughter-in-law, Sherry Cook at the Fur Ball Prom for Paws fundraising event, hosted by Pet Pilgrimage Crematory and Memorials. (Photo courtesy of Cavin-Cook Funeral Home & Crematory)



crazy, but we feel good about the things we do offer in the community.”

Crematory and Pet Pilgrimage

In 2004, Cook added a crematory to the funeral home.

“About 50,000 people lived in the city limits and 75,000 in the area and the cremation rate was bumping up. I bought a unit from Matthews,” Cook said. “Now we are approaching a 65% to 70% cremation rate of the services we do. When the Catholic Church issued new guidelines on cremation in 2016, our cremation rate almost doubled overnight.”

The number is above the North Carolina cremation rate of 48.2% in 2018, according to the Cremation Association of North America’s annual cremation statistics report.

In 2007, while at a funeral director’s convention, someone suggested he look into opening a facility for pets.

“When I took a ride out on Highway 150 here I saw a man riding with his dog on a golfcart. I knew there were many people who cared about pets, I just didn’t know how much. I looked into it further and we bought the equipment from B&L and opened up our pet facility,” Cook said.

In 2008, the Pet Pilgrimage Crematory and Memorials business opened next to the funeral home. Its mission is to serve pet families in need of end-of-life arrangements.

The following year, Cook met Leslie Reid, an interior designer, when he was remodeling the funeral home. “We started talking about pets and things of that nature,” Cook said. “She just loved pets and was looking for a change in her life, and I was looking for someone who could help show how pets are part of our family.”

Reid is now the director of Pet Pilgrimage. Just like his son, Michael Cook Jr., she uses the term “visionary” when she describes Cook.

“That was not my career path at all,” Reid said. “Mike believed in me, it took three years, but I finally came on board. He has been such an amazing mentor. He is a visionary. That is his most admired quality. It’s exciting to come to work with someone who is always thinking ahead and thinking of things that can happen.

“His love of funeral service for pets started as a child. He would place his friends and neighbors’ pets in his Radio Flyer wagon and lead a procession to some land behind his family’s house to have a full burial service,” she added. “Mike believes so much in serving families. He is a historian and loves his town. He has seen it grow by leaps and bounds. He is always community minded and thinking ahead for the growth of the business.”

When Reid first joined Pet Pilgrimage, it was serving about 300 families a year according to Cook. Now it is serving about 200 families a month.

“Leslie has been a tremendous asset. She knows how to help pet families get through at a time of grief,” Cook said. “She has made my dreams of what Pet Pilgrimage could be into a reality. It has opened a lot of doors for us. She has proved how special that relationship is people have with their pets.”

“We offer grief support. We want people to come here to see where their pet went,” Reid said. “It’s a joyful place, not a sad place.”

The facility also has four special greeters

“One can’t talk about Pet Pilgrimage without mentioning Angus. We call him the CEO, the K-9 executive officer” said Cook of his 11-year-old rescue poodle. “He works seven days a week like me, who they call his dad. He’s there with our granddog Luna plus his nephews Harley and Jack.”

In October, Cook opened a second Pet Pilgrimage facility in Denver, North Carolina, on the other side of Lake Norman from Mooresville.

“It’s in a suburb of Charlotte. It may be only 20 miles away but you have to drive around the lake and that can take an hour,” Cook said. “It became a logistical thing because we were serving a lot of families in that area. We bought a building there and totally refurbished it.”

The pet facility has handled all types of animals, including dogs, cats, guinea pigs, hamsters, iguanas, goats, chickens, snakes and cockatoos, according to Cook. “We can even handle up to a 500-pound potbelly pig,” he said.

Recently, when a child’s guinea pig died, the youngster wanted a paw print and Cook made sure that happened.

“Mike wants the children to have the same experience as he did,” Reid said. “He wants them to respect their pets and understand the ceremonial part of it. That’s important to him.”

The past two years, the pet facility had a “Fur Ball” where people can bring their pets and have dinner. It’s a benefit for a local animal rescue mission.

In 2017, the ball was a prom theme. In 2018, it was a Hawaiian luau.

“We had about 70 dogs there. Everybody, including the dogs, get dressed up,” Reid said. “There are a lot of photo ops. A lot of veterinarians are there, too.”



Top: The lobby of Pet Pilgrimage Crematory and Memorials. Above: Mike’s wife, Cathy, Mike’s mom, Doris and Mike at the annual company Christmas party. (Photos courtesy of Cavin-Cook Funeral Home & Crematory)

Six Questions

with Mike Cook

What is the best advice you have ever received?

A former business partner, James V. “Jimmie” Houston, shared this with me when I was able to purchase his interest in the business: “I have helped you. The only thing that I ask is that you help others in the future when you have the opportunity.”

What is your favorite book? Why?

“Truman” by David McCullough. This book is special to me because of my love for history and biographies. As I have read and studied this book, I find great encouragement in many aspects of President Truman’s journey. As I approach my retirement years, I hope that I can embrace them with the same dignity as President Truman.

What would people be surprised to learn about you?

From the time I was 14 years old, working in the concession stand at the state theater, I have worn a tie to work. For years, people would kid me that the only two people who wore a suit and tie to a Mooresville High School football game in the early '90s were Mayor Joe Knox and myself. The truth is, I really enjoy blue jeans, cowboy boots and a hat.

What is your all-time favorite movie? Why?

“The Godfather.” I am intrigued by that period of history as well as the reality of how harsh life can be.



Heritage House Event Venue

The Fur Balls have taken place at the Heritage House, an event venue opened in 2014 located next to the funeral home. It offers a setting for memorial and celebratory occasions as well as community events. There’s formal seating for 200 guests banquet style and 300 people theatre style.

“We built a building in front of our funeral home, in a nontraditional type of way. We have people coming on campus who would have never been here if it wasn’t for Heritage House,” Cook said. “The Rotary Club meets here, the Mooresville-South Iredell Chamber of Commerce. The very first event here was a Christmas party for the Lake Norman Shrine club, which supports the Shriners Hospital for Children.”

In September, Pet Pilgrimage hosted its eighth-annual pet life celebration with more than 300 people in attendance at the event venue.

“The purpose of Heritage House when we first built it, was for families who weren’t comfortable in the chapel, they could have a visitation there or use it for meals,” said Cook Jr. “It has become a multipurpose venue. We’ve had weddings, business meetings, family reunions, class reunions and baby showers.”

“That’s where my dad wants to give back to the community,” Cook Jr. added. “It’s a place nice and comfortable to have a function.”

Cook believes firmly in the celebration of a life and he’s had some unique services over the years.

“One man who we had a service for, he was a member of the Corvette club, so I encouraged his family to have his friends drive a Corvette to his service. We had 60 Corvettes here, people thought we were having a car show,” Cook said. “One person loved to watch TV sitting in his recliner. So we went to the family’s house, picked up the recliner and his TV remote and had that at his service. People loved it. We like the concept of celebrating life.”

Reid continues to see that in Cook.



Heritage House event venue is used for funerals, weddings and other social/business occasions. (Photo courtesy of Cavin-Cook Funeral Home & Crematory)

“Mike’s specialty is finding something unique about every decedent he serves so they are honored during their funeral service,” Reid said. “He has no limits and the word ‘no’ is not in his vocabulary.”

It’s all those things that have made Cook well respected around Mooresville.

“My dad does not meet a stranger,” Cook Jr. said. “He will go up and talk to anybody. My kids, when he goes out with us, say, ‘Grandpa knows everyone.’ The business leaders around our area, I see how much they respect him and how much he respects them.

“He goes out and supports their businesses. He believes if you support them, you will be shown the same respect as well.”

The Tuesday before Thanksgiving is the annual Mooresville Christmas parade. Of course, Cook is one of the organizers.

“He’s been doing that for more than 25 years,” Reid said. “He is in his element. He just loves his community. It’s a thankless job, but he will continue to do it even if we have to roll him there in a wheelchair.”

“I get to make fun of him that day because he’s in the parade wearing a stupid hat,” added Miller. “He usually wears an orange jacket and fancy colors. My son said he had never seen him wear anything but a black suit.”

For Cook, whose current office is ironically in the same spot as where he used to live at the funeral home, service to families and community is something that he learned years ago from Worth Goodrum.

“One of the biggest compliments I’ve had lately was from Whitey Meadows, who owned Whitey’s Barbershop in Mooresville for over 50 years,” Cook said. “He said, ‘I want to tell you something. Mike, you’re like Worth Goodrum. He was low key and you remind me of him.’ Whitey couldn’t have said anything to me that would have made me feel better.

“As a nine-year-old kid, I was looking up to a man who was nice to me. Worth Goodrum made me feel a part of everything. That’s what we try to do here.” •

Have you planned your own funeral? If so, what will the services include?

Yes, I want what I refer to as a traditional service: a visitation the day before the service and the service to follow the next day in our Heritage House building. I would like for the service to be personalized, celebrating my life and some of my personal interests. As a Shriner, I was fortunate to serve as potentate of Oasis Shriners, Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2012 and have numerous items I would like displayed and incorporated in the services. I would like to have a few of my “old cars” used in the procession, including the 1976 Miller-Meteor Hearse (this is a special vehicle and was used to transfer Elvis Presley from the medical examiner’s office to the Memphis Funeral Home and was transferred to us shortly after his passing). In addition, I want a bluegrass band, a bagpiper and the Oasis Patrol Color Guard – of which I am a member – escorting the procession along with the Oasis Drum Bugle Corps as well as the Potentates Guard walking beside the hearse. A little pomp and circumstance please!

If you could have dinner with any one or two people, whom would they be and why?

My daughter, Courtney, and my son, Michael. I am so proud of them both and their families. I missed so many of their events growing up because of work, but I am so thankful that they always seemed to understand that a family needed our help. I believe life is about relationships and is full of opportunities and possibilities. Both Courtney and Michael have great futures ahead of them and their families and I would sit and listen to their dreams, visions and plans for their futures.