



For the past six years Rob Champion has been the Mills & Mills Funeral Home & Memorial Park crematory operator. Here he stands next to the crematory building on the facility's grounds on Wednesday, March 3.

Yelm Man Has Been Helping 'Loved Ones' for 29 Years

Mills & Mills Funeral Home and Memorial Park Worker Rob Champion Provides Compassion, Respect and Dignity

BY PAUL DUNN
Nisqually Valley News

Rob Champion sees dead people.

But not via a sixth sense. And not by that name.

He, instead, respectfully calls them "loved ones."

And that's exactly what they are to Champion and his colleagues at Mills & Mills Funeral Home and Memorial Park in Tumwater.

Loved ones.

"We feel like we are a part of many of the families we interact with," said Champion last week from Mills & Mills. "They tell us stories about their loved ones, and we recognize the amazing things they have done."

Champion, 58, a Yelm resident who has worked at Mills & Mills for 29 years — the last six as crematory operator — exudes dignity, respect and compassion, in times of sorrow just the assets a family might need.

"You build a lot of relationships with people in this industry, and you connect with them on an almost spiritual level," Champion explained. "We really care about our families and want to help them feel at peace."

Champion, a Yelm High School graduate who has been married for 32 years to Yelm Community Schools bus assistant Theresa Champion, lives on a 30-acre farm with the couple's "furbabies" — three dogs, a couple of birds, a pot-bellied pig and two horses.

Champion, in fact, grew up on a 200-acre Yelm beef-cattle and lumber farm his mom and dad worked with the help of Champion, his sister and two brothers. Their hands were rarely idle.

Mending fences, placing hay, feeding animals and other chores kept them focused and occupied.

"From the time we could walk we were out doing something on the farm," Champion said.

His childhood memories are

stirred afresh from time to time at Mills & Mills, where his parents are interred. It's comforting to have them so near, he said.

"It's nice that they're here when I get to feeling lonely," Champion said. "I can go see them and chit chat."

And chit chat he did during those early years on the farm when Champion shocked his mom by declaring he wanted to be a funeral director when he grew up. Blame the unusual decision on a kindly mortician who unintentionally lit the lad's flame.

Champion remembers the circumstances quite clearly, even now 47 years later. He was in the fifth grade back then during a Mills & Mills memorial service for his just-deceased grandfather. Sensing the boy's discomfort, the funeral director unexpectedly took the lad under his wing, showing him around the funeral home and explaining the business as though he was speaking with an adult.

Champion has never forgotten the mortician's empathy and sensitivity.

"He was so compassionate and understanding," Champion said. "It was just amazing how he helped me get through the grieving process. I've always been kind of passionate for people, and I think it was how the funeral director wanted to help us mend over the death of our grandfather that stuck with me."

By the time Champion entered high school he began exploring the possibilities of becoming a funeral director, discovering exactly what it would take to achieve his goal. And after a four-year stint in the U.S. Navy, the now-seasoned adult landed a summer job at Mills & Mills where he began learning the ropes of what would become his cherished profession.

He landed his first permanent job soon after — cemetery worker — at Woodlawn Funeral Home Cemetery in Lacey. It's there that he dirtied his hands digging and backfilling graves, setting up services, mowing lawns and the like.

And he discovered over the five years at Woodlawn that he

didn't want to be a funeral director, though he was offered that opportunity while there.

"I realized that being a funeral director wasn't really my passion," he said. "It was more working on the grounds of the cemetery that I enjoyed."

And that's what he did when he accepted his next job at Mills & Mills. As he scans the spacious, green, park-like setting that surrounds the funeral home's graves, he can't think of another job he'd rather have.

"I wouldn't change fields if someone paid me to do it," he said. "It's so rewarding."

Paul Turner, 33, Mills & Mills funeral director, would no doubt love hearing those words. He admires Champion as perhaps the ideal funeral home employee.

"Rob has a very big heart and also an impeccable moral compass," Turner said. "One thing I really appreciate with Rob is his commitment to always doing the right thing."

Champion does the right thing these days by ensuring the facility's crematory is running smoothly and that he is available to periodically lend a hand in other areas.

He's occasionally woken up in the middle of the night, for instance, to perform "first calls" as part of the funeral home's removal team. First calls involve removing deceased people from their homes, transporting them to the mortuary, and placing them into refrigerated containers until they are buried, cremated or interred in mausoleums. Mills & Mills can refrigerate 40 people at a time on its premises.

Though the very thought of assisting families at home when a loved one has just died sounds horribly stressful, "it's not as bad as people think it is," Champion said. "Most families are very kind to us when we show up."

In addition to first calls, Champion is periodically called upon to set up areas for memorial services, which frequently requires some heavy lifting.

"Luckily, I don't have to do too many of those anymore," he said.

Blind checks are another of his periodic critical responsibilities — verifying placements for memorial services and double checking to ensure the chosen locale corresponds with the correct families.

"There are a lot of checks and balances," Champion stressed. "We have to go through to ensure we have the correct loved ones in all situations. We always check, double check and recheck, because we only have one chance to make it right for these families."

In his primary role as crematory operator, Champion ensures the correct bodies of the deceased are transported from the main funeral home to the crematorium. They're then cremated in rigid containers, which vary from simple cardboard to full caskets.

The crematorium — perhaps a quarter mile from the Mills & Mills greeting center on a road adjacent the funeral home's lush, green grounds — looks like a small, one-story suburban house, not a site to incinerate bodies.

But this is where Champion works, his utilitarian office hidden behind a curtain during the infre-



Yelm resident Rob Champion has worked for Mills & Mills Funeral Home & Memorial Park in Tumwater for 29 years. For the past six years Champion has been the facility's crematory operator. Here he is seen on Wednesday, March 3.



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quent times when family members are present.

About 10 percent of families elect to participate in "witness cremations," brief services inside the crematory building where they honor loved ones a final time. After the ceremonies, bodies inside containers are placed in an industrial furnace called a "retort" and cremated for about two hours at an average temperature of 1,600 degrees F. Mills & Mills performs about 15 cremations a week.

After cremation, Champion collects the bodies' bone fragments, processes them into ash, and places the ash into the urn of the family's choice. Then he thoroughly vacuums the retort to ready it for the next body.

For Champion, witness ceremonies can be intensely emotional, satisfying experiences.

"We cremate loved ones according to the wishes of the family," he said. "For instance, if Dad had a favorite baseball cap we make sure the cap is with him. Sometimes after we've done a witness cremation, people come up and want to hug me. Sometimes you don't realize how many people you impact."

But Tom Field does. The 60-year-old Mills & Mills receptionist and former funeral director sees it in Champion's every action.

"He (Champion) has impeccable professionalism, and he puts himself in families' shoes when he's caring for a loved one," said Field, a rural Thurston County resident who has worked at Mills & Mills for 11 1/2 years. "He treats every family member as though they were his own."

But COVID-19 has made that kind of commiseration more challenging, Champion noted.

"With COVID, everything has been kind of helter skelter," he said.

The pandemic has altered the funeral homes' normal mo-

duo operandi — most notably for graveside services. Conforming to state restrictions, only 30 people are allowed in-person, others either sitting in their cars or viewing the commemorations via video live stream.

"I feel badly for the families, because there hasn't been that closure like there used to be," he said.

According to Champion, Mills & Mills has accommodated about 10 COVID-19 victims in the year since the disease was first reported in Thurston County. In response, the funeral home took appropriate measures, Champion said.

"I never worried about COVID, because we took the precautions we needed to by wearing full hospital suits, masks and gloves. But most important to us was taking care of the families. We have a job to do."

But as Champion well knows, all work and no play makes Rob a dull boy. So in his leisure time he turns to his passion: working wood. Yep, using a lathe Champion makes a variety of gorgeous wooden bowls — among other periodic pieces like rocking horses — both for eating and decoration. Inspired by his father, he's been working wood all his life.

"My dad was amazing at making furniture, so I grew up working with wood," Champion explained. "I make whatever Theresa (his wife) tells me to."

He sometimes sells the bowls, which are made from maple, cherry or black locust wood, and has also offered some for the annual Yelm Dollars for Scholars auction.

The rest of the time, he simply "plays on the farm," he said.

And that must keep him centered, and ... jolly?

Could be, according to Turner.

"Rob is a wonderful person to work with," said the funeral director. "He's very funny sometimes, and at times there's some needed levity in our jobs."

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