

COVER STORY

By Patti Martin Bartsche

Doug Gober's Lasting Impact

Where do you begin to tell the story about Doug Gober's lasting impact?

Do you go all the way to the Batesville Casket years, where, after taking over a larger territory in Arkansas, he turned it into one of the top territories in the country? Or it can be traced to his time with Alton Doody and The Doody Group, where, among his many achievements, he was instrumental in planning and implementing a number of innovative merchandising concepts and products? You could also point to his move to Live Oak Bank, where, as the company's executive marketing director of death-care management, he was able to help the new funeral business vertical do over \$100 million in loans in its second year.

Others may insist that it was when he left Live Oak to form Gober Strategic Capital where he was able to broaden the

range of counsel and resources he could bring to death-care businesses. Some might even say it was when he became a partner at The Foresight Companies, which allowed him to expand his service offerings to include accounting, business valuations, human resource services, strategic business analysis, accounts receivable management and, of course, financing.

But maybe, just maybe, his most profound impact has been on all of the people whose dream of funeral home ownership – or the successful sale of their business – became a reality thanks to Doug Gober.

“He changed our lives,” said James Weldy, the owner (along with his wife, Terri) of Johnson-Danielson Funeral Home in Plymouth, Indiana, which they purchased in 2017. “He made our dream

of becoming funeral home owners a reality. It wasn't an easy journey, and at times I thought it would never happen. But every time something didn't work out, Doug was there, telling us to have faith and not to give up. There's no one in the funeral profession I respect more than Doug Gober ... he's been there for us and so many others; that's his lasting impact.”

Gober's contributions to the funeral profession will be celebrated during this month's International Cemetery, Cremation & Funeral Association convention in Kansas City, Missouri, where he will be presented with the Lasting Impact Award by the ICCFA Educational Foundation.

The decision to present the award to Gober was an easy one, ICCFA Educational Foundation President Jim Price said.

FOR DOUG GOBER, A 1977 GRADUATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA, "ROLL TIDE" IS AMONG HIS FAVORITE SAYINGS. (PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUG GOBER)





THIS PAGE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) IN 2018, DOUG GOBER BECAME A PARTNER AT THE FORESIGHT COMPANIES. THE FORESIGHT TEAM INCLUDES (FROM LEFT) DOUG GOBER; CHRIS CRUGER, CEO AND FOUNDER; AND JOHN MCQUEEN, DIRECTOR OF CLIENT EXPERIENCE. AN ASTUTE BUSINESSMAN, GOBER IS CREDITED WITH HELPING FUNERAL HOME OWNERS AND BUYERS REALIZE THEIR DREAMS. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FORESIGHT COMPANIES). OPPOSITE PAGE: DOUG GOBER FREELY SHARES HIS YEARS OF EXPERIENCE WITH FUNERAL PROFESSIONALS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. (PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUG GOBER)

“The remarkable connection across all of Doug’s career is his commitment of time and passion to education in our profession,” Price said. “His ideas, perspective, and innovations aren’t reserved for customers or paying clients, but freely shared with anyone interested in improving our profession. We are honored to have the opportunity to recognize Doug’s remarkable contribution to death care.”

That Gober was recognized for his contributions to death care in a career that has spanned 40-plus years (and still going) is likely a surprise to no one ... unless your name is Doug Gober.

“In my business life, this was the most surprising call I’ve ever received,” Gober said. “I honestly thought Jim was calling me to get somebody’s number or address. He calls me all the time just for us to catch up or ask if I know so-and-so – and more times than not I do – but that wasn’t what this call was about.

“And when he starts into why he was

calling, I was absolutely dumbfounded ... and it’s not often that I’m at a loss for words.”

As he was digesting what Price was telling him, Gober said it had never crossed his mind that he would be considered for the award.

“I’m not an insider, I’m not a funeral director, I’m not a cemeterian. I have more than a great respect for what they do, and I have endeared myself to a few of them, but it just never crossed my mind that I would even be eligible for something like this,” he said. “When I got that call from Jim, I teared up a little ... I just couldn’t believe it. This award rarely goes to those of us who are not owners or managers in some way.”

THE EARLY YEARS

How Gober got to where he is today is something the Alabama native has found himself reflecting on since the award announcement.

Looking back, it all began when the 17-

year-old Gober was balancing his senior year in high school and working full time at a local hospital at night.

“I was working at the hospital because they offered shift work. I would work from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. at the hospital, get off and go straight to school. I’d go home after school, go to sleep and then get up for work that night,” he recalled.

The hospital was small, probably just 40 beds, but it had an emergency room that was only staffed when somebody came in.

“So, it was one of those times when I had worked five days straight and gone to school five days straight and I was just worn out. I went back and sat down in the emergency area, which was completely empty, for a quick rest,” Gober said.

What happened next is forever engrained in Gober’s heart and mind.

“I hadn’t been there five minutes, and the emergency room door flew open, and a lady and a man came screaming into the room and dropped a dead baby right in

my lap,” he said. “I remember to this day that sound of that woman’s voice and you know, you’re 68 years old now and you start looking back on your life and what led you into what you’re doing now and having no idea that those things that occurred back there might have some influence on your life 30 years or more later.”

It was the first – but not the last – event that would drive Gober to where he is today.

Gober was a sophomore at the University of Alabama on his way to becoming a CPA, when he received word that a good friend from high school had died.

Gober was a member of his high school football team; among his teammates was Donnie Robbins, who he described as “one of the purest football athletes I had ever met.”

The two immediately hit it off, and quickly became best friends.

“He was so excited to tell me after his senior football season ended that he signed a football scholarship, and he was going to Auburn.”

Two days after the announcement, Robbins and his girlfriend died from an accidental carbon monoxide poisoning. “I was devastated ... my friend was here and then he wasn’t,” Gober said. “Donnie’s was the first funeral I was ever involved in creating; I was just 19 years old. I ended up singing at his funeral, in this little itty-bitty church, saying goodbye to my best friend.”

Although he didn’t know it at the time, those two events (and several others) would change the trajectory of Gober’s life.

THE NEXT STEPS

Even before he finished at Alabama, Gober had begun working for the CPA firm he would join after graduation. “They recruited me in my junior year, and I began working there about six months before I graduated,” Gober said.

It was only a short time before Gober was named a managing auditor, having about six people working for him. “All of them were at least a decade or two decades older than me,” he recalled. “It was an unusual situation, but we worked well once they realized that I was a good guy.”

The firm’s partners had indicated to Gober that he was on the partner path, so he was surprised by what he heard next when he was called into one of their offices. While the partners loved what he was doing and he was doing terrific work, there was one problem – Gober was having too much fun.

“At first I thought he said I was doing too much funding,” Gober chuckled. “But what he said was that I was having too much fun. I wasn’t supposed to enjoy it; I was supposed to be out there doing my work, keeping my head down and not interact with the clients.”

When Gober pointed out that he needed to interact with his clients to get the necessary information, the partner responded that he didn’t need to enjoy it so much.

“And then he went on to say words that I’ve never forgotten – ‘We don’t think you necessarily fit our mold here,’” Gober recalled. “I looked him straight in the eye – now this was a big deal, and looking back now it was even a bigger

deal than I realized – and I said, ‘Thank God I don’t ... and you will never see me again.’ I turned around, walked out the door and have never seen any of those people at the firm again.”

A NEW START

That in-the-moment decision would be a turning point for Gober, paving the way for what has become a long and successful career within funeral service.

His first stop was Batesville Casket Co., where, after a month’s training, he was given the Northern Mississippi and Arkansas territory to make his mark. It was January 1979, and Gober was taking over a territory of a man who was legendary in the field. “It would be like following Bear Bryant at Alabama,” Gober said. “He was the only Batesville Casket rep many funeral homes ever had. He had been there so long that he used to take the caskets off the train and deliver them in the back of a station wagon ... that’s who I was following.”

He need not have worried.



It was during his time at Batesville that Gober was introduced to marketing guru Alton Doody.

As legend has it, Doody was at his summer home in Michigan when a neighbor, John Hillenbrand of Hillenbrand Industries (the then-parent company of Batesville Casket Co.), asked what he'd been up to. When Doody described his work with marketing strategies, Hillenbrand's reply was, "We really need a way to do that for my business," Columbus CEO reported in a June 2013 story.

Weeks later, Doody was in Batesville, Indiana, and among the sales reps tapped to take him around was Gober.

"What Alton latched onto right away was the need for the funeral home environment to change," Gober said. "He believed that merchandise needed to be presented to customers differently, that his retailing expertise and knowledge could successfully be applied to the funeral business."

Doody wasn't wrong.

To prove his point, Doody set up prototypes of "new" casket selection rooms; 22 of the 37 nationwide prototypes just happened to be in Gober's territory.

"We were really using my territory as a live lab ... we did a small amount of consumer research before we took it to market, but not as much as we typically would because we had people (funeral home owners) willing to try it," he said. "We had the empirical data coming from real families making real arrangements in this prototype room. We knew we were on to something: how to communicate with families and best present the customer experience."

In 1995, Gober would leave Batesville to join The Doody Group as executive vice president working in the United Kingdom and France, successfully directing the company's European operations.

A year later, The Doody Group was acquired by the York Group, which itself was acquired by Matthews International

Corp. in 2001. Through all the transitions, Gober was instrumental in planning and implementing several innovative merchandising concepts and products, including fractional display idea.

It was an exciting time for Gober, who, after spending 16 years working at Batesville, would spend the next 16 years of his career at its rival Matthews International.

"But you know what? I didn't then – and haven't ever – left a company on bad terms," Gober said. "For me, it's all about building relationships, not just for a moment, but for a lifetime. I have never burned a bridge."

A NEW COURSE

It was toward the end of 2010 that Gober was approached by Carriage Services executives Jay Dodds and Rick Sattler with a simple question: Would he like to work with them as director of development and marketing?

"They made it very clear that they had



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DOUG GOBER AND HIS WIFE, VICTORIA AMATO. DOUG GOBER MAY NOT HAVE BEEN BORN IN LOUISIANA, BUT HAS EMBRACED EVERYTHING THE STATE HAS TO OFFER, INCLUDING NEW ORLEANS JAZZ FUNERALS. DURING HIS CAREER, DOUG GOBER HAS WORKED WITH SOME OF THE FUNERAL PROFESSION'S TITANS OF INDUSTRY, INCLUDING THE LATE ROBERT WALTRIP (LEFT), FOUNDER OF SERVICE CORPORATION INTERNATIONAL AND FRANK STEWART, THE FORMER CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OF STEWART ENTERPRISES. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF DOUG GOBER)



a place for me ... and I felt it was time for me to make a change,” Gober said.

Dodds, now chief operating officer for Park Lawn Corp., described Gober as “truly a unicorn when it comes to funeral service. Rarely do you find an individual with a finance background that has an undying passion for serving and caring for others.”

Within months of his January 2011 arrival at Carriage, someone reached out to Gober – Live Oak Bank.

“My first comment to those guys was I hadn’t changed jobs in 16 years, and now you want me to change jobs in less than five months?” Gober chuckled.

As Gober would learn, Live Oak Bank was looking for another area to explore, and they thought the funeral business would be a good area. At the time he was approached, Live Oak was serving pharmacists, dentists and veterinarians.

The recommendation to bring Gober on board was made by Jerald Pullins, who had worked with Gober when he was with The Doody Group and Pullins was with Service Corporation International – and a client.

“I kept hearing that I was the right guy for the job,” Gober said, “So, after thinking about it for a bit, I finally said yes.”

It wouldn’t be until September 2011 that Live Oak made an offer; Gober officially joined the bank the following month, becoming one of its 66 original shareholders.

David Lucht, chief risk officer for Live Oak Bank, said Gober was the right person to bring on board.

“He taught me a lot about the funeral business. His insights were vital for the bank to create a loan portfolio we are very proud of. His instincts and insights were remarkable,” Lucht said.

Just as importantly, Lucht added, “Doug did not see potential loan clients as a bunch of financial statements, but as people he could help.”

The division was a success from the start, Gober said. “In our second full year, we did over \$100 million in funeral home loans,” he said. “Starting something from scratch and seeing it thrive was a great thrill.”

At the same time, though, Gober began to feel pulled in two directions. On one side were funeral home owners who were

reaching out with questions that had nothing to do with financing, and on the other side were the rules and regulations imposed by the banking industry.

“As a W2 employee for an FDIC lender, you are not supposed to be giving advice on business valuations and what pricing should be,” Gober explained. “I was supposed to evaluate transactions and whether or not we would finance them.”

For Gober, who had built strong relationships with his customers throughout his career, not being able to speak freely with his friends – and that’s how he looked at many of his customers – put him in a difficult position.

The solution presented itself in September 2014 when Gober founded Gober Strategic Capital. As an independent contractor, Gober could continue to support financing through Live Oak while also being further involved in transactions.

“I’m putting transactions together because I have the skills and the connections, and then Live Oak Bank is still financing them,” Gober said. “To be able to be involved in transactions from the start has been great.”

Gober Strategic Capital soon found itself at a crossroads; the business had become “ridiculously large.”

“I was working from 7 a.m. to midnight or longer every single day every day, including weekends, it was just too much,” Gober said.

In 2018, Gober decided to partner with Dan Isard, founder of The Foresight Companies. From Gober’s perspective, the decision made perfect business sense: Foresight had the staff of business analysts and support staff that would allow Gober to focus on strategy – and making dreams come true for funeral home buyers and sellers.

Early in their partnership, Isard and Gober began looking for someone who could potentially take over the company down the road when the two men retired. That person would be Chris Cruger, who Gober had met in 1995 when he was in France with The Doody Group and Cruger was working for SCI.

Cruger joined Foresight as a partner in 2019, eventually buying out Isard’s share of the business and becoming the company’s CEO and controlling partner.

“I don’t think there’s another person

who cares more deeply about the funeral profession than Doug Gober,” Cruger said. “He is always trying to make somebody else’s dreams come true and help them be better at what they do as a person, as a professional, as a profession. Everything that drives him is always about doing the right thing.”

Cruger’s decision to become a part of and partner with Foresight was in large part due to Gober.

“We have a tremendous amount of respect for one another; we respect that we are totally different people in many ways but also totally aligned in all the important ways,” Cruger said. “From the day I began at Foresight there have been three non-negotiables: always do the right thing, always do the very best you can, and always make sure they know you care. If you do those three things every single day, everything is going to work out right.”

To Cruger, no one deserves the Lasting Impact Award more than Doug Gober.

“Doug’s contribution to funeral service – what has it been and what will it continue to be – is to open people’s eyes to the possibilities and the importance (of funeral service) and to continue to reinforce the importance of what they do, what it means to the community and what it means to individuals and families,” Cruger said. “Every day and in every way, he is giving the profession the reinforcement and the encouragement to continue to be exceptional in every possible way.”

Since joining Foresight as a senior M&A analyst in 2019, Jared Tanke has learned from some of the best in funeral service ... and Gober is at the top of his list.

“Doug’s been a wealth of knowledge and a great mentor as I continue to grow in this space,” Tanke said. “You know, I’ve really never met someone who speaks with so much passion; you know, every time we’re on a call with him, whether it’s with a client or an internal interaction with our team, he just has so much passion for what he’s doing.”

That passion for the profession and its people is displayed every time Gober walks into a room – or takes a stroll on a convention floor.

“Everyone is just always so happy to

see him and they come up and talk with him ... And you know, he always reciprocates," Tanke said.

Gober laughingly admits that it is sometimes hard for him to get from Point A to Point B when he's at events or walking the convention floor. "How can I not stop and talk to people?" he said. "Every single person I've ever had contact with has impacted my life ... that's a gift that I want to acknowledge."

Gober's passion is not lost on those who know him well.

"In the end-of-life care profession, one would be hard-pressed to name someone comparable to Doug Gober," Ernie Heffner, president, Heffner Funeral Chapel & Crematory in York, Pennsylvania, said. "In addition to being among the smartest people in the room and unlike the stereotypical image of a reserved CPA, Doug is outgoing, engaging and can be animatedly enthusiastic when talking about our profession. Over the past several decades, thousands have experienced his educational presentations, which are a testament to what he believes in his heart.

"Whether his topic of the day is sharing his observations of best practices, worst practices or a very personal experience in the loss of one of his family members, Gober's intention is always to enhance the profession's sensitivity and understanding when serving families, and ultimately that's for the greater good of the profession," Heffner added.

"To know Doug Gober is to know candor and sincerity," said Heffner the 2019 Lasting Impact Award recipient. "Much as Doug can be a prolific talker, he can conversely be a good listener, analytical and thoughtful. Doug Gober is a friend to many and a great resource ... he has been a positive influence in my life and I'm fortunate to know him as a friend."

Longtime friend Mark Krause, president of Krause Funeral Homes & Cremation Service in Milwaukee, recalled getting the biggest smile on his face when he learned who the ICCFA Educational Foundation would be honoring this year.

"I could think of nothing more than there is no one more deserving of this award," he said. "And the second thing was just how proud I am to be his friend."

His impact on the profession, in ways, large and small, has been profound.

"Doug talks about not being a funeral director and being unsure that he deserves this award, but I sometimes think that's made him as good as he is," Krause said. "He looks at things in a different way, not through the lens of a funeral director. He can look at the situation as a consumer or supplier and get a different perspective ... and that's what is needed in our profession.

"I've learned so much from people that haven't been funeral directors about our profession, and Doug is at the top of that list," he added. "His vision and his knowledge about what we do and how we do it is unmatched. Funeral service has been blessed to have Doug Gober as a part of it."

When it comes to those who have known – or known about – Gober the longest, look no further than Jeff Smith, president of Smith Family Funeral Homes in Arkansas.

Gober was Smith's parents' Batesville Casket rep when he was growing up, and it wasn't unusual to find him sitting in the stands watching a then teenage Smith play football on Thursday nights.

"That's who Doug Gober is ... he's that kind of guy," Smith said. "Did he have to come watch me play? No. But if he was in town and we had a game, he showed up, not because he had to, but because he wanted to."

Even from those earliest interactions with his family, Smith understood that all Gober wants to do is help. "He's a born helper ... he wants people to succeed, to realize their dreams," he said.

Smith says there's another thing important to know about Gober.

"He can't keep his mouth closed if he thinks there's a better way to do it ... he cannot help himself," Smith laughed. "He will say 'Why would you do it this way when there's a better way?' And sometimes people just don't want to hear it."

At the same time, though, there is no one Smith would rather have in his corner.

"At the end of the day Doug is just trying to help funeral directors be better businesspeople without losing their servant's heart," Smith said. "That's what

makes Doug so special ... he cares."

Gober's capacity for caring goes beyond the four walls of a funeral home.

"I don't think anyone could ask for a better friend than Doug Gober," said Benji and Donna Hughes, owners of Hughes Funeral Home and Crematory in Daphne, Alabama.

While the Hughes had first met Gober years earlier, they only started doing business when he was working at Live Oak Bank. The relationship grew, and when the Hughes decided to construct a new building four years ago, it was Gober they turned to for financial help and advice.

"He's so happy to answer questions, no matter the time of day," Hughes said. "I don't know what we would do if we couldn't just give him a call and say, 'Hey can we talk?' And if he can't talk in that minute, he will always call you back as soon as he can."

While the Hughes value the business relationship, what is more valuable is the friendship they share.

"There's one thing for certain ... Doug will always be there for you," Hughes said.

It's that passion for being there, for giving his word and sticking to it – which will have Gober taking a red eye to Kansas City, Missouri, to accept his Lasting Impact Award May 17. He had committed to a speaking engagement well in advance of being notified of winning the award.

"A commitment is a commitment," he said. "You don't go back on your word."

As for being the 2023 Lasting Impact Award recipient, Gober likens himself to a beloved movie character brought to life by Tom Hanks.

"I'm really the Forrest Gump of funeral service," he said. "I mean, Forrest Gump got to play for Bear Bryant. He got to meet presidents and was around when important stuff was happening in history.

"And I'm much the same way ... I've been around the most successful people in this business and have had a front seat to the change and the evolution of the profession. Like Forrest Gump, I may not be the smartest guy on the field, but I have a lot of energy and passion ... and I'm good with that." •