

Business

By Patti Martin Bartsche



Partnering

for a Better Trust Solution

In what may be a first for the profession, death-care industry leaders Live Oak Bank, Funeral Services Inc., Roosevelt Investment Group, and Broad and Cassel Attorneys at Law have formed a partnership to offer funeral home and cemetery owners a total turnkey trust solution.

The Players



Steve Jackson

Live Oak Bank.

Live Oak Bank creates a banking experience for small business owners through service and technology. Live Oak provides trust services for preneed funeral trusts, cemetery merchandise and services trusts and perpetual care trusts.



Bill Williams

FSI: Funeral Services Inc.

Is a trust administration and record-keeping and reporting company that provides trust solutions to funeral homes, cemeteries, third-party preneed sellers, industry associations and financial institutions. It offers web-based technology designed to enhance preneed and perpetual care programs.



Corie Gabriel

Roosevelt Investments Group.

Roosevelt Investments' industry knowledge, investment experience and risk-oriented approach have enabled the firm to provide investment management solutions for funeral homes and cemeteries for more than 30 years.



**Wendy Russell
Weiner**

Broad and Cassel Attorneys at Law.

Broad and Cassel is a full-service law firm serving clients worldwide from nine offices throughout Florida. The firm has more than 170 attorneys with extensive experience in a wide variety of practice areas and industries including the representation of death-care clients in many states.

In many cases, casual conversations don't amount to much. But sometimes, those conversations can lay the foundation for new business opportunities.

Just ask W.H. "Bill" Williams, president and CEO of Funeral Services Inc.

The Tallahassee, Florida-based trust administration and record-keeping company provides trust solutions to funeral homes, cemeteries and more businesses, offering web-based technology designed to enhance a firm's preneed and perpetual care programs with faster and easier access to documentation and reporting.

"We're a trust administrator and

a record keeper ... that's who we are," Williams said. "We're not a trustee or an investment manager."

But Williams, who started his career in the death-care industry as a funeral director, is keenly aware that trust management is complicated, and it involves three to four different parties that offer specialized services. "Typically what happens is that a funeral home or cemetery or association hires the trustee, record keeper, investment manager and legal services separately," Williams said.

Wouldn't it be better, Williams asked himself, if there was a solution that could provide all of the necessary services together?

Well-known in the industry as a problem solver, Williams decided to see if such a possibility could become a reality. As he tells it, he has known of Steve Jackson, the now CEO of Live Oak Trust, a division of Live Oak Bank, for a number of years.

"I didn't know him personally, but I knew of him when he was at Regions Bank and the success he and Rich Fisher were having there," Williams recalled. "I wanted to make a pitch to him (about a partnership) when he was there, but it didn't play out."

The opportunity never presented itself, either, when Jackson moved to Forethought Federal Savings

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– Corie Gabriel, director, private client group, Roosevelt Investments

Bank (now ClearPoint Federal Bank & Trust).

In 2015, Williams finally got to meet Jackson face to face at the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association Convention in San Antonio, Texas.

“It was just a casual conversation,” Williams said. “I was interested to hear what they were doing in the industry with Live Oak Trust (which was offering funeral and cemetery trust services).”

That casual conversation led to more substantive conversations, and by early 2016, Williams and Jackson were ready to bring in additional management team members.

For Jackson, the partnership just made sense.

“What we have built here at Live Oak is a trust group that’s about 2 1/2 years old,” Jackson said in a recent telephone interview. “And the trust group only does funeral and cemetery trust work, so we wanted to best serve that market.”

From the start, the idea of the partnership made sense, Jackson said.

Like a stool, trust management has three legs – the trustee, the record keeper and the investment manager, Jackson said. “We had

one leg – the trustee. We don’t have in-house investor management or record keeping,” he said. Live Oak, Jackson added, was constantly searching for the best partners for its clients.

The addition of Roosevelt Investments as the investment manager came from a mutual FSI and Live Oak Bank customer. For more than 30 years, the midtown Manhattan firm has been providing investment management solutions for funeral homes and cemeteries.

“We had all been working in the death-care space independently for many years,” said Corie Gabriel, director, private client group, for Roosevelt Investments. “There wasn’t really a turnkey solution for the trust services for cemeteries and funeral homes (before), but this partnership allows us to come together to bring a best-of-class solution for funeral home operators and cemetery operators.”

Gabriel said that over the years, Roosevelt’s clients have needed more services from the company than just good investment management. “They needed a more comprehensive solution,” he said. “This partnership will help us provide our clients with what they need ... solutions for today and the future.”

Those solutions also include legal expertise. Wendy Russell Weiner chairs the regulatory department of Broad and Cassel’s corporate and finance practice group and has provided regulatory consulting and legal services to death-care clients for more than 23 years.

“I think what we all realized early on was that we had many clients in common and that we could really capitalize on our common client base and our common practice areas to put together a partnership that would allow us to go in and market all of the services for a death-care client to effectively operate its trust,” Weiner said.

The partnership officially launches this month.

The benefits to customers are many, the partner companies say:

- Experienced partners. Each partner works with clients in the death-care industry, so they understand the goals and regulations specific to these types of accounts.

- Streamlined communication. The partnership has streamlined communication across the four companies to save funeral home and cemetery owners the time coordinating interactions between their trustee, record keeper, investment manager and legal services.

- The partnership is nonexclusive. Customers may choose to work with one, two, three or all four partners.

Most importantly, the partnership will allow death-care professionals to focus on the most important aspect of their business – serving families.

“What the partnership will be able to do is offer a turnkey solution for their business, allowing them to operate more efficiently and effectively,” Williams said. “The partners are focused on growing and preserving a funeral home owner’s trust accounts, allowing them to focus on their families.”

And what makes the partnership particularly unique is the experience it brings to clients. “You can get a bank and an investment adviser, find a local lawyer and buy software for record keeping,” Weiner said, “but not all four of those (individual) components are backed up by decades of experiences with the particulars that are central to effectively running a death-care operation and all of the other things related to that.”

The partnership is focused not only on providing clients with what they need to run their businesses, Weiner said, but also a direction and a strategy that will let them go where they want and need to.

There is no question there are many choices for trustee management, investment advisers and legal counsel, Weiner said. Perhaps too many.

“When I built my house 10 years ago, I started out thinking that I didn’t need any design service people ... I could do it all myself,” Weiner said. “But what I quickly learned that was in today’s world, the choices are so endless that I really did need an expert to narrow my focus to the things that were important.

“The partnership can help clients focus on their trust-related operations in the way they need to be focused on,” she added. “Clients get years of experience from partners who understand the industry and can help them today – and in the future.”

A comprehensive set of solutions is something clients have long been asking for.

“What we have found over the years is that our customers needed more services from us than just good investment management; they needed a more comprehensive solution,” Gabriel said. “This partnership will allow us to provide those solution services now and in the future. There are not a lot of

solutions like this out there.”

Jackson believes that the partnership will be a multistep process for clients. “I don’t think everyone is going to jump in all at once; I think it is going to take a little time,” he said. Still, once clients understand what the partnership can offer, “they are going to understand what a great idea it is and how it can benefit them.”

And by making the partnership nonexclusive, clients can still keep their investment manager, for example, and still use the other services.

“A funeral home owner or a cemetery operator may not need all parts of the pie, but they can still work with us and still benefit from the resources of the partnership,” Gabriel said. “It’s not an all-or-nothing solution ... and that’s important for clients to understand.”

While officially being unveiled this month, Jackson says there have been a number of the partners’ shared clients who have been using the service unofficially for several months. “There have been many success stories to tell,” he said. “The initial reaction is that it’s a good idea.”

Particularly well received is the streamlined communication the partnership provides. “A client doesn’t have to make four calls to get something done or get some information,” Williams pointed out. “Any one of the partners can give a client the information they need whenever they need it.”

While the partnership focuses on trust management, it also offers opportunities for each of the partner companies to offer clients more.

Roosevelt Investments, for example, works closely with funeral homes and cemeteries to help them prepare and implement appropriate investment policy statements for their trust funds.

But, Gabriel added, Roosevelt

can also offer personal planning to an owner’s staff or help the owner prepare for their own retirement or exit strategy. “What we want to do is to help them be proactive,” he said. “They are so focused serving their families now that they aren’t thinking about their business long term.”

And Live Oak Bank has a dedicated funeral home lending team, Jackson noted. “They are specifically focused on lending for acquisitions, refurbishing and financing old debt,” he said. “They understand the death-care space and what funeral professionals want ... whether that’s buying the funeral home they work at or preparing for retirement.”

While clients will benefit from four trusted partners – and reduced fees by using the partnership – each of the firms will also benefit.

“The partnership offers us the opportunity to get in front of new clients,” Jackson said. “It also offers us an opportunity to introduce our clients to trusted partners who can respond to their needs.”

The partnership will operate throughout the United States and in accordance with state laws. In states where a particular partner does not do business, that firm can form a relationship with a similar firm with the partnership benefits still in full effect for that client.

“Is it a different way of doing business? Absolutely,” Williams said. “Will it benefit funeral home and cemetery owners? Absolutely.”

It’s a win-win solution for clients, Weiner agreed.

“It’s a one-stop solution for those who want it and take advantage of it,” she said. “What it allows us to do is to talk to them about their most pressing needs, help support and advise them in all manner of things – work life and in many cases, personal life, to make the practice of their profession go more smoothly.” •