

# Houston Business Journal

## A Peace of the Action: Newly Formed Concierge Funeral Services Firm Everest Helps Clients Weed Out the Extras *Funeral Services Firm Strives to Disturb the Peace*

August 19, 2005

By Allison Wollam

Mark Duffey readily admits that his start-up concierge funeral planning company is going to unsettle the death care industry. In fact, that's exactly what he's striving for. Duffey launched Houston-based Everest earlier this month to represent individuals, not funeral homes, in planning and executing a funeral. The 100-employee company plans to analyze the extra services and expansive packages often marketed by funeral homes to help clients make a decision about what products and services to purchase.

Duffey was the co-founder and CEO of Houston-based Carriage Services Inc., the nation's fourth-largest publicly traded funeral and cemetery services company, before leaving the company in 2000 to focus on the creation of Everest.

The other co-founder is Michael S. Lade, who is the former vice president of corporate development for Carriage.

And Everest is far from a shoestring start-up. The company has aligned itself with technology giant EDS of Plano through a joint venture to operate call centers, the first of which is already open in Canada. Another call center will open in Tampa, Fla., next month, with a third scheduled to open in the Midwest by the end of the year.

The call centers are staffed with advisers 24 hours per day to provide assistance — similar to emergency automobile assistance - in helping customers make decisions about funeral-related issues such as burial and cremation options, customized memorials and casket pricing.

Everest's services are available through Fidelity Security Life Insurance, which includes the service in the price of certain of its plans. By the end of this year, clients who are ineligible for Fidelity's insurance because of age or health reasons will be able to purchase Everest's services for a one-time fee of \$495 (individual) or \$695 (couple), or for a yearly membership fee of \$48 (individual) or \$68 (couple).

Duffey believes that funeral homes "won't be too happy with what we're going to do in the industry." "We're going to get between them and their customer and bring transparency to an opaque market," he says.

Indeed, Dr. Joseph Coughlin, director of the AgeLab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, says a turnkey approach to funeral planning is long overdue.

"This is a disruptive innovation which is going to touch a cultural chord," Coughlin says of Everest's business plan. "It aggregates the decision-making and gives people a sense of empowerment."

Ron Bradshaw, owner of Houston-based Bradshaw-Carter Memorial & Funeral Services, doesn't feel threatened by Everest's concept. In fact, he says, the business model makes sense, but only if the company's advisors are knowledgeable about the infrastructure of the industry.

**[www.everestfuneral.com](http://www.everestfuneral.com)**

**1-800-913-8318**

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“I’m all for a consumer advocacy group, but I wonder how they are going to base their comparisons besides just pricing,” says Bradshaw. “There’s a big price difference between corporate-owned funeral homes and independent ones like ours. Pricing doesn’t tell you about the services provided or the quality of the facility.”

While Everest can help clients choose from among funeral homes, the company’s primary role is to handle details surrounding a funeral service directly with a funeral home of the client’s choosing. The company will also provide such “concierge” services as making sure a specific song is played or particular flowers are displayed at the service.

Because the Federal Trade Commission regulates the funeral industry, funeral homes are required to list their services in an “a la carte model,” which Duffey says can be confusing for consumers. “Based on my experience in the funeral home industry, I know what questions to ask to get the right information from these service providers which helps our clients avoid purchasing a big package from a funeral home and spending way too much money,” Duffey says. Everest does not sell funeral goods and services, and receives no commissions from funeral homes or other service providers in the funeral industry. Instead, Everest earns its money from fees collected after someone purchases life insurance from Fidelity, or through individual sales.

Duffey says he also plans to work with employers to offer these services as an employee benefit. He estimates that Everest will serve at least several thousand clients in its first year of operation.

The company is focusing in pre-need sales by targeting aging baby boomers, who have a fear of being upsold on unnecessary services by funeral homes.

A recent consumer survey conducted by Gelb Consulting and Greenfield Online shows that 59 percent of baby boomers, who are 55 years old and older, do not perceive traditional funeral home services as a good value, and 57 percent of baby boomers do not trust traditional funeral homes not to take advantage of them during their time of need. In addition, 90 percent of adults ages 35 to 54 and 81 percent of adults 55 and older expressed a desire to spare loved ones from the burdens associated with arranging and paying for funeral services.

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**EVEREST**

**CO-FOUNDERS:**

Mark Duffey and Michael S. Lade, both formerly of Carriage Services Inc.

**HEADQUARTERS:**

Houston

**BUSINESS:**

Turnkey funeral planning company

**EMPLOYEES:**

100

**CALL CENTERS:**

One in Canada, with another set to open in Tampa, Fla., next month and a third scheduled for the Midwest by the end of the year.

**JOINT VENTURE PARTNER:**

Technology giant EDS of Plano

**COST:**

Included in certain Fidelity Security Life Insurance plans; service for non-Fidelity customers is available for a one-time fee of \$495 (individual) or \$695 (couple), or for a yearly membership fee of \$48 (individual) or \$68 (couple).

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