



Search of funeral home reveals bodies, secrets amid investigation

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TOLEDO, Ohio – Robert Tate calmly walked through his funeral home and identified the decaying remains of people who had died weeks and months ago.

"This is Winkelman; it's his family that is complaining," Tate told a state investigator. He pointed to a white body bag and said, "That's Williams. This one is Green."

Records show he identified eight other bodies May 29 at his business, **Tate Funeral Services in Toledo**. The search stunned authorities and enraged families. Friends and relatives paid Tate, 58, to cremate their loved ones, but he never did.

For example, the body of 73-year-old Jewell Lee, which was stored under another corpse in the funeral home's garage, had been there for nearly six months. The remains of a premature infant who died in early May were found in an embalming room.

Police and state authorities are investigating the case. One lawsuit has been filed, and others are likely. The remains of the 11 were taken to the Lucas County Coroner's office and later cremated at area funeral businesses.

"This is heartbreaking," said Pam Feahr, the niece of Frederick Winkelman, who died April 23 and whose remains were found in the funeral home's garage. "It is just wrong."

The Ohio Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors suspended Tate and his business' licenses earlier this month. Tate has been a licensed funeral director since 1985.

The board said Tate "exhibited conduct that harms the integrity of the profession . . . in a way that would outrage reasonable family and community sensibilities."

It is unclear exactly why Tate failed to cremate the bodies or why the families did not ask for the remains sooner. Messages left for Tate were not returned. Richard Mitchell, Tate's attorney, declined to comment, other than to say he is reviewing the cases and plans to appeal the suspensions. A hearing will be June 29 at the state board's offices in Columbus.

Charles Boyk, a Toledo attorney representing the family of Thomas Gaston, whose remains were found in a corner of the funeral home's chapel, said: "It is almost beyond comprehension that someone could do this. It's like a third-world country."

Complaint leads to search

When Winkelman, 56, died in a suburban nursing home of heart disease in April, his family sought to have his body taken to another funeral home in Toledo for services. The cost, however, was too steep, said Pam Feahr, Winkelman's niece.

So the family chose Tate Funeral Services and asked for a little time in making the \$1,200 payment for the cremation. Feahr said the family hosted car washes and had community benefits to pay the fee.

In Ohio, most funerals cost about \$5,000 or more. Cremations cost about \$1,000 or more, depending on the situation.

When the family paid the cremation fee weeks after his death, they asked to see Winkelman briefly. An employee brought his body out on a gurney, Feahr said.

"He looked a mess," Feahr said. "It was awful. His hair, his beard. I broke down and cried. It is an image that I will never forget. Couldn't they have made him look a little more presentable?"

Feahr later asked when her uncle would be cremated. When she didn't get an answer, Feahr called the state board of embalmers and funeral directors May 28 and said she was concerned that the process had taken so long.

The next day, a board investigator went to the funeral home, and Tate let him in. Within minutes, the investigator called Vanessa Niekamp, the director of the state board.

Niekamp notified Toledo police, and she headed to Tate's business, **according to the minutes of the state board's meeting June 2**. Police searched the property after Tate consented.

By 1 p.m., Niekamp and an official with the Lucas County Coroner's office began identifying the bodies with Tate's help. The bodies were in the funeral home's garage, chapel and embalming room. None of the rooms had refrigeration units.

Tate pointed to Winkelman, according to the board's minutes. He identified a white body bag containing the remains of Louis Williams, a 57-year-old who died May 2. He also pointed to Betty Green, an 87-year-old who had died April 26.

Tate continued identifying the bodies, according to the board's minutes, telling Niekamp: "Under here is Jewell," he said, referring to Jewell Lee, who died Jan. 8.

"Who put these bodies here?" Niekamp asked Tate.

"I did," he said.

"You put them all here?" Niekamp said, according to the board's minutes.

"Yeah. I put them here."

Most of the remains were either in cremation crates or body bags, the board's minutes show. Dylan Adams' body was found in the embalming room.

The boy died at birth May 7 after his mother's six-month pregnancy. He was found on the floor in a medical container filled with embalming fluid, according to the board's minutes.

"It is devastating," said Vanice Williams, the child's great aunt. "It is one thing that he passed. It's another thing that he was mistreated."

Niekamp told The Plain Dealer that Tate was calm throughout the interview process. Tate said he was planning to cremate the bodies, according to Niekamp, but he offered no reason as to why he didn't do it sooner.

The family of Lee, whose remains had been at the funeral home for nearly six months, could not be reached for comment.

Under Ohio law, a funeral home cannot hold a body for more than 48 hours after a person dies unless the body is embalmed or placed in a refrigeration system.

The bodies had not been refrigerated at Tate's business, according to the state board minutes and interviews, and two bodies were never embalmed. Niekamp said the funeral home's garage and chapel had a strong odor.

A troubling service

Three days before police showed up at Tate Funeral Services, Thomas Gaston's family attended a brief service there.

Gaston, 55, died at his Toledo home May 17. As his family gathered May 26 at the funeral home, they noticed that his body was "heavily bloated," according to the lawsuit the family filed in Lucas County Common Pleas Court this month. They also were overcome by a strong odor coming from the casket. The body was later to be cremated.

But more than a week after the service, authorities discovered Gaston's remains in the funeral home's chapel.

"For the family's sake and the community's sake, we need to hear the whole story," said Boyk, the Gaston family's attorney. "And the only option to hear that story is to put the man under oath and depose him.

"He treated the bodies with a lack of respect. He had to know what he was doing. After all, there were 11 bodies."

Tate's funeral home does not have a crematory, meaning he needed to transport a person's remains to a crematory facility for the process. For years, he had a business agreement with Robert Scott of **Caring Cremation Services**. Scott said he and Tate had a disagreement, and the two men parted ways early this year.

"He just wasn't paying his bills," Scott said.

Serving the working class

For years, the funeral home served working-class families in Toledo. And many families opted for cremation because they could not afford the cost of a funeral.

The funeral service's website refers to Tate as "one of the most respected funeral directors in the Toledo community."

"We offer a tradition of compassion, personal attention and professional services that will meet your needs," the website says.

Feahr, the niece of Winkelman, scoffed. She said her family failed to find any compassion at Tate's business.

"Going through this has been like losing my uncle a second time," Feahr said. "I told them at the funeral home that it was cruel what they had done. And I told them that I was going to call someone about it."

Soon after she called the state, the secrets inside a funeral home were discovered in a way few imagined.

*To read more about the investigation in the minutes of the June 2 meeting of the Ohio Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors, **[click here](#)**.*

*To view a video of the meeting, **[click here](#)**.*

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