



# Cover Story

By Stan Goldstein

# BUILT for the FUTURE

Walk through the front door of the Mount Laurel Home for Funerals & Cremation Services' new building and you may wonder if you have entered the lobby of a five-star hotel by mistake. There's a warm, inviting openness with natural light projecting through tall windows, a fireplace, several couches, comfortable seats and an 86-inch high-definition TV mounted on the wall.

"Our new building is more like a Four Seasons Hotel than a funeral home," said David J. Petaccio Sr., senior funeral director and owner of the new 12,000-square-foot Mount Laurel, New Jersey, facility that opened at the end of 2019. It replaced Petaccio Sr.'s original funeral home built in 1991 that was located next door.

"We could have stayed in the building where we were in and bit the bullet, but we built a facility that we feel there's nothing like it in New Jersey or the United States," Petaccio Sr. said. "It's not like anything I have seen and I've been across the country."

The original funeral home had

been a doctor's office that Petaccio Sr. purchased and renovated. He had worked for several funeral homes in north and central New Jersey prior to that but he always wanted to have his own business. "I liked Mount Laurel because it was rapidly booming with growth and did not have a funeral home," he said.

*This article originally appeared in the March 2020 issue of American Funeral Director, published by Kates-Boylston Publications, and is being shared with permission. Visit [www.americanfuneraldirector.com](http://www.americanfuneraldirector.com) to subscribe.*





Opposite page: Mount Laurel Home for Funerals & Cremation Services opened its new 12,000-square-foot building at the end of 2019. Above: The funeral home's foyer features several couches and comfortable seating. *(Photos by Kates-Boylston Publications)*





**Left: David J. Petaccio Sr., (left) owner and senior funeral director, with his son, David J. Petaccio Jr., the general manager of the Mount Laurel Home for Funerals & Cremation Services. Above: The viewing/service room can fit up to 140 people. Opposite page: The hospitality room seats 28 and can also be used to accommodate a bigger turnout for the viewing/service room. (Photos by Kates-Boylston Publications)**

After a few years of planning, ground was broken for the new building in April 2018. “We did think of maybe moving, but we liked our location in Mount Laurel. We built next door to where we were,” Petaccio Sr. said. “We’re right by the junction of three major highways and we’re on a busy road.”

When he opened that first funeral home in 1991, Petaccio Sr. was impressed how cutting edge it was. Close to 30 years later, he realizes what is “cutting edge” has changed significantly.

“From that point to this point, we have almost done a 180,” Petaccio Sr. said. “That’s why we built this place, to accommodate the funerals of the future. We decided to change from the old model to a progressive model. Typical funeral homes had heavy drapes and were dark. We wanted to make it brighter.”

For Petaccio Sr., that “progressive model” is having a





facility that is geared more to funerals being a celebration of life and not as somber as in the past. The new building reflects that trend with a welcoming feel throughout the two-story structure. It's four times as big as the original funeral home, which has since been torn down. That area is now part of the parking lot.

While the construction was going on for more than a year, there were some disruptions to the funeral home's normal routine.

"The main challenge for us centered around one primary fact, which was unique to our situation," Petaccio Sr. said. "The footprint of the new building – specifically the portico – encroached upon that of the old building, so the old building had to be demolished before the new building could be completed. While we were able to set up our offices in the new building, we were not

able to have services in there."

For a few months, until the new building was fully operational in December, services took place in nearby churches, halls and sometimes other funeral homes. "For the vast majority of the construction project, the old funeral home operated as usual with no interruptions until it came time to demolish it in September," Petaccio Sr. said.

### **Prioritizing the Rooms**

When discussing the design for the new building with an architect, Petaccio Sr. made sure to address some of the things that have changed about funeral service since the 1990s.

"Thirty years ago, people would come to a funeral and be sad and somber. Now people are living longer and 80% of those we serve are in their 80s and 90s. People may not be as sad anymore and

instead the service may be joyous at times," he said.

That change is one of the reasons he had to reprioritize the layout of the new funeral home.

"Before I went to the architect, I designed my building exactly the way I wanted it. The most important room at the funeral home 30 years ago was the viewing room. That's not the case any more," Petaccio Sr. said. "The most important room now is the foyer, followed by the hospitality room, an easily accessed portico since society is getting older, the outdoor sitting area and then the viewing room."

Petaccio Sr. emphasized the importance of the foyer after he and his staff noticed there were more people congregating there than in the viewing/service room. "People go in to pay their respects and then they want to speak to friends and relatives they haven't seen in months or years," he said.



The “command center” is where services are monitored by staff members. (Photo by Kates-Boylston Publications)

His wife, Marianne, the funeral home’s vice president, helped pick out the furniture and the accessories plus the colors for the foyer. “I got to give credit to my wife, she’s the interior decorator. She decorated the foyer and the viewing room with warm colors. For the foyer, we wanted a lot of windows to make it bright and airy,” Petaccio Sr. said.

There’s also a hospitality room that seats 28 where, following a change last year in New Jersey law, refreshments may be provided to guests at the funeral home. Serving anything outside of water and peppermints had previously been banned in the state.

“We can have coffee and pastries for breakfast during a morning service,” Petaccio Sr. said. “For lunch, we can have box lunches, like from Panera, that guests can even take with them from the funeral home to the cemetery. For an evening viewing, we’ll have light snacks and beverages.”

Petaccio Sr. also sees another benefit of the law change: It might mean funeral homes change their rugs more often since guests may now spill beverages or drop food on them.

“A new colleague of mine asked me what I thought of the ability to serve food now,” he said. “I told him, ‘It’s fantastic.’ I explained that if we were allowed to serve food 30 years ago, the rugs would get dirty more and funeral directors would have to put money away every 10 to 15 years for new rugs. It would have helped old school funeral directors not to be old school anymore.”

Petaccio’s son, David Jr., the funeral home’s general manager, was also glad to see the change in the law. “We saw that on the horizon and we wanted to plan to have a luncheon-type room,” he said. “We wanted to have a fresh start and that was one part of us designing exactly what we wanted – a larger gathering space for family

and friends to visit.”

Another son, George J. Petaccio, is a licensed funeral director and works at the firm.

## Over Two Floors

On the first floor of the two-story building (there’s also a basement used for storage) off to the right of the foyer is the viewing/service room that can hold up to 140 people. The hospitality room is behind that and can be opened to accommodate a bigger turnout.

“We have only the one viewing room and we still only do one service at a time, which we take pride in,” Petaccio Sr. said.

The funeral home serves about 300 families a year with a nearly-even split between burials and cremations. “We embraced cremation 20 years ago. Who are we to talk people out of it? Give the people what they want,” said Petaccio Sr., who noted in 1992 his breakdown was 92% burials and 8% cremations.





**Top:** The “catch-all” room on the second floor can fit 50 people and is used for seminars and other events. **Middle:** The cremation arrangement room features a variety of urns. **Bottom:** A show-room features 18 full-size caskets. *(Photos by Kates-Boylston Publications)*



The viewing/service room is equipped with a nonintrusive camera and microphone located in the ceiling that can be used for a video transmission of a service to the big-screen TV in the foyer for an overflow crowd. There are eight big-screen TVs in the building, including one in the viewing/service room that can be used to show photos or videos, one in the foyer and one in the hospitality room.

“A neat feature is we have different color cove lights that we can utilize in the viewing/service room,” Petaccio Jr. said. Cove lighting is a technique that directs light toward the ceiling from one or more sides of a room to diffuse illumination. “We can have red, white and blue. Pink for breast cancer awareness, green for someone who’s Irish,” he added.

Just off the foyer is what’s known as the “command center” where Petaccio and his staff can monitor a service on a big-screen TV and make sure everything runs smoothly.

On the second floor, accessible by an L-shaped staircase or an elevator, are the staff’s offices, including a kitchen, a conference room, two display rooms and what the Petaccios call their “catch-all” room. That room, which can fit 50 people, is used for seminars and other events.

“We plan on having different events for the public here,” Petaccio Sr. said. “I’d like to have quarterly seminars covering a wide variety of topics, including having a regular funeral service or cremation, estate planning, grief seminars and Medicaid planning.”

He also plans to host different community events such as bringing in authors or speakers to talk about books and other keynote speakers.







**Left: A conference room used by the staff to meet with families to go over arrangements. (Photo by Kates-Boylston Publications) Below: The staff of the Mount Laurel Home for Funerals & Cremation Services includes (from left): David J. Petaccio Sr., Joseph M. Gigliotti, David J. Petaccio Jr., therapy puppy Chester, Lisa McDermott and John P. Napoli. (Photo courtesy of the Mount Laurel Home for Funerals & Cremation Services)**



“We can use this to create foot traffic,” Petaccio Sr. said. “We’ll serve refreshments. We will also donate use of our room to service organizations for their meetings.”

Petaccio Jr. is looking forward to offering those opportunities. “We want the funeral home to be like a community center,” he said. “We will open up the seminar space to community groups.”

The two display rooms give families the chance to see what burial and cremation options are available.

“We have a full showroom with 18 full-size caskets, two conference rooms to meet with families and one of those is a cremation arrangement room,” Petaccio Jr. said. “In that

room we have on display various urns and cremation keepsakes.”

The staff offices are much bigger than the previous building for the funeral home’s seven employees. There’s also a special spot for “The King of the Castle,” Chester, the therapy puppy.

### **Advice for Colleagues**

Petaccio Sr. believes funeral directors should take a look at what he did and consider constructing a new building that will help them survive into the future.

“My colleagues, if they don’t build a new facility, they may not make it,” he said. “I suggested to them that if they don’t have the money to do so, they should buddy up with

another colleague and sell one (of the funeral homes) and do it together. That’s the way to go.

“We have become comfortable as funeral directors in staying the way we are. They are creatures of habit,” Petaccio Sr. added. “They should upgrade their interior and their facility. I wanted to be ahead of my colleagues, not behind them.”

In the spring, the Petaccios will have an open house showcasing the new funeral home to the community. Petaccio Sr. hopes some of his colleagues will also attend. “I want to show them what we did and give them a reason to do this,” he said. “To show them how good it feels.”

Petaccio Jr. shares that excitement of showing off the new building and the doors it will open.

“We want to emphasize we didn’t do this for us, we did this for the community. We listened to the feedback we got from families. It’s great to have a first-rate facility to work in,” he said. “There’s been a lot of excitement surrounding it. People have been talking to us from local churches, hospice organizations and senior organizations. It has revolutionized how we serve the community.”

And Petaccio Sr. hopes it’s a building that will serve well into the future.

“This new facility will carry my children and my employees for 30 to 40 years until funeral service changes again,” he said. “This place is head and shoulders above any place I have seen. It is first-rate all around. This is not your grandmother’s funeral home.” •