

## Profile

By Steve Cronin

# Having a Large Impact With Small Caskets

Being one of the best in the world at what you do comes with its own set of challenges.

Just ask Michael Mims, president and owner of Cherokee Child Caskets, which is marking 75 years in business this year.

As its name implies, Mims' company manufactures only small caskets fit for infants, children and petite adults. It also sells vaults and ancillary products for child funerals.

His company has customers throughout the United States and as far away as New Zealand and Europe. This geographic spread means the company has many potential customers – but it also means those customers have a variety of tastes and cultural needs that Mims and his staff of 20 employees must be able to satisfy.

“Even though we are the only ones that do what we do now, what sells in California doesn't necessarily sell in New York. And what sells in New York doesn't sell in Texas or overseas,” Mims said.

Still, for more than seven decades, Cherokee has been figuring out customers' tastes and honing its operations so families mourning a loss get what they

want, usually within hours of making their choices.

Mims says his company can manufacture about 10,000 separate varieties of caskets, and can usually put a casket together to a customer's specifications within a few hours of receiving an order. Then the company delivers the casket as soon as possible.

“We not only have to be manufacturers, we also have to be logistics experts to get our products out,” Mims said. “Our goal is to get it in their hands within 24 hours and (the casket) has to be perfect. We know that the last time they will be seeing their loved one is in our casket, so we want to make sure we are doing it right.”

The company, based in Griffin, Georgia, has worked to do it right since 1941, when a woman named Sarah Betts started making caskets for children. World War II was raging and raw materials were hard to come by, but Betts was able to successfully establish Cherokee, first in Georgia, then regionally, nationally and then worldwide.

Mims' father and mother, Dean

and Henrietta, purchased the company in the 1980s and continued its growth.

“My dad was in the textile business for years. He moved down South. He just found this small business and decided to buy it,” Mims said.

Mims was in his 30s when his parents acquired the company. Now 62, he worked as a minister and in hospice care before taking over company operations in 2005. His son, Jason, and daughter-in-law, Casey, now work at Cherokee, ensuring the business' family-run character continues.

For Mims, joining the family firm was just another way of honoring his commitment to service.

“I saw it as a continuation of our ministry. I also saw it as a great opportunity to carry on the (family-run) tradition,” he said.

Cherokee serves a niche market – Mims figures the demand for child caskets is only 1 or 2 percent of what it is for adult-sized caskets. Proportional demand for the company's caskets has also declined over the years, thanks to advances

Opposite Page: Michael Mims and the Cherokee Caskets product wall. (Photos courtesy of Cherokee Child Caskets)



in medicine and safety regulations that have helped reduce child mortality rates. Like others in the funeral profession, Mims' company is also dealing with the increasing cremation rate and its impact on high-end casket sales.

“As a result of that, a lot of the companies that had been in the business of making child caskets went out of business because there was no market for them at the time,” Mims said.

While some adult casket manufacturers do make child-size products, Mims said his is the only company that only serves the child market. He figures his company provides caskets or products to about half of the child services that take place each year. It's a market

he's committed to focusing on.

“I think children deserve as nice a casket, if not a better casket, than adults,” Mims said.

Parents take great care in choosing a child casket, said Samuel Lay, a manager at Crowell Brothers Funeral Homes in Norcross/Peachtree Corners and Buford, Georgia.

“The personalization is significant (to families),” Lay said. Cherokee's selection allows families to choose the exact type of casket they want for their loved one.

“One of the reasons we use them is, not only do they provide quality merchandise, they also provide quality service,” Lay said.

It's not unusual for Cherokee to make same-day delivery on a casket

order or for employees to remain after hours so Crowell Brothers staff can pick up a casket when time is short.

“You need them when you need them, and they have never put us in a situation where we feel we are running out of time,” Lay said.

Cherokee is a self-contained operation, even making its own tooling to manufacture components for its child caskets. “There really is no tooling for children's caskets, so we have to make our own tooling,” Mims said.

The work is done at the company's 22,000-square-foot facility, where workers can create caskets out of steel, hardwood, pine or cloth-covered-wood. The company also sells burial shrouds,

child-sized urns, burial clothing and memorial products.

The company's caskets range in size from premie-sized containers that are 12-inches long on the inside to caskets large enough to contain an adult who is 5 feet tall.

By mixing materials, hardware and colors, Mims' company can manufacture several thousand different styles. The company keeps premade models of its top sellers in stock in the company warehouse, but the realities of funeral service – where the demand for child-sized products is small – mean that most of its products are put together once an order comes in.

"Funeral directors don't stock our caskets because they don't know when they are going to need them, and when they do need them, they don't know the size and the color they are going to need," Mims said.

Cherokee sells decorative panels that reflect religious or sports themes. A new camouflage lining has proved popular in the months since it's been introduced.

"Families really want to choose something that is reflective of their child," he said. "With children, it seems parents want personalization."

Mims knows the toll finding just the right casket can take on families – and on funeral directors serving such cases.

"I always tell funeral directors their job is so much harder than ours," he said. "We ship out thousands of caskets every year, so we don't know the circumstances (of each death). We don't really want to know, because it would get emotional."

When the thought of how his caskets are used does start to weigh on Mims, he thinks about how his business is like a service or a ministry. He knows the company and its employees are helping families through a very difficult time.

Sometimes, though, Cherokee employees know where their



**Each Cherokee casket is crafted at the company's Griffin, Georgia, facility, usually at time of order. The company offers a variety of styles, sizes, hardware and colors, giving families ample opportunity to customize their selection. (Photos courtesy of Cherokee Child Caskets)**



caskets are going. This usually happens when there are high-profile deaths involving children.

"If we hear of a tragedy on the news, we know we are going to get a phone call," Mims said.

Such was the case in December 2012, when a gunman killed 20 schoolchildren and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

"We had just got to work and were fielding phone calls, and then all the lines lit up," Mims recalled. The calls were coming from funeral directors around the country, who wanted to donate caskets to the victims' families. It wasn't until employees saw the news that they realized what had happened.

"When something like that happens, it makes it really emotional, because you know what you are shipping out for," he said.

Still, even though they don't deal directly with customers, families do appreciate the service Cherokee provides. That's apparent when the company receives thank you notes from satisfied customers.

"It's not common, but it's not unusual to get a card from a family. I post it on the bulletin board so everyone can see it," Mims said. Employees also get satisfaction from knowing "nothing leaves our plant until it is next to perfect, because we only get one chance to make it right."

While Mims said it's been his experience that the cremation rate for children is lower than that of adults, the number of child cremations is climbing as the national cremation rate increases, too.

Mims stays in touch with funeral directors to stay up to date with what's happening in funeral service and modify the company's offerings accordingly.

"Just as the funeral industry has changed for adults, it has also changed for children," Mims said. "When I came in, we were predominantly just caskets and vaults. Then I

heard the ladies on the phone saying ‘No sir, you have to contact this person or that person to get this product.’ That’s when I realized we could do ancillary products.”

Now, funeral professionals can order everything a family needs for a service from Cherokee – a memorial book, clothing, a casket, or an urn, for instance – and receive it all in one shipment.

This willingness to do whatever is best for the customer has helped the company with its sales overseas – where customs and requirements

are different than in American funerals.

In New Zealand, for instance, funeral professionals asked for caskets with removable lids. That’s because the burial customs of the island’s aboriginal people call for funeral services where the casket is placed in the center of the room. Having a casket lid affixed would interfere with the view of attendees on one side of the room.

In the Netherlands, caskets and linings had to be fully biodegradable, because the custom there calls for

remains to be removed and graves reused after a certain period of time, Mims said.

Cherokee also sells caskets and shrouds for use in green burials.

As the company moves forward, Mims is committed to maintaining an open approach to determining, and meeting, customer needs.

“We are working to look outside the box for funeral directors,” he said. “We are doing what we can to help funeral directors provide quality service for a child.” •

**In addition to providing caskets, Cherokee now sells urns and other memorial products. The company’s caskets, below, can be customized with a variety of linings and panels. (Photos courtesy of Cherokee Child Caskets)**

