

From One Family to Another

Sobering Funeral Chapel comes under new ownership

By Lisa Johnston

The father-mother-son team of Doug, Marlene and Steven Sobering have been serving the town of Beausejour, Manitoba for a quarter of a century at Sobering Funeral Chapel. That tradition changed on March 1, 2011 when the Soberings passed ownership of the firm to Libby Siebold and her family.

"It's probably been a year in the making," says Siebold. "I always sort of dreamed of owning a funeral home like I think a lot of funeral directors do. At first I thought who was I to own a funeral home, but then I realized I am a good funeral director, families are pleased with my service and I do have the skills to run a funeral home."

Originally from Regina, Sask., Siebold grew up hearing stories of funeral home life from both her dad and her uncle, who were employed in the death-care profession. However, it wasn't until she was in her early 30s that she decided funeral service was a career she wanted to pursue, enrolling in the San Francisco College of Mortuary Science. Liking the fact she would live and work at a funeral home during the school program and also receive an associate's degree, the college was a perfect fit as it also allowed her to fast-track her education and complete the two-year program in just one year.

After graduating, she moved to the Washington, D.C. area working at a high-volume family firm before returning to Canada when her visa expired. Most recently, she has been a funeral director and embalmer with McCall Bros. Funeral Directors in Victoria, B.C., where she also completed her master's degree in anthropology focusing on the funeral ritual and processing grief.

It was on the recommendation of a friend that Siebold contacted succession planning specialist Armand Lagacé regarding the possibility of purchasing a funeral home.



Lorenzo West, Rhonda Friesen, Libby Siebold, Marlene Sobering and Doug Sobering.

Siebold says she is ready for the hard work and is happy to be back on the Prairies after a lengthy time away.

"A friend who had known Armand told me to call him if I was looking for a funeral home so I sent him my resumé and some of my details and he said he would see what he could find for me," explains Siebold. "He was extremely helpful in co-ordinating what he felt would be best for me within my financial needs while meeting the desires of the vendor. In a sense he is like a matchmaker – a funeral matchmaker."

Siebold explains that she had no idea the amount of work that went into transitioning a funeral home to new owners, and therefore it was good to work with a broker who really knew the funeral profession.

"I really did not realize what was involved in buying a business; it was huge," adds Siebold. "Not only the financials, but also navigating through the accountants, lawyers, land titles, the inventories of the funeral home and making sure everyone was satisfied – Armand helped us with all of that."

Now that Siebold has officially taken ownership, she is



Outside view of Sobering Funeral Chapel.



Sobering offers the second largest chapel in the province of Manitoba.

"I have had a lot of support from my family and the existing staff at Sobering; they've all stayed on and they've been absolutely supportive and I could not be more blessed," says Siebold.

not alone in her endeavour. She is joined in the business by her mother, Leah, and her brother, Patrick. Although neither have yet made the move to Beausejour – located approximately 36 kilometres east of Winnipeg – they both have strong business skills and are only a phone call away. In addition, Siebold – who is still living in a hotel – says her father, Lyle, now in his 70s, will likely join her at the funeral home as a backup funeral director.

In addition, Siebold is fortunate that both Doug and Marlene Sobering are staying on full time for six months, with the potential to assist part time after that date. Meanwhile their son, Steven, who is still assisting as a sounding board, is turning his full attention to Sneath-Strilchuk Funeral Services that he purchased in 2007 with business partner Joe Coffey.

"I have had a lot of support from my family and the existing staff at Sobering; they've all stayed on and they've been absolutely supportive and I could not be more blessed," says Siebold. "I am really grateful the Soberings are staying on with me for the first little bit because in funeral service, every area is slightly different."

According to Marlene Sobering, they are more than pleased to assist the Siebold family during the transition but are looking forward to a slower pace in the months to come.

"We are reaching retirement age and Doug's health is not the best," says Sobering, adding that Doug will be celebrating 40 years in funeral service this year. "We decided that this would give us time to travel and to do other things that we have always wanted ... but whenever Libby needs us we will be available; we're not leaving town. It's our home here and we will still be around."

Siebold is grateful for the extra support as she spent the first month on the job meeting clergy, being introduced around the community and helping on numerous funeral services.

"It has been very busy with big traditional funerals," says Siebold. "And traditional services are a lot different out here than in the city where you have a 10-man team to work on everything. Here, you are loading the vault onto the trailer, you're hitching the trailer, you're making sure the snow removal is done at the cemetery, you're making sure they have dug the grave and the lowering device is operating properly – there is a lot more involved. At the same time, I think we give a little more concessions in the country too. If people want to stay an hour after a viewing that is fine. It is definitely more of the old-fashioned 24-hour-a-day funeral director's life."

Siebold says she is ready for the hard work and is happy to be back on the Prairies after a lengthy time away.

"It is home and it is nice to be in a smaller community where you get to know the people," says Siebold, adding that the community has extended a warm welcome. "We just sent some press releases as a lot of people did not know about the change. I've been very pleasantly surprised at the reception I am receiving.... It's a very friendly place but at the same time I don't want to force myself either. It is important to be real and authentic or people will pick up that you are just shmoozing for business."

Likewise, Siebold does not have any big changes in mind for the funeral home. Established in 1985 by the Soberings, the funeral home has had two major expansions – one that saw the chapel double in size in 1994 making it the second