

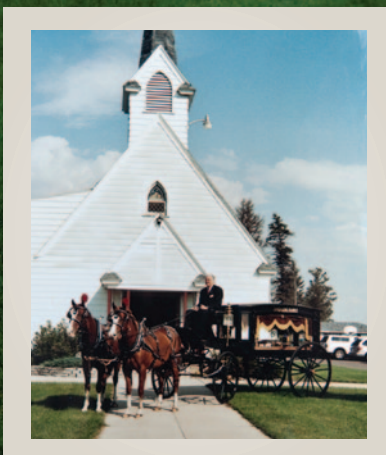






# TRANSITIONS

Accustomed to helping families deal with transitions, the Williams-Dingmann Family Funeral Homes are going through their own transition as they adjust to the merger of two long-established family businesses.



BY GAIL IVERS PHOTOS BY JOEL BUTKOWSKI

**W**hat do you do with a family business when the family members aren't interested? That was the question that faced Tom Williams,

owner of Williams Funeral Homes. A second generation owner, Williams can trace the roots of his business back to 1873 when the Tschumperlin Funeral Home opened. Following World War II, Williams' father, Barney, joined the Tschumperlin Funeral Home, purchasing the business in 1948.

Meanwhile, Williams was growing up in the business. In 1967 he graduated from the University of Minnesota with a degree in Mortuary Science and completed an apprenticeship in St. Cloud a year later. "I come from a family of six children and I was the only one interested in the business," he said. "It seemed a natural fit for me."

This was a time of transition for providers of funeral services. Up until 1957 a person could write a test and anyone

## BUSINESS PROFILE

### Williams Dingmann Family Funeral Homes

www.williamsdingmann.com

324 2nd Ave S  
PO Box 119  
Sauk Rapids, MN 56379  
(320) 251-1454  
Fax: (320) 656-5572

1900 8th St N  
PO Box 1495  
St. Cloud, MN 56302  
(320) 252-2522  
Fax: (320) 252-7058

### Owners

Tom Williams  
Deb Dingmann  
Doug Dingmann, Jr.

### Locations

St. Cloud, Sauk Rapids, Princeton, Minn., Avon, Eden Valley, Long Prairie, Becker, Clear Lake

### Number of employees

13 funeral directors, including the owners; four full time support staff; about 55 part time and casual, or on-call, staff

### Community Contributions

Caritas Holiday Program/ Christmas Remembrance Program; Good Shepherd Foundation; Country Manor; Boy Scouts; Central Minn. Community Foundation-Women's Fund; Quiet Oaks Hospice House; service on numerous civic and non-profit boards

Chamber member since 1873

## TIMELINE

**1873** The Tschumperlin Funeral Home is established in St. Cloud. By the 1920s the business is located at 315 St. Germain Street, current site of the St. Cloud Civic Center.

**1909** John Dingmann, great grandfather of Deb and Doug Dingmann, Jr., begins offering funeral services in the chapel above his hardware store in Clear Lake.

**1925** Leo Ross starts the Ross Funeral Home in Sauk Rapids. The business isn't enough to support his family so he enters the theater business as well. This is the beginning of the Ross family's ownership of theaters throughout the Midwest.

**1936** John Dingmann passes away; his son, Frunce, buys John's Clear Lake business

**1940** Frunce Dingmann opens a hardware store, funeral home, and implement business in Kimball, Minn.

**1948** Barney Williams, Tom's father, purchases the Tschumperlin Funeral Home and changes the name to Williams Funeral Home

**1954** Leo Ross sells his Sauk Rapids funeral home to Larry Veese, who renames it the Ross-Veese Funeral Home.

**1967** Tom Williams joins his father in business



## DOUG DINGMANN JR.

**Age 38**

**Family:** Wife Lisa, four children ages 16 mo. to 6 yrs. old.

**Education:** 1990 graduate of Cathedral High School, 1994 graduate of the University of Minnesota with a degree in Mortuary Science; Started working full time at Dingmann Family Funeral Home in 1994

**Hobbies:** Golf, going to the lake, volunteering with the Sauk Rapids fire department

**Advice for new business owners:** Serve the families – they come first. Provide the utmost service... that's the basis of our business.

who passed could be a funeral director. Embalmers were a separate profession and had to go to school to learn to prepare the body for burial. Usually there were many funeral directors in a community and a limited number of embalmers who serviced the funeral homes.

Over at the Dingmann Family Funeral Home, the Dingmanns were well acquainted with the Williams. "We've known the Williams family for a long time," Doug

Dingmann, Jr. said. "My grandfather was a funeral director and the Williams people helped him with the preparation of the bodies."

"That relationship goes back well beyond 1970," agreed Williams. Such long-standing goodwill started the two families thinking. Williams was in need of a succession plan. Siblings Doug Dingmann, Jr., and Deb Dingmann were situated to take over their family's business. Was there room here for a partnership?

## THE DINGMANN STORY

Now in the fourth generation of ownership, the first Dingmann Family Funeral Home was started by John Dingmann, great grandfather to Doug, Jr. and Deb. John was a hardware man in Clear Lake who could order caskets out of a catalog and performed services out of the hardware store. That was in 1909. "There was a visitation room and chapel in the upstairs," Doug, Jr. said, "but most visitations were done in the home."



## FUN FACT

FUNERAL DIRECTING RUNS IN THE DINGMANN FAMILY.

Though not everyone has remained in the business, over the years 12 of the Dingmanns have been licensed funeral directors: Doug, Sr., his father, three brothers, three cousins, three children, and a nephew.

## DEB DINGMANN

Age 41

**Family:** Four children ages 4-8

**Education:** 1986 graduate of Cathedral High School, 1991 graduate of the College of St. Scholastica with a Bachelor's Degree in Health Information Administration, 1995 graduate of the University of Minnesota with a

Bachelor's Degree in Mortuary Science. Started working at Dingmann Family Funeral Home in 1995

**Hobbies:** golfing, camping  
**Advice for new business owners:** Take care of the details and do what you have to do to get the job done effectively.



"THERE'S A FEELING OF GREAT SATISFACTION  
WHEN YOU HELP PEOPLE THROUGH A  
DIFFICULT TIME OF LIFE." —DOUG DINGMANN JR.

That's one of the many changes that has occurred in the industry, according to Williams. Around the time of the Industrial Revolution people moved into the city and homes weren't big enough anymore. "You needed funeral homes to hold the event," Williams said. Home visitations often lasted two days and people would stay with the deceased all night to pray. "That's where the term 'wake' comes from."

It was also common for furniture stores, hardware stores and even livery stables to be associated with funeral services. Furniture dealers built furniture and were well prepared to build caskets. "Even today you still see some places that are furniture and funeral home together," Williams said. "The livery stable could move the casket because they had big enough wagons."

In 1942 Doug and Deb's grandfather, Frunce Dingmann, expanded the family's funeral

services presence by opening a combination hardware store, funeral home, and implement business in Kimball.

Frunce's son, Doug E. Dingmann, Sr., went to mortuary school, graduating in 1970. "I always planned to go into the business," Doug, Sr. said. "Dad started me working pretty young. The last three years of high school I got out of school to help him whenever there was a funeral. I actually looked forward to that. There's a feeling of great satisfaction when you help people through a difficult time of life."

Though he says funeral services was always his plan, it took him awhile to figure it out. Doug, Sr. went to school and worked at the Ford plant in St. Paul for four years. He quit school, was married and had two children. "I just got tired of school, I guess," he says. In 1967 he returned to school, this time completing a degree in Mortuary Science.

Following in the entrepreneurial steps of his father and grandfather, Doug, Sr. bought an existing funeral home in Sauk Rapids in 1974. Originally the Ross-Veeser Funeral Home, it is known today as one of the Williams-Dingmann Family Funeral Homes. In addition to being a funeral home, the Sauk Rapids building also had living quarters. This is where Doug, Jr., Deb, their older brother, Dan, and younger sister Dawn grew up. Deb still makes her home here.

Though Deb had no interest in the business when she was young, Doug, Jr. was always helping. "I delivered flowers, shoveled snow, helped clean up," he said. "I was always around doing something."

Doug, Sr.'s purchase of the Sauk Rapids business was just one in a series of purchases and expansions for the Dingmanns. In 1973 Doug, Sr. purchased the original Clear Lake business from an uncle. In 1974 he bought the Kimball funeral

## TIMELINE

**1970** Doug E. Dingmann, Sr., Frunce's son, graduates from mortuary school at the University of Minnesota and begins working in Duluth

**1971** Doug Dingmann, Sr., moves to Sauk Rapids and joins the Ross-Veeser Funeral Home

**1972** Cousins Phil Arnold and Doug Dingmann, Sr., purchase the Clear Lake Funeral Home from their uncle Ralph Dingmann.

**1973** The Williams Funeral Home moves to its current location on Veteran's Drive

**1974** Doug, Sr., purchases the Ross-Veeser Funeral Home in Sauk Rapids, renaming it the Dingmann Family Funeral Home. Frunce Dingmann dies. Doug, Sr., purchases the Kimball funeral home from his mother.

**1976** Doug, Sr., sells the Kimball funeral home to his brother, Art

**1978** Tom Williams purchases the business from his father

**1980** Doug, Sr., purchases a funeral home in Eden Valley

**1985** Tom Williams purchases the Hanson Funeral Home in Princeton, Minn.

**1988** Phil Arnold sells his interest in the Clear Lake funeral home to Doug, Sr.

**1989** Tom Williams purchases the Thielman Funeral Home in Avon

## TIMELINE

**1990** Dan Dingmann, Doug, Sr.'s son, joins the family business

**1993** Dan moves to southwest Minnesota and purchases funeral homes in Worthington, Adrian, Luverne, and Wilmont.

**1994** Doug Dingmann, Jr., joins the family business; Tom Williams purchases the Kaun Funeral Home in Princeton, building a new facility and merging the two Princeton operations into one location

**1995** Deb Dingmann joins the family business

**2002** Doug, Sr., builds a funeral home in Becker

**2004** Doug, Sr., purchases the Stephan-Stein Funeral Home in Long Prairie

**2007** Tom Williams and the Dingmann's begin talking about a possible merger of their two businesses

**2008** Doug, Sr., sells Dingmann Family Funeral Homes to Deb and Doug, Jr., to help facilitate the merger. Doug, Sr., remains active in the business.

**August 2008** Dingmann Family Funeral Homes and Williams Funeral Homes merge, becoming the Williams Dingmann Family Funeral Homes. Tom Williams is managing partner. Doug, Jr., and Deb are given the option to purchase Tom's shares over time.



## TOM WILLIAMS

**Age 62**

**Family:** Wife Cathy, four children ages 29-40; daughter Julie died in 1996, 14 grandchildren

**Education:** 1967 graduate from the University of Minnesota's Mortuary Science program. Started working with his father at Williams Funeral Home in 1967

**Hobbies:** Hunting, golfing, fishing, visiting his grandchildren

**Advice for new business owners:** Do something you enjoy doing. After 42 years I still enjoy funeral service. I enjoy helping the families and I look forward to going to work every day.

home started by his father, from his mother. The Kimball business was eventually purchased by Doug, Sr.'s brother who, with his son, now own and operate funeral homes in Annandale, Maple Lake, and Kimball. In 1982 Doug, Sr. bought the Eden Valley Funeral Home, followed in 2002 with the building of a facility in Becker and the purchase of the Long Prairie based Stephan-Stein Funeral Home in 2004.

In the midst of this expansion, the eldest of the Dingmann siblings, Dan, joined his father in the business. In the 1990s, a funeral director from SW Minnesota – and good friend and colleague to Doug, Sr. – died. To help out the friend's family, Dan moved to Luverne

to run the business. "Dan went down pretty quickly," according to Doug, Sr. "He ran those sites for awhile before we bought them." Eventually Dan purchased the funeral homes – located in Worthington, Adrian, Luverne, and Wilmont – from his father.

Suddenly Deb, who had never had any interest in the family business, realized that maybe she was interested. A 1986 graduate of Cathedral High School, Deb studied Health Information Administration at the College of St. Scholastica. "I worked in that for a few years," she said, "but I think the business was always in the back of my mind. It's such a family business." In 1995 she received her bachelor's

degree from the University of Minnesota and from there the decision was easy. "I still had my job at Abbott," she said. "And Dan was here. But when Dad's good friend died and Dan moved to southwest Minnesota, the opportunity opened up in Sauk Rapids and I decided I wanted it."

For Doug, Jr., the decision was always straight forward. A 1990 graduate of Cathedral High School, he attended St. Cloud State University for two years then transferred to the University of Minnesota where he graduated with a degree in Mortuary Science. "I think when I was starting school – those first two years – I knew," he said. "I was never serious about anything else."

## FUN FACT

## DISPOSITION OF THE BODY.

The fourth most common disposition of a body is burial at sea. The top three are traditional burial, cremation, and placement in a mausoleum.

## WIN-WIN

"We've always been acquaintances," Deb said about Tom Williams. "We just started talking about things like sharing staff and equipment. It seemed very natural."

"There are so many challenges facing funeral services," Williams said. "Keeping good people. Changes in how we

## DOUG E. DINGMANN, SR.

Age 67

**Family:** Wife Karen; children: Dan, Deb, Doug, Jr., and Dawn

**Education:** 1970 graduate of the University of Minnesota with a degree in Mortuary Science; Purchased his first funeral home in Clear Lake in 1972; Purchased a funeral home in Sauk Rapids in 1974,

renaming it the Dingmann Family Funeral Home

**Hobbies:** Golf, horses, parades. A few years ago Doug, Sr. purchased a horse-drawn hearse that is similar to the one his grandfather owned. In fact, the lights are from his grandfather's hearse. He takes it to parades and

it is used at funerals when families request it.

**Advice for new business owners:** Be caring. Take care of the people you are dealing with and the rest will probably take care of itself.



honor the dead. The on-call time in a small funeral home is hard.”

With the new generation of Dingmanns clearly committed to the industry, and Williams thinking about the future, the idea of a merger became a natural transition for both families. “Now we can job share, we can provide better hours for our employees, the merger helps with costs, we’re able to reach a wider service area. Merging our businesses just made sense,” Williams said.

Doug, Sr. gave the idea his full support. “The merger was a terrific opportunity for us – for the kids especially,” he said. “They’re the ones who are going to be here long-term. I can already tell a difference with the employees. You can move people around to where you need them, when you need them. The schedule is better for the employees and we’re better able to serve the families.” To facilitate the merger, Doug, Sr. sold his portion of the business to Doug, Jr. and Deb. But don’t call him retired! “I’m here most days, except for a little while in the winter when I go south,” he said.

All parties agree that the transition has been essentially a smooth one. “Our cultures are a little different,” Williams said, “but not in a

bad way at all. How we do things is just different enough that we have to remember to talk about them – documents, paper work, accounting, things like that. For example, we had different opening times. Do we open at 8 a.m. or 8:30 a.m.? Little details like that. We’re finding the best way to do things – the best practices. Philosophically we’re the same.”

The combined business now has eight locations and 72 employees: 13 funeral directors, four full time support staff, and about 55 part time and casual, or on-call, staff. Having access to so many part time employees is critical because the schedule at a funeral home is unpredictable, according to Doug, Jr. “Nothing’s scheduled. Some days are very busy, some aren’t.” The merger allows the company to transfer staff to the location where they are needed most. “I think we have better service, that we’re better able to meet our customers’ needs more effectively now,” he said.

Working with and serving the customers is the reason all four entered the business. “This is a rewarding profession,” Deb said. “You help people through the most difficult thing they go through in a lifetime.”

“You get to meet and know so many wonderful people...you hear their stories. I get a lot of personal satisfaction from that,” Williams added. But like any caregiver service, he cautioned, you can’t let it take over. If you take a family’s problems on your shoulders you can’t help them accomplish what they’ve asked you to do.

“Untimely deaths are hard,” he said. “Tragedies – sickness, accidents, homicides, suicides – these are really difficult deaths. Add in the age component and it magnifies the tragedy even more. A lot of times you’re asked questions that have no answers.”

In those circumstances, Williams said, the best you can do is try to provide hope and comfort. “I’m honest with people. It’s going to take time, things are going to change. But we can also make suggestions on how to honor and celebrate the person who has died. Our goal is to find out from the family members what they need to help them move forward.”

And of course, not all deaths are tragedies, Deb added. “Death isn’t always sad. The rite of passage can be a relief – from illness, loss of mobility, confusion. It can be a happy time.”

### FUN FACT

Arnold’s  
Implements in  
Kimball originated  
from Frence  
Dingmann’s 1940  
hardware store,  
funeral home,  
and implement  
business.

“When older people die and the grandchildren start telling stories – it’s really uplifting,” according to Doug, Jr. “It’s a celebration of someone’s life. There’s a lot of satisfaction that families can receive in going through the funeral and memorialization process. We’re helping create memories.” **BC**

Gail Ivers is vice president of the St. Cloud Area Chamber of Commerce and managing editor of Business Central.