

## **Funeral Home Gives Life to Cultural Centre**

*Dirks-Blem Funeral Home in Bird Island will soon become the Bird Island Cultural Centre.*

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After much deliberation the time has come for Gordy Blem and Dirks-Blem Funeral Service to announce that the Bird Island Funeral Home building will find new life as the Bird Island Cultural Centre quite soon. The closing of the building as a place for evening visitations was an extremely difficult one for Gordy and his family to make and was only made due to current costs required to maintain a licensed mortuary.

For many years now, due to Health Department requirements, Dirks-Blem Funeral Service has served the community of Bird Island with all preparation of bodies, as well as funeral arrangement planning, inventory of urns, caskets, etc., being completed at the Olivia office while the Bird Island building was only being used for visitations on the evening before a funeral. Unfortunately, the Minnesota Department of Health's licensing requirement and annual building overhead fees for mortuaries costs the same no matter what size community they are based. In other words, the operation costs stay the same whether they do 15 or 300 funerals a year.

Gordy Blem shared a few interesting statistics with me when we sat down to create this announcement. As recently as the 1980's the Bird Island population accounted for an average of 30-34 funerals per year while the current 2016 population accounts for approximately 17 funerals per year. Comparatively, in the 1980's, the cremation rate was about 3% and now is selected by 50% of the families we serve. A significant change that Dirks-Blem has experienced is that just 20-25 years ago nearly 95 percent of all funerals had a visitation the evening before. This visitation was usually held at the funeral home. Currently though, the Bird Island Funeral Home has averaged only about five evening visitations per year the last several years. Gordy has understood this to be because many families now request the visitation and funeral all on the same day or prefer that the visitation be held at their church the evening before the funeral.

Gordy explained he realized how significant of a change this is for the community of Bird Island and, with the rest of his team at Dirks-Blem Funeral Service, "tried to focus on how this change could have a positive impact. With this in mind, we have decided to donate the entire building and grounds to the community for a non- profit Bird Island Cultural Centre. It is our hope that the "re-purposing" of this building will honor the community's long-standing dedication and commitment to innovation and creativity."

Mr. Blem recognized the minimal use of the funeral home building as is, and yet saw next door, at Mark and Rosemary Glesener's "Gramma's House", being used so often for different functions, and by dozens of locals regularly, led to conversations with the entrepreneurial couple the past

two years. Mark and Rosemary, along with a non-profit Board of Directors, are very much looking forward to bringing an exciting new use for arts, cultural opportunities, and a general community space as new life for the former funeral home. Gordy emphasized that, “Yes, rather than selling the facility for something else we are completely donating it to Bird Island in honor and memory of all those families in the community we have served in the past and will serve in the future. We are excited to see how the community finds uses for the property in the years to come....and are pleased Mark, Rosemary, and the Board will help oversee this opportunity.”

“Most importantly, nothing will change with Dirks-Blem Funeral Service’s commitment to bringing caring service to the community as we have for decades.” Gordy explained that they will simply hold evening visitations at the family’s church, who are compensated by Dirks-Blem, or at the Olivia Funeral Home when people prefer. “I heartfully thank you for understanding the reasons that led to this change. I am truly grateful for being allowed to serve so many families in the Bird Island area in the past and thank you for the privilege to serve you in the future in your time of need.” While Gordy is truly sad for this change in his funeral business, his heart is clearly full of hope and he is eager to see the positive changes that the Bird Island Cultural Centre could bring.

As for this new experience coming to our area, I look forward to sharing more about the Bird Island Cultural Centre and how this nonprofit is “organized exclusively for the promotion of community integrative health, happiness, and well being; the integrative betterment of individual community members (children, teenagers, adults, and elders) in body, mind, and spirit; and the enhancement of the social fabric of the Bird Island community.”