

Detroit man dies unexpectedly. Then things became even more unbelievable for family

Georgea Kovanis, MSN News May 20, 2020



Everything about the death of James Beavers was complicated, beginning with the fact that no one expected him to die.

The 55-year-old Detroit husband, father and grandfather had a bad cough from what seemed to be a cold, that's true. And he'd had health problems for years — congestive heart failure, diabetes, a history of pneumonia and was on oxygen. But with every crisis, every hospitalization, he bounced back and returned home to his family and to his backyard barbecues where he made ribs with a special sauce recipe unknown to anyone but himself.

So on the morning of April 19, when breathing became especially difficult and his family called an ambulance, no one thought they were sending Beavers to the emergency room to die.

"He was alive and well the previous day," said Krishan Dawson, his daughter-in-law. "Because he has a pacemaker and a defibrillator, I thought it would be easy to bring him back," said Kimberly Beavers, his wife.



© Mandi Wright, Detroit Free Press Kimberly Beavers with the funeral program of her husband James Beavers. When James Beavers died in April his family assumed they would be able to use the funeral home they had used for generations. Because of the high volume of Coronavirus deaths in Detroit, the Beavers family had to reach out to another funeral home. Verheyden Funeral Home in Grosse Pointe Park was able to accommodate the family.

Shocked and saddened, the family came together to make final arrangements.

And that's when their situation became even more unbelievable: They couldn't find a funeral home to bury Beavers. Every place they turned to for help was overwhelmed and overbooked as COVID-19 raged through Michigan, causing more than 5,000 deaths. "We didn't call just one location, we called multiple locations," Dawson said.

It's a very difficult time to die.

But it's an even more difficult time for the loved ones left behind, as the Beavers family, and so many others, are finding out.

Pandemic causes an uneasy grief

Everything we know about death and dying has been upended.

These days, the sick go to the hospital alone — family isn't allowed inside because of the contagious nature of the virus — and many end up dying alone without so much as a comforting word or caress from those who love them most. Family members and friends, devastated at the suddenness of it all feel guilty for not being there, for not helping with their loved one's transition.

Funerals are sparse, socially distanced occasions. Visitations are minimal; no more than 10 masked people in a room at a time, though many funeral homes offer live-streaming. There's no hugging or holding hands, no reassuring touch to soothe the grieving and remind them that even though they may feel alone, they are not. Large religious services are forbidden. There are no graveside vigils. No repast luncheons.



© Mandi Wright, Detroit Free Press The Family of James Beavers is greeted by Verheyden Funeral Director Brian Joseph on May 15, 2020. When James Beavers died in April his family assumed they would be able to use the funeral home they had used for generations.

Which only makes survivors even more uncomfortable, more unsettled.

"Whether or not they're spiritual in nature, families tend to have a particular set of rituals that we follow when we experience the death of a loved one," said Polly Gipson, a clinical assistant professor in the psychiatry department at Michigan Medicine who specializes in trauma and grief.

"Obviously, (death is) devastating at any time," she added. "But I believe it's going to be particularly devastating at this time because we aren't able to go through those typical rituals."

Those familiar rites and traditions, those services "help us all kind of acknowledge the loss and kind of come to understand this loss is profound and permanent," said Peter Litchenberg, a Wayne State University psychology professor who serves as director of the school's Institute of Gerontology.

"When people aren't able to adjust to the environment in which the deceased is missing after a period of time, and the grief is as fresh as it was, it can be very difficult," Litchenberg said. "People really start to have, not just the grief, but they have deeper depression and deeper traumatic reactions, almost like post-traumatic stress."

They may become preoccupied with the way their loved one died. They may begin avoiding places that remind them of the deceased. They may avoid talking about the person. They may withdraw into their grief.

In their time of crisis, the family of James Beavers — who had worked in a variety of beer and liquor stores until he became too ill to hold a job, who liked to work on classic cars and dote on his grandchildren —



"It was a tradition," said Dawson, who is 30 and married to Beavers' son, Demetrius.

For funeral homes, it's nonstop

Southeast Michigan has been hit hard by COVID-19, the illness caused by the new coronavirus. But few places in the nation have been as decimated as Detroit, where more than 10,000 people have been sickened and more than 1,200 have died, according to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

Funeral homes throughout the city — including Wilson-Akins Funeral Home, the Beavers family's first choice — were overwhelmed.

"It's nonstop from the beginning of the day to the end of the night," funeral director David Akins said last week. "It's very difficult. I've been in the funeral business all my adult life. ...I've never seen anything like this."

Dawson said the person who took her family's call suggested trying back in a few days. But the family couldn't wait. Leaving Beavers at the hospital morgue for several days not only felt wrong but the hospital, Dawson said, seemed insistent on moving Beavers sooner rather than later.

The family called the O.H. Pye Funeral Home in Detroit, but it was booked solid. "When (the coronavirus) first happened, we were really swamped. It was almost immediate," said owner Ozie Pye. "My parents started this business in 1980," he said. "I've never seen anything like this in 40 years. This is more like a movie. That's the only thing I can compare it to. This is just not normal."

"We went out and rented two coolers. At first, I just rented one and then our demand was still so great, we had to rent another one. Each of those coolers hold 22, 24 bodies." And even though demand has slowed down some, as of last week, he said "they're both currently full."

The Beavers family tried two more funeral homes, places they knew by reputation, places they knew had a largely African American clientele.

One had no openings.

One said it could handle the arrangements provided Beavers hadn't died from COVID-19. But the family couldn't say for certain that he hadn't.

The cough, the respiratory failure indicated COVID-19.

But heart failure can also cause respiratory distress.

Beavers' primary care doctor — with whom he'd been in contact — hadn't tested him for the virus. Neither did the hospital.



The Beavers family called.

Owner Brian Joseph told them that he'd be able to help.

Finding the comfort zone

Securing a funeral home for her husband, however, didn't put 50-year-old Kimberly Beavers at ease.

She knew next-to-nothing about Verheyden.

The family had chosen May 2 for the visitation, that way people from out of town and out of state who were willing to travel could make plans. But would the funeral home be able to accommodate a significant number of mourners? James Beavers loved large gatherings. The house he and his wife shared was always the hub for holidays and other family events.

Was the funeral home cosmetologist accustomed to working with African Americans; would her husband's makeup be too light? Would he even look like himself?

In the end, though, everything worked as well as possible, considering the incredible times.

Kimberly Beavers saw her husband before the visitation and asked the funeral home to shave his head; his hair had grown out during the time he was sick. With that, she was pleased with his appearance. More than one person told her that her husband looked like he was asleep, not dead.

Almost like a revolving door, the funeral home cycled 75 or so family members and friends past Beavers' casket. Everyone wore masks. Kimberly Beavers changed hers several times. It was soaked with tears.

© Mandi Wright, Detroit Free Press Shaneka Dawson, 37, of Detroit, poses with family members Keshan Dawson, 32, of Detroit, Kenneth Williams, 63, of Detroit, wife of the late James Beavers Kimberly Beavers, 50, of Detroit and Krishan Dawson, 30 of Belleville on May 15, 2020, outside of Verheyden Funeral Home in Grosse Pointe Park.

No one in the family is happy that they weren't able to have a religious service for Beavers. And no one is happy that only three people — Kimberly Beavers and two of the four children, all adults, she and James Beavers share — were allowed by the cemetery to stand graveside for the burial.

"I can't have the proper ceremony that I wanted. I didn't get the full turnout that I would have liked," said Kimberly Beavers. "This COVID thing really messed it up."

She hopes to have a memorial for her husband in July, near the date of his birthday.

Until, then, though, Dawson said, "it feels like he's just still at the hospital and we're waiting for him to get out."

Everything is so complicated.