

It is all thanks to Lorraine Melgosa, a woman with a mission from Manzanola, a small Colorado farming town of 500 in southeastern Colorado. She is the owner of Wellington Carriage Company and she and her horses have provided horse-drawn hearse services for more than 700 funerals for over 17 years. Since the start of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, her hearse has carried the bodies of more than 45 service people to their final resting place at no cost for the families.

It is her personal mission to bring respect back to funerals, to slow life down and give grieving family members a few more minutes with their loved one. Her family, friends and community have all sacrificed with her to make this dream come true.

Beginning of a business

The idea for a horse-drawn hearse carriage business came from Lorraine's brother, Barney Clancy. When their father died, they wanted a funeral befitting his aristocratic nature. He wasn't from royalty, but he always carried himself with an air of dignity.

When he passed away, Lorraine and Barney believed the best way to show their respect was with a horse-drawn hearse. To them, a horse-drawn hearse represented dignity and tradition.

However, no funeral home offered this service and they couldn't find anyone locally who offered horse-drawn hearse services. Because of their frustration and inability to provide their father with a last ride, Barney was inspired to start a new business. Lorraine became a partner with Barney in Wellington Carriage Company, named after their father, Wellington Joseph Clancy.

The hearse, an 1867 James Cunningham & Sons hearse, was purchased at an auction in Pennsylvania. It was pulled by their first horse, Mike, a dapple gray Percheron. As you can expect, people weren't knocking their door down for funerals. Barney ran the business for about a year before he lost interest and decided to sell it.

Lorraine didn't want him to sell the business they had named after their father, and she had grown quite fond of Mike. She took over the business from Barney in 1993. Lorraine now had a horse and a hearse, and no truck with which to haul either. She was also a farmer's wife with two small children at home.

But she was dedicated to this business and she added on. She bought a surrey so she could offer horse-drawn carriage services for weddings in addition to funerals.

"I discovered real quick, weddings are depressing," she says.

Brides would call and say they only needed her for 15 minutes, gripe about paying and want her to take the horse and carriage places she wouldn't take her own truck. Lorraine started stressing over wedding commitments and how she would handle it if a funeral came up suddenly. She never wanted to turn a funeral down so she could do someone's fourth wedding.

"Funerals are a once-in-a-lifetime thing," says Lorraine. "Just like my dad was special; it's an honor for me that they would include us in that special time. That's what you live your whole life for, and your funeral should reflect on your life. So I just do

funerals."

From the early days of the business, Lorraine never charged for the funerals of veterans, service personnel, children, murder victims or family or friends within the state. That meant 90 percent of all her services were free.

"It's a labor of love," she said. "You can't be in it for the paycheck. You have to do it because you love it. I believe in it and I get a lot of satisfaction from doing it."

When the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan started in 2001 she was going through a pretty tough time in her life. Then Staff Sgt. Justin Vasquez, who grew up in Manzanola, was killed while serving in Iraq. Lorraine had known Justin since he was born. She knew she had to do Justin's funeral. She immediately called his family.

A thousand people attended Justin's funeral, twice the population of Manzanola. That's when Lorraine says it hit her: "What problem do I have that's bigger than this?"

Commitment to those who served

Two weeks later Lorraine received a phone call from a funeral home in Denver requesting her services for Marine Lance Cpl. Chad Maynard. At the funeral for Cpl. Maynard she had some-one stay with Mike so she could go into the church and hear the service. It was her first real exposure to the sacrifices being made by our military servicemen and women.

After the funeral, as she was pulling out of the cemetery grounds holding up rush hour traffic, she encountered several impatient drivers. She realized at that moment this kid didn't know any of us. "This kid died for us," she says. "People can be mad and honk at me because of this inconvenience. These people don't care, but I have to care and I have to bring awareness to the public. Every day, these kids are dying for us."

The Maynard funeral was a turning point in Lorraine's life.

The Denver Post carried a story about Lorraine, the funerals and her aging and injured horse, Mike. After reading the article, Phyllis Patterson contacted Lorraine about helping her with the purchase of another horse. Lorraine had previously met Phyllis when she and Mike carried the body of Phyllis's nephew, Navy Seal Danny Dietz, to his burial at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver.

Phyllis explained that the Dietz family wanted to buy her another horse for all she had done for them. Lorraine instantly refused," she told Phyllis. "Number one, your [continued on page 18]

