

Special Edition Feature | PreNeed Systems



Mike (left) and Mark Iles posing with their father's portrait.

In this issue of BluePrint™, we sit down with Mark and Mike Iles of PreNeed Systems as they celebrate their 30th anniversary of helping funeral homes promote and sell pre-need. PreNeed Systems has partnered exclusively with Homesteaders since its inception. We're looking back at this successful partnership, which has resulted in more than a billion dollars in pre-need sales and peace of mind for countless families.

Can you tell us a little about the history of PreNeed Systems?



Mark Iles: In the 1980s, I moved back to Iowa from Texas to help create a pre-need sales program at my family's funeral home. I had been selling life insurance and knew quite a bit about prearrangements. Around that time, I started to notice an increase in corporate funeral homes. My father and I saw the success they were having promoting pre-need and the increased attention they were receiving from consumers. We thought that independent funeral homes like ours deserved to have that kind of success, too, but they needed some external help. So, I founded PreNeed Systems in 1988 to help meet that need.



Mike Iles: Our first client was our family's funeral home, but the idea quickly spread to other funeral homes in the state. As a result, we were able to get the word out quickly and eventually we were endorsed by the Iowa Funeral Directors Association. That endorsement really helped elevate us in the pre-need arena. After that, my wife, Kim, and I brought PreNeed Systems into Texas where we were able to help even more funeral professionals.

You have had a lot of success as Homesteaders' first exclusive marketing partner. What was your mission when you founded PreNeed Systems?

Mark: Early on, we discussed what kind of marketing organization we wanted to become. Our mission was to act competently and with integrity. In some sense, marketers can be consultants and advise clients on how to establish successful pre-need programs. Having our own group of family funeral homes has allowed us to show our clients tested

Continued from previous page

Special Edition Feature | PreNeed Systems

and proven strategies that our locations use every day. We can support our advice with real metrics and prove that our recommendations can be beneficial. This has led to many long-term client relationships, to which we attribute a lot of our success.

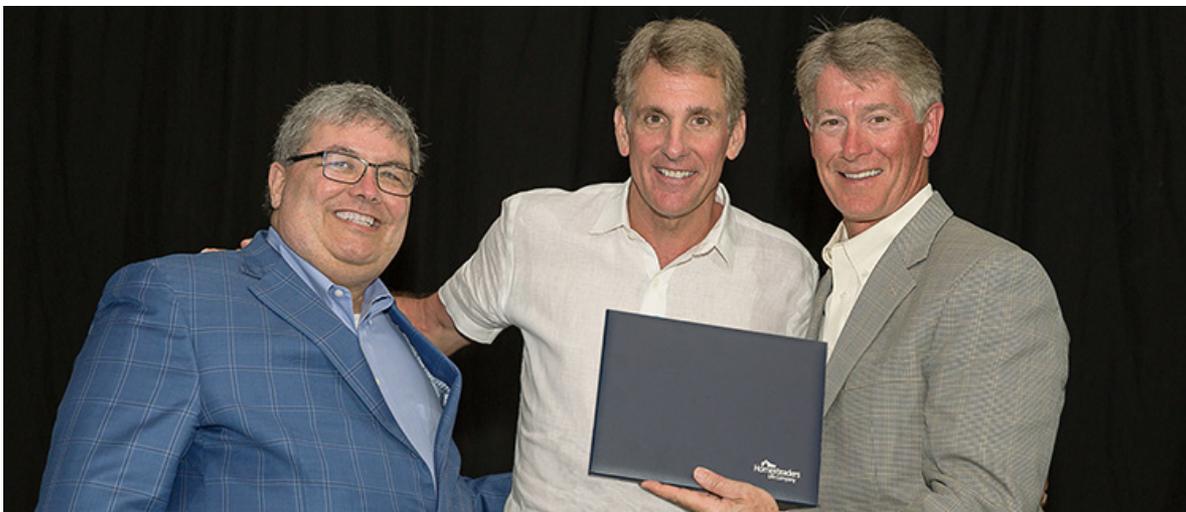


Homesteaders' Executive VP-Sales and Marketing, Lyndon Peterson (left), and Mike Iles.

What are some other things that have helped you become successful?

Mike: Without a doubt, our counselors have been critically important to our success. We've always sought out counselors who would choose to make PreNeed Systems their lifetime career. In doing so, we are able to mold them and help them become as well versed in funeral arrangements as a tenured funeral director. We invest in significant training, both virtually and in the field. To date, our pre-need counselors have qualified 279 times for Homesteaders' incentive trips.

Mark: We believe that the success of a pre-need marketing program isn't solely about the number of contracts sold by a counselor, but the quality of those contracts. We've been able to collect data on things like contract averages to help provide accountability and also highlight areas where more training may be necessary. Beyond that, we're proud to have pioneered a counselor benefit package that is equivalent to many funeral director benefit packages as part of our strategy to attract and retain the best counselors. As of today, 15 counselors have retired from PreNeed Systems and received \$900,000 in benefits thanks to our retirement plan.



(From L-R) Homesteaders President and CEO Steve Shaffer, Mark Iles and Lyndon Peterson at a past Homesteaders Leaders Conference.

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You've provided services and support to several other marketing organizations and agencies over the past 30 years. How did your strategic marketer partnership program begin?

Mark: We are very proud of our agency affiliate program, which was actually the brainchild of a former Homesteaders VP-Sales. They thought the best practices we developed as an organization would benefit other, smaller agencies who needed guidance and support in areas such as marketing and administrative services. So far, we've worked with 14 agencies located from coast to coast for almost 20 years. These affiliations have also benefited us, as the intelligent people managing them have given us a lot of good ideas that we've implemented as well. We're grateful to be affiliated with them.

Funeral service is changing to adjust to new consumer demand. What challenges do you hope to help solve in the future?

Mike: I foresee the importance of having a strong pre-need program increasing. I believe that consumers will want to have the ability to make advance payments on their final arrangements. We look forward to working with Homesteaders and utilizing their consumer-centric products to help families.



(From L-R) Former Homesteaders Chairman, President and CEO Graham Cook with Mark (center) and Mike Iles at an awards ceremony.

Your long standing relationship with Homesteaders has evolved over the years into new and exciting ventures. What are you most looking forward to in the future?

Mike: We have been lucky enough to work with four Homesteaders CEOs since 1988, and we look forward to working closely with Steve Shaffer during his tenure. Pre-need has never been more important than it is right now. Our future is full of possibilities, and we are excited to see how funeral service grows and changes over the next several years.

You can learn more about PreNeed Systems at preneedsystems.com.

homesteaderslife.com/newsletter