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Family stuck with funeral bills despite prepaying for services

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The former owner of an Atlanta funeral home is promising a distraught family that she'll help with burial costs of a woman who had pre-paid for services years before the home went out of business.

Juanita Sellers Stone, former owner of Sellers Brothers Funeral Home in southwest Atlanta, said she will help the family of 99-year-old Evelyn Dabney, who died recently on her birthday.

Renita Owens told Channel 2 Action News her great aunt had spent more than \$2,000 purchasing a pre-needs contract with Sellers Brothers in 1985.

Owens said the family didn't know that Sellers Brothers had gone out of business in recent years. So far the family has been able to raise just \$3,500, half of what's needed to bury Dabney.

"It hurts to know that it ends like this," Owens said. "I just don't feel like I should be going through this."

Bankruptcy trustee Neil Gordon told Channel 2 Action News the funeral home, a family-owned business that was founded in 1920, should have put money from pre-paid services in reserve.

"They [family] paid this money in trust to this funeral home business to be held for their needs or their family member's needs when that time arrived," Gordon told Channel 2 Action News. "And it wasn't done. The money was spent, it was diverted. But it was never reported to the court, it was never reported to me and we do not know where it is."

Sellers Brothers was founded in Newnan in 1920 by James Horace Sellers, who was later joined by brother Samuel Garrett Sellers and other Sellers family members. The African-American owned business later expanded to Fairburn and Carrollton before opening locations in Atlanta.

Before it closed in 2005, Sellers Brothers had funeral homes on McDaniel Street and on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive.

Stone, who operated the funeral home until it went out of business, told Channel 2 Action News that Sellers Brothers did nothing wrong or illegal and that she would help Dabney's family with the funeral costs.

In 2009, lawyers looking for the funeral home's records in East Point stumbled upon the cremated remains of 96 people in the back of three storage units. The discovery prompted investigations by the Fulton County medical examiner's office and secretary of state's office.

At the time, Stone said the funeral home was not being negligent and that it routinely held cremated remains for years, partly because family members refused to pick them up. She said the ashes were put into storage units because a building where they were previously kept was to be demolished.

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