

WILLIE A. WATKINS FUNERAL HOME, INC

WILLIE' BIO

At age 14, Willie A. Watkins got an after-school job at Atlanta's Thornton Funeral Home, where he remained until he opened his own service in 1982.

By 1971, however, he had already obtained his state mortuary license. "I was possibly the youngest to have such a license," he said. "I was only 20. When I got out of [Charles L. Harper] high school in 1967, I joined my buddies and enrolled at Morehouse College. I strayed for two years until they opened Gupton-Jones College of Mortuary Science. Once that happened, I made a beeline to Peachtree Street." He worked days and went to school nights until he graduated.

In 1982, with 11 years experience from Thornton, he purchased a 100-year old Victorian-style home on what was then Gordon Street in the West End. The house was owned by John Gordon, a confederate war general for whom the street was originally named. Watkins said his move was deliberate. "I bought this old house because I wanted to establish the atmosphere of this being a funeral home, not just a mortuary," he added.

Watkins stays extremely busy. Even on the day of his interview, he was constantly interrupted with phone calls. A family approached unannounced to make some arrangements, and he politely excused himself to deal with business. Such attention to detail, plus his unwavering religious faith have spelled success for him for the past 14 years, he said. Since his humble beginnings, he has brought his four other brothers into the business and already has plans for expansion. He admitted that he has long since outgrown his present location.

"Too many people get into this business because of the money," he said. "But me, I love the business I'm in. And because of that, I'll go one extra mile to provide good service."