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2024 NFDA Meet the Mentors Program: Exclusive Opportunity for Funeral Professionals to Connect, Learn and Advocate in Washington, D.C.

Brookfield, Wis. – Members of the National Funeral Directors Association are invited to enter for their chance to participate in the association’s transformational [Meet the Mentors](#) program. In 2024, the program will be held March 19-22, in Washington, D.C. in conjunction with the association’s annual Advocacy Summit.

Meet the Mentors has been wholly funded by the [Funeral Service Foundation](#) since its 2011 inception. The Funeral Service Foundation’s support of Meet the Mentors helps fulfill its mission of lifting up grieving communities by investing in people and programs that strengthen funeral service.

“We’re so excited to bring our Meet the Mentors program to Washington, D.C.,” said NFDA Associate Director of Education Sara Moss, MS, CT, LFD. “In addition to the learning and growth that happens during Meet the Mentors, this year’s mentees will have a unique opportunity to learn about the importance of being an advocate for the funeral service profession. They will also be able to participate in meetings with members of Congress along side our 2024 NFDA Advocacy Summit attendees.”

During Meet the Mentors, up to 25 funeral professionals who are age 40 or under or are new to the profession (first licensed within the last five years) will have an opportunity to meet, learn from and talk with innovative and successful funeral professionals. Meet the Mentors also helps participants to network and form relationships with other new professionals.

Three highly esteemed funeral professionals have been selected as the 2024 mentors:

- **Virginia “Jenni” Bryant, CFSP, CCO**, is the general manager of Smith Funeral and Cremation Services, which has several locations in Maryville, Tennessee. Bryant is a graduate of Gupton-Jones College of Mortuary Science in Atlanta and began her funeral service career at Smith Funeral and Cremation Services in 2000. Jenni is a Past President of the Academy of Professional Funeral Service Practice and is currently serving on the National Board Exam Committee.
- **Jay Dietz is the vice president of operations for Vertin**, on of the largest privately held family-owned funeral home companies in the Midwest. After joining Vertin in 1995, he spent the next eighteen years as a managing funeral director of firms in West Central, Minnesota, until becoming a key member of the organization’s leadership team in 2013. Today, as vice president of operations, Dietz is responsible for all funeral home operations, providing strategic leadership and ensuring all associates have the resources, tools and support they need to offer the highest level of service to all families.
- **Kenneth Howe, CFSP**, is the president, CEO and owner, of Holman Howe Funeral Homes, which has several locations in southeastern Missouri. He is a former chairman and member of the Missouri State Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers, a member of the National Funeral Directors Association and the Academy of Professional Funeral Service Practice. He

was named the 2012 Funeral Director of the Year by *American Funeral Director* magazine and is active in the daily management of his family's business. His firm has earned the NFDA Pursuit of Excellence Award 12 times and was awarded Best of the Best Award in 2015.

Meet the Mentors will begin on Tuesday, March 19 with a reception followed by a tour and dinner at the historic Joseph Gawler's Sons Funeral Home in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1850, the firm has provided funeral and cremation services to families in the Washington, D.C. area for more than 160 years. The firm has also been called upon to honor the lives of presidents, vice presidents, Supreme Court justices, members of Congress, cabinet secretaries, military leaders and foreign dignitaries. It is believed to be the oldest funeral establishment still operating in the D.C. area.

On Wednesday, March 20, Bryant, Dietz and Howe will share career advice and lessons they have learned while building rewarding and fulfilling careers in funeral service. Attendees will be able to connect with the mentors and their fellow mentees during roundtable discussions.

On Thursday, March 21, the mentees will spend the day on Capitol Hill with NFDA Advocacy Summit attendees meeting with Members of Congress. Meet the Mentors participants will literally have a seat at the table, sitting across from elected representatives and engaging them in a discussion about how decisions made in Congress have a direct impact on a funeral director's ability to serve families and run a business.

That evening, mentees will attend a special engagement session with **Duane E. Hills**, president of Joseph Gawler's Sons Funeral Home in Washington, D.C. Originally from rural Pennsylvania, he moved to the state of New York State to attend Simmons School of Mortuary Science in Syracuse, New York. In 2008, Hill joined SCI to manage a group of funeral homes and a cemetery in Lufkin, Texas. In 2012, he transferred to Washington, D.C. where he became the assistant manager at Joseph Gawler's Sons. In 2022 Hill self-published a book on the history of Joseph Gawler's Sons, "One Block West of the White House," which can be found in both the Presidential Library at the White House and the Law Library at the United States Supreme Court, and "Washington's Sinners & Saints" about notorious figures in and around the nation's capital.

Previous Meet the Mentors participants offer consistently high praise for the program. A 2023 mentee said, "Meet the Mentors was such an eye-opening experience. I was able to learn so much from so many different funeral service professionals. This program inspired me to dream bigger in my career."

Another 2023 participant noted, "This program was so well planned and well run. I left with tons of knowledge, connected with like-minded individuals I mostly didn't know, walked away with 30 plus new friends, and built relationships with people that have been paving the way for our success as the future generation of professionals."

There is no cost to participate in the Meet the Mentors program itself. The Funeral Service Foundation's generous grant provides exclusive, career-transforming access to three mentors and other leaders in the profession, and covers attendees' registration fees, three nights' lodging and select meals. The individuals selected to attend only pay for their transportation to and from Washington, D.C.

The names of the 2024 Meet the Mentors participants will be randomly drawn from among all who enter via the NFDA website, www.nfda.org/mentors. Entrants must be NFDA members in good standing, licensed funeral directors and/or embalmers, and age 40 or under or new to the profession (first licensed within the last five years). In addition to providing basic information, entrants will be required to submit a letter of good standing from their funeral home owner or manager and answer a brief essay question.

Entries will be accepted through 5 p.m. CST on January 6, 2024. The names of the 2023 Meet the Mentors participants will be announced in late-January 2024.

Complete details about the NFDA Meet the Mentors program, including eligibility requirements, information about the mentors and the entry form, can be found on the NFDA website, www.nfda.org/mentors. Members can also call NFDA at 800-228-6332 with questions.

NFDA is the world's leading and largest funeral service association, serving more than 20,000 individual members who represent nearly 11,000 funeral homes in the United States and 49 countries around the world. NFDA is the trusted leader, beacon for ethics and the strongest advocate for the profession. NFDA is the association of choice because it offers funeral professionals comprehensive educational resources, tools to manage successful businesses, guidance to become pillars in their communities and the expertise to foster future generations of funeral professionals. NFDA is headquartered in Brookfield, Wis., and has an office in Washington, D.C. For more information, visit www.nfda.org.

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