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Is the Funeral Profession Ready for Visible Tattoos and Piercings?

By Sarah Rickerd

There's a well-worn joke told among funeral professionals that the industry's standard dress code permits total flexibility for practitioners: You can wear any color dress shirt you want, as long as it's white.

It's no surprise, then, that in a field long accused of being resistant to change, visible tattoos and piercings are a rare find on today's directors. Funeral professionals, by and large, look remarkably similar to their suit-and-tie predecessors who have been serving families since funerals first moved out of private homes and into a public care setting. Though some firms have adopted a more business casual look of khakis and button-down shirts, body art and visible piercings (beyond the standard soft-lobe ear piercings 83 percent of Americans have had at one time or another) remain implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – verboten.

Interestingly, though, this reticence to embrace change remains in a time when different forms of body modification are becoming more common than ever before. A Harris poll of 2,016 adults conducted January 16-23, 2012, found that 21 percent of participants had at least one tattoo – up from 16 percent in 2008 and 14 percent in 2003. Further research conducted by Anne Laumann and Amy Derick and reported by the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* re-

veals that 35 percent of the study's 500 subjects had one or more piercings and 14 percent had a non-soft lobe piercing (or "body piercing").

Although historical data on piercing rates are limited, anecdotal evidence from funeral professionals, including those who teach and work with industry students, suggests that the prevalence of these types of body modifications is on the rise. Notes Jzyk S. Ennis, funeral service education instructor at Jefferson State Community College in Birmingham, Alabama: "We are seeing more, whether it's a piercing in the nose or more earrings in the ear. Tattoos are nothing new – we've had sailors and people in the military for decades. It's just that they've always been hidden. It used to be that tattoos were covered by shirts; now we have body art that's covering the fingers, neck, etc."

The case against visible tattoos and piercings

If the funeral service industry has been slow to accept those with visible body modifications, it hasn't done so without reason. A number of factors – from the presumed expectations of the primary demographics served to variations in regional acceptance of tattoos and piercings – contribute to firms' understandable reluctance to rock the boat in their communities.

Geographical considerations

While it's commonly acknowledged that standards of conduct are unique to different areas of the country, both anecdotal and statistical evidence confirm the notion that tattoos and body piercings are more acceptable in some cities, states and regions than others. Urban areas, for example, tend to be more liberal in their acceptance of different forms of body modification than rural regions. The Harris poll referenced earlier also suggests that those on the West Coast are more likely to be tattooed or pierced than those in the Midwest or South. Of the poll's respondents, 26 percent of West Coast adults reported having at least one piercing, compared to just 21 percent of East Coast and Midwest participants, and 18 percent of Southern respondents.

“The issue of first impression is not going to change; it's always going to be there: You don't get a second chance to make a first impression. If the first impression an employer wants to make is one that doesn't include tattoos, that's going to be the reality for employees.”

Lauren Budrow, president of Mid-America College of Funeral Service in Jeffersonville, Indiana, echoes these findings, saying of her experiences moving from the West Coast to the Midwest: “I moved to Seattle in 2010 and was shocked by the amount of tattoos that were very visible. That was not a conservative area of the country. The whole mantra of ‘come as you are’ is upheld there.” It is easy to imagine that those in areas where body modification is not as widely accepted would feel more comfortable being served by funeral professionals whose appearance mirrors their own.

Economic competition

For others in the funeral service profession, the argument against visible tattoos and body piercings isn't personal, it's economic. According to the 2013 CNBC feature *Death: It's a Living*, although Americans spend \$17 billion a year on the rituals and customs surrounding death, the average funeral home's profits are less than 6 percent. Furthermore, over the past 10 years, independently owned funeral homes have seen a 27 percent drop in profits, a trend many industry professionals attribute to increased competition in oversaturated markets, evolving preferences in death and aftercare services and declining savings rates across all demographics.

In light of the financial squeeze many funeral homes feel and the increasing difficulty of retaining market share, isn't it natural for firms to cling to any potential differentiator in these competitive times? If there's even the slightest chance that a heavily tattooed director would turn Grandma's business away to a competing funeral home, why wouldn't the firm stick to the straight-and-narrow, suit-and-tie approach that's served them well in the past?

Robert C. Smith III, executive director of the American Board of Funeral Service Education and former educator, understands the challenges firms face when interacting with the public, saying, “The issue of first impression is not going to change; it's always going to be there: You don't get a second chance to make a first impression. If the first impression an employer wants to make is one that doesn't include tattoos, that's going to be the reality for employees.”

That's not to say Smith is against tattoos; he acknowledges that he's worked with many excellent directors and other practitioners who have tattoos but keep them covered for professional purposes. When counseling students, however, he encourages them to think, “What does your Grandma think of your tattoos? And even if Grandma does accept tattoos, she's not the one doing the hiring or signing your paycheck.”

The slippery slope

If first impressions matter so much to the funeral profession, it's understandable that another of the objections presented most often by funeral practitioners to the question of hiring tattooed and pierced staff members is that doing so creates a slippery slope. If a firm that has enforced a strict “no visible tattoos or body piercings” policy in the past hires even one professional with these modifications, what's to stop other employees from wanting – let alone taking advantage of – the same privileges? And what, then, prevents a funeral home's staff from transforming from a clean-cut crew of professionals into a rag-tag bunch of pierced, tattooed ne'er-do-wells?



An open-ended question

Ignoring this hyperbolic thinking that too often occurs when discussions of proposed changes devolve into slippery slope arguments, the issue with many of the supposed reasons given by funeral professionals against hiring practitioners with visible body modifications is that they presume the public is, in fact, bothered by the presence of tattoos and piercings. And yet, what evidence is there to assume that Grandma will be so put off by visible tattoos and piercings that she'll take her business elsewhere? In a society where tattoos and piercings are becoming more common, is there truly still that much of a stigma surrounding their presence?

Budrow shares these concerns. “The question I have is, does the public care more than we do? Or does the public really not care? When I go to a restaurant, servers come up to me with tattoos up and down their arms, but I don’t care. I’m more concerned about the service and the food. As a society, if we’re more tolerant in all of these other areas of our lives, why are we not when it comes to funeral service?”

Budrow may be on to something. The 2012 Harris poll regarding body modification trends indicates that the popular conception of tattoos and piercings as “rebellious” or “deviant” is waning. Roughly three-quarters of poll respondents indicated that they believe people with tattoos are no more likely to engage in deviant behavior than those without such modifications. When the same question was asked in 2008, nearly 30 percent of survey participants believed those with tattoos were more likely to do something most people consider deviant, demonstrating a continuing trend toward greater acceptance.

As the number of people with tattoos and piercings in society overall increases, it’s only natural that the stigma against these body modifications would diminish. Far from being the ubiquitous markers of social misfits as they were once seen, tattoos and piercings have become so common in some areas they hardly warrant a second glance. But wider acceptance hasn’t trickled down to funeral service, and this issue is affecting one group disproportionately – funeral service students.

In coming years, the funeral profession will need an influx of new talent to contend with two major industry shifts, the first of which is projected growth in the field, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimating that employment of funeral service workers will grow 12 percent from 2012-22. Some of this growth will come from a projected 30 percent increase in deaths by 2030 (when the first baby boomers reach age 85), while further need will be generated by the exit, either to death or retirement, of a great number of Greatest Generation members and baby boomers currently leading funeral homes.

The professionals filling these spots will enter a vastly different environment than their predecessors. Cremation services currently account for 42 percent of all U.S. services – up from 21 percent in 1996 – while demands for personalized services have never been higher. In just 10 years, personalized funeral services have gone from being virtually nonexistent to dominating one-third of all funeral ceremonies. Baby boomers in particular feel that a personalized service is a more meaningful way to memorialize a loved one.

New expectations require new talent

Rising to the challenge of meeting these new expectations requires a new type of employee – a creative worker who is open to self-expression and comfortable translating these traits to the customized memorials wanted by the members of their community. Unfortunately, many funeral service students who embrace tattoos and piercings as similar embodiments of their individualism offer this exact combination of charac-

teristics, only to be discouraged by current practitioners who suggest that their visible body modifications should preclude them from service in the industry.

Funeral service educators working today openly acknowledge these challenges. Says Gene Ogrodnik, president of Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, of preparing future graduates for the profession’s old-fashioned nature: “We talk about the field and that it’s... pretty conservative out there. [Visible tattoos and piercings] probably won’t fly in terms of general acceptance.” Ennis confirms this perspective, sharing that in working with his students, “We have a very candid but



respectful conversation about tattoos and piercings since that’s something to which many funeral directors will have an aversion.”

Rachael, a funeral director in her mid-30s with extensive tattoos, is familiar with this struggle. Speaking about her experiences, she explains, “I don’t feel

limited by the art on my body, but that is simply because I keep it to myself while in a professional setting. Most of my tattoos are on my arms and chest, so I can cover them easily. I worked for a small green-burial firm at one point, which would be considered casual by industry standards. Although it was permissible to have my tattoos visible, I never did when meeting with families. I don’t want a family to have preconceived notions, however inaccurate they may be, about what type of person I am.”

As in Rachael’s case, many tattoos can be covered with professional clothing, specialized sleeves and makeup, while some visible piercings can be removed or replaced with more modest alternatives when on the job. And while educators report that the majority of students understand the necessity of these steps – even happily undertake them to fit in with the industry they love – should they have to? Certainly these modifications aren’t an option for all students (e.g., those with hand or neck tattoos or “plug”-style earrings), but even if all tattoos and piercings could be covered, they raise a larger question.

If we require all students to conform to an ideal of propriety that research suggests is waning, isn’t there a chance that we’re unnecessarily excluding potentially talented directors when future trends suggest we’ll need them the most?

Looking forward to future service

Rob Lewis, a West Coast funeral service student, finds himself caught in the dilemma. Lewis decided to pursue a career in the field, after working in retail and shipping and receiving, when interactions with medical professionals left him feeling grateful for the help provided and eager to give back in a similar way. Though Lewis was familiar with the conservative nature of the profession before beginning his schooling, he also

argues that his willingness to work hard and serve families to the best of his abilities should trump his physical appearance.

In his words: “I can’t cover my tattoos or hide the size of my ears, but I can offer a family as much help as they ask of me. I am proud of who I am and what I look like. Having a field of daisies covering my neck should have nothing to do with whether I am qualified for the job.”

Budrow also suggests that current practitioners would be wise to look past a candidate’s appearance lest they risk missing out on an excellent employee. “If I had an excellent student,” she states, “I would go personally to somebody and say, ‘You don’t want to judge this student based on what you see. You’ve got to give this person a chance to show you what [he or she] can do.’”

We can all agree that it would be a shame for a promising student not to be able to find employment based on appearance alone, just as it would be unfortunate for a funeral home to lose out on a candidate who would otherwise go on to do great work just because of the prospect’s visible tattoos and/or piercings. And yet few traditional funeral homes, apart from those on the more liberal West Coast, appear willing to be the

first in their communities to take the leap and expand their hiring efforts to consider those whose body modifications make them look different than the standard we’ve come to expect from funeral directors.

Nobody can tell a funeral home owner what he or she should do with his business, and the goal of this article isn’t to call for a mandate on hiring those with tattoos and piercings. It does seem prudent, however, to consider the economic impact of alienating an entire segment of the population. Moving forward, the funeral industry will need more workers to fill new positions and replace those who leave us, and it will need those who bring a fresh, enthusiastic presence to a profession that’s rapidly falling out of touch with the wants and desires of the modern consumer. In light of the dwindling stigma against those with visible tattoos and piercings, it could be those who so clearly demonstrate their creativity through the personal expression of body modification who bridge the widening gap between funeral homes and their increasingly personalization-seeking clientele.

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The Tip Sheet: Stay Organized at All Times!

By Lacy Robinson

NFDA Director of Member Development

Starting out organized is fun and really easy when the semester starts. The real challenge is maintaining that organization throughout each semester. Do your very best to hold on to all course materials. Every handout will come in handy as you compile information for final exams.

tip: When handouts and notes get overwhelming, scan and save them into the free app, Evernote. Handouts and notes saved in Evernote will be available at any time for however long you may need them.

Discover and commit to effective study skills

Perhaps mortuary college is your first college experience or maybe this is a second career and it’s been 20 years since your last college course. Either way, mortuary college is not an easy journey. If you don’t know the study skills that work best for you, take time early on to find out what method is going to ensure that you ace every exam. What works for another student may not work for you. Be open to unconventional methods of learning that ultimately help you study smart and save time.



tip: Write your own exams to practice over and over again. Think in terms of expecting the unexpected in order to cover every detail of the curriculum.

Student memberships and scholarships

The biggest perk of being a student are student memberships to some great funeral service associations. Student memberships are often free or generously discounted. Becoming a student member of an association is the best way to stay informed and can be a résumé booster. While researching student memberships, also look into scholarships from suppliers, vendors and associations. Whether it’s a \$200 scholarship or a \$1,500 scholarship, it’s an honor to receive and will certainly come in handy.

tip: Both NFDA and the Academy of Professional Funeral Service Practice offer student memberships.

Seek a mentor early on

Having a mentor who can relate to your unique college experience will be beneficial as you develop your skills and broaden your industry knowledge. There will be plenty of times when what you learn in school is not something friends or family outside funeral service will fully appreciate. A great mentor will listen and always look forward to hearing about your new discoveries.

tip: Take the initiative and reach out to a funeral service professional who is featured in a trade publication. Share with that person your professional goals and your desire to have a mentor on your journey.

Attend all field trips and guest speakers

Learning the different types of metals used to produce caskets can be interesting, but what's even more interesting is seeing how caskets are manufactured up close and personal. The minute a field trip is scheduled, make plans to attend. Field trips are invaluable to your learning experience. You will gain new knowledge that will eventually help you communicate the value of the products offered to families. When a guest speaker is scheduled at your school, listen and process the information he or she shares with the class. Guest speakers always offer a different perspective and share up-to-date information on current trends in funeral service.

tip: When you take a field trip or have a guest speaker, always make it a point to introduce yourself. Share your background and future goals and offer a way to stay connected through email or LinkedIn.

Know your professors and alumni board

Mortuary school can get tough. The extra support and guidance from professors during those tough times will be beneficial. Getting to know your school's alumni board will provide additional opportunities for networking. The added bonus to making those connections is a strong recommendation letter after graduation.

tip: Sit in the front row for every class, take really good notes and ask questions. Also make time to schedule one-on-one visits with each professor.

Take care of yourself

Your studies will take up quite a bit of time. Add on top of that clinicals, plus any additional hours you spend working. The only way to stay ahead of the game is to eat well, sleep well and exercise. Taking care of yourself first will ensure that you have the mental and physical energy to make your day as productive as possible.

tip: Avoid the dead phone battery, putting in a passcode and straining your eyes by ditching your smart-

phone calendar. Use a daily paper planner and feel the freedom of customizing each day in advance.

Think beyond funeral service curriculum

After graduating, the next big challenge is securing an apprenticeship, and the reality is it's going to be more difficult if your résumé and experience looks exactly the same as everyone else who graduated. Dedicate a portion of your time to developing additional skills that would be relevant to working in a funeral home. For example, take an online course on telephone customer service skills or social media marketing.

tip: Research volunteer opportunities with the hospice provider in your region. Your experience working with a hospice provider will certainly catch the attention of a funeral home owner/manager.

A great perk is student memberships to great funeral service associations. Becoming a student member of an association is the best way to stay informed, and it can be a résumé booster.

Soak it all in

There's no doubt your time during mortuary school will be one of the most unique experiences of your life. You'll meet people of different ages and backgrounds and those at different stages of life. The close friendships you build during mortuary school will be ones you value for a lifetime.

tip: Reach out to those who appear to be a little quiet. Students with little to no experience in funeral service may be intimidated by others. Their story and reasons for entering into funeral service are worth listening to.

Remain proactive about the curriculum

No matter what you're studying in college, it's not uncommon to hear those with more experience say, "You will never use that information in the real world." When you hear those comments, remember to stay focused on your goal and maintain a proactive attitude about the curriculum. The curriculum is comprehensive and will challenge you to understand funeral service on a much deeper level, and your enthusiasm for new knowledge will carry you throughout your college experience.

tip: Surround yourself with supportive family members, friends and classmates. Their support will keep your enthusiasm high.

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Student Essay: You Go to School for What?

By Paige Gaikowski

“You go to school for what?” As a mortuary science student, this is something I hear quite frequently, typically accompanied by a surprised – or sometimes even disgusted – facial expression. And once the shock subsides, there are several comments and questions that inevitably follow. Following are some of my favorites, along with how I handle them.



The first response from people is typically something along the lines of, “You are weird.” I’ve never once denied being weird, but what I still have not figured out is how wanting to be a funeral director makes me weird. And honestly, I probably never will understand because it is simply something I enjoy. I think plumbers are weird, but I don’t walk around telling them that to their faces!

Regardless, people can believe and say what they want because I am able to deal with and accept death, and that is what I think funeral service comes down to.

Next usually comes the question of why. Nothing else, just why. I ask why not. Why did you decide to go to college for whatever it is you studied? It’s exactly the same concept. I found something I enjoyed doing the same way everyone else does. I, like most of my classmates and others in the profession, have a desire to help others, and this is a way we are able to do that. We can truly be there in times of need and help make things easier for the loved ones of the deceased.



These next two phrases are generally uttered one after another, which opens a whole new window of thoughts for me. These phrases include, “It takes a special person,” along with, “I could see you doing that.” Um, what? Is this an insult or a compliment? I never really know for sure.

First of all, what, exactly, is meant by special? I could take it several ways, positive and negative. And then to combine it with the statement that they can see me doing it gets me every time. I go through it in my mind to understand what they’re getting at, but I never succeed. Let me break this down: Only certain people can do this job, but you can see me doing it because, as you said before, I’m weird. Yes, I think that must be what people are getting at because nothing else makes sense!

And then there’s the money question because, sadly, the world in which we live revolves around money. So the phrase “You’ll be rich” always comes up. This is not typically true. Most funeral directors I know are not considered to be rich; rather, we do this job simply because we like to help people, as I said earlier. Of course, there will be exceptions to this sce-

nario since, like with all jobs, someone is in fact going to make it big and do really well for themselves. Good for those people! But this simply just isn’t a common thread. Funeral directors are usually all middle-class citizens like everyone else.

This next phrase is something I can actually understand, and it actually make sense to me: “How can you deal with death all the time?” Usually, all I can say is that it is hard – sometimes it’s easier to deal with than other times – but we all have an outlet of some type. Everyone I know in this business says they have something they are able to do to get away when they need to.

Each person is different and we all need to find what works best for us. If nothing else, we are able to talk to each other since we all understand what is going on and can relate to one another. Dealing with death and sadness never really gets easier. Rather, we learn to accommodate and work with the emotion in a way that best works with our own personalities.



Typically, once people are done telling me how they feel about my chosen career path, they lead into the fact that they have a question... or 10! What they do not realize is that I will openly answer any and all questions they may have.

The problem here is that more likely than not, they do not actually want to know the answer to their questions. Yes, I will see you naked. Yes, we do actually drain your blood. Yes, we close your eyes and tie your mouth shut. You want to hear about the actual process and tools we use? Sorry, I don’t think you really do, so let’s just stop right there before anyone gets traumatized!

I explain to people that I will, in fact, tell them exactly what they want to hear. But in being honest and telling them they probably don’t actually want to know the answer, the subject is typically changed rather quickly.



Honestly, I could go on forever about things people have said to me, and I am sure other students and funeral directors have heard things I have yet to experience. From what I have learned, though, the best thing to do is shrug it off and laugh at the things people say because honestly, when you’re retelling conversations like the above to your friends who understand the business, everyone will be entertained.

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Paige Gaikowski is a student at Mid-America College of Funeral Service.

10 Items to Consider When Looking for an Apprenticeship

By Dan Welch

Graduation from mortuary science school is one of the most exciting periods in any future embalmer/funeral director's life. The months (or years, in some cases) of late-night cramming fueled by energy drinks and junk food all come down to one thing: the National Board Exam.

I, like many others, feared the National Board Exam. From the first day of class, my professors continually expressed the importance of passing the "boards," and rightfully so: In most states, it is the only way to obtain licensure. However, during my academic career in mortuary school, rarely, if ever, did I receive guidance or one-on-one discussion as to the importance of selecting an apprenticeship upon graduation.

For a handful of my classmates, finding an apprenticeship right out of school was as simple as calling Dad, Mom or Grandpa to see if they could work for the family business. Unfortunately, I did not have that option since I'm a first-generation funeral director. That put me in the position of seeking out, on my own, an apprenticeship. In that process, I learned 10 valuable lessons. It's my hope that these career hints can assist others beginning the endeavor of finding the perfect fit that not only benefits them but their employer as well.

1. *One of the most crucial aspects of finding an apprenticeship is starting the process of searching as soon as possible.* Starting your search after you've moved your tassel from one side to the other is not the time to begin. Aside from the job market being saturated with recent graduates looking for employment, waiting until after graduation may not give you the opportunity to find the best fit. It amazed me how many of my classmates took the first job they were offered. Sadly, many of them are no longer in the funeral service profession, claiming they were overworked and never mentored during their apprenticeship. Giving yourself as much time as possible will benefit you both at the beginning and in the long run.

2. *If possible, work on your apprenticeship while attending mortuary school.* Although some states may not allow you to apprentice while obtaining your degree, there are several benefits to doing so. So many of my classmates worked at restaurants, banks and clothing stores while attending school. One of the greatest benefits to my career goal of becoming a licensed embalmer/funeral director was this: Each day as soon as I left the classroom, I went to work at a funeral home. So

many times I would find myself confused during a lecture and, low and behold, I would go to work later and be faced with a real-life example that helped clarify what was taught in the classroom. These real-life experiences supplemented what I was learning, which made me a better student and apprentice. Working on your apprenticeship while earning your degree will allow you to earn your license sooner and make you a stronger candidate for full-time employment should you

Find an employer who has the time to teach you. Of the handful of classmates with whom I have had the privilege to stay in contact, I am astonished to learn how many of them bounced from job to job the first year.



choose to change firms upon ending your apprenticeship.

3. *Find an employer who has the time to teach you.* Of the handful of classmates with whom I have had the privilege of staying in contact, I am astonished to learn how many of them bounced from job to job during the first year. One worked for three different firms in 13 months. Of those classmates who moved around, most of them expressed

that it was because they were not learning anything and were simply being used as a "gopher." When selecting an apprenticeship, it is crucial to find someone who has the knowledge, experience, desire and time to teach you, to mentor you, to guide you.

4. *Find an employer who as an open-door policy.* One of the greatest rewards I had with the firm under which I served my apprenticeship was the ability to go to the employer with any question or concern without feeling like I was an inconvenience. Finding a mentor who can truly show you the ropes and has a desire to teach you will help you learn the skills necessary to forever serve families.

5. *Find an employer who has mentored other successful apprentices.* Although everyone learns differently, if an employer has had multiple successful apprentices, chances are he or she is a great teacher. Do not be afraid to ask former apprentices how their experience went and do not hesitate to ask a future employer about the successes they have had teaching others.

6. *Find an employer who will let you get your hands dirty.* It shocked me when a classmate told me he was almost finished with his apprenticeship and had yet to go on a first call or meet with a family on his own. His employer's apprenticeship philosophy was, "You watch me for a year and then you'll know how to do it." That would have driven me nuts! I am a very hands-on person and have found, especially in funeral service, that repetition can and will make you a better funeral director! Finding a teacher who will suit your learning style(s) is critical.

7. *Find an employer who will give you every holiday and weekend off.* Just kidding! However, it is important to find an employer who values the importance of self-care and allows an adequate amount of time off for family. Figuring out what that balance looks like may take some time, but finding an employer who is up-front about expectations in all areas, particularly work hours, is important in preventing burnout.

8. *Find an employer who will allow you to utilize and develop your strengths.* While completing my apprenticeship, my employer did an incredible job of allowing me to incorporate my knowledge and skill sets of computer technology into the daily tasks of the funeral home in order to better serve families. Having an employer who is willing to acknowledge those hidden skill sets and allow you to develop them will not only benefit the employer but also you, the apprentice.

9. *Find the best fit for you and worry about the money and benefits later.* I know that seems illogical to many. In the long

run, though, it will pay dividends to your professional development. Early in my career, I recall seeing statistics of what the "average" funeral director salary was right out of mortuary college. As I lived in the Midwest, you can imagine my surprise when I quickly realized that the coastline salaries dramatically affect the national average. However, looking back on my year as an apprentice, I realize that I never went without, and what I may have lacked in financial compensation was made up for in professional development. Finding someone who places equal importance on both types of compensation is invaluable.

10. *Find a reputable employer known for excellence.* Typically, a firm that is continually pursuing excellence in every aspect of funeral service will push you, as an apprentice, to do the same. Doing simple research prior to engaging with a potential employer will allow you to discover whether the firm is well-respected in community, innovative and truly cares about the minute details required to meet the needs of every family.

Finding the right place to serve your apprenticeship is a critical aspect to every young funeral professional's career. The apprenticeship is the initial foundation upon which all other professional development takes place. Rushing a decision or taking the first opportunity out of convenience may not be the best option.

By keeping in mind these 10 guidelines when selecting an apprenticeship, the groundwork to ensure success as a funeral professional will be laid, allowing you to better serve the hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of families that will one day call on you.

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Dan Welch is a first-generation funeral director and embalmer. He resides with his wife and daughter in Wichita, Kansas. In his spare time, he also enjoys hunting and storm chasing.

An Open Letter to Future Mortuary College Graduates

By Jzyk Ennis

As a full-time faculty member at one of the American Board of Funeral Service Education's accredited mortuary colleges and a licensed funeral director for more than 25 years who has managed a very large funeral home, let me be one of the first to congratulate you on your fantastic achievement!

And while no conclusive study has been done to determine the validity of the statistic that says 50 percent of those who enroll in mortuary college drop out by graduation, if we play along and assume it to be true, then congratulations indeed!

Others will say that 50 percent of students who have now graduated will disappear from our ranks within the next five

years. I pen this letter in hopes that this will not prove true.

I, and many like me, want to encourage you to stick around and enjoy the benefits of a noble and honorable calling. After all, we need you! There is a lack of qualified licensees in many parts of the country, and this need will only increase in the future as the "old hands" retire and ride off into the sunset.

But let me cut to the chase. If you're expecting vast wealth and a plethora of time off, you may need to revisit your decision. Mind you, you have chosen a profession that tends to be "recession resistant." What I mean is that when the factory closes and others are losing their jobs, funeral homes

still tend to need licensed, qualified employees.

To be fair, you deserve a commensurate wage for your education, experience and location. You also deserve time away from work to recharge and decompress.

For those who are religious or who otherwise appreciate a good parable, I direct you to Matthew 20:1-16. In short, when you agree to work for a certain wage, you must quit worrying about what everyone else is earning and do the best job you can with the resources God gave you. I promise that if you pay attention to the details, families will take notice, and so will we! If you're willing to move to the offers, they will come.

Yes, some reading this are thinking their offer hasn't come and they're busting their behind without reward. Sadly, we do have places in our profession where that happens. But there are employers out there that want you!

The pearls of wisdom that follow should bring this into focus. With this understanding, please accept these few pearls from a salt-and-peppered, bespectacled, "maturing old hand."

By the way, and please read this carefully, nothing – and I mean nothing – is ever “off the record” or in a “secret” social media page. State board members hang out there. Potential employers peruse there. Expert witnesses reside there.

First, find mentors – great ones! Not the ones who think they're doing you a favor, the ones you have to fight to spend time with, the ones who see you as a feather in their cap.

No, please find the mentors that Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, terms Level 5 Leaders – the ones who do great work but do not look for glory. As Collins describes, they are the plow horses instead of the show horses.

These are the self-deprecating funeral licensees who place families above their own needs. They're the ones who succeed and take good funeral homes to greatness.

Let's be clear: All of us in the funeral profession have some degree of pride and ego. We like to “toot our own horn” because we're afraid others may not hear it otherwise.

How can you tell a great mentor? In the words of Supreme

Court Justice Potter Stewart, who, when asked to define pornography, replied, “I know it when I see it.” You will also know the good ones when you see them at work.

The reality is that you need these mentors in your life and in your career if you want to be successful.

Second, please do not believe everything you read on the internet! When social media is used properly (see www.facebook.com/mitchellsjourney for a great example), it is a place for healing and positivity that cannot be matched. It makes us feel good about ourselves and others.

But when social media is used incorrectly, it is the devil. Many, many groups and sites have been set up to espouse the “tricks of the trade,” offering new and improved embalming techniques, ways to approach management/ownership to get what you want, opinions on how to deal with families and co-workers. Some are fine and distinguished colleagues – some better funeral directors and embalmers than I ever hope to be.

Others, well... they hold themselves up to be better than they are. Like the devil, they offer tempting opinions and techniques; however, once the bait is swallowed, you're hooked and bad things can happen, including litigious results, dissatisfied families, angry co-workers. And what are you to do? You certainly can't blame it on the internet!

By the way, and please read this carefully, nothing – and I mean nothing! – is ever “off the record” or in a “secret” social media page. State board members hang out there. Potential employers peruse there. Expert witnesses reside there. Did you know that any posts you make on one of those sites, secret or public, can be subpoenaed and used against you in a legal proceeding? At this point, please reference point number one – you need great mentors!

Third, get involved! There are some terrific local, state and national funeral associations. Find one or more and get involved, even if your funeral home doesn't. Ask to get involved and have the cost paid by the funeral home. The worst that can (or should) happen is that you're told no.

Which takes us back to my first point – this may be where you meet your mentor and find that fantastic job opportunity!

Again, on behalf of educators, licensees and associations, congratulations on your major accomplishment! We encourage you to stick around and grow into the outstanding funeral professional we all hope you will be. We need you! Good luck in your future endeavors!

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Jzyk Ennis is a funeral service education instructor at Jefferson State Community College in Birmingham, Alabama.

If I Knew Then...

By Mike Nicodemus

NFDA Vice President of Cremation Services

As I look back over the 40-plus years it's been since I strode the hallowed halls of Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science (PIMS), I think about the time I spent trying to become the "world's best funeral director." Was it time well spent? It sure was.

Having just finished college, I was used to studying day and night to maintain my scholarship, but I was a bit taken aback when the upcoming PIMS class of 1974 had to take an entrance exam. Afterward, all of us potential future funeral directors met with counselors at the school to determine whether we should even consider moving forward based on the outcome of our scores.

... I may have had a better understanding that when you first start out, you start at the bottom, meaning you are expected to do whatever is asked and do it right.

My score was such that the counselor told me I would be fine but would still have to work hard to make sure I graduated. I asked him why, and I'll never forget his answer: "Well, in just one year, you are going to learn what the medical school students down the street at the University of Pittsburgh learn in three years." And was he ever right! Anatomy, pathology, embalming chemistry, microbiology and restorative art were just a few of the subjects we had to tackle every day, and they were tough! But I made it through and passed both the national and state board exams to obtain my funeral director's license.

There were two things about being a new funeral director that were not really addressed when I went to school, and if I knew then what I know now, I may have had a better understanding that when you first start out, you start at the bottom, meaning you are expected to do whatever is asked and do it right. Paint, cut grass, wash cars and a thousand other things that made you think to yourself, "I went to mortuary school to do this?" I had no objection to doing these tasks, but I kept

thinking, "When do I get to see a family? When do I get to embalm?"

Had I been prepared for the fact that I was going to be the behind-the-scenes guy for a while, I could have accepted this role much more easily. By knowing I was not going to be driving the lead car to the cemetery the day after I graduated, I would have been a bit more prepared to paint and cut grass. I'm not sure just what I was expecting when I graduated, but I was ready to set the world on fire, and it just didn't happen that way. As they say, I needed to pay my dues.

Another issue we were told about but did not really cover was the strain this profession would put on your personal life. As I alluded to, yes, we were told that the deathcare profession was not a Monday through Friday, 9-5 job, but unless you were from a family-owned business, you really didn't have a true understanding of the time you were about to give to the funeral home and the families it served.

Some graduates came to this realization too late; only after they had spent 12 tough months studying day and night and had begun serving their internship with not a day off for two weeks did they decide that this profession wasn't for them. As all of us realize now, when a death occurs, we give of ourselves 150 percent, and family birthdays, anniversaries, recitals and Little League games take a back-seat until that funeral is over.

The family that has experienced the death of a loved one needs you, and you understood that, but you just didn't grasp the amount of time you would have to put into planning and executing just one funeral. Perhaps a few real-life presentations in school from those who were already living this life would have helped.

The funeral profession is unlike any other. Funeral directors are some of the finest, most hardworking, giving, caring men and women I know. We make ourselves available 24/7/365. No other profession meets you with a hug or a comforting smile at 3 a.m. No other profession jumps through so many hoops to make certain the experience of the death of a loved one is handled with ease and care.

So if I knew then what I know now, would I do it again? Without question. *.edu*

Mike Nicodemus is NFDA vice president of cremation services.



From the Editor's Desk...

Mapping Out Future Needs

In 2015, 1,713 students graduated from mortuary school programs, the highest number of graduates since 2000, when there were 1,745 graduates. The number of new enrollments also ended a four-year decline as 2,639 students enrolled in mortuary science programs, according to statistics compiled by the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE).

To go along with the uptick in enrollment and graduates, total enrollment in the 60 mortuary science programs in 2015 was 5,837, which was 1.02 percent higher than the 5,778 students enrolled in 2014. However, 2015 total enrollment was still 2.81 percent fewer than the 6,006 students enrolled in 2013 and 2.2 percent fewer than the 5,906 students enrolled in 2012.

Who are these new students? ABFSE statistics suggest that the most likely person enrolling in a mortuary science program in 2015 was a Caucasian female aged 21-25 and a high school graduate with at least one or two years of college.

The data also revealed that students entering mortuary science programs have more prior education than previous enrollees. From 1971-2004, the number of students with one or more years of college ranged between 51 percent and 62 percent. In 2009, that figure jumped to 69 percent; in 2015, it sits at 72.98 percent. This is an increase of 3 percentage points from the 69.7 percent in 2014 and on par with the 72.5 percent reported in 2013. Furthermore, in 2015, the number of new enrollees with bachelor's or graduate degrees was put at 16.56 percent, about 1.4 percentage points behind the 17.9 percent in 2014 and again on par with the 16.4 percent in 2013.

Continuing a 21st century trend, significantly more women than men are enrolling in mortuary science programs. The tipping point came in 2000, when the number of women enrolling in mortuary science programs surpassed the number of men 51 percent to 49 percent. In 2015, out of 2,639 new students enrolled, 1,670 (63.28 percent) were female. This is just a tick under 2014, when out of 2,567 new students enrolled, 1,636 (63.7 percent) were female. In 2013, 60.8 percent of the 2,755 new students were female.

Even with these increased enrollment and graduation numbers, one topic that resurfaces often is a labor pool shortage. On one hand, some 2,000 funeral homes have closed their doors over the last 10 years. On the other, funeral homes are looking for new staff who will make a difference.

It is not an overstatement to say that staffing decisions at funeral homes are the most important a manager or owner has to make. And if these statistics are framing a picture, that importance will only increase.



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