

- 1 THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-CARE**
- 3** Education: The Direction Of Your Profession
- 4** Majority of NFDA-Member Firms Have Served COVID-19 Family
- 6** Telling Your Story
- 8** Social Conversations And Self-Expression in The Digital Universe
- 9** Anatomy, Pathology, Microbiology... Cremation?
- 10** 2030 Vision: Imperfect But Coming Into Focus
- 11** Customer Service: Six Phone Skills You Need to Succeed
- 12** Fighting the Epidemic Of Distracted Driving
- 14** Three Tips to Push Your Scholarship Application to the Top of the Pile
- 15** Why Is This a Thing?



## The Importance of Self-Care

Attention new or soon-to-be-new funeral directors!

By Marc A. Markell



When students in funeral service education programs finish the requirements for licensure and enter the funeral service profession, they often feel excited about reaching a goal they may have held since they were young. Because of this enthusiasm, new funeral directors might quickly realize how overwhelming their lives can become if they don't pay proper attention to self-care.

There is a lot of information available about how to care for one's self, yet many funeral professionals do not practice intentional self-care and soon feel emotionally drained. There are numerous reasons funeral directors feel the need to constantly work, or think about work, and while they do well taking care of others, they neglect caring for themselves. People often praise funeral professionals for "working tirelessly," "always caring for others" or "always being present." This can create a lot of pressure to live up to these labels and, even though these are impossible goals, we might still feel that we are expected to maintain them.

For many years, I, too, ignored self-care. I would tell myself it wasn't necessary, was "silly" or that I had too much to do. However, once I started to practice self-care (and I admit it was initially challenging to set aside even a short time for myself each day), I was impressed with how it helped me. While it took several weeks, I eventually felt calmer and more centered.

So, how can we accept that we need to care for ourselves, too? How do we silence that inner voice telling us we need to work more rather than allowing ourselves to slow down enough to renew our energy? I wish there was a simple answer that would work for everyone, but like most other helpful ideas to improve our lives, there is a wide array of good strategies. Some will work better for one person than they will

for another. Therefore, as you read through the following suggestions, keep one piece of advice in mind: Commit to trying out some self-care strategies, even if they seem unnecessary, uncomfortable or you don't believe it will do you any good.



## SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

☺ **GRATITUDE** Expressing gratitude for the people and conditions in your life can prove very helpful in reducing stress for some people. Each morning, think of or write down three things for which you feel grateful. Understand that gratitude does not need to be preserved for “big or important things.” Often, the things for which we feel grateful might be considered mundane or trivial by others, such as morning coffee, the sun, flowers blooming, snow lightly falling, etc.



The practicing of gratitude can bring positive feelings and

reduce stress. If you want to take this activity one step further, you can make a point of letting the people in your life know that you are grateful for something they have done or simply for their presence in your life. This, too, can put life in perspective and help you focus on what is important. The practice of gratitude can quickly become a habit.

☺ **USE A MANTRA** A mantra is a word or phrase you can repeat to yourself to aid concentration. You will need to decide on the mantra you find helpful, especially during times of increased stress. You might want to try a few different options to see which one fits and helps. For example, some people might find “This, too, will pass” helps them feel calm when things become stressful. Other examples include “I am enough,” or saying “I send myself love” as you inhale and then “I send love to someone else who needs it” as you exhale.

You may also want to have more than one mantra to say at different times or in different situations. Each person needs to find what fits personally, but remember, as with all these suggested strategies, mantras may not work for you as a form of self-care.

☺ **SCHEDULE TIME FOR YOURSELF** Consciously putting aside “me time” can be beneficial. Some people might feel “me time” sounds selfish, but it can prove renewing and necessary. You might want to write times in a calendar or planner that you set aside just for you to take care of yourself. This time could be every day or every week at the same time, or it could be scheduled at different times, depending on your daily schedule. In addition, the scheduled time could be for a short or longer period, depending on what you want and need.

During your “me time,” you can either schedule an activity or leave it open to do what you want when the time comes.

Some might schedule time to watch a movie, read a book, listen to music, go for a walk, sit by a lake or just lie on the grass and look at the sky, while others might block off 10 minutes each day to just sit alone and breathe.

☺ **SAY NO** Many of us have learned that saying no to a request is impolite, and we feel guilty if we do. Saying no to things we don't have time for or don't want to do takes practice. Saying no and not feeling guilty often takes a *lot* of practice.

Some people might decide to ease into this self-care activity by responding to a request with something along the lines of, “I'm going to need to think about what you asked. I'll get back to you tomorrow.” The next day, the follow up could be stated as: “I've thought about your request, and while it sounds interesting and I appreciate you asking, I need to say no at this time. I would, however, be able to see if I could help you find someone else to help. Would you like me to do that?” Others might simply say, “That sounds like a good opportunity, but right now is not a great time for me to take on another commitment, so I'll need to say no.”

Usually, the person requesting will accept that you are unable to do what is asked, but if someone persists, then being firm with your “no” can prove challenging. This situation can still provide good, even necessary, self-care practice.

☺ **LAUGH** While we should not take the old saying “laughter is the best medicine” literally, many studies have shown that laughter can prove effective in the relief of stress. Different people find different things funny. For some, reading comics will make them laugh; for others, watching movies, television shows or videos, or getting together with friends or family members, triggers amusement. As with other self-care strategies, you might find it most effective to schedule laughing time.

☺ **MEDITATE, PRAY, EMPTY YOUR MIND** Meditating, praying or just sitting quietly and emptying your mind are self-care activities that often induce greater calm and reduce stress. For example, some people find the “Serenity Prayer” helpful to put things in perspective: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference.” You can modify this prayer to fit your beliefs, such as, “May I have the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.”

The bottom line is that we deserve self-care not only for ourselves but for those around us: the families we serve, our friends, our families and our communities. Self-care is not selfish; instead, self-care is self-nurturance, self-renewing and necessary to ensure that we have the energy to continue providing excellent care to others.

*Marc Markell teaches at St. Cloud University in the School of Education and at Worsham College of Mortuary Service. He holds a Ph.D. in educational psychology from the University of Minnesota and is a thanatologist certified in death and grief studies through the Center for Loss and Life Transition. He is trained by national funeral service professional organizations as an end-of-life- doula, crematory operator, funeral arranger and celebrant, and he has published three books on grief.*

# Education: The Direction of Your Profession

By Daniel M. Isard

## 1

### EMBALMER

In funeral service, there are three ways to create a career in funeral service. Your education must prepare you for the various opportunities you will face.

**EMBALMER** Embalming is a very noble and often thankless job. You care for human beings who died from any number of causes and help restore the appearance of their body so their family can see their deceased loved one in the best possible way one last time. Each case is going to be somewhat different, and the 25 or so embalming cases that are required to graduate is inadequate to prepare you for your future responsibilities. Talk about stress.

## 2

### FUNERAL DIRECTOR

A funeral director works with the living to help them plan the funeral event. The people you meet with are fighting sleep deprivation, stress, anger, fear and a hundred other human emotions. Your job is to help them get to the conclusion of the funeral service. You are further challenged to do everything right, make sure nothing goes wrong and ensure that no one, whether under your control or not, screws up.

**FUNERAL DIRECTOR**

**MANAGEMENT** Managers supervise funeral directors and embalmers, as well as administrators and vendors. Based on education and experience, their role is to keep everyone under their direction operating properly and make sure compliance and financial tasks are performed correctly. This is not unlike a three-ring circus master with no cages, nets or extinguishers. You have a whip, but you best not use it and anger the trainers, jugglers, lions or clowns.

So, which route do you take? In some states, you are required to be a funeral director/embalmer, as those states have only one license. Other states offer two, or “split,” licenses. (Colorado is license free.)

Unfortunately, licensure and your career might be at odds. For example, imagine you want to be a funeral director and use your mind to help the living, but you don’t want to be an embalmer. Unfortunately, if your firm is small and needs an

embalmer, and you have that license even though you don’t want to pursue it, you are going to be unhappy. This might cause you to find an exit strategy out of that firm or out of funeral service entirely.

And since more than half of all funeral home jobs are located in rural settings, moving from one funeral home to another may require uprooting your family. If you are in a two-worker household, that puts even more pressure on the relationship.

Funeral service is a calling for most. Whether they work as an embalmer, a funeral director or both, most people enter the profession with a lay-ministerial motivation. Like the ministry, however, funeral service is a still a job, and your desire to repair the world or those who are hurting must be tempered with a desire to stay gainfully employed.

This gainful employment represents a quid pro quo between the employee and employer. The employer is obligated to provide an accurate job description, training and safe working conditions. The employee is obligated to act according to the employer’s rules and in a professional way. For that, there is consideration, i.e., your wages or salary.

**SO, WHAT MAKES AN EMBALMER WORTH MORE?** Experience and competency are the two components that drive compensation amounts. An experienced embalmer with an unsteady hand will not be well compensated. This is a technical and surgical profession, and you will need to make decisions about chemicals, techniques and other things affecting tissue, gases and the flow of fluids. Embalming difficult cases is the best way to gain the experience you need.

There are some advanced classes offered by master embalmers, but you might not see cases such as the ones they present for many years. Moreover, the embalmer’s art is fading as fewer bodies are being embalmed each year.

**SO, WHAT MAKES A FUNERAL DIRECTOR WORTH MORE?**

This is a highly complex question. I think it is about revenue... Funeral directors meet with families, and if those families are satisfied, they not only pay their bill but also pay it quicker, which positively affects revenue. In addition, directors who get out into the community attract patronage, which also drives revenue.

Please understand that I don’t endorse funeral directors who upsell or persuade families to buy more merchandise than they can afford. In fact, I have very rarely seen this, but I know there are some who do it. On the other hand, I don’t want a family to learn a week after the funeral that there were ways in which they could have memorialized or celebrated the life of their loved one that they were not informed about. “Every option, every family, every time” is the credo to live by.

In many states, funeral directors also sell preneed. In those states, the funeral director with a better arrangement style

So, what makes a funeral director worth more? That's a highly complex question. I think it is about revenue...

and the willingness to handle the rejection of sales is more valuable. While this doesn't promote revenue today, it does drive tomorrow's patronage.

The modern-day metaphor is that employers want to get everyone "on the bus." The best passengers (employees) will sort out where their seats are located, but the driver (the employer) will still pull the bus over at times to train people how the bus works. And sometimes, the driver will pull the bus over to let someone off.

I like employers that give employees written reviews at least annually. A job description upon hiring is the start, but once a year at a minimum, employers should tell an employee how well he or she is doing at meeting the requirements of that job description. It could be that the employee just needs added training; this is the time to plan that out.

**SO, WHAT MAKES A MANAGER WORTH MORE?** You need job experience. You need to know how to guide people through both routine and not-so-routine matters. The two

greatest skills I think a manager needs are confidence and communication. A good communicator can transmit his or her confidence in getting things done to staff and families. A good communicator will train co-workers properly and in advance of need.

Confidence is critical, and you can only get confidence by doing, so place yourself in as many different jobs as possible.

As for communication, I love Toastmasters for teaching public speaking. I think it's critical to be a good writer as well, since we often communicate in writing to families and staff.

**SO, WHAT PATH SHOULD YOU PURSUE?** Start backwards and picture yourself at age 67, when you have retired and are collecting Social Security. What are the trappings around you? How happy are you? Did you bring joy to the world and those with whom you worked? Did you help families? What are the things you did that made you happy?

A client's son recently told me he is leaving funeral service because he never really wanted to go into it and only did so as a favor to his father. Well, his father had died and now the son wants to be a dairy farmer. I'm glad he figured this out now rather than at age 67!

Life is short. Be happy. Find a job you don't consider to be just work.

*Daniel M. Isard, MSFS, is president of The Foresight Companies in Phoenix, Arizona, a management consulting firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, valuations, accounting, financing and consumer surveys. Contact him at [danisard@theforesightcompanies.com](mailto:danisard@theforesightcompanies.com) or 800-426-0165.*

## Majority of NFDA-Member Firms Have Served COVID-19 Family

By Deana Gillespie and Edward J. Defort

A recent NFDA survey found that in the seven months since the first COVID-19-related death was recorded in the United States, nearly 9 of 10 NFDA-member funeral homes have served families that have lost a loved one due to the coronavirus.

This follow-up study sought to measure member satisfaction with the coronavirus-related information NFDA has provided, assess any changes since the original study was conducted in May 2020, and gauge how the pandemic has affected their businesses. Since the May study, there has been a 23.2% increase in the number of firms that have served families that lost a loved one as a result of COVID-19.

As of October 26, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 8,617,022 confirmed cases, and 224,601 deaths, in the United States. From March through July 15, the CDC reported that 1 in every 4 U.S. counties was considered a hot spot for COVID-19 spread for at least one day. In the spring, the CDC identified seven states that reported the most

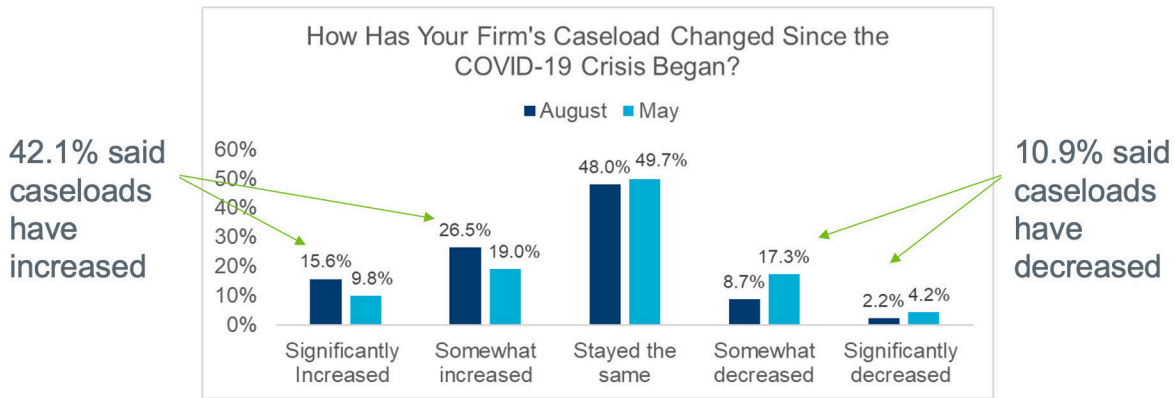
cases: New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Florida, Illinois, Michigan and California.

Of the 86.7% of NFDA-member firms that have handled COVID cases:

- 40.3% reported 1-5 cases
- 16.3% reported 6-10 cases
- 10.9% reported 11-15 cases
- 7.2% reported 16-20 cases
- 25.3% reported more than 20 cases

Approximately half of the firms (49.6%) represented in this study reported that at least one person at their firm had tested positive for COVID-19.

For the most part, firms report that their employees have avoided contracting the virus; 85.8% stated that no one at their firm has fallen ill from or had a suspected case of COVID-19.



Of the 14.2% who were either exposed or suspected of being exposed, 45% said they were not sure where the exposure occurred; another 45% said they or their staff members were exposed outside of work. Only 22% said the exposure occurred at work.

More than three-quarters of firms responding (79.2%) have not had to eliminate raises or bonuses, lay off staff or implement staff pay cuts since the onset of COVID-19. This is up from 65.7% of respondents in NFDA's May 2020 survey. Only 15.3% said their firms will not offer raises or bonuses for staff in 2020, which is down from 18.4% in May. Only 6.1% of respondents reported laying off staff, down from 11.6% in May.

Nearly half of firms (48%) say their caseload numbers have stayed the same since the pandemic began, compared to 49.7% in the May survey. In addition, 42.1% of respondents to the follow-up survey said caseloads have increased; 15.6% said significantly and 26.5% said somewhat. This compares with 9.8% and 19%, respectively, in May 2020. Only 10.9% indicated that caseloads have decreased, compared to 21.5% in the May survey.

Given the number of restrictions placed on funeral homes by states and local communities, conventional thinking suggests that the cremation rate should rise. The survey found that 60.9% of firms reported that their cremation rate increased (18.7% said significantly and 42.2% said somewhat); 36.4% said the cremation rate stayed the same; and 2.5% reported that it decreased.

The limited services funeral homes were able to offer families expectedly cut into the funeral homes' profitability. NFDA's survey found that 53.8% of firms stated that the COVID-19 crisis decreased their profits (by an average of 18.3%); 17.8% of firms stated COVID-19 increased profits (by an average of 20.1%); and 28.3% of firms stated that their profits remained the same.

When asked to describe the

firm's supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) prior to COVID-19, 18.2% of responding firms had either run out of PPE or had less than a month's supply, while half had a one- to two-month supply. Just over a quarter of responding firms had a three- to six-month supply; 3.6% had a seven- to 10-month supply; and 2.3% had an 11- to 12-month supply.

Six in 10 responding firms (61%) reported having trouble securing PPE, down from 77% in May 2020. Significantly, 43.2% of respondents said they still have trouble securing PPE, and 69.6% have had to change or add a PPE supply partner due to shortages.

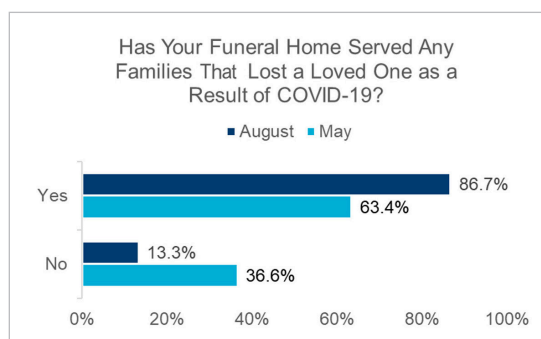
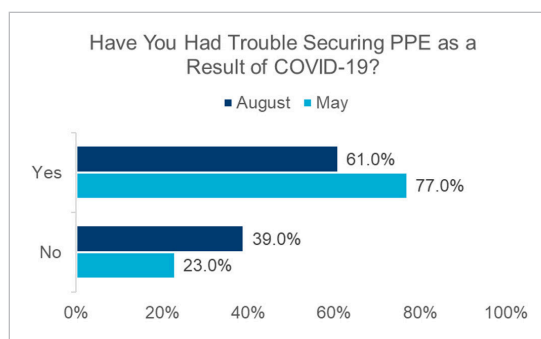
Almost half of respondents surveyed (49.1%) said their firm started offering livestreaming options since the onset of COVID-19, up from 47.4% in the May survey. An additional 21.3% plan to offer livestreaming options, down from 23.6%, and 14.6% have no plans to offer livestreaming options, down a tick from 14.9% in May.

NFDA's survey found that an average of just 22.7% of families have postponed services but intend to have some type of service with the assistance of a funeral director at a later date.

While the pandemic continues to limit public gatherings, the jury is still out on what changes made by funeral homes will remain once the virus is contained. Almost half of respondents (48.3%) said their firm will continue to offer livestreaming options.

### INFORMATION SOURCES

For funeral directors, taking in all of the pertinent information during the pandemic has been like drinking water from a fire hose. Most respondents have relied on their state association and NFDA for information. According to the survey, 71.7% of respondents said their state association was their primary source of information as it pertains to funeral service, followed by the NFDA website



Taking in all the pertinent information during the pandemic has been like drinking water from a fire hose.

(57.8%); the CDC (45.1%); local news sources (31.2%); NFDA publications (29.3%); NFDA webinars/educational opportunities (17.7%); and other funeral service associations (15.1%).

Almost two-thirds of respondents have accessed NFDA's COVID-19 Information Hub on the NFDA website, down from 73.1% in the May 2020 survey. The Information Hub received high marks from survey respondents, with 56% saying the information posted was either extremely helpful or very helpful. Another 40.3% said the information was helpful, while just 3.6% said it was not very helpful or not helpful at all.

Furthermore, 39.2% of respondents felt all of the information posted on NFDA's Information Hub was helpful, followed

by information regarding how to communicate with and protect staff and families, and information on obtaining PPE.

Of the 48 survey takers who responded to the question, "What information would be helpful to you that is not currently posted on the NFDA Information Hub?" respondents said they would like to see more regarding state/local regulations and how to communicate with and protect staff.

How to communicate with and protect staff was also the webinar topic of most interest to respondents (31.1%), followed by how to communicate with and protect families (19.8%), and embalming (14.2%).

Just 67 people responded to the question, "What information can NFDA provide that you are currently not getting from any other source?" Of those who answered, 41.8% indicated they would like updated and accurate information; 20% said "miscellaneous"; and 14.9% said both handling an infected body and where to get PPE/disinfectant.

A survey link was emailed to 4,525 NFDA main contacts with a valid email address. A total of 646 completed the online evaluation for a final response rate of 14.3%.

*Deana Gillespie is NFDA research manager.*

*Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.*

## Telling Your Story

By Welton Hong

Way back in May 2019 (yes, that seems like a lifetime ago now), the worldwide television sensation *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) aired its final episode. The finale of the beloved fantasy television show set an all-time ratings record for HBO, delivering a monumental 19.3 million viewers.

Although reviews for that particular episode (and the final season in general) were mixed, no one can dispute that *GoT* was a gargantuan hit in the United States and across the world. For six straight years, before HBO improved its security processes, *GoT* was the most pirated show in the world. (This was a major compliment, certainly, even if the network wasn't too thrilled about it.)

Not everyone thought *GoT* would be such a massive hit when it first premiered, however. While based on a popular series of novels by George R.R. Martin, it was a huge gamble for a television series. It was a sprawling, complex tale with dozens of major characters, balancing political gamesmanship and backstabbing (both figurative and literal) with fantasy elements such as sorcery and dragons.

But it became a huge hit due to the power of storytelling. In fact, the show's final episode drilled down – if a bit too obviously – on this very point. (Consider this your obligatory spoiler alert if you haven't seen the episode yet.) In the finale, the show's most popular character, Tyrion Lannister (played by Peter Dinklage), advises the most powerful people in the



land to select a new ruler. Specifically, he suggests they choose the person who has the best story.

"What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags?" Tyrion asks rhetorically before shaking his head. "*Stories*. There's nothing in the world more powerful than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it."

As a student planning a career in funeral care, how much can you take from a fictional character in a TV show – even if it's the most popular character in one of the most popular shows ever?

Honestly, I think there's a lot to learn here. Storytelling is a key aspect of being a funeral director, and it's essentially the core responsibility of being a life celebrant. Ultimately, practi-

cally everyone in a funeral home plays some role in telling the story of a decedent's life.

No less an authority than marketing superstar Seth Godin recently said, "Marketing is no longer about the stuff you make but about the stories you sell." Obviously, deathcare is a bit different – funeral professionals are helping families, not marketing products – but the core message still applies.

Here's the twist: It's one thing to be great at telling the story of a departed loved one. It's another thing entirely to be great at telling your own story. If you ultimately want to own your own funeral firm, it's imperative to understand this because it's where a lot of business owners miss the boat.

One of the best ways to attract new at-need and preneed business to a funeral home is to have a website that generates a lot of traffic and efficiently converts that traffic into clientele. You likely already know that, but you might not realize how much telling your story, as compellingly and comprehensively as you can, makes it easier to both drive traffic and convert visitors. For the most part, I'm referring to telling your story through content on your website, although there are additional avenues to pursue, such as social media content and offsite blog posts.

For example, look a bit into the future and picture a time after you've graduated and worked in funeral service for a bit. Perhaps you already own your own firm or perhaps you just want to help the business be as successful as it can be. Now, think about what your funeral home's website will look like and then try to put yourself in the shoes of a complete stranger visiting that site for the very first time. Finally, think of yourself as a detective and investigate the following questions:

- What can I learn about this business from the content on this site?
- How long has this funeral home been in business?
- Is this funeral home respected in the community? Is there a lot of objective evidence and testimonials supporting that or does the site just "claim" the business is respected?
- Who runs this business? What do the owners and staff look like? What do they sound like? Do they seem like caring professionals I can trust to take good care of my family member?
- What makes this funeral home different from others in the area? What most clearly distinguishes it? Is there a clear reason why I should choose this particular business?
- Does this funeral home have a particular defining feature? For example, is this the go-to option for environmentally friendly burial? Or cremation? Or wildly alternative ceremonies? Or military veteran services? Or fully catered services? (And so on...)

Those don't have to be the only questions you ask, but you get the picture. Your funeral home website won't be as effective as possible if you're not clearly defining who you are through the story you're telling there.

It's probably obvious how smart storytelling can help convert website visitors into clientele. Let's start with the less obvi-

ous point that telling your story actually helps attract families in need to your website in the first place. That's because the more high-quality, original content you have on your site, the better your search engine optimization (SEO) will perform. As I tell funeral professionals all the time, "content is king" for ranking at or near the top in your local area for organic (unpaid) search results.

And what better original content to have on your site than your own story? It's obviously original because no other site can claim your individual history. When you're a funeral home owner, this is a great place to tell visitors all about you, why you enjoy helping families through burial and cremation services, the full history of your business, etc. This is also where you can talk about your employees, including biographical information that helps visitors feel they "know" the employees as real people.

**"There's nothing in the world more powerful than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it."**

And of course by content, I'm not just talking about text. True, words are powerful, and you should use as many as you can because the longer your written content (within reason), the more "SEO juice" you'll receive from Google.

At the risk of sounding trite, however, a picture really is worth a thousand words. The more high-quality images you have on your site, the better. You absolutely need professional pictures of the owners, any other funeral directors and other key staff.

It's true that in deathcare, the idea of "images of your business" isn't as simple a matter as it is for most other industries, but it also doesn't have to be a big mystery. You can include professional, respectful pictures of your facilities. The more visitors see of your business on the site, the more comfortable they will feel.

Similarly, I'm a huge proponent of including video on your funeral home website. Record a high-quality video of yourself and other key staff talking about your business. Once visitors see and hear you, they will immediately trust you more.

Most of this would naturally appear in the "About Us" section of your website, and I encourage you to ensure that that is a content-rich area.

With that said, you can also include storytelling elements in other places, such as on your home page (great for testimonials and at least an image of the owners) and a dedicated blog page on the site. But don't stop there. Go back to the questions I listed above. How will your business distinguish itself from others? When people visit your site, is there something obvious that makes them think, "This is the one"?

That's the concept of the unique selling proposition, and

while you don't need to lock down what yours will be in the future right now, this is a perfectly fine time to start pondering it. If you can't think of a single quantifiable reason people should choose your funeral home instead of a competitor, few people ever will. You can't just tell them they should select you; you need to show them why.

It goes without saying that a family in an at-need situation must decide very quickly. Your site needs to tell a story that helps them make that decision immediately. That's all part of your storytelling process. Testimonials are stories, too, of course, as each person tells a story of how you helped their family in a time of need. So, when you do have your own firm, don't hesitate to ask satisfied families for testimonials.

Online reviews, of course, are also stories and a type of testimonial. The most successful firms post highly positive reviews on their site, either on a dedicated reviews/testimonials page or on the home page (or both). Every time someone talks about a business, that's building the story.

Again, everything I noted above remains hypothetical for you, but while you're learning about the nuts and bolts of funeral service, this is also an important time to think about how you're eventually going to run a business. If you eventually want to lead your own firm, understanding effective business practices is a core component, and it's good to start as early as you can!

So why don't more businesses – and funeral homes, in particular – employ these powerful storytelling techniques on their websites? Earlier in this article, I noted that funeral directors are great at telling other people's stories, but many have trouble finding their voice when talking about them-

selves. That's just human nature. Ask someone to give a speech at a wedding and he or she will overflow with lovely stories about the bride or groom. Ask that same person to talk up his or her own strengths on a résumé, however, and they'll have such a hard time extolling their personal virtues that they might lose the job purely out of a self-sabotaging modesty.

It's natural: Most people don't love talking about themselves and don't want to be seen as egotistical or narcissistic. But talking honestly and positively about yourself (and your business) isn't egotistical – it's just good business.

When my friends or family members struggle to put their best foot forward on a résumé, I simply offer them this trick: "Forget you are writing about yourself. Instead, write as if you are writing about a completely different person and you've been hired to say glowing things to help him or her get the job."

While this might sound crazy, it works. This is no time to be modest. Picture your future funeral home. It's wonderful, right? You have a great business. You have an excellent staff. You're a wonderful owner. There's no room for false modesty. So get out there and tell people who you are and what you stand for.

Remember what Tyrion Lannister said: "There's nothing in the world more powerful than a good story." He may be a fictional character, but that doesn't make him wrong.

*Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing (funeralhomeprofits.com) and author of Making Your Phone Ring With Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes.*



## Social Conversations and Self-Expression In the Digital Universe

By Edward J. Defort

It was late-night talk host Conan O'Brien who first quipped that there is big consolidation afoot in the field of social media. He joked that Twitter, YouTube and Facebook were going to merge, with the resulting firm known as "You Twit Face."

Among the challenges social media brings to the table are not only learning how to use it but deciding in which option you should invest your time. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube

remain the three most top-of-mind options. Fallen by the wayside is MySpace, which is still active but has been retooled to be a shell of its former self. Apple's venture into social media on iTunes and Ping, which was designed to allow fans to connect with artists, failed to generate any buzz. There were other attempts, including ConnectU, VitalSkate, The Hub, Yahoo! Buzz, Friendster and others.

As the average age of the typical Facebook user increases, a new communication frontier emerges. If I'm to go by the teenagers I know, they have embraced the mini reality series that is Snapchat. And have you ever been contacted by your "text-door neighbor"? Inspired by a Twitter trend, this is when you receive a text from someone whose cell number is close to yours. If your number is 123-4567, for instance, you might get a text from 123-4566 or -4568.

Every generation has its own nuances to consider, but doesn't it seem like some people just have their own language? I'm not talking just about millennials (although I still remember the crooked look I gave my niece the first time she used the phrase "on fleek" to me).

But while the format and tone changes, the purpose is still to effectively communicate information, thoughts and ideas to a listening audience.

## THE DIGITAL UNIVERSE

Have you ever seen or read something that brings to mind something you'd long forgotten? That happened to me while reading an article by Bill Ford, president and CEO of SESCO Management Consultants. It was nearly five years ago that a 30-year-old woman allowed her picture to be taken at Arlington National Cemetery in front of a sign that read "Silence and Respect" while she posed as if she were yelling at someone and making an obscene gesture.

Surprise! The photo found its way to Facebook and other social media ports, which means, of course, that it will never go away.

At one time or another, we've all said or done something we thought was going to be a laugh riot, only to have it fail. I understand that humor is subjective, and I suppose the actor here might have been going for a modern-day interpretation of the image of the guy leaning against a pole under a sign that says, "No Loitering." But this woman lost her job because of the complete disconnect between funny and shocking disrespect.

Of course, we can't be sure of her motives. Did she have illusions of the photo going viral and maybe securing a mention on one of those cable TV shows that spotlight foolish behavior found on the internet? Who knows, but she did issue an apology, saying it was a "spur-of-the-moment, total lapse of judgment" and that she "wasn't reacting to the place, she was reacting to the sign."

Reacting to the sign? Again, for the record, the sign said, "Silence and Respect" and "Arlington National Cemetery." While I will accept the "total lapse of judgment" comment, I can't see how she missed the cemetery's name on the very sign she was mocking. Did she forget where she was?

One thing is certain: She was neither the first nor will she be the last to be terminated for such behavior. The internet is unforgiving, and if you have second thoughts about something you said or did online, well, you're rolling the dice that no one took a screen shot.

While the general issue of a company's influence over an employee's behavior during the employee's off-hours has been debated in many circles, this woman made this decision pretty easy for her employer since she was on a company-sponsored trip to the cemetery. The woman's photographer-co-worker was also dismissed.

In the past, funeral directors could bank on the majority of end-of-life services being traditional funerals. Much has been said and written about baby boomers' tendencies to be more individualistic than previous generations, and Gen Xers and millennials might be even more individualistic than boomers. But one of the keys to arranging every conference is to consider who is in the room and what their needs are as far as communication and input.

Often, people try to communicate with others without considering what type of language and presentation they are comfortable with. And too often, people are spoken at rather than spoken to.

*Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.*

# Anatomy, Pathology, Microbiology... Cremation?

By Mike Nicodemus

Forty-some years ago, when I attended mortuary school, here is what I knew about cremation: The funeral home would receive the death call, pick up the decedent from the place of death, hold the remains for a few days and then take the decedent to the crematory... and that's it. (Thankfully, things have changed.)

Back then, I wanted to learn all I could about anatomy, pathology, restorative art and embalming because I was going to be a funeral director, so I needed to know all I could about the human body and how to trace a drop of blood from the



right earlobe to the left little toe. Oh, yeah, we had exams that made us do that.

But when it came to cremation, most of us students were like, “What is that all about?” My alma mater, Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, was a great learning institute, with instructors like Doc Emory James, Dean Bill Mussmano and Bob Mayer, to name a few, who taught us all they could on the subjects I named above – except for cremation.

Cremation wasn’t very popular 40 years ago. In fact, I’d venture to say that most funeral directors hated it, so it wasn’t covered at all back then.

But, as expected, things change, and I can’t begin to tell you how happy I am to know that more and more funeral service schools are adding this program to the curriculum to make sure that today’s students become well acquainted with this one-time “anomaly.”

Why has it become so important to add subjects and conduct programs on cremation? Well, five years ago, cremation surpassed burial as the preferred method of disposition in the United States.

More families now choose cremation than burial, and with the national cremation average exceeding 50%, I think it’s imperative that students learn all they can before sitting across from a family that really doesn’t know a whole lot about cremation but still wants answers to their questions. How long does it take? How hot does it get? What’s left of the body? are some familiar ones.

I suggest to any student who recently graduated and is now a licensed funeral director that you be prepared to answer any questions a family has. The last thing you want to say to a family that asks, “How long does it take?” is, “You know, I’m not sure.”

Students can tell a family exactly how a body is embalmed, and they should be able to do the same thing when it comes to cremation disposition.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, cremation procedures are the largest source of risk exposure and liability

in the funeral industry. In other words, there is much more to cremation today than picking up a decedent, holding the body for several days and then delivering the remains to the crematory.

In fact, litigation is at an all-time high. People will sue for any reason. Just don’t give them the chance. Be on top of your game with every family with which you make arrangements.

How certain are you that the person making the arrangements is the person who has the right of disposition? Do you require each family to identify the decedent prior to cremation? Did you make sure to cover with all of your staff who can receive the urn?

Another thing today’s students must understand is not to get involved in family disputes. If a family is having a disagreement about burial versus cremation, let them work it out. You stay out of it. Tell them, “When you all work this out, give me a call.” If you get involved in the middle of a family squabble, trust me, you are not going to win.

Cremation must be taken very seriously. As we all know, the cremation process is irreversible; once the decedent is placed into the retort, there is no turning back. I have been involved in dozens of lawsuits as an expert witness, and at times I shake my head and wonder, “What was [that funeral director] thinking?”

While it’s great to have a sound background in restorative art, embalming and anatomy, as well as in business management and other important areas, I strongly recommend that you supplement that knowledge with all the information you can gather on cremation.

By 2025 (that’s not so far away), NFDA projects that the U.S. cremation rate will be 65%. If I were a student getting ready to graduate, that would certainly get my attention.

The late Dr. Maya Angelou said it best when she stated, “If people knew better, they would do better.”

*Mike Nicodemus is NFDA vice president of cremation services.*



## 2030 Vision: Imperfect But Coming Into Focus

By Edward J. Defort

Since fall 2018, you’ve been reading stories in NFDA publications that have focused on 2020 Vision. In planning our 2019 editorial calendar, we talked about using 2020 Vision as a theme to spur owners to examine the changes they might make to their business and how they might improve the vision they have for them, whether that’s right now or five years from now. Our plan for 2020, then, was to run stories that relayed how member funeral homes had thought about their firms and whether they’d been successful in putting plans into action.

And then came COVID-19.

Although technology is becoming more prominent in the profession, few of us would probably have imagined that many funeral homes would have listed “upgrade IT to offer livestreaming” on their 2020 Vision list. The truth is, COVID-19 forced businesses to operate differently and more imaginatively than planned.

Here’s what we know. Over the last 20 to 30 years, the number of funeral homes has been declining. The average funeral home visitation has gone from roughly eight hours (over two days) to four hours in a single day. In less than half of cases the body is viewed by survivors. Memorial services are taking place outside of funeral homes and religious venues. Funeral directors are disengaging with their communities, and that information void is being filled by new players. The cremation rate, already soaring prepandemic, is likely to get a substantial boost due to the restrictions on public events. In NFDA’s recent COVID-19 Information Follow-up Study, 53.8% of the firms stated that the crisis has decreased their profits (by an average of 18.3%).

But what if everything we currently know about the funeral service profession was shattered and you were forced to start over? How would you rebuild your firm?

More families are eschewing a call to a funeral director to have a dead body moved from a hospital, hospice or home if the destination is a crematory and are likely to plan a memorial at a public venue at another, perhaps more convenient time. One increasing submenu of deathcare providers is low-cost providers; ironically, some of the new, lower-cost providers are making business difficult for the original entities. Investors see a profession in a state of flux and ripe for

disruption, and they aren’t doing things the traditional way.

But what if everything you currently know about the funeral service profession was shattered and you were forced to start over? How would you rebuild your firm to ensure its viability in 2030 and beyond?

The best way to expand a constricting universe is through partnerships. Consider funeral service evolving a worldwide end-of-life care universe that includes funeral directors, students, celebrants, cremationists, cemeterians, grief experts, vendors, hospice, nurses, death doulas, end-of-life celebration organizers, event planners, clergy and even pets – everyone who has a hand in end-of-life services of any kind. Some of these lines are still distinct, but consider how much blurring has taken place over the last 10 years.

There have been inroads made with the hospice associations, but it wasn’t that long ago that the mere suggestion of building a relationship with a hospice provider caused funeral directors to recoil.

Conversations must be deeper and on a higher level – almost on the same par as a merger. Already, the public is shying away from using the word “funeral,” so what do you think could be next?

As we saw in the HBO program *Alternate Endings – Six New Ways to Die in America*, the time at the end of someone’s life is the most precious; it’s the time when you are able to say goodbye and have a loved one hear you and smile at you one last time. If you watched this show, did you happen to notice how little involvement funeral directors had at the end of these lives?

Silos are the death of any company, and every company has them. As a profession, funeral service can’t afford to have silos. As we look ahead, we must come to the realization that all participants in end-of-life care have a hand in providing services and that our challenge is to work together. Consumer tastes always change, broadening in some ways and perhaps restricting in others.

Making people’s memorials the exclamation points to the end of their lives is best accomplished when everyone’s sitting at the same table.

*Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.*

## Customer Service: Six Phone Skills You Need to Succeed

By Lacy Robinson







To those reading this installment of *The Director.edu* who have graduated, congratulations! And to those who are now one step closer to graduation or perhaps just starting their funeral service education experience, you have much to look forward to over the coming semesters.

While you will study a wide range of topics during funeral service school, one in particular is difficult to test: customer service skills. Your ability to effectively communicate with client families is critical to providing a positive funeral home experience. Average customer service skills result in an aver-



age experience for consumers. Exceeding every family's expectations and displaying exceptional skills, however, results in an unparalleled consumer experience.

Often, the client family's experience begins with a telephone call. When you're talking on the phone to anyone, you play more than the role of a funeral director. You also serve as the supplier of information, a consultant, a problem solver and a public image representative. Remember, every telephone conversation is a performance and one that should leave the listener with a confident feeling about you, the funeral home and the information that was discussed.

Here are six basic principles that will help you make a great impression on the phone.

-  **1. BE PREPARED** Before making a phone call to anyone, be prepared by knowing the purpose of your call and the information you need, along with anticipating any questions the family might have. Jot down a few notes to refer to if the conversation becomes sidetracked.
-  **2. LISTEN CAREFULLY** Take on the role of "active listener." The more you listen, the more information you can obtain. Whether you are conversing with the next of kin or a doctor's office, playing the role of active listener will make that phone call valuable for both parties.
-  **3. TAKE NOTES** Significant phone calls require note-taking. Write down relevant points to avoid repeat questions (and repeat phone calls). Use your notes to recap the conversation at the conclusion of the phone call, which shows your attentiveness and understanding of the information discussed.
-  **4. BE KIND AND CONSIDERATE** When speaking with a family, wear your "compassion hat." Feeling compassionate and understanding affects the tone of your voice, and families need to hear that sincerity and seriousness in your voice. Being kind and considerate will enhance your performance.

Every telephone conversation is a performance, one that should leave the listener confident about you, the firm and the information obtained.

-  **5. BLOCK DISTRACTING NOISES** Many of the phone conversations you will conduct will not happen at the funeral home. If you're conducting business from home or in a public place, make an effort to block distracting noises. People can hear more than you think, such as gum-chewing, drinking and typing.
-  **6. MONITOR YOUR RATE OF SPEECH** Make a conscious effort to speak slower. When communicating with people of different cultures and backgrounds, it is necessary to speak at a slower rate. This helps you enunciate your words clearly while giving the listener time to adjust to your accent, translate words and comprehend your basic message.

During your career, you will have days at the funeral home where the phone rings nonstop; on other days, you will have plenty of time to catch up on your different responsibilities. When the phone rings, it could be a family member, someone in the community asking for support or a solicitor. As soon as you hear that first ring, follow the steps above and give your very best performance each and every time.

*Lacy Robinson is a speaker, trainer and writer specializing in customer service skills and hospice relations for funeral directors.*

## Fighting the Distracted Driving Epidemic

By Ken Deason

Distraction behind the wheel is a growing cause of auto injuries and deaths across the nation. To help the businesses we serve prevent crashes and combat this epidemic on a large scale, Federated Mutual Insurance Company took a wide-ranging approach to bringing awareness and action to this vitally important topic.

### THE CURRENT CAMPAIGN

In 2019, Federated began delivering a program titled "Protecting Your Business: You Hold the Keys." This effort was de-

signed to help clients protect both their businesses and their employees through driver screening, driving policies and by positioning their companies in a more defensible position should crash-related litigation arise. Our marketing representatives have delivered the message to our more than 38,000 policyholders.

This program gives clients the opportunity to order a complimentary banner to remind their employees to drive safely. To date, we have sent thousands of banners to organizations across the country. Federated also encourages funeral profes-

sionals to use this opportunity to help employees stay safe on the road.

## PRIOR DRIVER-FOCUSED INITIATIVES

Since 2005, Federated has made a concerted effort to help curb distracted driving through education and by providing training programs that give businesses needed resources that help their employees stay focused behind the wheel:

- 2005: “Distracted Driving: At What Cost?” raised awareness and introduced recommendations to help prevent distracted driving.
- 2011: “In the Blink of an Eye” again addressed the impact of distracted driving.
- 2015-16: “What Is Important to You?” targeted the dangers of texting and driving.
- 2017: “Drive S.A.F.E.” discussed four major contributors to vehicle crashes: speed, attention, fatigue and emotion.
- 2018: “Drive S.A.F.E.R.” expanded on the previous “Drive S.A.F.E.” campaign and called on businesses to continue to reinforce the message of safe driving.

**“You Hold the Keys” was designed to help clients protect both their businesses and their employees.**

## DRIVER MONITORING

Driver monitoring technology is a valuable way to help lessen the occurrence of accidents. Video-telematics systems provide data from inside and outside the cab to help pinpoint the cause(s) of collisions. This information can help prevent crashes by helping management identify risky behaviors, such as distracted driving, in order to better coach employees on safe driving techniques.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ADVOCACY

Behind the wheel, your company drivers’ hands should be focused on one thing – *driving*. State and local governments nationwide agree and increasingly pass important legislation designed to keep drivers from taking their hands off the wheel.

Last spring, for instance, Minnesota (Federated’s home state) enacted a hands-free law prohibiting drivers from holding mobile devices while driving. This was an important step forward in the fight against distracted driving in Minnesota,

*Federated has placed billboards like this one in Minnesota to remind drivers to drive safely.*



and Federated proudly advocated for its passage. In 2018, many Federated employees participated in a poll and shared commentary related to the proposed legislation. In addition, three employees spoke on a panel in support of the law and, through its membership with the Insurance Federation of Minnesota, Federated helped lobby to pass the legislation.

Federated also partnered with KARE 11, a community-engaged television station in Minneapolis, to help end distracted driving with the “#EyesUp” initiative. More than 2.5-million people viewed the “Drive S.A.F.E.” digital messaging in 2019 thanks to this campaign. Federated also sponsored a public service announcement challenge with high schools throughout Minnesota.

The company placed four billboards along major highways in Minnesota that remind drivers to focus on the road. These billboards are viewed 19 million times a year and share a consistent message: “Don’t Text and Drive” and “Please make it home safe today.”

## PREVENTING AUTO ACCIDENTS ENHANCES YOUR SUCCESS

Distracted driving affects nearly every industry, including funeral service. It hurts profitability and devastates families. Federated’s mission is to enhance the success of its policyholders and, by extension, our nation. We remain committed to helping employees of the businesses we serve make it home safely every night, and we will continue the fight against distracted driving.

*This article is for general information and risk prevention only and should not be considered legal or other expert advice. The recommendations herein might help reduce, but do not guarantee the elimination of, any or all risk. Some of the information herein might be subject to, and is not a substitute for, federal, state and local laws that might apply. Qualified counsel should be sought with questions specific to your circumstances.*

*Ken Deason is national account executive for Federated Mutual Insurance Company.*

# Three Tips to Push Your Scholarship Application to the Top of the Pile

By Kelly Manion

The term is well underway, and your classwork is piling up at the same rate as your dirty laundry. Fortunately, the Funeral Service Foundation is here to help. While we can't complete your restorative art assignment or sort your lights and darks, we can assist you with the costs associated with your education in funeral service.

Each year, the Funeral Service Foundation awards thousands of dollars in scholarships to students enrolled in ABFSE-accredited institutions and accredited Canadian institutions. Scholarships range from \$2,500 to \$5,000. In 2021, the Foundation is accepting applications February 1-April 15.

Completing a scholarship application doesn't have to be tedious. Here are a few tips that can help send your app to the top of the pile and get you back to studying and sorting laundry.

## KEEP YOUR ANSWERS BRIEF BUT MEANINGFUL

The application process includes answering five questions, using no more than 250 words each. The key is to answer each question completely and avoid "eloquent vagueness." Big words and long sentences are just clutter if they don't answer the question.

Your writing will become more succinct and descriptive if you avoid the following words: *really, just, so, very, many, things* and *a lot*. For example, instead of saying, "There are many things that I just really like about funeral service," try "[*Insert your reason*] is why I chose this career path." Or, instead of "Funeral service is so very rewarding," try "[*Insert your reason*] draws me to this profession."

## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Creating a brief video is part of the application process. If we've learned anything from all the virtual meetings we've experienced this year, it's that location does matter. While your camerawork doesn't have to be Hollywood quality, your attention to detail will set you apart, so take care to record your video in an appropriate location.

In addition, is the lighting adequate? How about sound



Our scholarship reviewers look for professionalism, strong character and poise in both essays and videos.

levels? Is the pile of laundry hidden? Is your cat in the background? Can we see only your eyes and forehead? Consider asking someone you trust to give you honest feedback before you submit your video.

## BE YOURSELF

Our scholarship reviewers look for professionalism, strong character and poise in both essays and videos. The best applications come from students who are honest, confident and wholly themselves. Playwright and poet Oscar Wilde stated, "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken." Simply put, be the best version of yourself and tell *your* story from the heart.

The Funeral Service Foundation is here to help you access a great education. If you've applied in the past but did not receive a scholarship, we strongly encourage you to apply again. Visit [FuneralServiceFoundation.org](http://FuneralServiceFoundation.org) for more information.

*Kelly Manion is Funeral Service Foundation director of communication.*

*From the Editor's Desk*

# Why Is This a Thing?



As the leaves have all fallen and the days turn colder, I find myself in somewhat of a reflective mood. The cover has been on the pool for a while now, long-sleeve shirts are at the front of the closet, and the World Series (sigh) is just another memory.

A couple of news articles caught my eye and caused me, in this reflective state, to wonder.

What is the deal with gender-reveal parties? One article delved into the history of the events. The first was credited to Jenna Karvunidis, a blogger, back in 2008, when her family gathered to cut a cake that revealed pink frosting inside, signifying that the child she was carrying was female. Sure, that made for a nifty little story, but little did she know how her party idea would evolve.

It's easy to understand why these parties became more involved; we can thank social media for being the fuel for this fire, with families adopting a "can you top this?" mentality to satiate the growing craving people have for a viral moment that would make Maury Povich's ambush-TV episodes look like C-SPAN.

Many of these stories have also captured headlines for all the wrong reasons, seeming like a cross between the Darwin Awards and *America's Funniest Home Videos*. In 2017, a fire sparked by a gender-reveal stunt burned more than 45,000 acres in Arizona. Last year in Texas, a plane used in a reveal crashed, and a pipe bomb that was intended to reveal blue or pink powder instead sent shrapnel through the air, killing a grandmother.

A recent gender-reveal party resulted in a massive wildfire in San Bernardino County, California, with more than 7,000 acres burned. The news of this tragic incidence even spurred Karvunidis to take to social media to criticize the ridiculous lengths to which people are going for these events. "Stop having these stupid parties," she wrote. "No one cares but you."

I am of the generation where fathers would find out if their child was a boy or a girl when the nurse came into the waiting room to tell them, so maybe I'm a bit jaded about all of this. (I do often wonder if my father passed out cigars when I was born like they did on TV.) None of my family and friends has had a gender-reveal party for their kids, so consider me among the uninitiated.

Over the course of my pondering on this topic, I found that my confusion lies in imagining such an elaborate event in which thousands are spent to let family members in on a little secret. As you widen the net to include friends and virtual friends, as well as the social media stranger, fewer and fewer people even care. I get it. We live in an experiential society, but what will be the shelf life of this experience?

The most perplexing thing about it all is this: When a family that throws an extravagant gender reveal suffers the eventual death of a loved one, will they take as much time and effort to have a memorial to celebrate that life well lived?

**EDWARD J. DEFORT**  
EDITOR

## The Director.edu

A publication of the  
National Funeral Directors Association

13625 Bishop's Dr.  
Brookfield, WI 53005-6607  
800-228-6332  
or 609-815-8145  
www.nfda.org

**Editor**

Edward J. Defort  
(edefort@nfda.org)

**Managing Editor**

Dawn M. Behr  
(dwehr@nfda.org)

**Contributing Editor**

Chris Raymond  
(cjrayment@nfda.org)

**Graphics**

Brooke Krishok  
(bkrishok@nfda.org)

The Director.edu is a quarterly publication of the National Funeral Directors Association. Its mission is to provide objective, comprehensive news and analysis to mortuary science students.

**Subscription Rates:**

The Director.edu is free of charge for all students of accredited mortuary science programs. Non-student rates are \$40 for one year (4 issues).

Unauthorized redistribution of this copyrighted material is unlawful.

No part of this publication may be reproduced by any means without prior written permission of the publisher.

Contents © 2020  
NFDA Services Inc.