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## FUNERAL SERVICE AT THE CROSSROADS

# Will You Succeed in Your Profession's New Era?

By Chris Cruger, with Alice Adams

Modern eras are generally marked by watershed events, such as the Great Depression that followed Wall Street's stock market crash or, in geologic ages, the Paleolithic Period.

Recently, our society witnessed a pandemic that engulfed the globe beginning late in 2019, killing millions and affecting the lives of all of us.

This era has been slow to end, but we are seeing fewer COVID-19 cases and fewer deaths. While the World Health Organization has downgraded COVID-19 from a public health emergency, it is still perceived as a health threat because of new and emerging coronavirus variants. For the most part, however, our society generally perceives 2023 and beyond as "on the other side of COVID-19" and, for all practical purposes, this year should mark the end of the "pandemic era."

This milestone has been embraced by funeral service because of the end of limited numbers allowed to publicly

gather and masking mandates. In addition, gone is the sheer number of cases that caused funeral homes and cemeteries to expand their operating hours, rent reefers, scramble for enough staff and personal protective equipment, and juggle work schedules because staff required time off to care for family members who contracted COVID-19 (or even became infected themselves).

As the number of coronavirus cases subsided, what did funeral homes look like in the aftermath? How could the funeral service and cemetery professions better understand post-pandemic consumer perceptions and how they wanted to do business in the new era? More importantly, were these professions ready to make the changes necessary to survive and succeed given this "new normal"?

**Are our professions ready to make the changes necessary to survive and succeed in this "new normal"?**

For the past four years, surveys conducted by The Foresight Companies found consumers relying more on the internet and online commerce during the pandemic. This is how many were able to conduct business, including restocking their home pantries and fridges, so the required operating changes should not come as a surprise.

The 2023 survey found the new era has ushered in an amplified need for funeral directors to get out from behind their desks and become more engaged in the communities they serve. This “new normal” not only mandates writing checks to sponsor a soccer team or buying T-shirts for a youth basketball team, but also hosting a hot-dogs-and-lemonade team party at the funeral home; attending games; or partnering with law enforcement so newly licensed drivers can tour your firm as part of a driver-safety program.

This effort to step up engagement with your community is critical because of the massive disconnect The Foresight Companies discovered in its most recent consumer-profession survey. Reconnection will require bringing the community into your funeral home for events other than funerals as part of this new level of engagement. This might mean making a meeting room available for a non-profit organization, or hosting a “lunch and learn” to discuss local history, the options your firm offers for green

burials or pet services, etc. Other ideas include offering your facility for a 50th birthday party; hosting a monthly book club; or making a place for a bridge club in order to enhance public familiarity with your location. Greater community engagement and more transparency comprise a much-needed change across the profession.



### TRANSPARENCY, TECHNOLOGY AND INFORMATION ACCESS

Before the pandemic and the isolation and quarantines it triggered, funeral professionals had largely been insulated from such transparency, as well as the use of more and better technology. Unable to conduct business face-to-face during the pandemic, however, and forced to rely on technology

**The new era shows amplified need for funeral directors to become more engaged in the communities they serve.**

for online purchases, Zoom meetings and internet access to needed information, consumer expectations for increased tech and transparency are no longer optional for funeral homes and cemeteries. Instead, they have become an essential aspect in doing business.

**A firm's reluctance to make prices public indicates the profession does not want to be transparent or has something to hide.**

The data in our latest public/professional survey, “The 2023 Funeral & Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study,” found a profession too often resisting the changes required in doing business with the new, evolving and less traditional consumers. These consumers want to access transparent information, at their convenience and on their own time. The new, post-pandemic consumer also wants to make educated decisions and, while some firms have begun posting GPLs and modified price lists, the majority have hesitated to provide this information.

According to public perception, a firm's reluctance to make its prices public indicates the profession doesn't want to be transparent or has something to hide. This creates a trust and confidence issue for the entire profession. Bottom line: Shoppers are likely to select a firm whose website is more informative.

Closely tied to the trend of online consumerism are the off-the-shelf, generic websites many firms have used for years. Back when these affordable, cookie-cutter websites were introduced, their sole purpose was to give a firm a presence on the internet. That is why the only distinguishing information (and therefore the only variable data) on these websites-in-a-box is the firm's name, phone number and address. That falls far short of the needs and expectations of today's consumers for data to inform/assist them in making an educated decision when selecting a firm at-need.

Providing the information and options in one place that consumers need to help them decide is the new norm. Yes, making these changes to your website and creating a more open and welcoming online presence will require an investment, but it's not only essential given today's “new normal” but the return-on-investment will more than offset the cost while contributing to your success.

So, as you prepare for the new era, think about the following questions:

1. How easy is your website to navigate?
2. When was the last time you had a web designer

- update or upgrade your website?
- Does your site welcome those who want to educate themselves on how you might serve them?
  - Have you listed all of your service options and explained them in layman's terms?
  - Do you introduce your staff on your site?
  - Do you include your pricing?
  - Does your website explain the process, from first call to final disposition, and what to expect?
  - Does your site answer basic questions and make things convenient for at-need and preneed families?

### PERCEPTION GAPS

The real surprise of this year's survey concerned the gap between the profession's perception of itself compared to that of consumers. Under the heading "Honesty," the profession scored 76% versus the consumer score of 54% – a 22% gap!

Under the category "Responsiveness to Cultural Traditions," professional perception scored 74% while consumer opinion fell to 56%, a gap of 18 points and another sizable difference. And in reply to "Responsiveness to Problems," funeral and cemetery professionals scored themselves at 66% while consumer perceptions tallied just 56%.

**The news wasn't all bad. Many areas showed consumer perception higher than the profession ranked itself.**

The news wasn't all bad, however. There were many areas where consumer perception actually ranked the funeral and cemetery professions higher than professionals ranked themselves. These include providing a modern/contemporary environment for services/celebrations/receptions: consumers 57% vs. profession 47%; access to technology-based products and options: consumers 43% vs. profession 35%; and support after the service: consumers 52% vs. profession 51%.

Just as making upgrades to your website, opening your doors for senior "bingo afternoons," or hosting a wine tasting once a month requires dedication, planning and staffing, bridging gaps between public and professional perceptions will take commitment.

### STAFFING ISSUES

There's no better time than today to be in funeral service because the new era's bar is fairly low and your success in the era of this 'new normal' begins by hiring individuals who are

tech savvy and complementary to your business model.

Some firms today hire employees who do nothing but community outreach or possess experience in personalization and event planning. They find this engagement that's important and definitely worth the investment. Getting out the message begins by being out in the community, communicating one-on-one and educating people in your community



The other staffing aspect requiring change given this "new normal" involves employee compensation. In the past, management has been overly miserly in compensation, but valuing a good employee takes more than an occasional "attaboy/attagirl."

In the new era, hiring and keeping outstanding performers should be "Job One" in your business plan. Replacing an outstanding employee takes money and valuable time, so it might be time to re-evaluate salaries in order to reward employees who regularly go above and beyond and pay them enough to keep them, thereby letting them know you truly appreciate the stellar service they provide.

For your firm to meet the expectations of consumers, every employee must reflect a pride of association, but they also must feel valued by management. Feeling a valued part of the team enhances performance, and this same pride brings a mindset of excitement in doing an outstanding job. If every employee set a goal to become 1% better every day, you'd be amazed at how quickly your firm will grow.

Given the "new normal" of funeral service, you must adapt. If you don't, you'll find your comfort zone has become a rut and, without changing, you'll end up not having a seat at the table. Therefore, put down your phone and engage your community in a real dialogue about what your firm and its staff can do for consumers.

To accomplish this, you should upgrade your website to make it easy to use and information-rich, including your pricing. In addition, review your staff salaries and make sure you reward outstanding employees. Finally, improve/increase your community engagement. Don't just make a donation, get involved!

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# Servant Leadership Can Help Attract Talent

By David Hernandez



The employment challenges facing funeral homes are perhaps the most vocalized concern I hear among my colleagues. The aging funeral professional, pandemic burnout, and a lack of interest among those entering the field – combined with the general work-life balance – are all contributing factors to this challenge.

As the world continues to evolve, so does the employment environment, and the funeral profession has experienced significant changes in recent years. Funeral directors today seek greater work-life balance in positions – and historically higher compensation levels. In turn, funeral homes are sounding the alarm as the profession faces an exodus and shortage of funeral directors, embalmers and support staff.

The current decrease in average revenue per funeral only compounds the complexity of the situation. The ability of a firm to meet these challenges relies on many aspects, including current staffing levels, call volume, budgets and operational philosophies, to name a few.

There is no single solution to today's employment challenges but, even if you were to meet all of those needs, studies show that employee motivation and efficiency are higher when they have a leader they trust and respect.

One way to attract funeral professionals in today's employment environment is to understand the concept of "servant leadership." Robert K. Greenleaf coined this phrase in "The Servant as Leader," an essay he first published in 1970. In it, Greenleaf explains that servant leadership is a leadership style that focuses on serving the needs of others first. In terms of the funeral service profession, this approach puts the needs of employees, families and the community at the forefront.

Families and the community – aren't these the core values of every funeral professional, where empathy and compassion are paramount? If so, then let's take the servant leadership model and turn it toward our employees.

By using the same approach through your compassion to serve, and providing talent that attracts families to your firm, you will be able to attract professionals by adopting a

servant leadership style. This shouldn't be a heavy lift; you do it daily with the families you serve.

Staffing constitutes a firm's most significant expense. Rather than focusing on trimming payroll, benefits and overtime, look at ways to invest in your workplace that will boost productivity and drive revenue, ultimately decreasing staffing expenses as a percentage of income.

To attract funeral directors, it is important to embody the qualities of a servant leader. Here are some key qualities to consider:



**EMPATHY** A servant leader must be empathetic to the needs of others. Owners and managers must be able to connect with their teams and understand the pressures of difficult workloads, high-volume periods, and work-life balance.



**COMPASSION** Servant leaders must be compassionate and understanding. Understanding that their employees are people first and have needs, compassionate leaders focus on developing both their staff and a work environment where individuals feel valued and safe. Many have felt that the workplace should be free of emotion, despite the fact that the funeral service profession is built on it. We connect with families deeply during the most vulnerable times in their lives. Similarly, compassion can foster greater connection with your staff and strengthen the bonds between management and employees.



**HUMILITY** A servant leader must be humble and willing to put the needs of others before their own. This isn't the most glamorous or common trait associated with leaders, who must be willing to admit their weaknesses and ask for help when they need it. Many leaders in the funeral service profession have been in place for years, if not decades. By staying humble and asking for contributions from their team, they have been able to solicit varying opinions from team mem-

bers to meet the changing funeral preferences of consumers.



**LISTENING** A servant leader must be a good listener. As funeral professionals, we listen to the needs of grieving families and provide personalized services that meet those needs. Do you listen to your employees' needs, or do you simply reference standard operating procedures? Some employees come to work for a paycheck, but there are others who have found purpose, a vocation in deathcare, and they can become valuable assets to your organization. They need to be understood, however, and only a leader skilled in listening to their needs can identify them.



**ADAPTABILITY** The funeral profession is constantly changing, and so is the workplace. Managers must be able to adapt to those changes. We focus so much time on consumer trends that many of us have overlooked employment trends. Understanding compassion fatigue, creating reward programs, and acknowledgment announcements are some of the keys to attracting top professionals. Funeral professionals around the country often say that a thank-you from a family or a hug after a service is all the motivation they need. Couple those rewards with a firm that focuses on developing employees, creates a safe work environment and establishes trust will create a differentiating quality that many firms will have a hard time catching up to, let alone equaling.

The secret or “special sauce” in servant leadership is authenticity. When a firm adapts this style, it starts with a changed heart and a focused mind. You must also stay the course;

## Cracking the Glass Ceiling of Funeral Service

By Lee Senderov

For as long as I can remember, the study of leadership has energized me. I have been blessed to know, follow and work with an amazing collection of inspirational individuals who have molded me into the leader I am today. That list begins with my dad, who advised me to “work for someone whose job you aspire to have one day.” It also includes Simon Sinek, world-renowned speaker and author of *Together is Better*, who said, “Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge.”

We all wear many hats, but professional women often wear more than their male counterparts. A *Harvard Business*

**The secret or “special sauce” in servant leadership is authenticity.**

there will be times that you show all of the above qualities and still lose employees or get hurt – that is simply business. But if you stay disciplined in placing your team first, you will foster powerful and meaningful relationships with your team, similar to those you have with your community.

When I contemplated running my first marathon, I decided in my mind first and my body followed. It was fun until the cold-weather training and injuries. The only way I got to the start line – and ultimately the finish line – of the race was through discipline. Emotions, motivation and purpose will come and go, but when you decide to follow a disciplined servant leadership approach, a true change of heart will prevail.

By embodying the qualities of a servant leader, funeral homes can attract the best funeral professionals, provide exceptional service to their clients, and ultimately increase brand awareness.

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*Review* article written at the start of the pandemic stated: “Despite the fact that women outnumber men in the paid workforce, women still do more of the domestic work and childcare – almost twice as much as their male partners.” And although significantly more women than men are graduating from mortuary schools today, the funeral profession,

like many other businesses, is still largely male-dominated in executive leadership positions.

My own funeral-industry career journey began in 2021. I was president of the digital division of Richland Group, a Berkshire Hathaway company, when I received a call from a recruiter about joining Foundation Partners Group. I had never thought about the deathcare profession, but I was intrigued. I ultimately decided to join the company because I sincerely believe there is an opportunity to improve how families interact with deathcare services by combining a modern, digital experience with the compassionate end-of-life care provided by funeral directors and other field personnel.

In my experience working in many different industries during the past 20 years, I do not think the challenges women face in the funeral profession are necessarily different from those in other professions. I do find, however, that the service nature of the funeral profession does tend to make women deprioritize themselves as they work to support families during the darkest days of their lives.

Foundation Partners has a history of supporting and nurturing female leaders in its funeral homes, as well as in regional and national management positions. Since its founding in 2010, the number of female leaders and team members has grown from 33% to 53% of its workforce of nearly 2,000 employees. From the chief-executive level to field offices, women bring their unique talents to comfort and support the more than 150,000 families the company serves each year across 270 locations in 21 states.

**We all wear many hats, but professional women often wear more than their male counterparts.**



**I had never thought about [working in] the deathcare profession, but I was intrigued.**

Recently, I sat down with four of these leaders to learn more about their journeys in the industry, their views on the challenges facing females in the profession, and their advice for women looking to rise in funeral service leadership:

- Julie Judge, senior vice president of human resources
- Holly Escudero, area vice president
- Danielle Bicker, Southwest Florida director of operations
- Isabel Vieira, Advisory Board member and location leader

Recognizing the importance of collective effort in fostering women's leadership, I also invited Andrew Clark, chief customer officer, to share his insights on the topic.

#### CAREER JOURNEYS

Escudero, Bicker and Judge began their careers in healthcare before discovering funeral service was their true calling. Escudero was senior director of business operations for a large medical group; Bicker worked as a certified nursing assistant delivering home hospice care; and Judge was a chief executive at a healthcare staffing firm.

"Deathcare was particularly intriguing as it, like healthcare, serves a greater purpose," Escudero said. "The work we do each day in funeral service is so important to the families we care for. The funeral directors, attendants, operators and administrators each play such a vital role in a family's ability to get through tough times."

After earning a degree from Worsham College of Mortuary Science in Wheeling, Illinois, in 2011, Bicker's deathcare career journey took her to Colorado before she settled in southwest Florida. "I reached out to John and Michelle Farley Williams, who owned and operated Farley Funeral Homes & Crematory in Venice and North Port, Florida," she said. "John took the time to sit down and meet with me, even though he wasn't looking to hire another employee at that time. He and I met four or five different times before he offered me a full-time position. I will forever be grateful for the time and energy they both spent to get to know me, learn about my career experience and question me about how I could make their team better. Since starting with [the company] in May 2020, John and Michelle have provided me with the utmost respect and support to guide me through the process of leadership and management."

Judge was chief experience officer in Columbia, Maryland, when she was approached by a headhunter for her current role. "I quickly realized that funeral service and healthcare are similar in that they are mission-oriented professions that serve others," she said.

Vieira was born in New Jersey to Portuguese parents and found funeral service as a second career after 15 years as manager of a public-accounting office. “Funerals, death and the care of decedents was something that I talked about a lot,” she said. “Mostly out of curiosity, I guess. As a young girl, my mom would tell me how, in Portugal, care of the dead was left to women. They would bathe, dress and perfume the deceased, and keep them at home in their beds, where family and friends would visit until the next day, when they were buried. The women’s jobs did not stop there, however. They also cooked for all those who came to visit and offered comfort and support to those closest to the deceased. That sounds like a funeral director to me.”

### **BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN**

When this group was asked about the biggest challenges facing women in funeral service, two themes emerged: self-confidence and work-life balance.

Said Bicker: “I believe a lot of women struggle with confidence in this industry, mainly because, historically, this business was dominated by men. As the years have passed, more and more women have realized that funeral service is their true calling. The caring and compassionate demeanor of women is extremely beneficial when it comes to assisting families at the worst times of their lives. I’m not saying men in the industry are not capable of empathizing, but it seems to come more naturally for women. That lack of confidence also stems from worldwide research that shows women are taken less seriously as leaders than their male counterparts.”

Vieira sees work-life balance as the biggest challenge facing women in funeral service. “For women with young families, it’s even harder. This is a very demanding industry. Often, we must work long hours, weekends and even holidays, forcing us to cancel or reschedule personal plans. We willingly sacrifice our own families for our work families,” she said.

Escudero agrees that work-life balance is a challenge for women but adds that it’s not their problem alone. “The challenge is modifying expectations and standards to support better work-life balance and decrease burnout,” she added. “Funeral directors are people too; they deserve and need to spend time with their families and friends. This balance will ultimately make them better, happier people and will improve the longevity and power of the profession.”

**When the group was asked about the biggest challenges facing women in funeral service, two themes emerged: self-confidence and work-life balance.**

Clark brings a man’s perspective to the discussion of work-life balance. “A good work-life balance can look different for different people,” he said. “For me, it’s about proper time management and setting priorities. I believe women who influence a team of workers can be very successful in a leadership role. A good leader recognizes that influence and strives to create a working environment that supports a healthy work-life balance for team members. It starts with knowing and understanding your team’s needs. For example, I know many parents who would prefer to drop off or pick up their kids from school. Allowing team members to have schedules beyond the standard 8 to 5 not only allows flexibility but promotes greater satisfaction. Team members who have leaders who understand what’s important to them can help cultivate a strong and committed team.”

**Think strategically about your career. Careers don’t just happen – they are well-thought-out journeys.**

### **ADVICE FOR RISING LEADERS**

Escudero’s advice to anyone looking to rise in the funeral profession is simple: *Put people first*. “Deathcare professionals are a phenomenal group with a strong, diverse skill set in organization, attention to detail, logistics, operations and, perhaps most admirably, people skills,” she said. “I have never met a group of people who can meet anyone and quickly connect, building trust and credibility in a matter of moments. As leaders in this industry, perhaps the most important thing we can do is recognize that skill set and honor it by putting people first. In their lives, they often deprioritize themselves and their families to support other families in tough times. Having a leader who understands that and prioritizes them is powerful. Make sure your team members know they matter and why. Say ‘thank you’ at every opportunity.”

Judge encourages everyone interested in a career based on service to others to enter this rewarding profession “if you aspire to be a servant leader, and you have the right motives.” She added, “I also encourage all leaders to have a circle of informal mentors – within and outside their organizations – to offer support and guidance when challenging situations arise.”

Her advice is sound, indeed. I believe that, in general, women do not advocate for themselves enough and, often, do not ask for help because they think they can “do it all.” Therefore, be realistic about what you and your team can accomplish with the resources you have, and ask for help when needed.

Moreover, think strategically about your career. Careers don’t just happen; they are well-thought-out journeys. In

every leadership position I have held, I have asked myself: “What skills do I have that I can apply to this position to ensure we win? What skills will I gain by taking on this role? Will the person I’ll work for be my advocate?”

### LOOKING AHEAD

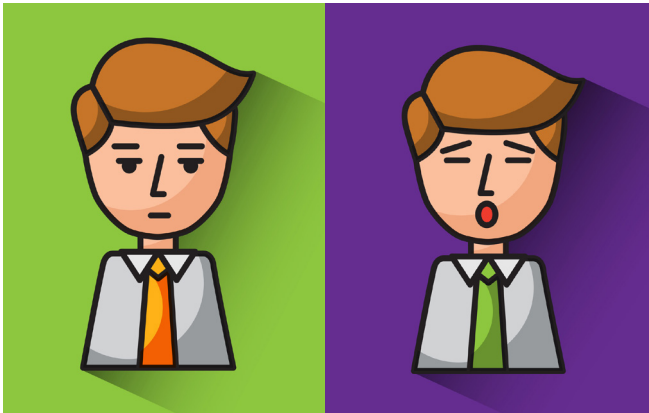
The good news is that the days of females getting passed over for senior roles in the funeral profession are numbered. When all leaders in an organization come together and proactively consider women for advancement opportunities, impactful change will follow.

“As we have seen in other industries, having more diver-

sity at all levels of any organization lends itself to a stronger, healthier organization,” Escudero said. “Women need to continue to push and illustrate the value they add – not only as funeral directors but as leaders. Women in key leadership positions can bring positive change; they often come in with a fresh perspective, asking ‘Why do we do it this way?’ and are unwilling to accept the common answer ‘Because that’s the way we have always done it.’”

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## Deactivating “Amy”

### Signs, symptoms and self-care for compassion fatigue.

By Edward J. Defort

Good habits start early. Even those with the best intentions and a perpetual passion for funeral service still run the risk of burnout. For mortuary science students, the message offered by Lynda Cheldelin Fell at NFDA’s Leadership Conference last June will resonate.

During her workshop, she shared a story with attendees that painted a picture of the topic she would focus on: compassion fatigue. In 2009, a 15-year-old girl was driving home from a swim meet when her car was T-boned by a truck traveling at a high rate of speed. The girl died instantly.

Her family had absolutely no experience with death or grief but soon found themselves sitting across from a funeral director. The girl had already made known to her family that she wanted to be cremated. The family often talked about things like that. But before she was cremated, her father

wanted to see her. He needed to see his baby girl once more, so arrangements were made for a family viewing.

That morning, the family arrived on time, but the funeral director did not. The door was locked, and 15 minutes went by before the funeral director arrived. When they were let in, the parents could see their daughter at the back of the room, lying on what appeared to be a gurney covered with a white sheet. When they made their way to her, they realized she had not been cleaned up from the accident; there was still dried blood in her hair.

This was the final viewing this family had of their daughter and sister.

“What do you think happened?” Cheldelin Fell asked attendees. The answer? Compassion fatigue, a term traced back to 1907 when first used by psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Carl Jung to describe the concept of the “wounded healer.”

Cheldelin Fell, a retired firefighter/EMT certified in critical-incident stress management, specializes in trauma, grief and compassion fatigue. She is a founding partner of the International Grief Institute, which is dedicated to building community resilience through programs and trainings available exclusively for the funeral industry.

Compassion is something everyone is born with. “You all have an abundance of compassion,” said Cheldelin Fell. “It’s built into you, and this is what you use day in and day out as you hear death stories. It’s our desire to alleviate someone’s suffering.”

She said compassion fatigue happens when funeral directors listen to death stories repeatedly without recharging

**Compassion fatigue occurs when directors listen to death stories repeatedly without recharging their own batteries.**

their own batteries. It's also known as vicarious trauma. "We often say we live vicariously through someone else," said Cheldelin Fell. "When we hear stories over and over and over again, we are absorbing someone else's trauma and, if we're not careful, it can stick to us like Velcro, and we take it home with us."

She noted that compassion fatigue comes about from violent deaths, overdoses, suicides and mass casualties. "More and more of you are finding yourselves in a position to tend to those victims because they have to go somewhere, and they happen in every town. Because some of these traumatizing cases are grotesque, and you are human, they cause sensory overload." Long hours with unpredictable breaks can also trigger compassion fatigue.

Many of those things you can't change, but Cheldelin Fell said that what you can change is your work-life balance. Many in the audience admitted to struggling with that balance. "Because of those long hours, you never know when you're going to get home; you don't know how many calls are going to come in the middle of the night," she said. "That's what you work with."

Sure, it's what funeral professionals signed up for when they entered the profession, but the work-life balance is going to make the difference between being able to enjoy that calling or burning out.

"Anyone who has compassion fatigue should not feel ashamed," she said, "because it's resulting from you doing your very best work. Anyone in the caregiving profession is at risk, including firefighters, service workers and healthcare workers. But no one has been hit harder by the events of the past couple of years than funeral service workers."

Cheldelin Fell pointed out that a 2017 study showed that 87% of emergency responders reported symptoms of compassion fatigue. Furthermore, 70% of mental-health workers reported symptoms of compassion fatigue. The same was reported among 30% of child-welfare workers.

"No one has studied compassion fatigue among funeral directors until recently," she said. In a study done in Belgium, a quality-of-life survey was sent to 241 people at the height of the pandemic, and again at the end of that first quarter. Cheldelin Fell noted, however, that the survey was flawed because the respondents all worked for the same company. "So far," she said, "we don't have any stats to know how many funeral directors are suffering, and we will change that."

How does compassion fatigue affect the funeral home?

**Anyone with compassion fatigue should not feel ashamed because it's the result of you doing your very best work.**

"Absenteeism," said Cheldelin Fell. "Your battery is low, you're physically tired, you're mentally tired, you're going to call in sick." What happens when someone calls in sick is the caseload gets put on their colleagues. Some might go to work but are not really "there" if they're mentally checked out.

"Because you are mentally and emotionally tired, your productivity decreases," she continued. "When we're stressed, when we're fatigued, we don't get as much done because we move slower, we make errors – not intentionally, of course, but they happen. Compassion fatigue can trigger a lapse in judgment, as well."

A high staff turnover rate will negatively impact a funeral home, and the owner will need to spend money recruiting and training new employees. "Employee retention – that's all money," she said. Mental health, stress and compassion fatigue costs the funeral profession upward of \$48 billion annually.

Cheldelin Fell noted that Mother Teresa understood compassion fatigue and its effects. After all, she tended to the sick and elderly. "She mandated that her nuns, every five years, take a full year off from work to recharge their batteries," shared Cheldelin Fell. "She required it; it was not up to negotiation. Granted, that's not something that corporate America can do, but there are other things that can be done."

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Cheldelin Fell cited some of the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue. As you might suspect, these include mental and/or physical exhaustion, irritability, difficulty concentrating, errors, lapses in judgment, dreading work and insomnia. "Remember, you're tired," she said. "You dread going into work because you are tired."

Many people don't understand the difference between compassion fatigue and burnout, but the symptoms just listed are the same for burnout. What's the difference then? "Compassion fatigue can be mitigated," said Cheldelin Fell. "It can ebb and flow, and tends to have a faster onset, whereas burnout – think of a slow burn – is harder to mitigate. We are seeing funeral professionals leaving the calling they love because they're burned out. They need to do something different, and that's heartbreaking because many of you are in this field because it's a calling, not because you decided when you were in sixth grade, 'I think I'm going to become a funeral director.'"

"You were led into this [profession] either because it was in your family already or you have a heart for it," she added. "Unmitigated compassion fatigue, if left unchecked, is a pathway to burnout." And even if you are not feeling com-



passion fatigue yourself, members of your staff might be.

Cheldelin Fell likened compassion fatigue to an empty cup, i.e., there's nothing more to give. "It's also a metaphor for everything we do in life – when we feel better physically, mentally and emotionally, we cope with things better," she said.

### SELF-CARE PLAN

The first part of a self-care plan is **AWARENESS** about how stress affects you. "For me, it puts a knot in my belly, and I start feeling like I'm ungrounded," said Cheldelin Fell.

She asked attendees what types of cases they take home with them. One said the death of a child, and another said people they know and love. Others mentioned high-profile, violent and military deaths.

Cheldelin Fell then shared with attendees that when she was a firefighter/EMT, she once had back-to-back calls, both involving 17-year-old daughters who did not survive. At the time, her oldest child was the same age. "Those are two cases I think about in the quietness of my mind," she shared. "There was nothing I could have done to have changed the outcome, but they were needless deaths. For me, that is a trigger that I'm aware of."



She advised attendees to think about what causes them to identify with a family. What is it that makes it so hard for you to "leave it at the door" when you leave for the night?

The second part of awareness, said Cheldelin Fell, is being aware of what stress is going on in your life – what work pressures contribute to your overall stress. One attendee said

there is not enough staff to share the workload. Another said it's when work and family obligations pull him in different directions. "Absolutely," replied Cheldelin Fell, "because you have responsibilities on both ends. How do you choose which is more important?"

Debt can be a stressor if you owe the bank a lot of money. Another attendee cited over-commitment, trying to be all things to all people, and being visible in your community outside of your work and your family.

There might also be personal stressors. Maybe the ownership partners do not see eye to eye, or perhaps there are situations within the family that require caregiving attention. "Consider what your work stressors are, your internal stressors, and your home stressors, and then factor all of it in because they all play a role," she said.

### BALANCE

Balance is about finding that middle ground between work and life. Many in funeral service don't have a great work-life

**Many find setting emotional boundaries very difficult, but "we all know one or two toxic people who can suck the energy from us."**

balance due to the unexpected nature of the profession – not knowing when the next call will come and if it will be one of those deep stressors, or not knowing when the next vacation can be taken.

Many people find setting emotional boundaries very difficult, but everyone must put some kind of boundaries in place. "We all know one or two toxic people in our lives who can suck the energy from us," she said. "Many of us are very uncomfortable putting boundaries on the toxic people. Maybe that toxic person is related to us, so we don't have a choice," she said.

Cheldelin Fell suggested attendees close their eyes and imagine themselves standing on a stage. Where on the stage would they place themselves? Then imagine a toxic person in your life sharing that stage. Where would you place that person?

Next, she asked attendees to envision a glass dome and to consider putting it around themselves. "You can still hear that person and they can hear you, but their toxic energy cannot enter your bubble," she explained. "Often, when people have a toxic person in their life and they practice this exercise, it makes them feel safer, makes them feel more in control – that toxic energy is not entering the bubble, and that is by design. That's one way to help mitigate toxic people in your life."

Another thing to consider, she said, is how you minimize external stress since much of it is often out of your control. Connect with like-minded people who lift you up and bring you joy. This will limit exposure to the toxic relationships.

"Ask yourself how strong your support system is," said Cheldelin Fell. "What do you do outside work that allows you to connect with people who enjoy things that you enjoy?" It could include being part of a walking group, a book club or tennis club, or golf. "Interacting with people who share things that you love triggers endorphins and makes you feel good," she said. "These connections can be right in your community."

### DECONTAMINATION TOOLS

When you hear "decontamination tools," you might think of nurses or firefighters decontaminating themselves from head to toe after a hazmat encounter. But what do they do to decontaminate their minds before they walk through the front door at home?

"What rituals do you have that allow you to leave work be-

**In the brain, the amygdala (“Amy,” for short) is triggered by anxiety, fear, anger and stress.**

hind?” asked Cheldelin Fell. One attendee shared that he had a 30-minute commute home, and she called that an excellent modality. “That 30-minute drive allows you to decompress. You can run through your day, and it allows you to process [everything] by the time you walk through your front door,” she said.

Another attendee said he leaves his cellphone on the porch for an hour when he gets home so he can engage with his wife. He learned he can survive without always being connected to his phone.

Whatever the ritual, Cheldelin Fell said it is important to create something that allows you to leave the stressors of the day behind.

### THE PROBLEM WITH STRESS

There is good stress – the feeling you get after the birth of a baby, receiving a promotion or even buying a bigger home. “It triggers endorphins in our brain that make us feel good,” she said. “We also have distress, which triggers hormones, as well, but they don’t make us feel good.” Perhaps a loved one is incarcerated or there is financial strain; that is distress, and stress hormones are the brain’s way of reacting to that. “But what happens when we are under distress?” she asked.

In the human brain, there are two almond-shaped collections of nuclei within each cerebral hemisphere known as the “amygdala.” (Cheldelin Fell called it “Amy” for short.) “Amy is triggered by anxiety, fear, anger and stress,” she explained.

When faced with a stressful situation, such as an encounter with a wild animal, before you even have a thought about what you’re going to do, your brain (Amy) is already on it. “She is your internal alarm system,” said Cheldelin Fell. “She is already secreting the stress hormones your body needs to either flee the wild animal, fight it or freeze. It’s about saving your life.”

What happens with stress, she explained, is that when Amy is triggered, the brain’s chemicals anesthetize the frontal lobe – the part that handles critical thinking and problem solving. “In essence, Amy and her band of hormones have hijacked your brain,” she said. “Your critical thinking and problem-solving skills have been disabled.”

The bad news about this response is that it hampers the human brain’s “neuroplasticity,” i.e., the nervous system’s ability to change its activity in response to intrinsic or extrinsic stimuli by reorganizing its structure, functions or connections after injuries. As an example, Cheldelin Fell

noted that when a person suffers a stroke, they often can’t read, write or speak unless/until the brain can rewire around the damaged area.

“The problem is that when Amy remains on high alert day after day, what she is doing is creating neuroplasticity tracks of stress, so you stay in a heightened state of stress,” Cheldelin Fell said. And unmitigated stress leads to compassion fatigue.

The good news, though, is that by using any of the following modalities, you can create neuroplasticity tracks to undo that stress.

### RESILIENCE STRATEGIES

While almost everyone knows the importance of staying hydrated, eating a nutritionally balanced diet and getting regular exercise, Cheldelin Fell explained that there are other evidence-based modalities we might not know about that might be good for us. The first involves creating a **SELF-CARE PLAN** to help you stay healthy and grounded and ready to perform necessary tasks to the best of your ability as you serve families.

To illustrate her point, she asked attendees to think about the three people they love more than anything in the world and then asked if anyone had included *themselves* in that group. “Make yourself your own best friend,” Cheldelin Fell encouraged. “If you found out that your best friend was in a terrible accident and in the intensive care unit, you would visit them to cheer them up and give them some TLC. Why not do that for yourself? Make yourself your own best friend by creating a care plan – because when we feel better, we cope better.”

The next strategy is to create a **TRAUMA FILTER**. “Trauma is a language you hear all day long. You hear death stories from the moment you go in to the moment you leave,” Cheldelin Fell said. “How much trauma are you absorbing outside of that? Do you listen to the news? It’s full of trauma. Do you talk shop with someone else in the same field? When you do, you are also vicariously absorbing [trauma] stories that are not your own.”

When someone tells a story, she explained, “We visualize ourselves in it, so part of creating a trauma filter is viewing [the story] on a screen, as if you’re watching from the audience, not immersing yourself in it,” she said.

How do you know if you’re immersing yourself in the story? “Check your breathing,” she said. “Are you leaning in? Are you mirroring the facial expressions and gestures? If you are, then chances are you’re in their bubble.”

If you need a little visual distraction, Cheldelin Fell



suggested placing a bouquet of flowers between yourself and the speaker. “[Use that as] your visual to stay out of the bubble,” she said. “You can listen to their story without being part of it.”

Handling a case in which someone suffered an adverse childhood experience that you have also experienced, such as physical abuse or an alcoholic parent, can also trigger your trauma response and land you in their bubble. “Especially in those times, you want to create that trauma filter – because that is not your story,” she said.

**DEBRIEFING** is utilized by the military, firefighters and law enforcement. After they’ve been through a traumatic call, they come together as a team. Cheldelin Fell explained that debriefing involves a logical sequence of events to help those involved begin to process what they’ve experienced. The goal is to help them mitigate their emotional stress and let some of that steam off before they go home. “This is something that can and should be done in a funeral home,” she advised.

Cheldelin Fell shared a story she heard involving a funeral director who was leading a service at a cemetery as someone nearby was creating a noisy disturbance. The funeral director stopped the service, walked over to the man and asked him to quiet down. Inexplicably, the man pulled out a gun and shot himself right in front of her.

“Her boss didn’t call to check on her,” Cheldelin Fell said quietly. “The coroner called her five times to check on her. No debriefing was offered. No one in the funeral home even took the time to ask how she was doing. That’s a pretty horrific event and it was not addressed – and she was a mess. She did get the help she needed, but not from her funeral home.”

“Debriefing is a very powerful modality, especially in funeral service. It doesn’t have to take long, but it’s highly effective. During a debriefing, rank isn’t recognized, and you get to be honest about what you’re feeling without fear of your boss holding you accountable,” she added. “There are no repercussions for you to have a moment of meltdown. If you undergo [a debriefing], in 72 hours you generally will do better than those who don’t.”

Next, Cheldelin Fell discussed the **VAGUS NERVE**, the longest nerve in the human body and responsible for various bodily functions, including digestion, heart rate and breathing. She shared a story from her days as an EMT about a patient experiencing tachycardia. Because his heart was racing, she instructed him to hold his lower abdomen and bear down on it as if he were having a bowel movement. “What that does is get the vagus nerve to secrete a chemical that calms down the heart,” she explained. “It’s an effective way to deal with feel-



**The problem is that when “Amy” remains on high alert day after day, she creates neuroplasticity tracks of stress, so you stay in a heightened state of stress.**

ing stressed, anxious or on the verge of a panic attack.”

Another exercise involves the downward **STROKING** of the upper arm in a soothing way. Stroking your head and face is also effective in creating delta waves, which have been shown to help relax the mind.

**TAPPING** is another psychosensory modality. “It really has to do with tapping certain areas of your body 15 times, which introduces the same delta brainwaves,” she said. “Again, it can be done anytime and anywhere. It is a super-easy modality.”

**IMAGERY** is an effective strategy, as well. “The human brain is magical,” said Cheldelin Fell. “We can envision feelings both good and bad. Fortune 500 CEOs and elite athletes use this trick: they imagine the outcome before they take the stage or the field.”

How can you use this technique? Cheldelin Fell explained that you can create a “vacation scenario” in your brain that is unique to you and then visit that spot any time you need to decompress. “When you have time, imagine what the spot looks like,” she suggested. “What does it smell like? Engage your senses and try to visit that spot at least once a day – a peaceful, calm and inviting place that you want to go to. Imagery is very powerful.”

Another modality is called a **ZEN ZONE**, which could be a room in the funeral home that serves as a place where staff can go to decompress. “It could be a room where you practice your vacation spot in your brain,” she said. “The manager of the funeral home can stock it with stress toys or use aromatherapy, incense or flowers to create a calm place where staff can go when they need a moment.” One attendee said his firm has such a room for employees with a massage chair in it. Another said their room includes a waterfall feature.

**COLOR** can also help you deal with stress. “Colors affect how we feel,” Cheldelin Fell said. “The study of chromotherapy has been around since ancient Egypt, and Western culture is just now beginning to study its efficacy. What we do know is that [colors] help relax Amy if we pick colors that calm us down.”

Particular colors might not have the same effect on people across the board, however. For example, while some see red as an invigorating color, others see it as angry. “Notice how you react to colors and then use chromotherapy to change how you feel,” Cheldelin Fell offered. She noted that some people might try their hand at adult coloring [books], but

**“If you can induce a good belly laugh at least once a day, you will feel better. Many of these modalities are to deactivate ‘Amy,’ and unless we deactivate her, she’s going to stay.”**

there are other ways to engage in chromotherapy without having to pick up a crayon.

She suggested hanging colored lights in your bedroom or office. You can also watch color-wash videos on YouTube or find a picture that makes you feel calm and use that as a background on your computer. “Colors influence how we feel, so you can use that to your advantage,” noted Cheldelin Fell.

One study showed that spending 20 minutes outside in greenery can lower your heart rate and make you feel calmer by reducing blood pressure and pulse rate. This is an ancient Japanese practice called **FOREST BATHING**. “That’s why they created recess for kids,” she said. “They go outside – in that fresh air, green grass, trees – to help them calm down, so when they come back in, they can focus.” If you don’t have a park near you, use a serene photo as the wallpaper on your computer or blow it up into a poster and put it on the wall.

Another stress mitigator is **INTIMACY**. Some people are huggers, but not everyone is. “Skin is the largest organ in the body, and we all have the need to be touched, caressed and held, so when we give a hug and get one, it triggers endorphins,” Cheldelin Fell explained. “But what most people don’t know is it also puts pressure on the thymus gland, which is responsible for manufacturing white blood cells, which keep us healthy.”

Yet another modality is something Cheldelin Fell called **“MINDFUL DECON,”** which involves a “decontamination ritual” at the end of the day. “You want to be proactive rather than reactive,” she said. “What ritual are you creating before you step inside the door? It’s going to look different for each of you. One person listens to headbanging music; someone else puts in an audiobook. Do it before a shift and do it after a shift. Create that ritual that’s going to separate your work from your life.”

Crocheting and knitting can also prove effective because **REPETITIVE MOTIONS OF THE HAND** induce a meditative state. “I am a prolific crocheter,” she said. “At the end of the evening, that’s my ritual, and if I don’t get the crochet in, I get cranky – my husband will tell you.”

Next, Cheldelin Fell related her friendship with a school superintendent back home who chairs many committees. In

every meeting, she said, the superintendent has a **DOODLE BOOK**, in which she doodles throughout the meeting. “A lot of people were offended by that – they thought she was not paying attention – but she has a Ph.D. for a reason,” she explained. “Research has proved that people who doodle while on the phone or listening to a meeting retain up to 29% more.”

Cheldelin Fell also recommended **RESTORATIVE SLEEP**, which allows the body to repair and replace the cellular components necessary for biological functions that become depleted throughout the day. “What many people don’t know is that 17 hours without sleep is cognitively equivalent to being legally impaired,” she said. “It’s important that people understand how sleep affects our brain.”

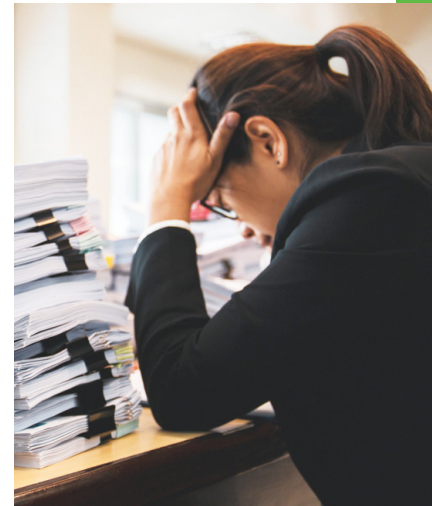
The saying goes that **LAUGHTER** is the best medicine. “Yes, it is an evidence-based modality,” confirmed Cheldelin Fell. “When you get a belly laugh, you create a perfect diaphragmatic breath, and the perfect diaphragmatic breath oxygenates your brain,” she said. “It’s also a natural painkiller. Who knew?”

But what if you don’t feel like laughing? When you are under stress – when things are piling up – the people who feel least like laughing are those who need it most. “If you can induce a good belly laugh at least once a day, that will make you feel better,” she said. “Many of these modalities are to deactivate Amy, and unless we deactivate her, she’s going to stay.”

Like chromotherapy, **MUSIC THERAPY** is effective as well. “Music influences how we feel, so use it to your advantage,” Cheldelin Fell noted. “If you feel like you’ve got a buildup of tears, then go ahead and listen to a song that helps you release that emotion. Laughter and crying are yin and yang. They both release emotion.”

One last evidence-based modality is **DANCE MOVEMENT THERAPY**. “Dancing is something that moves your lymph system and triggers hormones,” she explained. “We all have a go-to song. And it’s not about knowing the dance steps, nor is it about knowing all the words. It is about triggering the vagus nerve to release those chemicals.”

“Compassion fatigue affects our health, our relationships, our personal lives and eventually our clients,” said Cheldelin Fell. “Managers, take care of your staff. Help them understand that tools are available to them so they can endure a long career they love.”



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



## Back to the Future's Forum

By Edward J. Defort

In 2002, NFDA presented its first Future's Forum. At this event, some 70 thought leaders from within and outside of funeral service gathered at the association's headquarters in Brookfield, Wisconsin, to discuss the road ahead for the profession and how best to navigate it.

The challenges laid out by participants of that event some 20 years ago included:

- Consumer needs and demands, which were changing dramatically, such as an increase in cremation and a decrease in embalming.
- A funeral service business model that relied heavily on physical assets, such as buildings and caskets. As the type of service demanded by consumers was changing, the business model was breaking down, paving the way for new business models and new ways of generating revenue.
- In general, there was a negative image of funeral service among consumers, which suggested a growing need for consumer-centric initiatives.

The 2002 Future's Forum participants identified five specific opportunities that had surfaced:

- *Personalization* It would prove increasingly necessary to blend the personalization theme into funeral businesses. Offering highly customized points of entry, disposition options and tributes were likely to become important key factors.
- *Alliances* As the playing field shifted, new entrants would have skills unique from those of traditional funeral directors, and they would be looking for partners. Therefore, successful firms would excel

**NFDA invited new thought leaders to discuss the road ahead and chart a course to navigate the changes.**

at creating alliances and relationship management.

- *Flexibility* As consumer preferences shifted and industry structure and business models followed suit, there would be an increasing need to adopt flexible strategies.
- *Strategic Thinking and Leadership* As times became more turbulent and challenging for funeral directors, it would become increasingly important to have a long-term strategic perspective on decisions and options.
- *Maintaining Open, Honest Dialogue* As a group, funeral directors held a great deal of power with both suppliers and consumers. Openly and honestly discussing issues affecting the profession with each other – and acting as a coherent group – would prove critical to success.

With that as prologue, NFDA recently invited a new group of thought leaders to discuss what the road ahead might hold and to chart a course to navigate through the myriad of changes the funeral service profession faces. Held in May 2023, the event was facilitated by Paul Schoemaker, who had conducted the first Future's Forum, along with his colleague Jim Austin.

This new Future's Forum examined how funeral directors, many of whom face revenue challenges, cost increases and



staff shortages, can use various approaches to find new growth options and pursue innovation strategies.

As a member of the next generation of funeral directors, funeral service education stu-

dents like you should pay particular attention to the observations of event participants as they outlined the challenges funeral directors face, including:

- Demographic trends and psychographic shifts in the United States, which reflect changing consumer needs, including the continuing shift toward cremation; decreasing preference for viewing and embalming; consolidation by corporate entities; low-cost entrants; and numerous digital innovations. In addition, environmental concerns are fueling natural burials and other avenues for more-sustainable solutions.
- Today's funeral service business models still rely heavily on physical assets, such as real estate, facilities, automobiles and inventories, e.g., caskets. But since the type of services demanded by consumers is changing, this business model is under stress and breaking down in various locales.
- In general, funeral directors continue to have a poor-to-mixed reputation among consumers overall.
- Just as many service industries face staffing shortages, from restaurants to hotels to airlines, the regulatory requirements specific to funeral homes add to this shared burden.
- Continued disruptions from digital innovations, with an increasingly IT-savvy clientele, means that more-flexible marketing channels need to be deployed – especially social media and websites. Looking forward, new platform models will emerge that rely on augmented reality, artificial intelligences (AI), and even multiverse worlds in which avatars, robots and other hybrid constellations offer a new medium for planning, experiencing and recording funeral services. These technologies, including AI, might also alter how grieving, bereavement, healing and memorialization will be conducted in years to come.

All of these challenges call for management approaches that can not only handle standard cases of decision making under risk but also situations entailing significant uncertainty, ambiguity or even chaos.

Like the 2002 edition, the 2023 Future's Forum was not meant to have a beginning, middle and end. Instead, it is a work in progress that will constantly evolve to meet changing consumer needs and the business realities of the day.

Several participants at this year's event weighed in on the program, including:

- **Joshua Meyer** *manager, Chaput-Buoy Funeral Home, Concordia, Kansas*
- **Benny Capaul** *fourth-generation funeral director, Capaul Funeral Homes, Ida, Michigan*
- **Jake Johnson** *president of Johnson Consulting Group, Phoenix, Arizona.*

*What did you think about the concept of the Future's Forum event when you first heard about it?*

**Meyer:** I thought the concept was very intriguing, and I did not know that there was a previous Future's Forum until I attended this version. I felt that the group was a solid mixture of all facets of funeral service.

**Capaul:** I thought this would be an awesome way to get together with intelligent leaders in our profession and be able to bridge, educate and strategically plan how to develop better skills in our profession and help promote and show value in our profession, as well as our communities.

**Johnson:** The concept of putting industry leaders in the various areas of our profession together – from funeral home ownership to vendors – was very humbling. I was honored to be in that crowd. To share ideas from different perspectives of what's going on in the profession really provided great insight into what our current and future challenges are, and how we might be able to tackle them.

*What were your expectations and did the event live up to them?*

**Meyer:** I did not have any expectations coming into the forum or meetings. I really wasn't sure what the discussion would include or how we would begin discussions. I came in open minded and felt that whatever came from the meetings would be beneficial.

**Capaul:** No, but not in a bad way. Just as in it was more of

**The 2023 Future's Forum was not meant to have a beginning, middle and end. It's a work in progress.**





a leadership presentation with breakouts occasionally. It was a good presentation on how to be better leaders but not necessarily on the main topics of our everyday firms. Networking was honestly the best part for me.

**Johnson:** The expectation was that I would be amongst top industry professionals, and it certainly lived up to that expectation. It was a humbling crowd and having the opportunity to mingle and get to know fellow industry leaders was a unique experience.



*What were the key topics you wanted to discuss?*

**Meyer:** How do we survive in this industry, moving forward, with margins and profits shrinking and a workforce shortage? How do we serve rural communities that still have a need but not the volume to pay staff and expenses? How do I become a better funeral service professional for my community and help my colleagues in my area and state?

**Capaul:** Educating the youth in our communities so we can better handle not only the families we serve but the staff that will help us do it. Also, educating youth on death; breaking the sexism and prejudices in our profession; promoting young funeral directors and their ideas; helping bridge the gap between the young and the more-experienced directors; promoting healthy diversity and stopping sexism.

**Johnson:** A key topic was how the funeral profession tackles the changing preferences of the families we serve, both electronically and through the facilities and offerings we provide.

*What, if anything, surprised you during the discussion?*

**Meyer:** I believe we are beginning to turn a corner regarding our reluctance to help our fellow funeral professionals. I think many of us see that we need to make a collective, col-

laborative effort to be better to one another in sharing ideas, philosophies and strategies to survive. I feel that our profession is beginning to understand that hoarding ideas does not benefit us as a whole.

**Capaul:** That it was more of a teaching forum and not a breakout strategic planning for the future.

**Johnson:** Very little surprised me during this discussion.

*What were key takeaways from the session?*

**Meyer:** The key thing I took away from the forum was that I really needed to remove myself as an operator and professional, and look from the “outside in.” What do I need to do to make the experience better for my client families? What are those “pain points” for my consumers? Also, how can I better educate my community about the value of service? What is our vigilance quotient?

**Capaul:** The breakout conversations truly solidified my thoughts that we need to work more as a unit and not as individuals. Stop the competitor conversation and start promoting colleagues. The better we can educate and help each other, the better for our communities when it comes to death and grief.

**Johnson:** Artificial intelligence, online offerings, and modern funeral home design were key takeaways for me.

*Most important for this event, what are the key points that you will implement in your business?*

**Meyer:** When I was waiting for my return flight, I put together almost two pages of notes to begin discussing with my staff. These included going back to some basics and defining who we are as a business in our community, revisiting our mission statement and business model, and making adjustments to both. I also sat down with my staff, and we all discussed our own mental health and what can we do collectively to make things better for us, as well.

**Capaul:** To start really pushing and trying to install some outside-the-box ways of doing business and defining a community member.

**Johnson:** As a funeral home owner, more transparency in online offerings and improved layout in my facilities are points I will implement. As a vendor, focusing on those pain points that funeral businesses are experiencing through the families they serve.

**We've begun to turn a corner regarding our reluctance to help our fellow directors. Hoarding ideas doesn't benefit us as a whole.**



*Were there areas you wished to discuss but weren't brought up?*

**Meyer:** I would have liked some additional ideas about innovation, but that can sometimes turn into a sales pitch. I think time with roundtable

discussions about different innovation ideas would have been helpful, but a fair amount of that did occur in the social settings.

**Capaul:** Sexism in the workplace; education vs. real life in the field; youth in the funeral homes; inflation of employees' family and loans; competitor vs. colleague; educational differences and no uniform degree/licensure nationally.

*What changes would you like to see at the next Forum?*

**Meyer:** I think the roundtable discussions with reporting back was very helpful and useful. I believe the more we can share ideas and passions, the better served our profession will be in the future. I think that as technology advances, there may be a way for everyone in the forum to participate via a phone app, iPad, laptop, etc., to be able to participate and share ideas that can be collected and then shared to the group after the forum, in a PDF format, Google docs, etc.

**Capaul:** More of a table discussion/strategic planning for the future. I'd like to see more youth and also more conversations trying to make the funeral profession what it deserves to be.

**Johnson:** With most gatherings like the Future's Forum, there is so much to discuss and so many perspectives, depending on the size of the market that various businesses serve. Having said that, it has been hard to determine the "magic pill" that solves some of these problems. What would be interesting to see in the future would be to bring up the topics and issues that resonate with those top leaders prior to the event and have roundtables to literally solve the problems – possibly even prior to the event – to present those problems in group roundtable formats, and then the entire group decides if it was a profound solution or not.

Everybody's talking about change. Everybody knows what

**No one yet has come up with something that has profound change that impacts the entire profession and resonates off the charts with families.**

change is and that it's here or coming, but nobody has really come up with something that has profound change that impacts the entire profession in a way that resonates off the charts with families. We all have our best practices and better ways we can provide customer service, but what are some unique ways that are truly earth shattering? Ways that make you say, "Wow, I've never looked at it that way. That is really eye-opening."

*Please add any general comments, pro or con. Constructive criticism is welcomed and encouraged.*

**Meyer:** I felt that this forum accomplished a good starting point to begin the process of forward-thinking discussion, but it was just that, a starting point. We need to be vigilant and continue our discussion and sharing ideas regularly. The gap between these forums was too long. We need to have a "Future's Discussion" at our national convention on an annual basis to make sure the wheel continues to spin around. Then, ideas from those discussions can be passed along throughout the year to the members and, hopefully, they will at least read and make an attempt to try one or two things.

**Capaul:** All in all, I was truly honored to be even considered for the forum. It would be cool to offer more scholarship money to us young funeral directors who may or may not get help from our firms in general. Also, to see more youth and more female representation – maybe even having a younger funeral director host some of the conversation. Thank you, NFDA, for this amazing opportunity.

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



*From the Editor's Desk*

# Why Is This A Thing?



As the leaves on the trees fall in the autumnal crispness, I find myself in somewhat of a reflective mood. The cover is on the pool, the long-sleeve shirts have been moved to the front of the closet and the World Series will soon offer the last grasp on summer.

But a couple of news articles caught my eye and caused me, in my reflective state, to wonder: What is the deal with gender-reveal parties?

One article delved into the history of these 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 her unborn child 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.

But many of these stories capture headlines for all the wrong reasons and seem 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. In November 2019, a plane used in a reveal crashed in Texas because of the reveal stunt. One month earlier in Iowa, a pipe bomb that was supposed to release blue or pink powder instead sent shrapnel through the air, killing a grandmother.

In 2020, a gender-reveal party resulted in a massive wildfire in San Bernardino County, California, that ultimately burned more than 22,000 acres and resulted in the death of a firefighter. The news of this tragic circumstance 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 this. I do often wonder whether my father passed out cigars when I was born (that's what 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 and reflection on this topic, my confusion involves imagining 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 really care. I get it – we live in an experiential society, but what will the shelf life of this experience be?

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ed."

**Edward J. Defort**  
Editor

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