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Inside Look: ABFSE Enrollment and Graduation Numbers

By Deana Gillespie and Edward J. Defort

As you probably knew well before you enrolled in a funeral service program, statistics hold varying degrees of interest. Each year, the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) issues a statistical report that offers a detailed look at enrollment and graduation numbers in ABFSE-accredited funeral service education programs.

So, what does this mean for you? While we keep an eye on the number of funeral service graduates, we must also be mindful that a number of states are seeing shortages in funeral director applicants.

And let's not lose sight of that nebulous baby boomer spike that was predicted to occur any time between 10 years ago and 2025. In actuality, what is expected is going to be less of a spike and more of a gradual increase. About 10 to 15 years ago, prognosticators suggested that the baby boomer-fueled spike in number of deaths would be hitting about now. And though that projection turned out to be at least a half-decade premature, it still forced the profession to think about the developing labor pool.

And with the number of new funeral service graduates in 2020 at the highest level in 20 years, and new enrollments off just a tick from 2019, it also doesn't appear that the COVID-19 pandemic had much of an impact, at least on the number of students in funeral service education programs, according to ABFSE statistics.

Total current-year enrollment (new students, pre-graduates



The number of new grads in 2020 reached its highest level in 20 years, and new enrollments were off just a tick from 2019.

STUDENT ENROLLMENT / GRADUATION

Year	New Students	Graduates
1975	2,475	1,852
1980	2,155	1,397
1985	2,222	1,509
1990	2,213	1,622
1995	3,022	2,221
2000	2,368	1,745
2005	2,691	1,483
2010	2,824	1,374
2011	2,917	1,494
2012	2,885	1,589
2013	2,755	1,548
2014	2,567	1,449
2015	2,639	1,713
2016	2,511	1,638
2017	2,411	1,646
2018	2,359	1,501
2019	2,588	1,597
2020	2,560	1,720

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

ATTRITION PROGRAM YEAR 2020

Reason for Withdrawal	Number	Percentage
Remained in funeral service-related major but transferred to another institution	8	1.06
Changed major but remained in higher education	40	5.29
Left for academic reasons	253	33.47
Left for financial reasons	89	11.77
Left for personal reasons	335	44.31
Left for other reasons	31	4.10
TOTALS	756	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

5,947, which is 6.3% higher than 2019, and 8.9% higher than the 5,420 enrolled in 2018.

While the pandemic failed to move the needle on enrollment in funeral service education, it did force every college in the country to shift to distance delivery, for which the U.S. Department of Education requires accreditors to evaluate and approve the programs.

As for ABFSE-accredited programs, 19 of them offer 50% or more of courses via distance learning. “A total of 43 offered some distance-education courses pre-COVID-19,” said Robb Smith, ABFSE executive director. “This could be in the form of prerequisite or general-education courses, and as few as one or

NEW ENROLLEES BY AGE PROGRAM YEAR 2020

Age	# of Students	Percentage
20 or under	388	15.16
21-25	794	31.02
26-30	518	20.23
31-35	315	12.30
36-40	225	8.79
41-45	154	6.02
46-50	63	2.46
51-55	58	2.27
56-60	28	1.09
61-65	10	0.39
66-70	1	0.04
71 and over	1	0.04
Unknown	5	0.20
TOTALS	2,560	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

NEW ENROLLEES BY PRIOR EDUCATION PROGRAM YEAR 2020

Level Completed	# of Students	Percentage
GED	165	6.45
High school graduate	2,379	92.93
Other	16	0.63
TOTALS	2,560	100%
High school or equivalent	663	25.90
1 year of college	455	17.77
2 years of college	678	26.48
3 years of college	218	8.52
Bachelor's degree	407	15.90
Master's degree	86	3.36
Other	53	2.07
TOTALS	2,560	100%

Previously attended a funeral service program 138

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

and graduate students) in the 56 funeral service programs in 2020 was

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With the number of new enrollees remaining consistent with previous years, Ennis noted that there were more graduates from ABFSE programs in 2020 than in the previous several years. “This is a good sign if they all become licensed and stay in the profession,” he said.

Looking at 2020, the ABFSE funeral service program total enrollment of 2,560 is down 1.1% from 2,588 new students in 2019, and up 8.5% from 2,359 new students in 2018.

This year's new enrollment is 20.3% fewer students than the record 3,213 students enrolled in 1996. The 1996 figure, however, is considered an aberration since that was the year the associate degree was implemented as the minimum ABFSE

two funeral-specific courses.”

The most recent entries into distance education were Mid-America and Gup-ton-Jones colleges. The University of Arkansas at Hope was approved to offer the accredited program via distance in June 2021. Three additional programs indicate they are currently preparing applications for distance-education (DE) approval. (The U.S. Department of Education requires approval of a DE program by the accreditor.) Three or four others have inquired about the process to seek DE approval.

In 2020, Smith said 39% of graduates were reported to have completed 50% or more of their funeral service education via distance education, up from 32% of graduates in 2019, and 21% in 2018.

“I do believe that the COVID-19 experience taught many schools how challenging it is to develop and maintain a quality DE program,” Smith said. “It is far more than converting classroom material and lectures to an online format.”

INSIDE THE NUMBERS

As he did during his term as ABFSE president, Jzyk Ennis, ABFSE immediate past president and funeral service educator at Jefferson State Commu-

NEW ENROLLEES BY ETHNIC ORIGIN AND GENDER PROGRAM YEAR 2020

Ethnic Origin	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
White	458	65.80	1,140	61.16	1,598	62.42
African American	144	20.69	349	18.72	493	19.26
Hispanic	70	10.06	267	14.32	337	13.16
Native American	4	0.57	16	0.86	20	0.78
Asian-Pacific Islander	6	0.86	14	0.75	20	0.78
Other	14	2.01	78	4.18	92	3.59
TOTALS	696	100%	1,864	100%	2,560	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

NEW ENROLLEES BY PRIOR FUNERAL SERVICE EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM YEAR 2020

Employed	# of Students	Percentage of Total Students New Enrollees (2,560)
Less than 6 months	356	13.91
6 months to 1 year	263	10.27
More than 1 year	407	15.90
TOTALS	1,026	40.08%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

NEW ENROLLEES BY FAMILY IN FUNERAL SERVICE PROGRAM YEAR 2020

	# of Students	Percentage of Total Students New Enrollees (2,560)
Parent	151	5.90
Spouse	38	1.48
Sibling	24	0.94
In-law	23	0.90
Other	102	3.98
TOTALS	338	13.20%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

GRADUATES BY ETHNIC ORIGIN AND GENDER PROGRAM YEAR 2020

Ethnic Origin	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
White	408	71.83	776	67.36	1,184	68.84
African American	111	19.54	202	17.53	313	18.20
Hispanic	31	5.46	121	10.50	152	8.84
Native American	3	0.53	13	1.13	16	0.93
Asian/Pacific Islander	5	0.88	13	1.13	18	1.05
Other/Did Not Indicate	10	1.76	27	2.34	37	2.15
TOTALS	568	100%	1,152	100%	1,720	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

standard. Thus, many students flocked to ABFSE certificate and diploma programs to complete their funeral service education before the requirement took effect.

Between 2011 and 2018, new enrollment showed a gradual dip – from 2,917 students in 2011 to 2,359 in 2018 – a 19.1% decline. The 2019 and 2020 numbers show the strongest year-after-year growth since 2014-15.

The 1,720 graduates in 2020 is 7.7% more than the 1,597 graduates in 2019, and 14.6% more than the 1,501 graduates in 2018.

In 2020, 756 students left accredited funeral service education programs, which is 5.1% more than the 719 students who exited in 2019, and 9.9% more than the 688 students who left in 2018.

This year, reasons cited for leaving include personal reasons (44.3% vs. 29.7% in 2019), academic reasons (33.5% vs. 40.9%),

financial reasons (11.8% vs. 7.5%), changed major but remained in higher education (5.3% vs 8.34%), and “other” reasons (4.1% vs. 11.78%). In 2020, 1.1% remained in a funeral service education-related major but transferred to another institution.

There has been much chatter in funeral service through the years about the enrollment decline in funeral service schools possibly creating an environment in which there is a shortage of qualified professionals. But this is a two-pronged problem. While it’s true that the schools do see attrition, it is the post-graduate exodus that most concerns funeral directors and owners.

According to a recent study charged by ABFSE, graduates leaving funeral service cited compensation as the most frequent reason for their departure. That was followed by hours and burnout, domestic and/or family issues, a toxic environment, the expectations of the career and no opportunity for advancement.

NEW ENROLLEE PROFILES

Based on the ABFSE statistics, the “typical” person enrolling in a funeral service program in 2020 was a white female, 21 to 25 years of age, and a high-school graduate with at least one or two years of college.

In terms of age, just 12.3% of 2020 new enrollees were over 40, while slightly more than half fell between 21 and 30.

The data also reveal that students entering funeral service education programs continue to have more prior education than previous enrollees. From 1971-2004, the number of students having one or more years of college under their belts ranged between 51% and 62%. In 2009, that figure jumped to 69%. In 2020, it landed at 74.2%, up from 71.5% in 2019, and 70.7% in 2018.

Furthermore, in 2020, the number of enrollees with bachelor’s or graduate degrees was put at 19.3%, up from 16.7% in 2019, and 17.3% in 2018.

Continuing a 21st century trend, significantly more women than men are enrolling in funeral service programs. The tipping point came in 2000, when female enrollees surpassed

GRADUATES BY AGE
PROGRAM YEAR 2020

Age	# of Students	Percentage
20 or under	97	5.64
21-25	567	32.97
26-30	400	23.26
31-35	226	13.14
36-40	168	9.77
41-45	113	6.57
46-50	69	4.01
51-55	37	2.15
56-60	32	1.86
61-65	7	0.41
66-70	3	0.17
71 and over	1	0.06
Unknown	0	0.00
TOTALS	1,720	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

GRADUATES BY PRIOR EDUCATION
PROGRAM YEAR 2020

Level Completed	# of Students	Percentage
GED	82	4.77
High school grad	1,616	93.95
Other	22	1.28
TOTALS	1,720	100%
High school or equivalent	352	20.47
1 year of college	283	16.45
2 years of college	529	30.76
3 years of college	159	9.24
Bachelor's degree	324	18.84
Master's degree	50	2.91
Other	23	1.34
TOTALS	1,720	100%
Previously attended a funeral service program	63	

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

GRADUATES WHO WORKED WHILE IN SCHOOL
PROGRAM YEAR 2020

Employment	Number	Percentage of Total Number Grads (1,720)
In funeral-related services	1,093	63.55
Other non-funeral service employment	427	24.83
TOTALS	1,520	88.38%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

GRADUATES BY FAMILY IN FUNERAL SERVICE
PROGRAM YEAR 2020

Employment	Number	Percentage of Total Number Grads (1,720)
Parent	123	7.15
Spouse	22	1.28
Sibling	9	0.52
In-law	17	0.99
Other	50	2.91
TOTALS	221	12.85%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

the number of males enrolling 51% to 49%, respectively. Today, the number of women entering funeral service education programs is more than two-and-a-half times the number of men, 72.8% to 27.2%. This compares with 2019 when, out of 2,588 new students enrolled, 1,814 were female (70%) and 774 were male (29.9%). In 2018, of the 2,359 new students enrolled, 1,572 were female (66.64%) and 787 were male.

Broken down by ethnicity, 62.4% of all new students were white in 2020, compared with 64.6% in 2019, and 66.9% in 2018. The percentage of African American enrollees in 2020 was 19.3%, up from 18.3% in 2019, but down from 19.4% in 2018. Hispanics accounted for 13.2% of new enrollees in 2020, up from 12.3% in 2019, and 10.5% in 2018.

From a much smaller base, the number of new Asian/Pacific Islander enrollees was 0.8% in 2020, down from 1.2% in 2019, but up a tick from 0.7% in 2018. The number of new Native American students was also 0.8%, down from 1.2% in 2019, and 1% in 2018. The number of new students of “other” ethnic backgrounds was 3.6% in 2020, up from 2.4% in 2019, and from 2% in 2018.

According to ABFSE’s 2020 stats, 65.8% of male new enrollees and 61.2% of female new enrollees were white. This compares to 67.4% of male new enrollees and 63.4% of fe-

male new enrollees in 2019, and 72.8% and 63.9%, respectively, in 2018.

The number of African American new enrollees in 2020 was up: 20.7% of male enrollees and 18.7% of female enrollees. This compares with 19.4% of male new enrollees and 17.9% of female new enrollees in 2019, and with 19.7% of male new enrollees and 19.2% of female new enrollees in 2018.

In 2020, 10.1% of new male enrollees and 14.3% of new female enrollees were Hispanic, compared to 9.6% of male enrollees and 13.4% of female enrollees in 2019, and 5.5% of male enrollees and 12.3% of female enrollees in 2018.

Asian/Pacific Islanders accounted for 0.9% of new male enrollees and 0.7% of new female enrollees in 2020, compared with 1.4% of new male enrollees and 1.2% of new female enrollees in 2019. In 2018, it was 0.5% of new male enrollees and 0.8% of new female enrollees.

Native Americans accounted for 0.6% of new male enrollees and 0.9% of new female enrollees. This compares with 0.8% of male enrollees and 1.3% of female enrollees in 2019, and 0.5% of new male enrollees and 1.2% of new female enrollees in 2018.

Of those who checked “other” in 2020, ABFSE reported 2% of all new male enrollees and 4.2% of new female enrollees. This compares with 1.4% of all new male enrollees and 2.8% of all new female enrollees in 2019, and 1% of male enrollees and 2.5% of female enrollees in 2018.

In 2020, 13.2% of all new enrollees were found to be carrying on, or getting into, the family business, up from 12.8% in 2019, and 13% in 2018.

Of all new enrollees last year, 5.9% had a parent in the business; 1.5% had a spouse; 0.9% a sibling; 0.9% an in-law; and 4% said “other” relative.

Graduates who worked in funeral-related service while attending school logged in at 63% in 2020. This was down from 67.9% in 2019. Ennis commented that this roughly 5% drop in those who worked in a funeral home while in school is not surprising considering the pandemic.

GRADUATE PROFILES

As mentioned earlier, there were 1,720 graduates from ac-

NEW ENROLLEES / GRADUATES BY STATE (PROGRAM YEAR 2020)

State	New Enrollees	Percentage	Graduates	Percentage
Alabama	43	1.68	26	1.51
Alaska	2	0.08	0	0.06
Arizona	4	0.16	30	1.74
Arkansas	49	1.91	37	2.15
California	112	4.38	55	3.20
Colorado	27	1.05	29	1.69
Connecticut	25	0.98	19	1.10
Delaware	14	0.55	5	0.29
District of Columbia	5	0.20	4	0.23
Florida	107	4.18	86	5.00
Georgia	79	3.09	80	4.65
Hawaii	0	0.00	0	0.00
Idaho	9	0.35	9	0.52
Illinois	165	6.45	110	6.40
Indiana	106	4.14	65	3.78
Iowa	25	0.98	27	1.57
Kansas	18	0.70	18	1.05
Kentucky	63	2.46	34	1.98
Louisiana	57	2.23	30	1.74
Maine	10	0.39	6	0.35
Maryland	44	1.72	45	2.62
Massachusetts	46	1.80	30	1.74
Michigan	52	2.03	50	2.91
Minnesota	40	1.56	21	1.22
Mississippi	44	1.72	19	1.10
Missouri	42	1.64	32	1.86
Montana	5	0.20	10	0.58
Nebraska	20	0.78	10	0.58
Nevada	5	0.20	3	0.17
New Hampshire	9	0.35	1	0.06
New Jersey	91	3.55	37	2.15
New Mexico	7	0.27	5	0.29
New York	243	9.49	101	5.87
North Carolina	112	4.38	76	4.42
North Dakota	7	0.27	8	0.47
Ohio	74	2.89	74	4.30
Oklahoma	76	2.97	31	1.80
Oregon	26	1.02	17	0.99
Pennsylvania	118	4.61	84	4.88
Rhode Island	9	0.35	2	0.12
South Carolina	25	0.98	13	0.76
South Dakota	4	0.16	10	0.58
Tennessee	59	2.30	44	2.56
Texas	307	11.99	189	10.99
Utah	19	0.74	16	0.93
Vermont	1	0.04	1	0.06
Virginia	59	2.30	46	2.67
Washington	31	1.21	18	1.05
West Virginia	16	0.63	16	0.93
Wisconsin	39	1.52	35	2.03
Wyoming	2	0.08	2	0.12
Unknown	0	0.00	0	0.00
Foreign	8	0.31	4	0.23
TOTAL	2,560	100%	1,720	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

credited programs in 2020, the highest number since 2000, when there were 1,745 graduates. Looking at more recent history, the number of graduates in 2020 was up 7.7% from the 1,597 graduates in 2019, and 14.6% from the 1,501 graduates in 2018.

These graduates represent 48 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Alaska and Hawaii were the only states without a graduate, and four graduates hailed from other countries. Texas led all states with 189 grads, followed by Illinois with 110, New York with 101, Florida with 86, Pennsylvania with 84, and Georgia with 80.

As also noted before, 2000 was the year in which the scales tipped toward women on the enrollment side, but it wasn't until 2005 that there were more women than men graduating from funeral service education programs. That year, of 1,483 graduates, 52.2% were women. Overall in 2020, more than two-thirds (67%) of the 1,720 graduates were female. In 2019, 65.2% of the 1,597 graduates were women, up slightly from 2018, when 64.8% of the 1,501 graduates were women.

In terms of age, only 15.2% of graduates in 2020 were over 40, while 56.2% fell between 21 and 30 years of age.

The 2020 data also found that the number of graduates with a bachelor's or graduate degree was 21.7%, up from 18.6% in 2019.

Ennis noted that less than a quarter of graduates hold a bachelor's degree or higher. "I mention this," he said, "because in previous years, some publications have said that we need to focus on students in liberal-arts colleges to get them to come into the funeral profession. I'm not sure that we are that attractive with pay/benefits/schedule."

According to ABFSE, 68.8% of all graduates in 2020 were white, compared to 69.1% in 2019, and 70.9% in 2018. The percentage of African American graduates was 18.2%, compared with 18.2% in 2019, and 16.5% in 2018. The percentage of Hispanic graduates in 2020 was 8.8%, down from 9.6% in 2019, and 9.1% in 2018.

From a smaller base, the percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander graduates was 1% in 2020, up from 0.8% in 2019, but down from 1.5% in 2018. The percentage of Native American graduates last year was 0.9%, on par with the 0.9% in 2019, and up from 0.3% in 2018. Graduates with "other/did not indicate" responses was 2.1% in 2020, up from 1.2% in 2019, and from 1.73% in 2018.

Broken down by gender, 71.8% of male graduates and 67.4% of female graduates in 2020 were white, which compares with 74.87% of male graduates and 66.1% of female graduates in 2019, and 76.7% and 67.7%, respectively, in 2018. Last year, 19.5% of male graduates and 17.5% of female graduates were African American, compared with 16.8% of male graduates and 19% of female graduates in 2019, and 15.5% of male graduates and 17% of female graduates in 2018. Among Hispanic graduates in 2020, 5.5% were male and 10.5% were female, compared with 5.4% and 11.9%, respectively, in 2019, and 5.1% and 11.3%, respectively, in 2018.

From a smaller base, Native Americans accounted for 0.5% of male graduates and 1.1% of female graduates in 2020. This compares to 0.7% of male graduates and 1.1% of female

graduates in 2019, and 0.2% of male graduates and 0.3% of female graduates in 2018.

In 2020, 0.9% of all male graduates and 1.1% of female graduates were Asian/Pacific Islander, compared with 0.9% of male graduates and 0.8% of female graduates in 2019, and 1.1% of male graduates and 1.7% of female graduates in 2018.

ABFSE reported that 1.8% of all male graduates and 2.3% of all female graduates classified themselves as "other/did not indicate," which compared with 1.4% of all male graduates and 1.1% of all female graduates in 2019, and 1.3% of all male graduates and 1.9% of all female graduates in 2018.

While funeral service was long considered a multigenerational family business, ABFSE stats show funeral service trending away from being a family affair. In 2020, 12.8% of graduates had a relative in funeral service, which is down from 14.9% in 2019, and 16.6% in 2018. A total of 123 graduates (7.1%) had a parent in the business in 2020; 1.3% had a spouse; 0.5% had a sibling; 1% had an in-law; and 2.9% responded "other" relative.

Ennis noted that in 2020, the number of graduates who had family members in the funeral profession dropped by 5%, meaning that less than 13% of 2020 graduates had a family member in the profession. "That means there are overwhelmingly more first-generation funeral professionals coming out of our ABFSE programs," said Ennis. "This is great, but why are owners' kids, etc., not entering the 'family business'? Is it tied to schedule/off time, pay/benefits, etc.? I believe so."

Smith said he did not think it is appropriate to compare graduation or enrollment numbers to the recent ABFSE Task Force study of those remaining in or leaving funeral service. "Some enter our accredited programs with the goal to work for the medical examiner or in a cemetery, crematory, casket company, chemical company, etc.," he said.

"Over the years, I've met graduates at our conventions who now work for vendors and suppliers, but the education and experience in funeral service provided those opportunities," Smith continued. "Our funeral service educators are drawn from the ranks of funeral home employees. In the ABFSE office, we get phone calls and emails from individuals who really want to work in the medical examiner's office or in an autopsy facility or as CSI technicians, but they have been advised to get a funeral service education first."

Smith added that attracting new candidates to enter funeral service and providing a work environment that will maintain the existing workforce can be two different challenges.

"In order to address the labor shortage, funeral service needs to be aware that potential employees are not just comparing job offers from different funeral homes, but they are comparing the options available to them throughout the workplace," he said. "We also need to recognize that funeral service is not alone in concerns regarding the labor pool. Teachers, social workers, nurses – and the list goes on – face the same concerns. How do we keep those we have and how do we attract new?"

Deana Gillespie is NFDA research director.

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Understanding Email Marketing Options for Funeral Service

By Welton Hong

As a consumer, you're probably most familiar with promotional emails that offer discounts, free shipping if you buy right away or 20% off if you refer your friends.

That's great for certain businesses, but it's not the best type of email campaign for a funeral home. "Flash sale on caskets ends tomorrow!" and "BOGO headstones" aren't the type of offers likely to endear a funeral home or cemetery.

As a funeral service student, you're learning about how to provide services to your community, but the business aspect of deathcare is just as critical. Once you're in a position of making decisions on how to promote your services, you'll need to have a good understanding of email marketing. And just because traditional promotional emails are off the table doesn't mean you can't use email marketing to drive leads and conversions.

Email marketing can drive a very impressive return on investment. The average is \$42 for every dollar spent.

Here are five other types of campaigns deathcare firms might engage in.

WELCOME CAMPAIGNS

Welcome emails thank someone for signing up or for making a purchase. But it's more than good manners. That sign-up or first contact opens the door for you to further engage with potential clientele.

Welcome email campaigns are usually a series of three to five emails triggered by a sign-up. The first arrives immediately upon sign-up (or at least within the first 24 hours). It thanks the consumer for their action and provides one or two bits of helpful information.

Other emails in a welcome series carry on a sort of one-sid-



ed conversation, providing the consumer with additional information in an attempt to prompt continued contact or a purchase.

Firms can use welcome email campaigns when someone signs up for a newsletter or webinar, or requests pre-

planning information or a brochure. Simply put an opt-in box on any of those forms that gives you permission to send marketing emails; if the consumer doesn't uncheck the box, the welcome campaign will launch automatically.

You can also customize the campaigns to meet the needs of your business and target audiences. Here is an example of how a campaign might run if someone requested preplanning information:

- ▶ **EMAIL 1:** Thank the prospective client for reaching out and attach information about preplanning.
- ▶ **EMAIL 2:** Follow up to see if there are any questions and provide a link to a blog post with statistics about preplanning.
- ▶ **EMAIL 3:** Offer an invitation to download a workbook on preplanning to help them get started.
- ▶ **EMAIL 4:** Let them know you're available whenever they're ready and give them a specific name and number if they want to reach out.

SEASONAL CAMPAIGNS

In the retail world, seasonal email campaigns are created around times such as holidays or back-to-school months. Deathcare businesses should avoid being overt, however. Yes, death rates tend to rise in December and January, but launching a midwinter email campaign based on that premise is unlikely to bear much fruit and may scare off your audience.

Instead, create seasonal email campaigns meant to provide existing subscribers with value, while positioning your funeral home as a caring part of the community. Reach out with fun summer recipes or tips for beating the heat in the neighborhood, for example, and use soft, subtle calls to action that remind people you're there if they have a need.

CAMPAIGNS CONNECTED TO SOCIAL MEDIA

Funeral homes that want to build a better presence on social

media might start with email campaigns meant to bring subscribers to Facebook or Instagram.

Begin with a compelling social media post that includes an image. Next, include the image and part of the caption in an email, along with an obvious link to the post. Then ask your subscribers to respond, using a call to action:

- We'd love to hear your feedback on...
- Share your story about...
- How do you use an urn to honor your loved one?
Share a picture with others.

Make sure the call to action is relevant to the social media post and it's clear what you want people to do with the post.

If you want to drive more participation, couple your call to action with a giveaway. Purchase a gift card to a local shop or restaurant, for example, and say you'll pick a winner from all who respond or share your post on social media.

The goal of these types of emails is to engage people across multiple channels and build rapport with members of your target audience. This helps increase future activity on your social media pages and the likelihood people might call on you when they have a need.

REENGAGEMENT CAMPAIGNS

Reengagement campaigns remind people that they were interested in your service at one point and might help to persuade them to act now. This is a great option for reengaging consumers who previously showed interest in preplanning services.

Again, you can customize your campaigns to fit your brand and audience, but a sample preplanning email reengagement campaign might look like this:

- ▶ **EMAIL 1:** Remind potential clientele that they had requested information about preplanning, acknowledge that life gets busy, and provide a link to download

a quick guide or infographic on preplanning.

- ▶ **EMAIL 2:** Provide three ways in which your firm makes preplanning easy.
- ▶ **EMAIL 3:** Dispel a common myth about preplanning and let the prospect know how they can reach out to learn more or begin preplanning.

EDUCATIONAL EMAILS

Educational emails are a common form of triggered email campaign for deathcare firms, as they're automatically triggered by the action of potential clientele. For example, if someone indicates on your site that they're interested in preplanning, a series of five emails will follow. Kicking off the campaign might be preplanning tips, links to more information or step-by-step guidance on how to begin the preplanning process.

You can also send educational email series to your existing subscriber list without a trigger. Instead of a monthly newsletter, you might send a short series of emails explaining green burial options or what people can do with cremated remains to honor loved ones.

Email marketing can drive a very impressive return on investment; the average is \$42 for every dollar spent. By the time you're calling the shots at your deathcare firm, that figure might well be higher.

As you continue your education in funeral service, make sure you're always contemplating how you can serve more people in your community. Email marketing and associated promotional tools might not be your top priorities right now, but they're essential to the success of a deathcare firm.

Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing (funeralhomeprofits.com), a regular contributor to The Director magazine and author of Making Your Phone Ring With Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes (second edition).

Make Learning Your Quest

By Daniel M. Isard

This is how you might see your life playing out right now: Mortuary school graduation. *Check.* Mortarboard. *Check.* Switch tassel from left side to right. *Check.* Smile while accepting diploma. *Check.* Pass national boards. *Check.* Okay, then, education is complete. *FALSE!*

While it might be a bit late in your life for me to ask this, I must: "Is funeral service a profession, a technical vocation or a job?" Perhaps a few definitions will help:

- ▶ *Profession:* a paid occupation, especially one that involves prolonged training and formal qualification
- ▶ *Vocation:* a person's employment, especially regarded



as particularly worthy and requiring great dedication

- ▶ *Job:* a paid position of regular employment.

The governing body for employment law is the U.S. Department of Labor. However, depending on the state in which

I dare say we must go from requiring continuing education to requiring a significant amount of continuing education to requiring post-licensure continuing education.

you work, funeral directors can be classified as vocational workers, employees working a job or professionals.

The biggest distinction between vocational workers and professionals is the education each receives before being licensed and after. It is this education that allows the practitioner to make independent judgments in the care and treatment of families and the decedent.

Regarding continuing education in the funeral profession, though, we set the bar very low. Continuing education as a requirement for maintaining your license ranges anywhere from zero to eight hours per year. An hour of education can be an actual clock hour or a percentage of a clock hour.

The professional organization representing you and others in your state regulates continuing education. But isn't that a cop-out? Can you imagine a medical doctor saying, "I am too busy to learn anything. After all, I got my education 20 years ago, so what else is there for me to learn?" I hope I never seek treatment from a doctor with that attitude, yet

many of your peers will have this attitude, and it goes against the argument for a professional status for funeral directors throughout the country.

Professionals usually earn more than job holders or vocational workers, assuming equal tenure. Why are we cutting our own paychecks by not encouraging more continuing education? In some states, you can't even talk about business, pricing or other contemporary issues in a continuing education setting! This is silly.

I dare say that we must go from requiring continuing education to requiring a significant amount of continuing education to requiring post-licensure continuing education. While there are master's and doctoral programs in thanatology and business that you can pursue, I am thinking of easier and more practical levels, such as the Certified Funeral Service Practitioner certification (CFSP), which is not a level of education but a professional designation, and I think it has to become a minimal standard at some point in time.

So, as you prepare for your entrance into the profession, I beg you, do not feel complacent. If you think smart, well-educated funeral directors are expensive, how much more do stupid, uneducated funeral directors cost their employers?

Therefore, set off on a quest to learn for your own fulfillment and progress, and for the good of the profession.

Dan Isard is president of The Foresight Companies, a business and management consulting firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, valuations, accounting, financing and consumer surveys. Contact Isard at 800-426-0165 or danisard@theforesightcompanies.com.

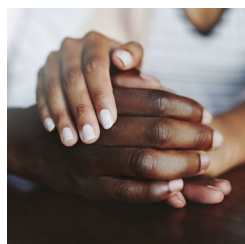
The Changing Face of African American Funerals

By Renita Jones

The way African Americans grieve has led to a shift in the funeral business. The profession has evolved over the years, making changes mostly to regulate the industry and for consumer fairness. Due to numerous religions and worldviews, the funeral trade tends to adjust and create ways that will allow people to grieve and find closure when someone dies.

When death occurs, it has always been important for the African American community to mourn and honor the life of those dear to them. The changes in African American funeral rituals have often made it necessary for the funeral profession to make modifications in its services, and generally, this has been beneficial for African American funeral homes.

Mourning matters to the African American community, whether done publicly or privately. Suzanne E. Smith, Ph.D., a specialist in African American history, wrote: "Death in the Black cultural imagination was not feared but rather em-



braced as the ultimate homegoing, a welcome journey to a spiritual existence that would transcend the suffering and injustices of the mortal world.”

Death was not only mourned as a loss but also celebrated. In 1964, the killings of two white civil rights workers, Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, and one Black civil rights worker, James Chaney, proved that even segregation would not prevent people from exercising the right to mourn. Chaney had a short, private funeral that was witnessed by family and close friends. Later that evening, hundreds of Blacks, and some white activists, gathered for a public memorial service for Chaney.

“Culture and practice and ritual are known and remembered in a black funeral home, and that matters in a time of grief,” said Karla FC Holloway in her book *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories, A Memorial*.

Funerals for the African American community later became extravagant and expensive celebrations. The grief shifted from mourning to celebrating the life of the dead. The affordability of an elaborate funeral opened the door for African Americans to have the option of choosing expensive caskets and grand processions to the gravesite.

Today, burials seem to be declining while cremation is becoming the primary choice for a homegoing service.

“A surge in the number of Americans who no longer identify with any religion has contributed to the decline of the historically traditional funeral in America – and the rise in cremation as the disposition of choice,” said NFDA’s 2021 Cremation & Burial Report.

It appears that African Americans are becoming more accepting of cremation. When they choose this option, they avoid the cost of a casket, burial plot and embalming. Cost-effective cremations cut into the profits for funeral homes, however, one of many challenges family-owned firms are facing.

Mourning matters to the African American community, whether done publicly or privately.

This redirection of funeral expenses requires funeral professionals to make yet another shift, allowing them to expand and become innovative for the next change in the industry.

CELEBRATORY GATHERINGS

African American funerals are similar to spiritual celebrations. In between the tears, there are joyful cries to be witnessed at the homegoing. It is a time when attendees can dress as they choose, whether in their Sunday best or a colorful display representing the favorite color of the deceased.

A service can be officiated by a funeral director, a clergy member or a funeral celebrant. Having a funeral celebra-

tion is an especially important ritual that brings the African American community together.

The traditional funeral practices of the African American culture arose from the need to express grief without rules and regulations. This form of celebration was something they could claim as their own.

CONCLUSION

The traditional funeral practices of the African American culture arose from the need to express grief without rules and regulations. Economic hardship and oppression, from slavery to systemic racism, added to the pain of losing a relative or friend, but this form of celebration was something they could claim as their own.

The elaborate funerals once practiced are dwindling due to the affordability of life insurance and the COVID-19 pandemic and its social-distancing regulations. Somehow, African Americans find a way to grieve within the ambience of the societal norms they are in. Their need to gather, celebrate, honor and memorialize their dead can lead to a paradigm shift for the funeral industry to serve this community.

Trained certified celebrants can be an asset to funeral homes. The celebrant can create an environment for African Americans to celebrate and incorporate the funeral rituals they practice. A good funeral director will try to create an exceptional funeral home by offering a variety of personalized options, even if a celebrant is not available. If the client is an animal lover, for example, the funeral director can create an atmosphere for the grieving family offering therapeutic value by way of including pets. Another option to add value to the funeral home is to offer to create a playlist for the client.

Technology is also allowing families to gather and grieve virtually via webcasting. It will be a good idea for funeral homes to become more technologically capable to help future families grieve and have memorable funeral services.

The goal is to be willing to give families suggestions to represent the deceased by reinforcing to them the personal significance of representing the deceased.

Renita Jones worked at a family funeral business for a year before deciding to pursue a career as a licensed funeral director/embalmer. She will be graduating in December 2021 with a mortuary science associate degree from Worsham College of Mortuary Science. Her goal is to own and operate a funeral business.

THE HOMICIDE SURVIVOR

10 Ways to Deal With the Grief

By Victor M. Parachin

According to the FBI, “homicide” or “murder” is defined as the “willful (non-negligent) killing of one human being by another.” And whether the homicide is the result of a school shooting, a murder during a burglary, the killing of one family member by another, domestic violence or a random act, the grief and trauma for survivors differs significantly from those who lose a family member due to illness, accident or natural causes.

The grief resulting from an act of murder generates a deeper, disturbing and more devastating sense of loss and pain. Unexpected and unbelievable, the ensuing grief can feel unbearable.

Here are 10 key ways to deal with homicide grief.

ANTICIPATE COMPLICATIONS

“Murder causes unimaginable complications,” says Mary A. White, author of *Harsh Grief, Gentle Hope*, a book about the murder of her son, Stephen. “Loved ones face the paralyzing shock of the victim’s untimely and often brutal death, endless consultations with the police, appalled reactions by friends, messages from the district attorney’s office, newspaper interviews, television reports, court hearings – sorrow upon sorrow upon sorrow. Murder not only destroys the loved one but continues to rip and tear and bruise the emotions and spirits of those left behind.”

Understanding that homicide grief is complicated and chaotic will help you be more self-compassionate and patient with yourself.

KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT

According to victimconnect.org, some “normal” grief reactions after homicide include:

- ▶ Inability to understand or believe what has happened to your loved one
- ▶ Feeling helpless and powerless over your surroundings
- ▶ Preoccupation with personal safety and the safety of surviving loved ones
- ▶ Thinking you somehow could have or should have protected your loved one from harm
- ▶ Feeling haunted by images, nightmares and flashbacks of the murder, even if you were not a witness
- ▶ Fear of strangers and worry that the perpetrator



(or any perpetrator) will strike again

- ▶ Intense rage toward the perpetrator(s)
- ▶ Distrust of others and of the world around you
- ▶ A desire to avoid people and places that remind you of your loved one or of the homicide
- ▶ Experiencing physical symptoms, such as head- or stomachaches, or difficulty sleeping, eating or focusing
- ▶ Feeling blamed, isolated, exploited or stigmatized by law enforcement, healthcare providers, the news media, and/or your friends and family
- ▶ Anger and assigning blame in many different directions: toward yourself, other family members, witnesses of the homicide, law enforcement, spiritual leaders and God.

DON'T GET BOGGED DOWN IN “STAGES” OF GRIEF

Some people mistakenly burden bereavement for griever by citing steps, stages or phases of grief. In reality, grief is more cyclical than linear. It eases and then cycles back around.

Furthermore, everyone has their own unique grieving style. Honor that, and grieve in the way that feels natural for you. Kenneth Doka, Ph.D., a bereavement expert and author of *Grief Is a Journey: Finding Your Path Through Loss*, explains there aren’t “stages” of grief, but that the “actual experiences of grief are far more individual, often chaotic and much less predictable. Grief is not a single process that everyone experiences the same way. This is critical for you to try to remember. Since we do not experience grief in a predictable set of stages, there is no one-size-fits-all way to cope with loss.”

FIND OTHERS LIKE YOU

Because homicide grief can feel extremely isolating, it’s important to find others who have experienced a homicide death. The United Nations’ World Health Organization reports that one person is murdered every 60 seconds. While not good news, it does indicate that in most communities, there are likely others who have experienced homicide and the ensuing grief. Locate and join a homicide survivor grief support group; the benefit will be positive and immediate.

10 Ways to Help Homicide Grievers

Be there. There will be people who hesitate to show up because of the homicide. Don't feel you have to say something profound; your quiet presence will bring comfort and strength.

Allow survivors to talk about the victim. Listen not only with your ears but also with your heart. Don't interrupt. Just let them talk and talk and talk. This is very therapeutic for survivors.

Keep the focus on survivors, not yourself. Don't say, "I know how you feel," which injects you into the tragedy. Simply stay focused on survivors by saying, "I am here for you. I want to help."

Listen without interference. There will likely be anger at the perpetrator, officials, the media, etc. Allow that to be expressed. Don't shut it down. Remain receptive to whatever expressions emerge.

Avoid clichés. Don't use sentences such as "You'll get through this," "Time heals all wounds" or "You still have a lot to be thankful for." Clichés tend to irritate grievers and intensify their frustration.

Provide unconditional support. Homicide survivors become part of a world not easily understood by others. They feel different and are often shunned. Offer compassion combined with unconditional understanding.

Be very patient. Grief recovery takes time. Don't rush the process by indicating in any way that "you need to get over this and get on with your life." Trust grievers to recover at their own pace.

Help financially. There will be unexpected funeral expenses. If the victim was a wage earner, there will be an economic loss of security for surviving family members. If you are able, help financially or establish a memorial fund.

Stay in touch. So many supporters quickly drop off after the memorial service. Be there after the first wave is over. Prorate your support through the weeks and months after the tragedy.

Remember the family at special times. Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, Father's Day, Mother's Day, etc., can be grief triggers.

After her son was murdered, Jewel Zeihen from Spokane, Washington, experienced powerful emotions but couldn't find a way to express them until she sought out and attended a homicide survivor support group. There, she experienced the kind of acceptance and understanding that freed her to share her loss and feelings: "It was being able to talk to and listen to people who had gone through something similar. Unless people have gone through this, they don't understand. They think they do, but they don't," she said.

To find a group in your community, search online for "homicide support groups near me." If there isn't one in your area, consider joining an online group.

EDUCATE YOURSELF

Homicide grief is new territory, so make some time to learn about it and ways to deal with it. That information will be both liberating and empowering. Find books and magazine articles, listen to podcasts about grief recovery, attend local workshops and seminars dealing with bereavement, and search online for information. Some exceptional books include:

- ▶ *Grief Diaries: Surviving Loss By Homicide*, Lynda Cheldelin Fell
- ▶ *Healing Grief*, Victor M. Parachin
- ▶ *Homicide Survivors: Misunderstood Grievers*, Judie A. Bucholtz
- ▶ *What to Do When the Police Leave: A Guide to the First Days of Traumatic Loss*, Bill Jenkins.

SPEND TIME WITH A GOOD LISTENER

Family, friends and colleagues will truly feel for you and want to be helpful, but many just don't know how to be effective helpers. It is important for you to identify and spend time with a few people who will listen without interruption, caution or judgment.

After Mary Louise Williams' daughter, Margaret, was murdered, she discovered the importance of having a confidant who could just listen. "This is the loneliest of all experiences I have had," she recalled. "Dear ones and friends have helped me and continue to help, but they cannot share completely. Sometimes I note in my friends a too-careful screening of conversation. They seem to think, 'Will she cry? I mustn't open the wound again. I must help her to forget.' They need not worry. I may or may not cry, but the wound is still open, and I shall probably never forget. I need and want to talk about my loved one. This is all I can do now. I need to express my grief in words to someone who will listen."

CULTIVATE SOLITUDE...

Create some healing space in your life through solitude, a brief period of time during which you can be by yourself and temporarily "get away from it all." This time can be used for meditation, prayer or spent outside absorbing the healing qualities of the natural world. Solitude will allow you to decompress and take the edge off your stress level.

In his book, *Living With Loss, Healing With Hope*, Rabbi Earl Grollman advised: "In times of stress, you need time to

rest your body and your mind. You need time to be alone. Go for a walk. The rhythm of your step releases the tension in your body, mind and spirit. Spend some quiet time in a lovely, solitary place. Let the sounds, sights and smells of nature surround and infuse you. Seek healing solitude and peace through whatever activity in whatever place feels best to you.”

...BUT STAY CONNECTED

Balance solitude with connection. Though you might feel like withdrawing and isolating yourself from others, it's better and healthier to keep a link with your family, friends, colleagues and neighbors. Their friendship and support will help you navigate through the hardest days.

One man shared his experience with grief and withdrawal: “In the midst of my adversity, I noticed a tendency to retreat, not to bother anyone else with my misfortune. What a mistake! The love and support of family and friends, in letters, phone calls, visits and invitations, was so gratifying and so enriching as to defy description. This caring continues to stand out in my mind as a bright spot in an otherwise bleak scenario. Reach out! Martyrdom is not a necessary part of the mourning process.”

ADOPT A SURVIVOR'S ATTITUDE

Psychologist Ann Kaiser Stearns interviewed dozens of women and men whose lives were impacted by powerful tragedies and discovered that they embraced these common survival attitudes:

- ▶ I will vividly examine the future.

- ▶ I will not be defeated.
- ▶ I will not assume the victim posture.
- ▶ I must be willing to expand.
- ▶ I can do it if I set my mind.
- ▶ I consciously decide to be in the company of good people.
- ▶ I choose a life of hope.
- ▶ I will accept life's challenge.

Adopt and embrace these types of attitudes. Your survival and recovery depend on a positive, hopeful attitude.

BELIEVE IN YOURSELF

The single most powerful factor in dealing with homicide grief is to believe in yourself. Around the world and across the ages, many have been in your situation and have managed to not only survive but turn wounds into wisdom. Human beings are endowed with inborn strength, resilience, adaptability and the power to overcome the harshest blows of life. Face your challenge with strength and spirit.

Author Isaac Asimov observed: “It has been my philosophy of life that difficulties vanish when faced boldly.”

Victor Parachin is a writer and minister whose work focuses on experiences of grief and loss.

THINK OF THE CHILDREN Using Books To Explain Serious Situations

By Tanya Kenevich

When there is a serious illness or death in the family, one challenge families face is how to explain this to the young children involved. Although many websites and various other resources provide information on how to better explain these serious events to children, Tiffany Williford decided to utilize a more “kid-friendly” way through the books she created.

Williford's husband was admitted to the hospital the night before their daughter's first birthday. He had collapsed in the bathroom after coming home from work and would be diagnosed with colorectal cancer. During this time, Williford's daughter continued to ask questions about what was going on.



“At first, we thought the right approach was not to say much because it was a heavy topic,” said Williford. “[But] we noticed that not explaining what was going on was causing more concern or uncertainty.”

Because of this, she decided to create a kid-friendly book explaining what was happening to her husband. She called the cancer an “owie” and also explained the other situations her daughter was seeing, including hair loss, chemotherapy, fatigue and light sensitivity.

“I talked about how sometimes Daddy has the energy to play and sometimes he does not, how we cannot jump on Daddy when he has his chemo pump on, how Daddy can't go

outside too much because a lot of sun is not good for his skin," Williford said.

Her husband was so impressed with the story that he told her she had to try and get it published, even buying her a computer so she could continue to make stories. The end result was *Daddy Has an Owie* (Williford also published *Mommy Has an Owie*).

Although Williford's husband, sadly, would lose his battle with cancer after three-and-a-half years, the books became popular and continue to educate children on what they are experiencing. "After publishing *Daddy Has an Owie* and *Mommy Has an Owie*, I kept having families, medical professionals, ministers and pastors ask me for a book on the death of a loved one. They would tell me of young children with a parent or loved one who passed away," Williford said. "At the same time, my youngest was starting to ask me more questions about her father's death. I had had the conversation many times with my oldest, who was 4 when her dad passed, but now I needed to have the conversation with my youngest, who was 12 months when my husband died."

In turn, Williford wrote two more books: *Daddy Is an Angel* and *Mommy Is an Angel: Explaining a Parent's Death to a Child*.

Through her own experiences, she learned a lot about how to better explain situations like these to children. "When it comes to difficult topics like a serious illness or a death, kids need to hear the same answers or explanations over and over again to get understanding, to get some form of comfort and reduce anxiety from the unknown," Williford said. "I even think hearing the same answer to a question gives some kids security."

She also learned that kids are sensitive to changes, moods and things we are going through as adults, and when they are unsure about what's going on, it can create anxiety and fear.

"Providing them with some degree of knowledge and understanding brings them comfort and opens the dialogue in the household. My girls continue to ask me questions as it pertains to their dad's cancer and death. We read the books still, and they ask questions, sometimes the same ones as before and sometimes new ones," said Williford. "It is hard enough for us as adults to understand serious illnesses and death; children are dealing with this right alongside their parents and loved ones. The books help to bring understanding to their level and make them comfortable to have an open dialogue with their family."

In addition, Williford doesn't feel that as a society, we give enough credit to children and their understanding of serious events. "Realizing how intuitive my daughters are has been a shock to me. They pick up on everything!" she said. "The times I have not known the right words to explain what is going on or attempted to shelter them, I am shocked after talking to them what their level of awareness and maturity is."

Using books like this can prove powerful resources for funeral directors and the families they serve, Williford believes. "I think *Daddy Has an Owie* and *Mommy Has an Owie* are great books for explaining a parent's cancer or serious illness during the battle and afterward. Even after a loved one has passed, a child is still trying to understand what cancer is,

Although Tiffany Williford's husband, sadly, lost his battle with cancer, her books became popular and continue to educate kids on what they're experiencing with the death or serious illness of a loved one.

what a serious illness is, and relate it with why that caused their loved one to not be here anymore," she said. "*Daddy Is an Angel* and *Mommy is an Angel* are great books to explain a parent or loved one's death to a child. I mirrored the books after how I explained my late husband's death to my girls. Even though their dad is no longer here physically, I wanted to let my girls know that he will always be with them."

Added Williford: "I think it is important for children to have that security that the love they have for their loved one does not go away and their loved one does not stop loving them just because they are no longer here physically. With the book's whimsical illustrations, it makes heavy topics a little lighter."

The reaction to Williford's books – from both children and adults – shows how great they are at explaining serious issues. "I have been surprised by how many adults enjoy reading it. It's shocking that some people have said they have been comforting to read and they read them frequently, even though they are not dealing with the issues in the books. I didn't expect school [districts] to buy them for each of their elementary schools for guidance counselors or to help with social-emotional learning," she said. "Churches use them to hand out to families to extend support during illness and grief. Families grabbed all the copies in the hospital gift shop, and they sold out. Families across the country buy them to help their families during a difficult time."

For Williford, the success of the books has been wonderful, but the enriching power of the books' content and its help to others has been the true prize. "For me, writing each book and seeing how it has helped the families and professionals who reach out to me has been healing for my own grief. I haven't had much control over my circumstances. It has been a hopeless feeling, like many of the directors and funeral staff reading this article see families feel every day," she said. "It has been nice to be able to do something and it has been healing to help my children have a better understanding of their dad's cancer and death through the books."

For more information on author Tiffany Williford and her books, visit daddyhasanowie.com.

Tanya Kenevich is a New Jersey-based freelance writer who has covered funeral service since 2008.

From the Editor's Desk

The Challenge

By Edward J. Defort



The challenge for funeral service education programs has been, and remains, producing quality students/graduates who stay with the program/profession. It's been a widely held belief that about half of graduates leave the profession within five years. Recently, the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) sought to test this long-held belief by commissioning a task force to bring statistical data into the discussion.

A decade ago, Glenn Gould, CEO of MKJ Marketing, reported on the Funeral Service Foundation's Recruitment and Retention Project. Said Gould: "Many recent mortuary school graduates drop out of the funeral profession within the first five years following graduation, which represents a terrible loss for the funeral profession, but also for the individuals who invest time and money in unproductive training. Understanding the expectations funeral home owners and managers have of recent graduates is the foundation for improving both the career opportunities for mortuary school graduates and the quality of the students in mortuary school."

The ABFSE task force was unable to pinpoint the exact percentage of attrition, but it doesn't seem the widely held belief was too far off. (One problem is that not every funeral service program tracks its graduates' career paths.) Less of a mystery were the reasons why graduates left the profession. At the top of the list was money, followed by hours/burnout.

In this equation, the question of why graduates leave the profession outweighs the question of when. Once the why is addressed, the when becomes less of an issue.

Recruiting and retaining funeral directors has long been considered one of the most important issues facing funeral service. According to the 2020 NFDA "Funeral Directors' Expectations Study," finding qualified funeral directors to fill open positions surpassed decreasing profit margins as the greatest challenge facing funeral service.

The ABFSE study suggested the need for an industry-wide conversation about compensation and hours/burnout – cited most by directors for attrition among new professionals. And recent graduates – the newly minted funeral directors – must continue to have a voice in that conversation. According to ABFSE, it suspects that the attrition rate among new professionals is lower than the prevailing belief of 50%, but the results of the research should still be cause for alarm. Tempering student expectations to align more closely to current realities warrants consideration as well.

"You can't put toothpaste back in the tube" is an apt expression to describe this situation. Employers should welcome these conversations, and employees should be able to speak freely – before the toothpaste leaves the tube.

And as the study says, these are conversations that need to take place sooner rather than later.

 Edward J. Defort
Editor

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