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Origin Stories and Reflections

By Gabriel Schauf

One of the first questions funeral directors may hear once someone learns of their job title is, “How did you get into that?” Sometimes it’s asked with a “morbid” curiosity; at other times with an air of dislike.

Be that as it may, most people love a good origin story. Personally, I’m always curious as to how others found themselves in the funeral service profession. Even more so, I like to hear from those new to this line of work, i.e., students and graduates fresh out of school and looking forward to the future in hopes of making a positive impact on the profession and those they encounter along the way.

Often, their stories include a bit of reflection on how they got to where they are now, the struggles they encountered and overcame, and what they see on the horizon. It always makes for great conversation and perhaps offers a little inspiration to others as well.

As you read the three origin stories that follow, I hope, if you’re just starting out, that you find both inspiration and confidence that you have chosen a great career path and that despite the challenges, you are not alone in facing them. And even if you’ve been at this for some time, I hope you can look back and reflect on your journey.

Gabriel Schauf is a licensed funeral director, instructor with the Milwaukee Area Technical College mortuary science program and host of NFDA podcast A Brush With Death.

ORIGIN STORIES WANTED

Do you have an origin story and reflection you’d like to share? Please send it in Word or PDF format (up to 600 words) to gschauf@nfda.org and you might see it in a future issue of *The Director.edu*. Remember, your words and experiences just might inspire others to do great things in this profession!



My Origin Story: Kyle Dunn Arapahoe Community College



Getting into the funeral industry was a long journey for me, one that began with various jobs that all had the same common goal in mind: getting to work with and help other people.

Frankly, it was on a bit of whim that I decided to try shadowing at a local funeral home, but I ended

up falling in love with the work. This led to me pursuing a degree in mortuary science while working part time at that same funeral home.

From the start of my education, I was more engaged with the subject than anything else I had previously studied in school. It felt as though this was something I was truly interested in and wanted to learn. However, one of my biggest concerns about entering this profession was if I'd be able to handle working with the dead. I knew I could work well with other people and felt comfortable in that role, but I had never even seen a dead body before starting my job.

It came as a shock, then, that I found a love for prep work while at school. The process of embalming and restoring the

deceased spoke to me in a different way – one I hadn't expected. The ability to help a family by restoring an appearance of normalcy to their loved one meant so much to me, and I felt so honored to be able to care for the deceased in such a hands-on way. After my first embalming lab, I knew I wanted to not only work with families but also care for their loved ones.

I believe the biggest current challenges to working in this industry are those you'll hear from a lot of people: stress, unkind hours and emotionally draining work. It is difficult work and can be very draining, emotionally and physically.

For me personally, I think there's a certain degree of pride that comes with the work that helps with these factors. While I might still feel stressed or drained at the end of the week or after an especially long and difficult day, it's the reward of the work itself that keeps me going more often than not. This might sound incredibly cliché, but the gratitude and kindness of the people I help do more to relieve my stress– and make me feel happy to come to work – than anything else.

Moving forward, I hope to continue to grow my skills as an embalmer and funeral director so I can offer families and their loved ones the best experience possible. Someday, it would be nice to open my own funeral home in a small town, but for now, I'm simply focused on becoming the best funeral director I can be.



For me personally, there's a degree of pride that comes with the work that helps me with the stress and unkind work hours.

My Origin Story: Sunshine Smith Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service



If you had asked me a few years ago if I could see myself working in funeral service, I would have looked at you as if you were crazy and given you a big "NO!" In February 2021, however, I lost my mother, which put many things into perspective for me.

In September of that same year, William Hightower, a longtime family friend and part-owner of Hightower Family Funeral Homes in Georgia, approached me with an offer to join the business. My desire had always been to help others in some way, so I took a leap of faith and began shadowing at their Bremen location. Soon I felt that this was exactly where God wanted me – and no doubt where my mother sent me through her passing. That is where my inspiration for funeral

service began and, in the two years since, it has become my great passion.

In January 2022, I embarked on the journey of mortuary college at Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service as a full-time online student. Working an 8-to-5 job, being a wife and mother and adding online classes on top of everyday tasks sometimes felt like more than I could handle. Being an online student took great dedication and organization on my part. There were many times I gave up things I'd rather do in order to study, and I encountered some of the hardest, most stressful times in my life, but I never gave up and now I am about to graduate!

The hardest times I've encountered in this business involve dealing with the loss of children and infants, and other tragedies. To a certain extent, you have to desensitize yourself in those situations to do your job to the best of your ability – but not so much that it doesn't affect you. I have handed over the body of a precious child to his mother to hold one last time, walking away to give the family private time, and then rushed



to my office to shed many tears because of the empathy I felt for them. That is something I never want to lose. Knowing God set me on this path, I fully believe that He put me here to pray for the families I serve.

I hope one day to create a great aftercare program for the funeral home where I work so families will know they are never forgotten.

One of the biggest surprises for me has been standing strong for families when they need it most. I feel like there are times when it is okay to share your own emotions with families, but there are also times when families need strength from those leading and guiding them during this most difficult time in their lives.

I see myself long term with funeral service, jumping in with both feet to continually learn all I can and becoming part of many associations, such as NFDA and the Georgia Funeral Directors Association, to gain more knowledge about helping families. I hope one day to create a great aftercare program for the location where I work so families will know they are never forgotten. Having gone through the great loss of my mother, I want those I serve to know they can truly count on Hightower Family Funeral Homes for all of their needs, as well as me personally.

Funeral service has quickly become more than just a career for me. It is now my passion to truly make a lasting impact on the families I serve, whether by making “Mom” look better than she has in years or taking the worries off the family's plate while leading them through the process of service planning. Because that is what funeral directors do.

My Origin Story: Jessica Clasby Cape Cod Community College



In May, I received my pin from the Cape Cod Community College (formerly Mount Ida) funeral service program. I'm from southeastern Massachusetts and would like to become licensed in both that state and Rhode Island.

Even though I just finished my program, I'm likely to return to school once I've completed my state and national board exams. Cape Cod offers several certificate programs to enrich our careers and I hope to obtain my certificates for bereavement support, funeral celebrant and funeral administration.

I have no intention of ever stopping my education altogether as I have an overwhelming desire to learn.

As for what started my journey, I really woke up one morning mid-pandemic and decided to switch majors. “Why?” has been my favorite question to answer ever since. Even though I knew the appeal, I couldn't articulate it at first. “Dead things don't scare me” seemed more than a bit reductive, and tagging on, “In fact, that part really appeals to me,” rarely made sense to anyone who's not in this profession.

Ultimately, the combination of anatomy, restorative art and a love for helping people drew me to the funeral service profession. I get a deep satisfaction from providing some closure for the grieving souls who require our services, as

The biggest challenge I see myself facing in this industry is my desire for big change.

well as a sense of real accomplishment when I am in the prep room.

I see myself at a smaller funeral home somewhere close, while extending my embalming services to directors who don't have the time to embalm. In addition, it would be an honor to see firsthand the funeral practices of as many different religions and cultures as I can.

I'd also love to experience all of the nontraditional forms of disposition, such as the process of terramation and alkaline hydrolysis. With the increasing popularity of pet deathcare, I can see myself exploring that later in my career as well. I also aspire to teach funeral service once I have enough time and experience.

The biggest challenge I see myself facing in this industry is my desire for big change. Though this feeling is nothing new, I've heard this is a persistent struggle for new directors because our industry has been slow to change.

I'm exceedingly confident we can make strides, however, and my greatest faith in this comes from my classmates. I am consistently blown away by the wave of young women who are taking the industry by storm. This program has introduced me to some of the most talented, intelligent and inspirational women, and I wholeheartedly look forward to collaborating with each of them.

The best thing a future funeral director can do for her or his learning experience is to network with the vast amount of people you come in contact with. The many amazing students, passionate professors and interesting class speakers I met fueled my learning and desire for this career far more than any textbook ever could. That's really what made my education special.



Another Record-Breaking Year for Funeral Service Education Enrollment

By Edward J. Defort

For the second year in a row, new enrollment in funeral service education programs set a record, with the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) reporting 3,462 new enrollees. This represents a modest 2% increase over last year but a staggering 35% increase over 2020's new enrollees.

Last year's enrollment numbers established another record, with funeral service education programs setting a new high in total enrollment of 7,034 students (new, pre-graduate and graduate students) in the 59 accredited programs. That is 6.5% more than in 2021, and 18.3% higher than the 5,947 enrolled in 2020. [

In 2022, there were 1,588 total graduates – 2.8% more than in 2021 but 7.7% below the 1,720 in 2020, which was the highest number of grads since 2000.

"Labor-pool issues are a paramount concern in funeral service across the country, so it is good to see that interest in funeral service education is not shrinking," said Robb Smith,

ABFSE executive director. "This is even more significant during a time when the traditional college-age population is not growing. In my opinion, the pandemic probably emphasized the role of funeral practitioners in a positive manner. However, we [funeral service as a whole] are still slow in adjusting to many of the realities of the current environment in which we operate."

INSIDE THE NUMBERS

Even more impressive about this year's new-enrollment figures is that the previous high of 3,212 in 1996 was, at the time, considered an aberration since it was the year the associate degree was implemented as the minimum ABFSE standard, which shifted the educational requirement from one year to two. Many students flocked to ABFSE certificate and diploma programs to complete their education before the requirement took effect.

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
2021	3,395	1,546
2022	3,462	1,588

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

Historically, 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). 2020 and 2021 numbers show the strongest year-after-year growth since 2014-15, which set the stage for the record enrollment.

As the 2022 enrollment number was larger, however, so was the number of students who left accredited funeral service education programs. In 2022, 1,049 left, which is 6.8% more than the 982 students who left in 2021, and 38.7% more than the 756 students who left in 2020.

In 2022, cited reasons for leaving a program included:

- Academic (42.02% vs. 38.7% in 2021)
- Personal (36.70% vs. 37.4%)
- Financial (11.44% vs. 8.5%)
- Changed major but remained in higher education (4.48% vs. 5.9%)
- “Other” reasons (3.62% vs. 4.9%).

Last year, 1.72% remained in a funeral service education-related major but transferred to another institution (4.68% in 2021).

Smith noted that students older than traditional high-

Attrition Program Year 2022		
Reason for Withdrawal	Number	Percentage
Remained in funeral service-related major but transferred to another institution	18	1.72
Changed major but remained in higher education	47	4.48
Left for academic reasons	441	42.04
Left for financial reasons	120	11.44
Left for personal reasons	385	36.70
Left for other reasons	38	3.62
TOTALS	1,049	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

school graduates have long been a significant segment of the funeral service student population. “When economic conditions impact the workplace, it’s been common for workers to return to school to pursue new occupational interests,” he said. “Employers and educators need to figure out how to best take advantage of the formal and informal

skill sets that second- and third-career workers bring.” With the higher numbers in enrollment also comes a higher number of students that withdrew from the program. “We know funeral service is not a career for everyone,” said Smith. “Students often embark on their education in funeral service without a clear picture of what is expected in the workplace. And in spite of the descriptions and warnings, the guidance often is ignored. That contributes to attrition.”

Smith also noted another significant concern – the growth in distance education. Many students see distance education as the answer that eliminates the need to relocate or commute or give up a current job. “What is often overlooked is

Often overlooked by students choosing distance education is the time and dedication necessary to successfully complete a program.

New Enrollees By Ethnic Origin and Gender Program Year 2022						
Ethnic Origin	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
White	555	64.76	1,703	65.37	2,258	65.22
African American	195	22.75	477	18.31	672	19.41
Hispanic	63	7.35	299	11.48	362	10.46
Native American	9	1.05	29	1.11	38	1.10
Asian-Pacific Islander	11	1.28	18	0.69	29	0.84
Other	24	2.80	79	3.03	103	2.98
TOTALS	857	24.75	2,605	75.25	3,462	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

**New Enrollees
By Age
Program Year 2022**

Age	# of Students	Percentage
20 or under	464	13.40
21-25	1,040	30.04
26-30	692	19.99
31-35	495	14.30
36-40	285	8.23
41-45	200	5.78
46-50	124	3.58
51-55	88	2.54
56-60	50	1.44
61-65	15	0.43
66-70	8	0.23
71 and over	0	0.00
Unknown	1	0.03
TOTALS	3,462	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

**New Enrollees
By Prior Education
Program Year 2022**

Level Completed	# of Students	Percentage
GED	239	6.90
High school graduate	3,161	91.31
Other	62	1.79
TOTALS	3,462	100%
High school or equivalent	1,055	30.47
1 year of college	673	19.44
2 years of college	823	23.77
3 years of college	237	6.85
Bachelor's degree	461	13.32
Master's degree	98	2.83
Other	115	3.32
TOTALS	3,462	100%

Previously attended a funeral service program: 139

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

**New Enrollees By Prior
Funeral Service Employment
Program Year 2022**

Employed	# of Students	Percentage of Total Students New Enrollees (3,462)
Less than 6 months	655	18.92
6 months to 1 year	306	8.84
More than 1 year	568	16.41
TOTALS	1,588	44.17%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

**New Enrollees By
Family in Funeral Service
Program Year 2022**

	# of Students	Percentage of Total Students New Enrollees (3,462)
Parent	349	10.08
Spouse	49	1.42
Sibling	27	0.78
In-law	24	0.69
Other	171	4.94
TOTALS	620	17.91%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

in distance education must thoroughly investigate the options available. They are not all alike.

“Additionally, the perceived ‘schedule convenience’ of distance education is interpreted as being easier than the classroom route... Attrition often results when the realities of distance education set in,” he noted.

Another reality, Smith pointed out, is that employers often misinterpret the availability of students. “Because students are not in a classroom or on a campus, employers often [equate] that to being available to work,” he said.

“Work experience is a valuable supplement to formal education, but without sufficient class time and study time, student success can be hampered, often contributing to attrition and/or the ability to successfully complete a program in a timely fashion.”

the time and dedication necessary to successfully complete a distance-education program,” he said.

“Distance education occurs when coursework may be completed at a time and place independent of the course professor,” Smith added. “This often occurs online, but multiple distance-education formats are utilized. Not all allow for working in one’s pajamas at 2 a.m. Students interested

There has been much chatter over the years about the enrollment decline possibly creating an environment in which there is a shortage of qualified professionals. 2022’s enrollment certainly offers reasons for optimism.

Still, this is a two-pronged problem. While it’s true that schools do see attrition, it’s the post-graduate exodus that most concerns funeral directors and owners.

According to a 2020 study charged by ABFSE, the list of reasons graduates left funeral service cited compensation as the most frequent cause. That was followed by hours and burnout, domestic and/or family issues, a toxic environment, career expectations and a lack of opportunity for advancement.

NEW ENROLLEE PROFILES

Based on ABFSE statistics, the most likely person enrolling in a funeral service program in 2022 was a white female, 21 to 25 years of age, and a high-school graduate with at least

While it’s true that schools do see attrition, it’s the post-graduate exodus that most concerns funeral directors and owners.

New Enrollees / Graduates By State (Program Year 2022)

State	New Enrollees	Percentage	Graduates	Percentage
Alabama	76	2.20	27	1.70
Alaska	1	0.03	1	0.06
Arizona	34	0.98	19	1.20
Arkansas	40	1.16	15	0.94
California	110	3.18	75	4.72
Colorado	34	0.98	23	1.45
Connecticut	38	1.10	22	1.39
Delaware	16	0.46	4	0.25
District of Columbia	4	0.12	3	0.19
Florida	121	3.50	66	4.53
Georgia	249	7.19	68	4.28
Hawaii	4	0.12	0	0.00
Idaho	15	0.43	3	0.19
Illinois	183	5.29	128	8.06
Indiana	157	4.53	37	2.33
Iowa	33	0.96	23	1.45
Kansas	40	1.16	22	1.39
Kentucky	120	3.47	17	1.07
Louisiana	63	1.82	37	2.33
Maine	13	0.38	11	0.69
Maryland	69	1.99	31	1.95
Massachusetts	93	2.69	39	2.46
Michigan	90	2.60	41	2.58
Minnesota	49	1.42	38	2.39
Mississippi	47	1.36	19	1.20
Missouri	53	1.53	28	1.76
Montana	9	0.29	7	0.44
Nebraska	21	0.61	13	0.82
Nevada	12	0.35	0	0.00
New Hampshire	16	0.46	5	0.31
New Jersey	103	2.98	46	2.90
New Mexico	13	0.38	8	0.50
New York	215	6.21	111	6.99
North Carolina	144	4.16	66	4.16
North Dakota	8	0.23	7	0.44
Ohio	76	2.20	54	3.40
Oklahoma	99	2.86	28	1.76
Oregon	31	0.90	19	1.20
Pennsylvania	139	4.02	59	3.72
Rhode Island	17	0.49	4	0.25
South Carolina	56	1.62	23	1.45
South Dakota	3	0.09	8	0.50
Tennessee	95	2.74	35	2.20
Texas	407	11.76	152	9.57
Utah	31	0.90	21	1.32
Vermont	7	0.20	1	0.06
Virginia	76	2.20	53	3.34
Washington	50	1.44	17	1.07
West Virginia	22	0.64	6	0.38
Wisconsin	51	1.47	35	2.20
Wyoming	4	0.12	2	0.13
Unknown	0	0.00	0	0.00
Foreign	5	0.14	5	0.31
TOTAL	3,462	100%	1,588	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

one or two years of college.

Despite the enrollment increase, the numbers do not point to a dramatic increase in any specific age category. In 2022, just 14% of new enrollees were over age 40 (versus 12.9% in 2021, and 12.3% in 2020), while about half fell between the ages of 21 and 30.

The data also reveal that students entering funeral service education continue to have more prior education than did 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 2022, it landed at 69.5%, which was up from 61.4% in 2021, but down from 74.2% in 2020, and 71.5% in 2019.

That said, 30.5% of this year’s new enrollees have a high school or equivalent education, which is down significantly from 38.6% last year, but up from 25.9% in 2020.

Furthermore, in 2022, the number of enrollees with bachelor’s or graduate degrees was 16.1%, down slightly from 16.3% in 2021, and 19.3% in 2020.

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 male enrollees 51% to 49%, respectively. Today, the number of women entering funeral service programs is more than triple the number of men – 75.2% to 24.7% (compared with 72.1% female to 27.9% male in 2021, and 72.8% female to 27.2% male in 2020).

“Growth in the number of females pursuing careers in funeral service has been a reality for more than two decades,” Smith stated. “Public perceptions of a typical funeral director seem to be more realistic than the perceptions of many employers.”

Broken down by ethnicity, the largest percentage gain in

Graduates By Ethnic Origin and Gender Program Year 2022						
Ethnic Origin	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
White	313	69.87	782	68.60	1,095	68.95
African American	86	19.20	182	15.96	268	16.88
Hispanic	29	6.47	124	10.88	153	9.63
Native American	2	0.45	8	0.70	10	0.63
Asian/Pacific Islander	5	1.12	14	1.23	19	1.20
Other/Did Not Indicate	13	2.90	30	2.63	23	2.71
TOTALS	448	100%	1,140	100%	1,588	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

Graduates By Age Program Year 2022		
Age Percentage	# of Students	
20 or under	81	5.10
21-25	466	29.35
26-30	349	22.57
31-35	266	16.75
36-40	153	9.63
41-45	98	6.17
46-50	71	4.47
51-55	37	2.33
56-60	24	1.51
61-65	11	0.69
66-70	2	0.13
71 and over	0	0.00
Unknown	0	0.00
TOTALS	1,588	100%

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

Graduates By Prior Education Program Year 2022		
Level Completed Percentage	# of Students	
GED	73	4.60
High school grad	1,510	95.09
Other	5	0.31
TOTALS	1,546	100%
High school or equivalent	294	18.51
1 year of college	314	19.77
2 years of college	457	28.78
3 years of college	150	9.45
Bachelor’s degree	279	17.57
Master’s degree	57	3.59
Other	37	2.33
TOTALS	1,588	100%

Previously attended a funeral service program: 71

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

Despite the enrollment increase, the numbers do not point to a dramatic increase in any specific age category.

2022 was traced to Hispanic enrollees at 10.5%, up from 9.3% in 2021.

In 2022, ABFSE reported that 65.2% of all new students were white, compared with 60.5% of all new students in 2021, and 62.4% in 2020. African-Americans accounted for 19.3% of new enrollees in 2022, down from 23.2% in 2021, but up from 13.2% in 2020. From a much smaller base, the number of new Native American students was 1.1%, up from 0.9% in 2021, and 0.8% in 2020. The number of Asian/Pacific Islander new enrollees was 0.8%, down from 1% in 2021, and on par with 2020. The number of new students of “other”

Graduates Who Worked While in School Program Year 2022

Employment	Number	Percentage of Total Number Grads (1,546)
In funeral-related services	1,056	66.50
Other non-funeral service employment	318	20.03
TOTALS	1,056	66.50

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

Graduates By Family in Funeral Service Program Year 2022

Employment	Number	Percentage of Total Number Grads (1,546)
Parent	118	7.43
Spouse	11	0.69
Sibling	10	0.63
In-law	6	0.38
Other	68	4.28
TOTALS	213	13.41

Source: American Board of Funeral Service Education

ees in 2021, and 2% of all male enrollees and 4.2% of female enrollees in 2020.

In 2022, 17.9% of all new enrollees were found to be carrying on or getting into the family business, compared with 14.5% of all new enrollees in 2021, and 13.2% in 2020. Of all new enrollees, 10% had a parent in the business, 1.4% had a spouse, 0.8% had

ethnic backgrounds was 3%, down from 5.1% last year, and 3.6% in 2020.

ABFSE stats show that 64.8% of male new enrollees and 65.4% of female enrollees in 2022 were white. This compares with 59% of male new enrollees and 61.1% of female new enrollees in 2021, and 65.8% of males and 61.2% of females in 2020.

The number of African-American new enrollees in 2022 was down – 22.7% of male enrollees and 18.3% of female enrollees. This compares with 30% of male enrollees and 20.7% of female enrollees in 2021, and 20.7% of male enrollees and 18.7% of female enrollees in 2020.

In 2022, 7.3% of new male enrollees and 11.5% of new female enrollees were Hispanic, which compares with 5.6% of male enrollees and 10.7% of female enrollees in 2021, and 10.1% and 14.3%, respectively, in 2020.

In 2022, 68.6% of graduates were women, 51.3% were age 21-30, and 21.1% held a bachelor’s or master’s degree.

Asian/Pacific Islanders accounted for 1.3% of new male enrollees and 0.7% of new female enrollees in 2022, compared with 0.3% of new male enrollees and 1.2% of new female enrollees in 2021, and 0.9% of male enrollees and 0.7% of female enrollees in 2020.

Native Americans accounted for 1% of new male enrollees and 1.1% of new female enrollees in 2022, compared with 0.5% of male enrollees and 1% of new female enrollees in 2021, and 0.6% and 0.9%, respectively, in 2020.

Of those checking “other,” ABFSE reported 2.8% of all new enrollees were male and 3% were female, compared with 4.7% of all new male enrollees and 5.2% of new female enroll-

a sibling, and 0.7% had an in-law; 4.9% responded “other” relative.

Enrollees who had prior funeral service-related employment logged in at 44.1% in 2022, up from 39.2% in 2021, and 40.1% in 2020.

GRADUATE PROFILES

As mentioned at the start, there were 1,588 total graduates from 59 accredited programs in 2022. This was up from 1,544 graduates from 56 accredited programs in 2021, but down from 1,720 graduates in 2020. 2022’s graduates represent 48 states and the District of Columbia, with only Hawaii and Nevada without a graduate; there were five international graduates, as well. Texas led all states with 152 graduates, followed by Illinois with 128, New York with 111, California with 75, Georgia with 68, Florida and North Carolina with 66, and Pennsylvania with 59.

Also, as noted earlier, 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 2022, 68.6% of the 1,588 graduates were women. This compares with 70% of 1,544 graduates in 2021, and 67% of 1,720 graduates in 2020.

Just 15.3% of 2022 graduates were over age 40. This compares with 14.2% of 2021 graduates. In 2022, 51.3% fell into the 21-30 age bracket, which compares with 55.2% in 2021, and 56.2 in 2020.

The 2022 data put the number of graduates with a bachelor’s or master’s degree at 21.1%, up from 19.4% in 2021, but down from 21.7% in 2020.

According to ABFSE, 68.9% of all graduates were white, compared with 66.6% in 2021 and 68.8% in 2020. The percentage of African-American graduates was 16.9% in 2022, up slightly from 16.6% in 2021 but down from 18.2% in 2020. The percentage of Hispanic graduates in 2022 was 9.6%, down from 10.8% in 2021, but up from 8.8% in 2020.

From a smaller base, the percentage of Asian/Pacific Is-

lander graduates was 1.2% in 2022, down slightly from 1.5% in 2021; it was 1% in 2020. The percentage of Native American graduates last year was 0.6%, down a tick from 0.8% in 2021, and 0.9% in 2020. Graduates with “other/did not indicate” responses made up 2.7%, down from 3.7% in 2021, but up from 2.1% in 2020.

Broken down by gender, 69.9% of male graduates and 68.6% of female graduates in 2022 were white, which compares with 68.2% of male graduates and 65.9% of female graduates in 2021, and 71.8% of male graduates and 67.4% of female graduates in 2020.

Last year, 19.2% of male graduates and 16% of female grads were African-American, which compares with 16.7% of male graduates and 16.5% of female graduates in 2021, and 19.5% of male graduates and 17.5% of female graduates in 2020.

Among 2022 Hispanic graduates, 6.5% were male and 10.9% were female, compared with 7.2% male and 12.3% female in 2021, and 5.5% male and 10.5% female in 2020.

From a smaller base, Native Americans accounted for 0.4% of male graduates and 0.7% of female graduates in 2022. This compares with 0.6% of male graduates and 0.8% of female graduates in 2021, and 0.5% of male graduates and 1.1% of female graduates in 2020.

In 2022, 1.1% of all male graduates and 1.2% of all female graduates were Asian/Pacific Islander, compared with 2.3% of all male graduates and 1.1% of all female graduates in 2021, and 0.9% of all male graduates and 1.1% of all female graduates in 2020.

ABFSE reported that 2.9% of all male graduates and 2.6% of all female graduates in 2022 classified themselves as “oth-

er/did not indicate,” which compares with 4.8% of all male graduates and 3.3% of all female graduates in 2021, and 1.8% of all male graduates and 2.3% of all female graduates in 2020.

In 2022, 17.9% of graduates had a relative in funeral service, up from 16.2% in 2021 and 12.8% in 2020. A total of 349 graduates (10.1%) had a parent in the business in 2022, 1.4% had a spouse, 0.8% had a sibling, 0.7% had an in-law, and 4.9% responded “other” relative.

Graduates who worked in funeral service-related jobs while attending school logged in at 66.5% in 2022. This was down from 68% in 2021, but up from 63.6% in 2020.

Taking in this year’s numbers, Smith said the ABFSE statistics regarding new enrollees and graduates do not surprise him because he has been watching the data for many years. “I have seen changes in the appearance and attitudes of students,” he said.

“Funeral service and funeral service education is not the same as it was when ‘I’ started [by “I” he means every educator and practitioner],” said Smith. “Fortunately for funeral service, one important ingredient seems to be consistent. Today’s students recognize the helping nature of a funeral service career, even if their perception differs from that of funeral service veterans.”

He added, “Educators, practitioners and potential employers need to be mindful that change is constant and look for ways to collaborate and cooperate in order to make the most of the available pool of talent.”

Edward J. Defort is publisher and editorial director of NFDA Publications.



Inside the 2023 NFDA Consumer Awareness and Preferences Study

By Deana Gillespie and Edward J. Defort

Making a connection with consumers is key to sustainability for funeral directors, but getting inside the consumer’s head becomes more challenging every year for professionals looking to stay ahead of the curve when it comes to memorialization trends and preferences. Really, there’s only one way to find out what someone wants – you ask them. And, since

2012, NFDA has been asking consumers exactly what they want in a funeral service for a loved one or, eventually, for themselves.

This is NFDA’s 12th “Consumer Awareness and Preferences Study,” and the numbers are fairly consistent, reflecting a statistical significance and a high level of reliability. In ad-

dition, each year, new questions are incorporated to keep the content fresh and to make the study as comprehensive as possible.

The 2023 survey added several new questions, the answers to which were certainly unexpected and present more color to the current funeral service landscape.

As always, the study's main objectives are to measure consumer awareness and perceptions of funerals and funeral services in order to help professionals improve the quality of service they provide by learning more about consumer attitudes toward new funeral service trends.

As in past surveys, NFDA again asked consumers about a wide variety of topics, including shopping for a funeral home, planning for a funeral, why they chose one funeral home versus another, social media, religion, clergy, celebrants, green funerals, body donation, preneed, cremation and memorialization.

The most notable observations in this survey wave include:

- More than 85% of consumers agree that a funeral is for the living and something that helps them begin their grief journey and the healing process.
- More than two-thirds (71.0%) of respondents feel it is either "very important" or "important" to have a funeral or memorial service to commemorate the life of a loved one.
- Regardless of their disposition preference, 57.3% of respondents would prefer to have a funeral service with a viewing and visitation prior to the burial or the cremation.
- Respondents who attended a funeral/memorial service with burial were significantly more likely to state that the service was "very helpful" in paying tribute to or commemorating the life of their loved one, and was an "important" part of helping them begin the healing process, versus those who attended a cremation service.

MOVING ONLINE

The practice of making funeral arrangements online (with or without the help of a funeral director) has been gaining momentum. This year, 65.6% of respondents have personally



71% of respondents say it's very important/important to have a funeral service with a viewing and visitation prior to burial or cremation.

been involved in planning a funeral for a loved one.

Continuing the move toward online activities, more than half of consumers (54.8%) visited a funeral home website when they planned a funeral or memorial service. Of note, 26.1% of those made all of the arrangements online, and 41.3% started the arrangement process online but followed up with a funeral director.

This year, 47.2% of respondents felt the online planning process was a good experience but still needed the assistance of a funeral director, while 41.1% were satisfied with the experience and were able to accomplish everything they wanted online.

NFDA's survey found that 13.6% of respondents said their first interaction with the funeral home was online.

Here's a stat to keep an eye on: 19.6% of respondents would prefer to make funeral prearrangements online versus speaking directly to a funeral director.

In the past, word of mouth was the most powerful endorsement for a product or business, but these days, it's online reviews. When selecting a funeral home, more than one-third of respondents (36.6%) said an online review either solidified their decision and/or steered them toward a particular funeral home.

FUNERAL HOME WEBSITES AND FACEBOOK PAGES

Similar to past surveys, 66.7% of consumers have visited a funeral home's website, primarily to look for an obituary; look for price information; look for information about planning a funeral; and/or to write an online condolence to a family.

Facebook remains the social-media platform of choice as 86.2% of respondents use Facebook, and 65.4% stated they use it daily or several times per week. In addition, NFDA's study found that 42.9% of respondents who use Facebook have visited a funeral home's Facebook page, primarily to

look for an obituary, and 21.3% of those who use Facebook said they have used the services of a funeral home they found on Facebook.

RELIGION AND MEMORIAL SERVICES

When it comes to the religious component of funerals, the fluctuation in these num-



19.6% of respondents would prefer to make funeral prearrangements online versus speaking directly to a funeral director.

bers over the years has been perplexing. In 2023, 41.1% of respondents felt that having a religious component as part of a funeral was “very important” (down from 47.3% in 2021). Nearly 60% of respondents identify as Christian, and 18.9% had no religious preference.

One-third of respondents (33.0%) felt it was “very important” to have the body/cremated remains present at a funeral, which is down from 40.9% in 2021.

Looking at venues where consumers are holding memorial services for loved ones, 53.1% have attended a funeral at a location other than a funeral home or a place of worship. Correspondingly, 47% have attended a funeral or memorial service where someone other than a member of the clergy presided over the service.

The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have given live-streaming some permanence among funeral service offerings. One-third of survey respondents (33.5%) have participated in a funeral or memorial service via a streaming service. Of those who have not participated in a livestreamed service, 50.5% would consider doing so.

When it comes to funeral home shopping, more than one-third of consumers (38.6%) called/visited more than one funeral home when they planned a funeral. Of those consumers who called/visited more than one, 52.9% did so to compare prices, and 43.2% did so to check if the funeral home is available to accommodate the service.

Of those who called/visited more than one funeral home to compare prices, 53.3% obtained pricing information in person, 24.2% obtained pricing information over the phone, 13.9% did so via email, and 8.8% obtained pricing information via a web search.

The majority of respondents (70.9%) felt it was “easy” or “very easy” to obtain pricing information.

Of those who contacted more than one funeral home, the main reason they chose a particular firm was because they had an existing relationship with a funeral director (18.7%), the firm offered an affordable price (16.4%), and/or they previously used the funeral home for a service (13.0%).

CREMATION

Looking at cremation, approximately 40% of study respondents said they would prefer cremation for their own funeral. Of those, 25.2% would prefer a funeral service with viewing and visitation prior to the cremation, and 21.4% would prefer a memorial service.

When asked why they would choose cremation for themselves, 54.4% said it was more cost effective, and 42.5% said it was easier/simpler/convenient.

Of those that would prefer cremation, 37.7% would pre-

In 2023, a majority of respondents – 70.9% – said they felt it was very easy/easy to obtain pricing information.



fer scattering their cremated remains in a sentimental place, 17.3% haven't decided, and 17.0% would bury or inter them at a cemetery.

If provided the opportunity, 26.2% of respondents would be either “very interested” or “interested” in witnessing the start of the cremation process, while 33.2% were “not interested at all.”

PREARRANGING

When making prearrangements, 80.4% would prefer to make those arrangements by speaking directly to a funeral director. Only 10.1% of respondents have actually made prearrangements in writing with a funeral director.

Furthermore, 17.3% of NFDA study respondents have prearranged and prepaid for their funerals. The main reasons include to guarantee the prices of products and services; so survivors won't have to pay for arrangements; and so survivors won't worry about making funeral arrangements.

METHODOLOGY

NFDA conducted its latest “Consumer Awareness and Preferences Study” March 7-15, 2023. Survey invitations were emailed to an online consumer panel consisting of Americans, age 40 and older. A total of 1,023 participants completed surveys, and results for all respondents are projectable within a range of $\pm 3.2\%$ (with 95% confidence).

Please note that consumers who participate in online panels are typically higher-than-average internet users with higher income and higher education levels.

NFDA used a sampling method designed to generate a good representation of different racial/ethnic groups:

- 606 surveys obtained from the general population (primarily White)
- 134 surveys obtained from the Black/African-American population
- 132 surveys obtained from the Asian population
- 151 surveys obtained from the Hispanic population.

Deana Gillespie is NFDA research manager.

Edward J. Defort is publisher and editorial director of NFDA Publications.

Your Unique Footprint

By Jennifer Muldowney

The chances of us being born as the individuals we are is one in 400 trillion. So, to say we are unique is an understatement. Our fingerprint, our DNA, our footprint, our heartbeat – they are all unique to us and only us.

And it goes even beyond that with our experiences and our memories. No one ever in history will experience this exact moment in the exact same environment, with the exact same emotions and thoughts as you are right now.

Recognizing our uniqueness as humans, we in the funeral space can help create more meaningful and personalized end-of-life experiences that reflect the individuality of our client families.

NFDA forecasts the U.S. cremation rate will reach more than 81% by 2045. To show this in terms of numbers of actual human beings, the number of cremations in 2010 was 1 million, and it is expected to rise to 3.23 million by 2045. The number of Americans who no longer identify with any religion will also contribute to the decline of traditional funerals and the rise of cremation as the disposition form of choice.

From 2007-21, the percentage of religiously unaffiliated adults increased from 16% to 29% of the U.S. population, according to Pew Research. With the inability to hold a service during COVID-19, more than 33% felt it was important to hold a service of some kind and are likely to plan one in the future. This same group experienced more difficulty moving forward in their grief compared to others.

Meeting the bereaved where they are, as opposed to where we think they should be, can bring great value to the consumer experience.

All this research and data shows an opportunity for funeral homes to educate families about the value of meaningful memorialization in the healing process while also increasing revenue and their own priceless place in the community.

The benefit of after-death rituals (funerals/memorials) depends on the ability of the bereaved to shape those rituals and to say goodbye in a way that is meaningful for them. In this article, I will redefine the funeral and show how, by shifting an antiquated mindset and embracing a new blue-



print, we can apply new, more-freeing techniques and offer more support to grieving families.

Many traditional funerals and memorials are at odds with the facts and style that characterized the life of the deceased. Many religious services are highly formulaic and refer only to scripture or generalized readings. This can feel depersonalizing and dehumanizing. A modern end-of-life ritual should have two goals: to provide a cathartic healing experience for the living, and a suitable and highly personal tribute in honor of the deceased.

Self-esteem and self-value are at the core of being human. Inclusion and personalization create a feeling that one is a valuable participant in a meaningful situation – and that can apply to both the deceased and the bereaved. We are all unique human beings, and one person’s funeral might not be a good fit for another who, outwardly at least, appears to want similar. We all value different things.

Meeting the bereaved where they are at – as opposed to where we want them to be or think they should be (religion, sales of caskets, timing) – can bring great confidence and value to both the funeral home and the post-death experience for the consumer. Enabling the families we serve to be architects of their own solution in response to the information we provide them is key to respecting their dignity in grief. By allowing survivors the freedom to grieve at their own pace and in their own unique way at a memorial or funeral, we remove an antiquated and faith-driven construct of mourning and make way for an all-inclusive service.

In the last decade, I have witnessed – first in my own country of Ireland and now here in the United States – the decline in people attending Mass, churches, synagogue or performing religious rituals. Yet, when it came to a funeral, they often felt they had “no choice” but to have it in their local church or similar. This does not have to be the case.

This is the benefit of engaging celebrants and memorial planners, and offering these services in your funeral home. This is the “new” funeral. Imagine offering families something vital, transformative, healing and maybe even spiritual; something that stands out in their minds, that pushes them to write a review and tell their friends and colleagues

about an incredible service held in a beautiful antique building or out on a luscious private rooftop. Something that takes the fear out of the funeral and opens people up to talking about their loss at the service, immediately after the service, and in the weeks and months to come.

Let's be honest, it never feels comfortable to sit so close to others' grief. We work in the death industry, so we have our coping mechanisms in place (or should). But for those who attend the service we hold for families, it can be uncomfortable, profound and sometimes overwhelming.

A celebrant who works with a funeral home can become a member of the team and can aide the funeral director in many ways. They can become a secondary source of revenue where needed. A celebrant is often seen in a "friend" role that is separate from the funeral director – not better, just different. They can, while planning out the script/service, discuss things such as live music, printed programs and catering pre- and post-service in a very non-sales-associate way – all of which are potential extra billable line items.

Celebrants can also report back feedback on the firm's staff when it is provided, both positive and negative. Often, it is easier for a family to say what a wonderful job "X" did to someone else, or to express frustration on paperwork delays or the like, which the celebrant can then share with the funeral home, perhaps preventing a nasty future review!

A memorial planner or local event planner can help you source different and interesting venues, appetizing caterers and top-of-the-line audiovisual support. Whether you broker a deal with them to utilize their services completely and holistically, or negotiate deals with each vendor privately, is up to you and what services you wish to provide.

The opportunity to work with a memorial planner is an incredible (and proven) opportunity for funeral homes to create

more-meaningful and personalized end-of-life experiences that reflect the individuality of client families. It shows the value of the funeral home and meaningful memorialization in the healing process. The funeral home is the glue that binds all the elements – the disposition, the service, the support, the expertise, and the access to a vast network of experts in their field – and can help the bereaved embrace a new-funeral blueprint while shifting an antiquated image of the funeral.

Our heartbeat is unique to us and only us. Isn't that worth celebrating and recognizing? Our uniqueness as humans should create a blueprint for more-meaningful and personalized end-of-life experiences that reflect the individuality of the deceased. Shifting from the "this is how it's always been done" mindset into a new, more open, more diverse, more inclusive perspective will help provide a cathartic healing experience that honors the deceased in a highly personalized way.

Just as one funeral home is not the same as another in the same town, state or country, neither are our client families. The sooner we embrace this new mindset, the more valued, successful and respected our profession will become.

Jennifer Muldowney is a journalist, author, speaker and positive advocate for the funeral profession who shares her views on The Glam Reaper podcast. Her first book, Say Farewell Your Way, was released in 2013, and she is currently writing her fourth book. In 2016, she shared a thought-provoking TEDx Talk called "Grief: As Unique as Your Heartbeat." Her media moniker, The Glam Reaper, given to her by British media, conveys just how much Muldowney stands out from a crowd. She hails from Dublin, Ireland, and incorporates the ancient funeral customs she grew up with to encourage modern-day healing.



The Expanding End-of-Life-Care Circle

By Edward J. Defort

When former President Jimmy Carter announced he was entering hospice care in February, it turned a spotlight on the rapidly growing end-of-life-care continuum. Funeral service professionals are obviously quite familiar with this and other end-of-life-care options, but the public at large was not likely fully informed of these.

The primary goal of end-of-life care is to enhance the quality of life for patients and their families by addressing their physical, emotional and spiritual needs with care and dignity.

Emotional and psychological support is a key aspect of end-of-life care. End-of-life care recognizes the emotional

challenges faced by patients and their loved ones. It provides counseling, therapy and support groups to help individuals cope with the fear, anxiety, grief and other emotional aspects of the end-of-life journey.

Communication and decision-making are also key components. Open, honest communication between patients, families and their healthcare providers is essential. Discussions about treatment options, goals of care, and advance-care planning are encouraged to ensure that patient preferences and values are respected.

End-of-life care also extends beyond the patient's healthcare, i.e., after his or her death, to support the grieving pro-

cess of family members, which includes a memorialization of their loved one. Bereavement services might include counseling, support groups and other resources to assist individuals through the mourning and healing process.

Each person's end-of-life journey is unique, and the care provided is tailored to meet their specific needs and wishes. The aim is to offer compassionate support and dignity, thereby allowing patients to live as comfortably and meaningfully as possible during their final stages of life.

A multidisciplinary team of healthcare professionals – including doctors, nurses, social workers, chaplains and other specialists – collaborate to provide comprehensive care. They work together to ensure continuity of care, coordinate medical treatments, and to address the diverse needs of the patient. Funeral directors are often, but not always, part of these conversations.

David Stamberg is the owner of Senior Care Authority for northern and central New Jersey, as well as Rockland County, New York. He is a certified senior advisor, a certified dementia practitioner, and a “Beyond Driving With Dignity” professional. Stamberg and his team help families and seniors navigate the broad, confusing and stressful conversations regarding senior living options, as well as the complex and sensitive senior driving issue. He has helped many families throughout New Jersey and in Rockland County find the best senior living solutions by providing the answers and information they need so they can make educated decisions and establish well-thought-out plans.

In this interview, Stamberg discusses Senior Care Authority as it fits into the end-of-life-care continuum.

David, please describe the services offered by Senior Care Authority.

Stamberg: Senior Care Authority is an elder consulting company that puts an emphasis on placement assistance. We help families find the best assisted-living or memory-care neighborhoods for their aging loved ones. And, almost always, our ability to help is a free service.

We also own and operate “Beyond Driving With Dignity.” This is where we help families navigate the sensitive senior driving conversation by helping a senior decide for themselves if they should retire from driving.

How did you get involved with this business?

Stamberg: Like many, I had to make a pivot in 2020. Through personal scenarios with my own parents, I understood the opportunity to help families going through the same stressful discussions.

From what I see on your social media, you are involved in a lot of relationship building with a number of different organizations.

Stamberg: There are others that do what I do, but many do not know we exist. Word of mouth and being present on social media for how we can help is vital. I connect with the Alzheimer's Association of Greater New Jersey to be a re-

source for families looking for my services – but also because my dad died of the disease.

People need to be aware of the disease, the support the charity has, and the research and advocacy that has to happen. One in three seniors dies from Alzheimer's or another dementia. More glaring is that between 2009 and 2019, deaths from heart disease decreased by 7.3% while deaths from Alzheimer's increased 145%!

What you do seems focused on life care. Do your conversations move into end-of-life care? For example, when you have conversations with families, does the subject ever progress toward last wishes and funeral services?

Stamberg: We do tend to talk about preparations from a financial and legal perspective. Has money been put aside to pay for a funeral's cost? Is there a power of attorney or healthcare proxy? We suggest using FiveWishes.org.

Funeral directors have been attempting to build relationships with hospice, visiting-nurse organizations and elder-care attorneys. Can funeral directors become more involved with end-of-life organizations such as yours?

Stamberg: Absolutely, and a few have. After being in this business for a couple of years, I have learned that many adult children “don't know what they don't know,” and that includes funeral planning. The other phrase I use is “It is not a crisis until it is.” Like me, funeral directors can help families plan and prepare by not waiting for a crisis.

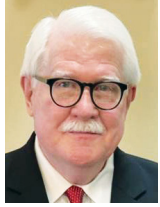
It's important to note that funeral directors work alongside other healthcare professionals and caregivers involved in end-of-life care, such as hospice providers, doctors, nurses and social workers. They collaborate to ensure a smooth transition from the dying process to the final arrangements and support families in their bereavement journey.

Stamberg: Absolutely, there are many ethical and legal aspects to know. I dealt with it when my mom passed about her wishes for her husband's remains. It was not as simple as she might have thought.

Do you have any suggestions for funeral homes trying to stake a presence in the end-of-life-care continuum?

Stamberg: Networking is key. Meeting all of the homecare companies, assisted-living providers, elder attorneys, financial planners and, of course, people like me and so many others would allow funeral homes to connect to those who are already helping families. But having programming and education – for professionals, as well as families – is vital to get the message out.

Edward J. Defort is publisher and editorial director of NFDA Publications.

From the Editor's Desk

Todd Van Beck 1952-2023

By Edward J. Defort

The real value of the funeral is in sharing stories and keeping alive the memories of those who entered our lives, who made a difference. So, when I heard that Todd Van Beck had died, my head was flooded with memories of the stories he told with humor and an unrelenting passion for funeral service.

In 1996, I had just started as an associate editor with *American Funeral Director* magazine. Just five weeks into the job, I attended my first NFDA convention, which was held in Cincinnati that year. The editor at the time, Nick Verrastro, was plotting out the workshop schedule we would cover. For me, he circled a workshop presented by Van Beck. Nick said to me, "I think you're going to enjoy this one."

Sure enough, I did enjoy it and made sure that at all subsequent conventions I attended, I circled any workshop presented by Todd. After that first workshop, I patiently waited as attendees gathered around him to shake his hand for my chance to introduce myself as the new guy at Kates-Boylston. He congratulated me on the job and told me to make sure I listened to Adrian Boylston, who owned the company at the time. (Boylston also told me to pay attention to Todd). Todd said he would like to continue sending me articles from time to time, and it was a friendship/relationship that lasted from that moment on.

Having Todd Van Beck welcome me to funeral service was a very fortunate circumstance. The stories he told were often self-deprecating. "If there was a mistake to be made on a funeral, I made it," he'd said.

I enjoyed his articles, and he basically launched the "Funerals of the Famous" series. They weren't just about what happened at the funeral; he put those funerals in historical context. It was in those articles that he spoke of the history of funeral service and of reverence for the dead. His voice as a speaker and writer was unmistakable. Every time our paths crossed, I smiled when I heard his booming voice say, "Hello, Ed."

Earlier this year, he published a new book called *Funeral Chronicles*, which aims to tell the reader fascinating funeral stories. "And if funeral service is anything, it is fascinating," Van Beck said. "This book has been written by a funeral professional. It is not an exposé or sensational tell-all book about the world of undertakers. It was written to accomplish one mission: to share stories about the funeral profession that are interesting, and which have not been told, and which deserve to be told." His voice comes through loud and clear on every page.

As the news of Todd's death spread, I saw on social media people sharing their memories of him, often framed by a photo of them together. He appreciated the kind words but always said he was just an undertaker from Iowa.

Some words are overused to the point that they lose meaning. "Icon" is one of them. But Todd Van Beck indeed was a funeral service icon. I can't think of anyone else like him, and his loss leaves a huge void in funeral service.

To all of us, he was a friend, mentor, teacher, storyteller, historian, advocate for the profession and – the role he was definitely most proud of – funeral director. He will be missed.

Edward J. Defort
Editor

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