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Adapting to Change in the Age of COVID-19

By Jzyk S. Ennis, *ABFSE President*

To say that the past many months have challenged both funeral service education students and faculty is an understatement. Who would have believed that, at a moment's notice, on-campus, face-to-face interaction would be halted?

In truth, the change really didn't affect all students in the same way. Across the United States, there are numerous funeral service education programs accredited by the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) that deliver most of their content via distance education. For the most part, students who couldn't move or commute to campus for on-campus courses were already using distance education and had already adapted to how online courses and testing worked.

For students who learn more visually or need the direct support of faculty and colleagues, however, the move to total online education was a huge leap – and a huge disadvantage. While funeral service programs adapted and made great strides to reach out to students to meet them wherever they

are along their educational path, the reality is that some students can handle less structure and use time-management skills well, while others cannot. Only time will reveal the true impact of COVID-related disruptions on students, faculty and the profession.

Despite this, the challenges to your education caused by the pandemic are not dissimilar to those you will face as a licensed funeral service professional, if you think about it. Every family is different, and some are difficult/challenging. These days, we might go into arrangement conferences and services with a plan but find it must be altered and adapted through no choice of our own. We have to learn to adapt by the minute and meet the needs of families as they develop.

Funeral service today can sometimes feel like a moving target due to the attitudes, needs and requests of families. Just as funeral service professionals must adapt to a changing environment, so must we, as students and educators, adapt

to changes in funeral service education due to the pandemic. We didn't ask for these changes, but we do have to face them. And we are!

Students must adjust to this new environment because there is no other choice right now other than to halt your education plan and wait until the pandemic passes. For those in state-issued internships/apprenticeships, it might not be possible to suspend your education. Therefore, you must rely on great institutions of learning, outstanding faculty and your own drive to succeed.

Currently, I serve as president of ABFSE and can tell you, after speaking to many of your instructors, that they are as concerned about you as you are about yourself. Our job is not to fail you (although we must if you don't reach the educational bar) but instead to help you be the best you can possibly be and to transition you, with the required credentials, to a job market desperately needing qualified help.

This leads me to another critical point. As testing has moved completely online due to the pandemic, the possibility for academic dishonesty is tempting. Funeral service educators even had a town hall meeting about test security and how to protect the integrity of the educational process.

Do not fall for the bait. Here is the reality: In most states, you must graduate from an ABFSE-accredited funeral service education program to be licensed. You must also pass a licensing exam; in most states, this is the National Board Exam (NBE) administered by the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards (ICFSEB). The NBE is proctored by a testing service adept at ensuring test security and prohibiting academic dishonesty in the testing environment.

Even if (and it is a big if) you were to cheat your way through your funeral service education program and receive a diploma to hang on the wall, if you can't pass the NBE, you will never hold a license to practice.

The NBE is designed to measure minimal competency to enter funeral service practice, so even if you choose to cheat on your online exams, it will catch up to you, I can promise you that.

None of us knows what the future holds and when the educational environment will be back to "normal" following the pandemic. In fact, it may be that the "old normal" has already transitioned into a "new normal" for funeral service education. Online instruction, the use of communication platforms (such as Zoom), more students opting for online education, etc., might *be* the new normal. We just don't know yet.

What I do know is that ABFSE, the ICFSEB, funeral service education programs, faculty and students will adapt and succeed. Of that, I am confident.

Finally, I offer you the following advice as you continue your journey in funeral service education and practice. As educators, we know some of you are struggling to adapt to a fully online educational environment. We truly want to help you and are working hard to meet you where you need us to be. Many of us have adapted our office hours and shifted our availability to nights, weekends and holidays just to be sure you receive the support and answers you need to be successful. But we can only meet you halfway. You must do your part to meet us during your education journey.

Many educators shifted their office hours and availability to be sure students have the support they need. But we can only meet you halfway. You must also do your part.

So, what do you need to do if you are struggling – or even if you're not but simply want some reassurance?

- **REACH OUT TO YOUR FACULTY** Know that they truly care about you and your educational success. Don't wait until late in the semester, when the damage is done, and success might be difficult or impossible. Email, text and/or call your funeral service faculty and stay in touch. They will help you!
- **STAY ENGAGED IN YOUR LEARNING** You *must* take ownership of your situation in this pandemic. Get organized and be driven to success. Implement time-management skills. Remember that no one cares about your success more than you do. If you don't care, then there really isn't much anyone else can do to help.
- **YOU CAN'T CHEAT YOUR WAY TO LICENSURE** Academic dishonesty is not okay, and it will catch up with you. You are only cheating yourself and your chance for reaching your academic and professional goals.
- **DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE FUTURE** We don't know what the future holds, so focus on the now and capture success today. Collectively, we will adapt and move forward once the danger of the pandemic has passed. None of us can speed up or control the pandemic; we can only occupy and seize the space each of us is in during this time. Be passionate about success.

Please know that you are not alone. Your faculty, current/future employers and chosen profession are counting on your success. We need you. We live in unprecedented times, and I know you will rise to the occasion.

Good luck in your endeavors and thank you for sticking with your educational plan. The future is very bright for those who push through to licensure and begin a very rewarding professional career.

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Juggling the Challenges Of COVID-19

By Michael S. Burns, PIMS Dean of Faculty and Students

It was a typical Sunday in March in southwestern Pennsylvania. We were escaping with a gentle winter and little snow, and there were lots of reports on TV and online of a coronavirus sweeping across China and Italy. I had just come out of church and was pulling into the local grocery store parking lot when I received a text from our program director, Dr. Barry Lease, asking if I could call him as soon as possible. This was odd. If he was texting me on a Sunday morning, it was important.

I called him back in a few minutes and, after another 10 minutes, we decided to close the school for the week to let this virus scare “blow over.” I grabbed an old envelope from my glove box and found a red pen in the center console and started taking notes. The simple phrase used in that conversation was “in an overabundance of caution.” Little did we know that it would become our mantra for the next nine months. Within a few hours, the entire student body, administrative staff and faculty were told to take off for the week.

Truthfully, this impromptu one-week vacation looked pretty nice. Unfortunately, that was only the beginning, and the next few weeks are a little blurry now. Several long, early-morning meetings with lead administrators were organized. Discussions that included phrases such as “just two

Alternate delivery, while solving the problem of students not being on campus, was still a synchronous system. Students still had the same classes and followed the same schedule.

more weeks,” “alternative delivery” and even “shut down” continued almost daily. Reports from the CDC, the governor’s office and the county health department looked bleak. Decisions (big ones!) needed to be made immediately.

Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science (PIMS), under the guidance of program director Dr. Barry T. Lease, decided to carry on with what it’s supposed to do – educate students in the fine arts and sciences of funeral service education. Only now, the juggling game began. Imagine a juggler tossing two balls in the air at the same time. One ball is the virus, the other is the students. Doesn’t sound like too much of a challenge, right?

And of course, safety is another huge concern, so add an-

other ball. The entire building was immediately treated with microstatic virucides and bactericides, and plexiglass dividers were installed in

key offices. We ordered face-masks and shipped in germicidal wipes by the thousands. We bought temporal thermometers. We hung signs in every corridor, stairwell, office, classroom and restroom reminding everyone of social distancing, handwashing and mask wearing. We notified students of their responsibilities during this pandemic – not only for themselves but also for their immunocompromised relatives with whom they lived. We sent emails almost daily and updated our website constantly.

Of course, education is our ultimate goal, so add another ball (that makes four). When students could not be on campus, we needed to make plans for the “alternative delivery” of classes, which is different than “online” classes. Online students follow an asynchronous system, i.e., they get an assignment and have a week to complete it on their own time. Alternative delivery, on the other hand, while solving the problem of not being on campus, was still a synchronous system. Students still had the same classes and followed the same schedule as if they were actually in the building. For example, accounting class was held via Zoom from 8-8:50 a.m., followed by pathology from 9-9:50 a.m., etc.

As far as sharing information, such as lessons, assignments and assessments, we used the already-in-place platform we use with our distance education cohorts. This meant days of course setups and hours of adding the correct students to the correct classes, not to mention the purchase of several Zoom accounts.

You cannot teach without something to teach, so add a fifth ball. All of our instructors had to become very adept at adding their campus class content to the alternative-delivery platform. Many late nights and weekends were spent moving “stuff” over, such as PowerPoints, videos, assignments, quizzes and exams. I admit that, sometimes, a transfer was made less than 24 hours before the class was conducted.

Without students, you can’t teach, so add ball number six. Because our on-campus students had never used our distance education platform, we had to have them all log on, take practice courses, find their classes and learn all the intricacies of alternative delivery – *fast*. After all, we were going to be up and flying in this educational mode in one week.

Next, the Pennsylvania Department of Education set up very strict rules for all institutions, including our private li-



censed school, to follow (yes, add a seventh ball). These rules involved a lot of “you can only do this... you cannot do this... you must report to us this... if you have a special need or request, you must do this... any violation of these rules will mean this... the deadline for this is this...” I will not bore you with details, but it was a challenge, to say the least.

After that, the governor stepped in, adding ball number eight to all the others already in the air. The state mandates were very detailed and lengthy, changed often and were sometimes vague, sometimes harmful and sometimes promising. It did not matter, however, because they all had to be followed to the letter.

Then the county had its say and add yet another ball. (And don't say I'm adding balls unfairly; while these were both government entities, they often made different policies.) These rules said, “this many people can gather... this many people are allowed in this sized space... ‘This many people’ is now ‘this many people’...” Anyone who works at a funeral home knows what I'm talking about, and I'm sure you were challenged by local guidelines as well.

As all this was being handled, we needed to add a 10th ball to our very talented juggler – the effect on the students. Remember, the student as a person was one of the first balls, but the way this affected students' needs collectively also had to be addressed.

This was the hardest aspect for me as I am one of their main advocates. If they decided to temporarily withdraw, what would happen to their financial aid packages? If they dropped a class or two, how could they re-register next term? What would the next term's schedule look like if only half of us were allowed in the building at one time? How were we going to reschedule restorative art labs and clinical embalming requirements so they could graduate on time? How were we going to offer celebrant training? How were they going to take their comprehensive exams? What was going to happen to their commencement ceremony? Could new students even be accepted for the next term?

Ten balls, all of varying sizes, weights and colors, were now in the air, where they remain to this day, and I am very proud to say that not one has hit the ground.

Although it was a huge joint effort by so many, two main participants get the MVP award. One is Dr. Lease, whose role was paramount. His demeanor was amazing and he brought new ideas to the (socially distant) table daily, usually along with chocolate chip cookies, doughnuts or bagels. He did the research, proposed the ideas and provided the means to do it.

As all this was being handled, we needed to add a 10th ball to our very talented juggler – the effect on students. This was the hardest aspect for me.

The other MVP award goes to PIMS students – the amazing people who initially took it hard but then learned to adapt, take it in stride and make the best of it. At first, I was worried they might be getting shortchanged, but, as it turns out, they might be one of the best groups of students so far. What do excellent funeral directors do? They persevere, they meet tough challenges, they do not give up, they finish the job. These students are now experts at this.

The pandemic is a horrible experience, and I hope it never happens again in my lifetime. But I also know that with our experience, along with a good team and incredible students, anything can be done. We have instituted new programs and ideas at our school that will probably continue into the new normal. We learned a great deal about better ways to teach. We also learned how resilient a dedicated student can be.

PIMS is just one of mortuary school that pulled off some amazing tricks this past year, and I applaud all the schools and students who made it happen.

That's just what a funeral director does.

Michael S. Burns is dean of faculty and students at Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

What the Pandemic Taught Me

By Lindsay Michael, *PIMS Student*



When I started mortuary school at the beginning of last year, I certainly did not think it would be during a global pandemic. Many would say 2020 was less than ideal.

I agree, for the most part, but this unprecedented time resulting from COVID-19 showed me that I can handle

new challenges and changes. Still, to say the least, my time at Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science (PIMS) has been a roller coaster.

I was thrilled to be attending one of the top funeral service schools in the country. My classmates and I became like a family, and we all pushed each other to do our best. As a result, I was voted into the student senate by my peers. I love having the opportunity to help others succeed, and I like that because the school was small enough, I could get to know everyone.

In March, our in-person classes were switched to alternative delivery, and we had our lectures via Zoom meetings. Although I did not think this would last long, I finished my first term and the whole second term through alternative delivery. Given that I learn better in person, this would become one of my biggest challenges.

I was disappointed that the whole second term was online. Even though the instructors and PIMS faculty still provided everything we needed to succeed, I felt like I was missing out on the campus experience. My passion for in-person instruction stemmed from my education at the University of Pittsburgh, where I obtained my bachelor's degree in biology before I decided to add the capstone of my education by attending PIMS.

Having classes via Zoom was not ideal for me because it was harder for me to learn. Personally, having classes online was actually much more draining than attending in person. I felt like my days dragged out, and I had a hard time focusing when participating via Zoom. Halfway through the second term, PIMS did offer "learning enhancements," where instructors would hold weekly in-person reviews. I found this to be really helpful, especially for students like me who need in-person instruction, because it allowed me to understand the material better and reduced the time I spent outside the classroom trying to understand it.

Due to the unknown factors surrounding COVID-19, I believe my instructors and school made the best of the situation at hand. Despite my disappointments, I was happy that my safety and that of my classmates was of great importance.

We were still able to complete all the requirements during the second term. I volunteered to continue embalming at PIMS during those months. We were not allowed to embalm if it was a coronavirus-positive case, which I feel was fair at the time. Also, I am thankful that PIMS provided me with an opportunity to become a certified celebrant, so I can provide families with meaningful celebration-of-life services. I was still given the opportunity to work on essential restoration skills through the PIMS restorative arts lab, which I was excited to complete because of its exclusive "Headzoz." I am a hands-on learner and very appreciative that these opportunities were still available to me.

I started my third, and last, term in September 2020 on campus. We wore our masks and were socially distanced, but we could not be happier to be back. We attended our lectures in person and took our quizzes and exams through alternative delivery. PIMS also provided me with an opportunity to become a CANA-certified crematory operator. My love of science and my background in biology also allowed me to tutor the new class in anatomy and microbiology. I really enjoyed tutoring because I got to be involved with the new class and was able to give advice to help them succeed.

Around Thanksgiving, we were given the option to "room or Zoom," meaning that if you felt comfortable coming to campus, you could do so, but if you didn't feel safe, you could stay home and attend via Zoom. I chose to continue to go to campus because I felt I got the most out of my education in person.

When the term was almost over – with COVID-19 cases continuing to rise – all students were again learning from home, unfortunately. I was still able to embalm at the school, and students were now allowed to embalm coronavirus-positive cases if they feel comfortable doing so.

As a PIMS student, I am very thankful for Dean [of Students Michael] Burns, Dr. [Barry T.] Lease [program director] and all of the faculty members for continuing to provide the education I needed during the pandemic. When we first went to alternative delivery in March, I was not sure if my education would be placed on hold or if the school would have to close. The PIMS faculty provided everything I needed to make sure I stayed on track for graduation, and I am very thankful for the opportunities I have had there.

Going to school during a pandemic has shown me how to evaluate a situation, adapt and conquer any obstacle I might encounter. This pandemic has shown how important funeral directors are to their communities, and I cannot wait to do my part to serve families.

Lindsay Michael, 24, from Butler, Pennsylvania, earned a Bachelor of Science degree in biology from the University of Pittsburgh in 2019. Currently enrolled at Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, she anticipates graduating in 2021 with an associate degree in specialized technology.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 Students and Teachers Face Similar Challenges

By Lauren Budrow, Professor, Wayne State University

Ten months ago, the way I taught on-campus courses changed significantly. Spring break 2020 was the starting line for what feels like a never-ending marathon. Due to the concerning increase in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths in Detroit, Michigan, Wayne State University made the decision that any courses that could be taught online would be. Field

trips and labs were canceled, research projects were stalled and clinical rotations were up in the air for all health sciences programs.

As chaotic as that initial move was for students, it was equally chaotic behind the scenes for instructors and program directors, who scrambled in one week to move all course ac-



tivity online and determine how students would complete clinicals in order to graduate on time.

Fortunately, I was one of those instructors who already utilized our learning management system for my face-to-face courses, so there was little disruption in providing content or assessing my students. The courses didn't look different for the in-person students, but they certainly felt different once the campus classroom was removed from the equation.

My previous article in the Summer 2020 issue of *The Director.edu* focused on the impacts of COVID-19 on funeral service practice. This companion piece focuses on how funeral service education has been affected in my world. I asked three of my students for their perspectives on how the educational experience has changed for them during the coronavirus restrictions. It isn't surprising that students and instructors have similar experiences.

As an online student, what struggles have you had with engaging in your education during COVID-19?

Class president **Dominique Johnson** was already an online student prior to COVID-19, so the sudden shift wasn't as disruptive to him as it was to classmates used to being in the classroom. However, the workload increase at the funeral home during this time, he said, still affected his studies:

Being an online student actually works out great for me due to my personal and work schedule. I can say it definitely has its advantages, just as long as you keep a good schedule for studying and making sure your work is done on time. During COVID-19 – well, the first wave of it – it was definitely a struggle trying to manage work and school. I work at my family funeral home, The House of Johnson Funeral Home. It was very challenging having to work 10 to 12 hours a day and then come home and try to study or even attempt to take a test. After, I think, the second week, I had to change my study habits and basically incorporate studying and working at the same time.

I taught online courses prior to COVID-19, and like Johnson, online instruction allows me to have some flexibility in my schedule; I'm able to work on additional projects while continuing to facilitate online courses. But the push to totally online meant I had to quickly change my in-person plans. I had to cancel two excellent annual field trips that students and vendors look forward to, move what would have been in-person presentations to online submissions with peer reviews and create discussion forums for those topics I had planned to address during lectures.

I was also adapting to the angst students were beginning to exhibit as they missed deadlines and struggled to stay engaged. I found myself doing a lot of encouraging – and searching for my own source of it while trying to maintain calm for students.

Another student, **Marjorie Newson**, had a different experience with the transition to online learning:

Transitioning from in-person learning to online learning affected my performance/interest tremendously. I entered the program excited and eager to learn. Once COVID-19 hit and we went entirely online, I got slightly discouraged and lazy. In-person learning gives me a better grasp of comprehending the material, as well as being able to discuss certain topics and/or material at-hand with the professor and/or fellow peers. The classroom setting gives me more discipline compared to being online at home.

Also, as a returning part-time student, it was hard entering the fall semester trying to reach out to my new peers simply because we didn't really know one another. We're not able to support/encourage each other as we would in the in-person class setting.

The initial move was equally chaotic for instructors and program directors, who scrambled in one week to move all course activity online.

Instructors get discouraged on occasion, too. I know I do. And the initial stages and uncertainty of COVID-19 were emotionally challenging for many, making it hard to focus, whether you were completing an assignment or grading it. The physical classroom adds structure for instructors as well. It's a space in which we are able to bounce ideas back and forth with students, and that immediate feedback is a driver for both instructor and student course satisfaction.

I had hoped the fall semester courses would be in person so I could get to know the incoming cohort, but that didn't happen for the courses I teach. Like Newson, I don't know students in the same way I would if we were in the classroom, and Zoom sessions aren't engaging when students turn off their cameras and feel less willing to share their thoughts online among classmates they also don't know.

Mary Ferrero joined Wayne State's program in the fall. She would have been an in-person student in my classroom during non-COVID-19 times, but she has had to take most of her courses online so far. My only interaction with her has been via Zoom, email and assignment comments, and I'm hoping to meet her before she graduates this year. According to Ferrero:

Being an online student, I've struggled to change my learning style based on what professors are able to provide. From in-person classes, I was always able to recall lectures I heard my professors give. Shifting to PowerPoints and assigned readings took that aural aspect away. It's also challenging to find the motivation to be engaged in general. With the personal hardships we have all faced this year, it's tempting to stay in your pajamas and sit on the couch for long periods of time.

Working at home, I'm not getting the benefit of hearing what other instructors are doing. The same happens to students who can't learn from each other in the classroom.

Yes, we've all experienced personal hardships this year. Yes, it is tempting to stay in your pajamas when you aren't going into the classroom (not that I'm complaining about this point). Finding the motivation to build a course, make needed updates, grade and give meaningful feedback can be tough. It's easy to see how some online instructors become absent in their courses, leading students to feel as if they are merely teaching themselves rather than being taught.

My frustration with what Ferrero calls the "aural aspect" is that even when a real-time lecture is offered, most students don't attend unless it's required – even when held at a time when they would normally have been in the classroom. This is one reason I feel less motivated to host real-time lectures.

Ferrero's additional comments reveal some of the additional disconnection students feel between themselves and their instructors:

The PowerPoints and print-offs help tremendously in learning. The downside is not being to apply what we learned in class, especially for the hands-on courses. The struggle I had with engaging in my education with COVID-19 was feeling like I was missing some of the material – meaning that during in-class learning, the professors gave us little tidbits to help us learn/understand. There is a constant dialogue between the professor and the class. I'm not saying we're not able to reach out online but it's not the same.

Lab-enhanced courses were disrupted for the limited number of students able to be on campus. Instructors are challenged with finding new ways to assess and offer feedback for what they traditionally watch in person. Modeling tech-

niques are done via Zoom or recorded and submitted for a grade, how-to videos are created so students can follow along or take notes and journal entries are used to assess a student's knowledge of using terminology to describe techniques, instruments and case analysis.

Online feedback and assessment take longer to grade, however, and getting a quality recording or finding the time to join a Zoom session can be difficult for students who would have been in the classroom otherwise and didn't need to have the technology to attend. I try to offer extensive feedback to my students so they know I'm still invested in their learning, even when I'm not in front of them, and provide a variety of tools to use that offer immediate feedback when I'm not able to.

Again, all these things take time to do – time I had been spending elsewhere; time students are spending at work now since they aren't in class. I haven't struggled to change my teaching style as much as I have to separate my work day from my home time. Since my in-person courses have all been moved online and I don't go to the office to prepare for classes, my work is done completely from a desk in the corner of my loft apartment, which I share with my husband, dog and cat. The classroom and office gave me quiet space.

Likewise, I see students needing that third space – the classroom – so they can get away from their domestic distractions to focus on an exam or content for that week. It also provides a social support network with classmates that simply cannot be achieved in the same way through social media.

Being alone at home to work, I often go days without colleague interaction, which means I'm also not getting the benefit of seeing and hearing what other instructors are doing in their courses. The same happens to students who aren't able to learn from each other in the classroom.

Have you seen any unexpected advantages to being "forced" into completing online courses when you would have normally been in the classroom?

The sudden shift for many programs to deliver their curriculum online hasn't been all bad. Instructors who resisted online instruction are realizing the benefits of certain technologies, particularly when classroom instruction has been interrupted for brief or extended periods. Students who were traditionally resistant to taking online courses are also seeing the benefits.

From Johnson's perspective, the push to online has introduced new components to his asynchronous instruction:

I think the professors at Wayne State University do an amazing job with the online program. ... There is the disadvantage of not being face-to-face with teachers, as the traditional students have been. The professors make up for that disadvantage by offering Zoom conference calls. I think this is great because you are able to interact with the professor and ask those questions you are not able to ask in class, and the professor can check on you to see if you need any additional help with the course. Overall, the content of the course and modules are great and very informative with what you need to learn.

Now that Ferrero has established a new routine for her online studies, she realizes that time and money spent on a

commute can be better applied elsewhere:

Being that I live in the metro Detroit area rather than the city, I have been given the gift of time not having to commute. The flexibility of not being obligated to be in the classroom at a designated time has been a blessing in disguise. Extra money not spent on gas is always a plus, too.

I live in downtown Detroit and don't own a car. I walk, cycle or take public transit to my office, which is two miles from home. On beautiful spring or summer days, I don't mind the walk. In the middle of a cold, rainy or snowy day, I'm grateful to sit in my apartment to do my work and attend meetings via Zoom. My commute might not be the same as that of students, but instruction hasn't been interrupted for either of us because of inclement weather or school closings.

I also don't have to worry about my students risking the drive to campus in poor conditions or choosing to come to campus when they are ill.

One thing I mentioned in my previous article was how COVID-19 has pushed a technology-reluctant profession into videoconferencing arrangement conferences and webcasting funerals. On the instruction side, it has pushed students and instructors into aspects of teaching and learning we might not otherwise have embraced readily.

This has also pushed preceptors to be that much more supportive during student clinicals at funeral homes. Ferrero expands on this:

The instructors remind us that this field requires us to be tactful and resilient, and this pandemic has been preparation

for that. Funeral directors must think on their feet to successfully manage funeral home operations. [The instructors] also give us constant positive reinforcement to keep going.

Nothing new occurs without trials and tribulations. Many instructors across the country had little preparation for the jarring events and changes in content delivery in 2020, but the entire education community is working to share ideas to smooth out the bumps in instruction as we get through this pandemic.

Some instructors have not been comfortable delivering content online, but many more have stepped up and improved the way they teach using online tools. Likewise, not all students have been successful at online courses, and certainly some have decided to postpone their funeral service education until they can return to the classroom full time.

For students and instructors, online education requires dedicated time, effort and discipline to do well. Those who can navigate it are gaining skills that will make them better practitioners and teachers down the road.

Rest assured, though, that instructor and program goals have not wavered during these last months despite the many challenges and changes. We are as committed to student success as ever.

Lauren Budrow is assistant professor of mortuary science at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan.

A Tapestry of Essential Elements

By Alan D. Wolfelt

Show me the manner in which a nation or a community cares for its dead. I will measure exactly the sympathies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals.

~ WILLIAM E. GLADSTONE

We have funerals for many essential reasons. As you move through your funeral service training, I can think of nothing more important for you to learn and embrace than the "Whys" behind your essential vocation.

For thousands of years, in addition to offering a way to respectfully dispose of the body of someone we love, funerals have been a means of expressing our beliefs, thoughts and feelings about life and death.

I created this triangle graphic to capture the purposes of the funeral ceremony. I call it my "Hierarchy of the Purposes of the Funeral." Similar to psychologist Abraham Maslow's fa-

mous "Hierarchy of Needs," this pyramid puts the simplest and most fundamental reasons on the bottom and works its way up to more esoteric, yet still significant, reasons.



REALITY It's hard to truly accept the finality of death, but the funeral helps us begin to do so. At first, we accept it with our heads, but only over time do we come to accept it with our hearts.

RECALL Funerals help us begin to convert our relationship with the person who died from one of presence to one of memory. When we come together to share our memories, we learn things we didn't know and we see how the person's life touched others.

SUPPORT Funerals are social gatherings that bring together people who cared about the person who died. Funerals are held in remembrance of the person who died, but they are for the living. The funeral is a special time and place to support one another in grief.

EXPRESSION When we grieve but don't mourn, our sad-

ness can feel unbearable and our many other emotions can fester inside of us. Mourning helps us heal, and the funeral is an essential rite of initiation for mourning. It helps us get off to a good start and sets our mourning in motion.

MEANING Did the person I love have a good life? What is life, anyway? Why do we die? There are no simple explanations, but the funeral gives us a time and a place to hold the questions in our hearts and begin to find our way to answers that give us peace.

TRANSCENDENCE Funerals have a way of getting us to wake up – to think about what we truly care about and how we want to spend our precious remaining days. Ultimately, funerals help us embrace the wonder of life and death and remind us of the preciousness of life.

These are the crucial reasons why we have funerals, but to be an effective funeral director, you must be able to do more than understand and articulate why we hold funerals in general. As you help each unique family create the “sweet spot” of experience, you must also understand and be able to articulate – or educate about – why we use each individual element of the funeral ceremony.

You see, the meaningful funeral ceremony is a tapestry. Made up of various elements, it creates a transformative experience that is much greater than the sum of its parts. While each family’s ceremony will and should be a unique tapestry, it can only create a tapestry if it draws on the full repertoire of possible elements.

Another metaphor I often use when talking about mean-

ingful funerals is that of a puzzle. It is only through combining the puzzle pieces of the ceremony – the visitation, music, readings, eulogy, symbols, actions and the gathering – that the complete picture emerges. While each element might seem random or superfluous when considered separately, each is essential to the final experience.

I wish you well in your studies and hope you will take the time to learn, discuss and ponder more about why funerals matter and how you can educate families about creating truly meaningful funeral experiences. This, in my view, is your highest purpose.

Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., is the founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado. He speaks on grief-related topics, offers training sessions for caregivers and has written many bestselling books and other resources on grief for both caregivers and the grieving. For more information, visit centerforloss.com, email drwolfelt@centerforloss.com or call 970-217-7069.



Cremation Services: Making Lasting Impressions

By Tyler J. Little



Burial had been the preferred method of disposition in North America for centuries. As time moved forward and consumer preferences changed, cremation by fire has now taken the lead position. With this change has come confusion and even anger within the funeral service industry as some funeral homes struggle to adapt to the technology and wants of modern consumers.

As the funeral industry in North America goes through a transformation, funeral directors are stepping up to the challenge to find new and creative ways to celebrate the lives entrusted to their care. The fate and future of the funeral in-

Funeral directors have always had to think outside the box, but that means something completely different today than it did in the past.

dustry are dependent on funeral directors making lasting impressions on families that choose cremation.

It is believed that cremation of the dead first started in the Stone Age (around 3000 BCE) and became more widespread as time progressed. While we don’t know the exact time frame of cremation worldwide, it is clear that the practice of “mod-

ern” cremation in the United States started in 1876 when Dr. Julius LeMoyne built and operated the first crematory. Since then, cremation has increased rapidly and continues to rise. According to current NFDA statistics, the U.S. cremation rate in 2018 was 52.9% and is expected to reach 63.3% by 2025.

For most people, the choice to cremate their loved one has been driven by cost, with the median cost of a burial approximately four times the cost of cremation. According to NFDA’s annual Cremation and Burial Report research, for years, the rising number of cremations was attributed to changing consumer preferences, weakening religious prohibitions, cost considerations and environmental concerns.

Funeral directors must bridge the gap between what people want and the services and offerings available to meet those desires.

In addition, NFDA noted that the rise in cremation and corresponding decline in burials followed a relatively steady pattern nationally, averaging about 1.6% annual growth in most U.S. states. In 2018, 27 states had cremation rates above 50%. Last year, NFDA reported that 36 states are projected to reach cremation rates exceeding 50%, and by 2035 predicted that all 50 states will have cremation rates above 50%.

Funeral directors play a very important role in assisting families that choose cremation. Often, they facilitate the cremation by obtaining the proper permits, authorizations and certificates. Families might even contract with funeral directors to perform services, either before or following the cremation. As cremation rates increase and profits from full “traditional” burials decrease, however, many funeral providers are finding it more difficult to run their businesses. It is not necessarily the fact that people are choosing cremation but that people are utilizing the funeral home’s products and services less frequently.

As societies move forward, it is no secret that the way things are done changes with time. Social standards and practices change as newer generations are born and technology is invented and introduced. This has impacted the funeral industry significantly in the last decade, as these social changes are determining how people want to celebrate their loved one’s life and dispose of their remains.

According to the 2020 NFDA Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey, 59.5% of respondents stated they had some level of confidence in planning and executing a memorial service without help. The year before, it was 53%.

As customer service trainer Lacy Robinson mentions in her article, “Meeting Tomorrow’s Customer Today” (*The Director*, February 2017), funeral directors are meeting a whole

different generation that seeks to make funeral arrangements. This newer generation is more self-reliant and resourceful. Economic factors might have played a role, however, and Robinson states that social media has had a lot to do with it. Social platforms and DIY sites have given this new generation the tools they need to do things on their own and possibly exclude the funeral director’s services in some ways.

Another aspect changing within the funeral industry is the location of services. This is important because, in many regions, most funeral homes are designed to hold services there or at a place of worship. NFDA’s consumer preferences survey last year found that 55.7% of respondents have attended a service at a nontraditional location, such as an outdoor setting, public venue, home or cemetery. All of these places do not require a funeral director’s involvement.

The study does not go into why folks are choosing other venues for services, but I hypothesize they are doing so because they are more comfortable elsewhere than in a traditional funeral home or place of worship.

Communities rely on their funeral directors to provide them with honest advice and quality products and services. To do this efficiently, I believe it is important that directors seek out and take advantage of opportunities for continuing education, such as seminars conducted by state and national associations, along with published works and classes offered by accredited mortuary schools detailing industry trends and innovations and how they can be applied effectively.

Along with this education would come necessary networking opportunities to help funeral directors gather the resources necessary to keep up with the wants and needs of consumers. Funeral directors have always had to think outside the box, but it means something completely different today than it did in the past. They must be creative and innovative if they want their business to succeed. Having the right materials, products and knowledge helps them do so. That way, when a DIY family needs services, funeral professionals can effectively communicate with them and keep the business at the funeral home.

The days of traditional funeral homes are starting to wane. Consumers are less willing to spend their money in an establishment that is only updated every 40 years. They expect modernization. That could be the ticket to help keep services in the funeral home, along with innovative ideas, such as outdoor service and respite areas, and equipment that makes services possible at other locations.

Just as it is important for funeral directors to be properly educated, the public should have an understanding of what is available to them and how to go about achieving what they desire. Directors must bridge the gap between what people want and the services and offerings available to meet those desires. One way of doing this would be inviting the public into the facility to see the offerings firsthand.

Unfortunately, during the pandemic, in-person meetings were not a viable option, forcing funeral directors to embrace and be creative with digital media. They could hold webinars and even produce videos showcasing their firm’s offerings –

anything to show the community that the director is committed to caring for them not under the funeral director's terms but on their terms.

Finally, funeral directors must advocate for family participation. There are going to be some who do not want to be involved in the deathcare process as much as others do. These people should not be forced; those who wish to participate should be encouraged to do so.

As mentioned earlier, families are frequently turning to DIY ideas to help celebrate the lives of their loved ones and

putting their own creative spin on what would otherwise be a standard service. This participation can be a big benefit for the funeral director. Not only is the family going to be pleased because it is their display or work, but, in my experience, it can provide a sense of comfort and help invoke memories of the life the family is trying to celebrate.

Tyler J. Little is a student at Worsham College of Mortuary Science.

Mobile Marketing's Connection to the Funeral Audience

By Welton Hong



I love running a company that leverages digital marketing tools to help funeral homes succeed, but it's not without its challenges. For example, although I know how much these firms can benefit from leveraging their audience's use of mobile devices, it can be hard to convince a traditional funeral home owner – particularly someone in his or her 60s or 70s – that mobile marketing works wonderfully.

But I'm guessing this concept shouldn't be any problem for most funeral service students. Even if you're an older student, quite likely smartphone use has been a fundamental aspect of your day-to-day life for years now. You probably have more than one mobile device – possibly a tablet and/or a Kindle – along with your smartphone, but you most likely don't have an old-school desktop computer.

In other words, you know that mobile computing isn't the future – it's the present. And when you move on as a funeral service professional, you'll need to reach at-need and preneed consumers where they're mostly likely to be found – on their mobile devices.

That's been true for some time, but it's especially true when you consider how much life has changed during the pandemic. Due to the virus crisis and its subsequent lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, Americans have become more reliant than ever on communicating, informing themselves and getting things done digitally. Frankly, we haven't had much other choice!

While things are obviously fluid at present, it's fair to say that practically everyone is online now, including older people (who make up the deathcare demographic) and the nearly two-thirds of internet users who use mobile devices as their primary way of connecting with online content. For some,

particularly your fellow students, it's the *only* way they access the internet.

And while the danger of COVID-19 will (hopefully!) be long past by the time you graduate, many of these changes are likely permanent. Now that people in every demographic do their shopping online, visit with family and friends online, watch movies online, etc., those behaviors aren't simply going to bounce back to how they were before.

With that in mind, consider the following ways in which my firm counsels clients to leverage mobile marketing. (For simplicity in communicating the following points, put yourself in the shoes of someone running their own funeral home, as I'm confident you will do in the future.)

YOUR FUNERAL HOME WEBSITE MUST INCLUDE RESPONSIVE DESIGN

You likely understand this already but, just in case, “responsive design” refers to websites that are chameleons when it comes to presentation. The shape, size and placement of elements on the screen change depending on what type of device someone is using. For example, menus that stretch along the top of your screen when you access a site via desktop might become nested in simplified drop-downs on mobile. The number of images that show up on your page might be reduced on a smaller screen or they'll be repositioned atop or under text instead of to the left or right of it.

When a funeral home website uses templates and themes that are responsive, it doesn't need to worry about all these little details. The changes are automatic when the site is opened on different devices. You must, however, test the site on different devices to ensure that it works across multiple screens and platforms.

MAKE SURE THE CONTENT WORKS ON SMALLER SCREENS

While responsive design automates many details, you should still take steps to create mobile-friendly content. This is true whether you're creating ads, onsite landing pages, social media posts or email marketing content.

Mobile-friendly content is easy for readers to scan. It includes plenty of white space due to shorter paragraphs, bulleted and numbered lists, subheadings and images. If all your paragraphs are 100 words each, with nothing to break them up, it shows up as an intimidating wall of text on a mobile device.

Also remember that mobile content is typically displayed vertically, and images will be much smaller. Keep that in mind when determining what information to display visually.

APP MARKETING IS SOMETHING TO CONSIDER EVENTUALLY Admittedly, it's very rare for an individual funeral home to have its own exclusive app, and the vast majority of firms don't need it (at least not right now). The world of mobile tech is always changing, however, and the landscape could be very different in a few years – possibly when you're in charge of marketing funeral services.

Regardless, whether you develop your own app, such as one designed to help people choose preplanning services or select among cemetery options, or simply advertise in apps, you can connect with new audiences by broadening your mobile horizons. Smartphone users of middle age or older average three or more hours on their devices, and almost 90% of that time is spent interacting with apps. If your services are not showing up in apps, you might eventually not show up to local families at all.

GEOTARGETING AND GEOFENCING ARE GREAT MOBILE TOOLS Mobile marketing also specifically allows for “geotargeting,” which allows you to create a campaign that reaches out selectively to people within a given geographic area. For example, at-need clients almost always seek a funeral home that's nearby, so you can target such individuals based on their proximity.

Another technique is “geofencing,” which lets you build a “virtual fence” around a particular location to send advertising messages specifically within that area. A hospital would be a perfect location to utilize this tool for at-need cases.

Both of these methods take advantage of the fact that mobile devices now upload highly specific location data in real time. You can essentially “track” anyone who is using a cell phone that has its location service turned on (and very few people turn it off).

You can also create advertisements on search engines such

as Google to target very specific locations. When someone in the target area searches for “funeral services,” “burial,” “cremation” or related terms, your ad is positioned to immediately catch the searcher's eye.

Click-to-call is an absolute must for anything being marketed on a smartphone. Someone pulling up your website wants to act *now*.

CLICK-TO-CALL IS ESSENTIAL No one wants to go through a complex process to reach any business, and this is especially true for a grieving family member immediately following a death. Mobile marketing click-to-call ads let them call your business with a single touch on their phones. That one touch converts a potential client from online to a live phone conversation, which allows you to provide answers and explain how you can help in their time of need.

Click-to-call is an absolute must for anything you market on a smartphone (whether related to deathcare or otherwise). If someone pulls up your site on a phone and wants to act *now*, you want as little “friction” (as we call it in the marketing world) as possible between that decision and their ability to act. Just clicking on the number to start the call on their phone is the most frictionless process possible. On the other hand, if they need to take the time to write down the number or memorize it before punching it into the keypad on their phone app, they might just end up connecting with a competitor instead.

The key to getting traffic to convert is to make everything as easy as you can, and click-to-call is a perfect example of that.

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



Referee Your Own Career

By Daniel M. Isard

Sporting events have officials, and as you've watched an event on your big-screen TV, complete with slow motion and instant replay, you might have said to yourself, “I could do that as well as that guy!”

Well, you can't. What separates these

referees from you is their ability to deal with the *speed* of professional play.

As you ponder your future in funeral service, remember the following points about your career choice:

1. The pace of play is much faster.
2. A bad decision can sidetrack a successful person.

3. Good decisions should never be made under pressure.

Now, draw a horizontal line on a sheet of paper. The left end of the line is today; the right end is your retirement. In between, you must figure out what is going to make your career and life a happy and healthy one.

Assume you want to plot out your future income. On the left end is current income. What income amount do you want to enter on the right end, at the end of your career? If your current income is \$40,000, for instance, and upon retiring you want your income to be \$100,000, how must you prepare?

Draw a horizontal line. The left end is today; the right is your retirement. In between, you must figure out what is going to make your career and life a happy and healthy one.

If you don't know those numbers, there's a great U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics website that takes data and publishes the basics on the value of being a funeral director ([bls.gov/ooh/personal-care-and-service/funeral-service-occupations.htm](https://www.bls.gov/ooh/personal-care-and-service/funeral-service-occupations.htm)).

But no one ever entered funeral service for the money. It is a calling, a service to mankind, a personal passion. You can't spend that calling at the store, however, and you need to be paid for that calling, just as a minister is paid for providing his or her calling to the community. Thus, you must be prepared to talk about money and compensation. No one should be embarrassed to ask to be paid what their service is worth.

I think education is critical to income, but alas, there has been no conclusive study that shows that education and income go hand in hand in funeral service. There are about 25,500 people presently employed as "morticians, undertakers and funeral directors." The average compensation on an hourly basis is about \$27.07, or about \$56,300 per year.

This tells me that the top 10% earn almost \$85,000 per year, and the lowest 10% earn about \$29,000. States with the

highest compensation are Connecticut, Massachusetts, Delaware, New Jersey and Illinois.

There is very little unemployment among funeral directors. However, states with the highest employment level of funeral directors as a percentage of population are Texas, Florida, New York, California and Illinois. The lowest are North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa and Wisconsin.

Why am I telling you to plan your future goals as it pertains to pay? Too often, people realize they are not being paid a reasonable rate. Too often, that observation is made by a friend, family member or parent – someone who has no basis for that conclusion. Too often, young people have an unrealistic expectation as to what their compensation should be.

I gave a presentation to a group of students and business owners a few years ago, and while I spoke to the students, another presenter spoke to the owners. After about an hour, we switched audiences. I asked the students, "How much do you think a funeral director with five years of experience should be earning?" The students gave answers from \$40,000 to \$80,000. When I previously asked the same question of the owners, I got answers from \$40,000 to \$50,000! Compensation needs to be realistic, and the marketplace ultimately sets that amount.

What goes hand in hand with income increases is the law of supply and demand. If you want to make more than an average funeral director, then your choices are the following:

- Find a way to market your personal goodwill to attract consumers to the firm for which you work.
- Work in a state that has the lowest number of funeral directors looking for a job.
- Prepare yourself for management and take on more responsibility.

The goal is to do everything you need to do to make sure your Yellow Brick Road proceeds correctly. Each decision you make should be made to facilitate getting your career to the goals and objectives on the right side of that sheet of paper. Sometimes, knowing the range of realistic results is the place to start. Check out that government website to figure out how you want to handle your compensation.

Daniel M. Isard is founder of The Foresight Companies in Phoenix, Arizona, and a frequent contributor to The Director.edu.

"How Can You Stand to Do That Job?"

By Todd W. Van Beck

Several years ago, I was flying to Ireland to do a series of seminars. The all-night flight left around 10 p.m. The plane was packed. I was seated on the far-left side and there was one vacant seat next to me, which was quickly occupied by a young lady. We exchanged the customary quick glances and polite smiles, and then silence.

Once the plane was airborne, this charming young lady leaned over to me and said, "Hi, I'd like to introduce myself. My name is Stephanie."

I replied, "Nice to meet you. My name is Todd."

Polite silence fell again. I was just dozing off when Stephanie once again leaned over and asked, "Todd, what do you do?"

I call this “the situation,” and every funeral director on earth knows precisely what I am talking about. My response was direct and honest: “Stephanie, I am a funeral director.”

BAM! That was the end of the conversation. (We will return to this cross-Atlantic journey later.)

I would like to explore this “situation.” Everyone in funeral service has experienced this, and we all know how to handle it, but why does this situation persist? With the sterling reputations of most funeral professionals, why does the “How can you?” question persist?

In tackling this age-old situation, I found some interesting information. This “situation” is nothing new. In fact, as far back as 1651, a chap named Lord Essex penned these lines:

How long, I would ask, are we to be subjected to the tyranny of custom and undertakers? Truly, it is all vanity and vexation of spirit – a mere mockery of woe, costly to all, far, far beyond its value; and ruinous to many; hateful, and an abomination to all; yet submitted to by all, because none have the moral courage to speak against it and act in defiance of it.

Obviously, Lord Essex had a bit of the thespian in him, but this basic overstatement has been repeated for centuries. Yet, the funeral ritual and the funeral professionals have survived.

Not many people are paying much attention to old Lord Essex today, but over the decades, there have been a few people, most now forgotten, who picked up his overall theme and forged ahead, expounding their own theories about undertakers, funeral expenses and the like.

Here is a brief history of these efforts.

In 1928, a fellow named John C. Gebhart published a book called *Funeral Costs: What They Average, Are They Too High? Can They Be Reduced?* Nothing came of his efforts.

In the late 1950s, *The American Funeral: A Study in Guilt, Extravagance and Sublimity* by LeRoy Bowman came out, but once again, nothing came of the effort.

Then, in 1963, two books came out about the financial aspects of the funeral profession and the accompanying theme that undertakers are untrustworthy and are to be looked upon with suspicion. The first, by Ruth Mulvey Harmer, was given the very imaginative title *The High Cost of Dying*. The Harmer book did not capture much attention, but a few weeks later, Jessica Mitford published *The American Way of Death*. The reaction to Mitford’s book was much different; it definitely captured people’s attention.

The American Way of Death has been in print for a whopping 58 years, and it is still one of the most frequently cited expert reference sources about funeral facts and figures. The book is used by lawyers in legal actions, college students doing research papers and educators in death and dying class-



es, and it has risen to the inviolate position of one of the most trusted resources about the funeral profession ever printed.

The first time I read *The American Way of Death*, I sat on the edge of my bed and wept.

Mitford created a group of disciples who, in the ensuing years, tried to pick up her legacy and mantle as a self-appointed funeral economic expert. Many of her disciples have faded from memory, moving on to more lucrative and interesting pursuits than undertakers and funerals. People who had impact, temporarily, included Karen Leonard, Father Henry Wasielewski and Lisa Carlson. Each wrote, spoke, were

interviewed on talk shows and were visible for a while. But their work did not endure the test of time.

However, the literary efforts of Jessica Mitford have indeed stood the test of time.

In the mid-1990s, the before-mentioned Leonard helped Mitford edit a new version of her 1963 book, which was creatively titled *The American Way of Death Revisited*. I found the dedication page of this revised book very interesting: “Dedicated to Karen Leonard, Lisa Carlson and Father Henry Wasielewski, who, each and all, have inherited the mantle of Scourge of the Undertaking Industry”

I found the phrase “scourge of the undertaking industry” interesting. My immediate thought was that I was thankful and happy that my life’s work and mission was not to be a “scourge” to anybody or anything. Personally, my ambition in life was to be helpful in my caretaking of the dead and my attempts at being a caregiver to the living.

***The American Way of Death* has been in print for a whopping 58 years and is still one of the most frequently cited expert reference sources.**

At this point, the question can easily be asked: Why did Jessica Mitford’s book, in comparison to other efforts, result in *The American Way of Death* still being in print? What struck such a chord with people?

I can answer that with one word: humor.

Mitford was funny. She had a razor-sharp wit. Said a news commentator when interviewed about his thoughts concerning *The American Way of Death*: “Miss Mitford is funny and the funeral directors are not funny.” Ouch! That one stung.

Laughing at death... Wow! Now there is a powerful psychology.

When *The American Way of Death Revisited* was published, reviewers were effusive in their praise – not of the accuracy or depth of the book but heaping one adjective after another on Mitford’s wicked, biting, sarcastic humor. Here are some of the accolades written: hilarious, funny, witty, light-hearted, sarcastic, comic... and the list goes on.

Mitford was not the originator of death humor, however, or of portraying the undertaker in a humorous or even ridiculous manner. A satirical 1850 cartoon in London’s *Punch* put undertakers front and center for ridicule when they were forced to reduce their high fees and had to “beg on the street.” Even Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, treated the undertaker with humor in his book *Roughing It* in 1872.

As we have explored, here and there, now and then, occasionally, there are people, probably well intended, who are complimented by being described as a “scourge.” They put pen to paper, publish one or two books at most, get on the lecture circuit temporarily and then vanish and move on to more interesting (and probably more lucrative) pursuits than “scourge of the undertaking industry.”

Jessica Mitford and Charles Dickens had one significant thing in common – their own experiences with death, which, not surprisingly, were frequent and tragic.

In this tangled history of death humor, criticism and ridicule of the image of the undertaker, and presenting the image of the undertaker as weird, creepy, odd, strange and a crook, there is one primary person who gets the credit for starting this unrealistic and highly exaggerated picture of the undertaker. And, no, it was not Lord Essex or Jessica Mitford.

It was Charles Dickens, who had firm opinions on what he viewed as the artificial opulence and expense of the Victorian funeral in London. It was Dickens who had the literary skill to portray the undertaker with the mental images movies and television still embrace to this day.

Mitford and Dickens had one significant thing in common: their own personal experiences with death, which, not surprisingly, were frequent and tragic. Mitford had significant losses in her life, namely the death of her husband and, tragically, the death of a child. Dickens could claim associated bereavements. For example, his maternal grandmother died in 1824 while his father, John, was incarcerated in debtor’s prison. When Dickens was 25, his beloved sister-in-law, only 17, died under his very roof. Ten years later, his father died a few

days after having surgery, and that was followed shortly by the heart-breaking death of Dickens’ last daughter, Dora.

Dr. Edgar N. Jackson, my psychology professor in mortuary college, astutely observed that a person who has inordinate death anxieties, who battles death phobias and feels an exaggerated and heightened fear of death, almost always shows enmity toward funeral directors. The easily accessible defense mechanism people use to control and distance themselves from subjects that cause anxiety is most often expressed in humor and ridicule.

In his attempts to cope with his personal anxieties about death, Dickens did not omit undertakers from his novels. On the contrary, he embraced them. Dickens’ treatment of undertakers, however, was, for the most part, not complimentary; hence the genesis of the creepy stereotype that persists to this very day.

In Dickens’ novels, undertakers are given odd names that help readers visualize the character. For example, Mr. Sowerberry, the undertaker in *Oliver Twist*, leaves readers with an unmistakable image of a “sour berry” and might make them shudder and grimace to think of something unpalatable, stale or stagnant. Dickens goes on to give a very detailed description of the old undertaker, who was a “tall, gaunt, large-jointed man attired in a suit of threadbare black, with darned cotton stockings of the same color, and shoes to answer.”

In other novels, Dickens continues to give his undertaker characters odd but highly imaginative names, giving readers a clear mental image of what these characters are like. Another example is Mr. Mould in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (no more need be said on what Mr. Mould’s name refers to). Dickens, in detail, describes Mould “as a balding, elderly man in a black suit with a face in which a queer attempt at melancholy was at odds with a smirk of satisfaction.”

In *Great Expectations*, the undertaker’s name is Mr. Trabb (rhymes with *drab*, i.e., lacking brightness or interest; drearily dull).

Yet for all of Dickens’ efforts to make the Victorian undertaker a comic object – and a source of revulsion and ridicule after Albert, the Prince Consort of Queen Victoria (her husband), died in 1861 – no human effort on earth could counter the typical Victorian’s renewed dedication and devotion to all of the cultural funeral rites, rituals and ceremonies that Queen Victoria herself had decreed and successfully implemented.

The Victorian approach to funerals would become culturally entrenched for more than a century, and it is still observed in many places. Even in the United States, where people usually shunned most English customs, the Victorian funeral ceremony was embraced with enthusiasm. The coffin constructed for the funeral of Abraham Lincoln in 1865, for instance, was patterned from the overall design of the coffin used for Prince Albert only four years before.

But Dickens had succeeded in giving a lasting mental image of the Victorian undertaker as the stereotypical “Dismal Trader” and “Merchant of Sorrow.”

Nowhere has this unrealistic and exaggerated image been embraced more than in Hollywood films, in the theater and on television. In many theatrical productions of Dickens’

works, undertakers are portrayed as strange and odd, even if that was not precisely the case in the author's original story.

For example, in *David Copperfield*, the undertaker, Mr. Omer, is innocently described as "a merry little old man in black with rusty little bunches of ribbons at the knees of his breeches, black stockings and a broad-brimmed hat." This innocuous image of Mr. Omer has not been accepted in Tinseltown, and over the decades, the image is repeatedly created in the prototype of Mr. Sowerberry.

The imagery created by Charles Dickens more than 150 years ago has become part of the Hollywood portrayal of members of the funeral profession. The silver-screen image of the funeral director is almost always male, with actors such as Vincent Price and Boris Karloff in lead roles. I doubt very much I will live to see the day when Brad Pitt, Richard Gere, Tom Cruise, Harrison Ford, Antonio Banderas or George Clooney play a funeral director on the silver screen, which adopted Dickens' image of the undertaker hook, line and sinker.

In the movie version of Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One*, a satire of funeral service in California, the undertakers were portrayed by none other than Jonathan Winters and Liberace!

Remember Johnny Carson? Any time he ran into trouble in his opening monologue, he would tell a joke about the world-famous Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California, and bring the house down. Ah, the power of humor and death. Carson, I thought, gave Forest Lawn hours upon hours of free publicity on national television during the 30-year run of his late-night television show.

Now let's return to Jessica Mitford. When she died in 1996, the media hailed her as "queen of the muckrakers." Interestingly, for all the humor and criticism Mitford heaped on our profession, she herself carved out an entire career with her obsessive interest with funeral service. Privately, I wondered at times why Mitford just did not bite the bullet, go to mortuary college, get licensed and be of service to bereaved people since she seemed utterly obsessed with our work in funeral service.

In October 1963, my old professor, Dr. Jackson, wrote a book review of *The American Way of Death*. Here is a quote from that review: "If this fear of death motivates attacks upon funeral directors, Jessica Mitford must be frightened to death of death." No one ever said it better.

On this important motivational theme of death anxiety, the great Union Theological Seminary professor and acclaimed philosopher Paul Tillich said that death anxiety is the basic human emotion. It underlies all our other fears and apprehensions about the process of living. People with death



anxieties will be motivated to act on their anxieties, whether that be with an undertaker joke, a stinging insult, incredulity that one became a funeral director or silence and avoidance.

I have concluded that when dealing with an all-pervading and unfocused emotion such as grief and fear, it is not surprising that one's anxiety can lead to some form of acting out that might seem incongruous, immature and fearful because the person is operating in the arena of the nonrational.

Here is a rational, sterile, logical fact of life: The death rate is 100%. Just try to get a group of people, or one individual, to rationally

respond, however, and embrace their own quality of life by acknowledging this fact. Some get it, many do not, and the number who don't get this rational truth is growing day by day.

I once taught a ministry class at a church for people who wanted to learn about grief psychology. I started out by stating the logical, sterile, rational truth that the death rate is 100%. The group looked at me as if I had lobsters crawling out of my eye sockets. They squirmed and wiggled in their chairs as if their seats had been electrified. I was never invited back.

Dickens exhibited an anxious, irrational fear of death, and so did Mitford. Interestingly, Mitford's experience with death was as tragic as that of Dickens. At 19, she married her second cousin, Esmond Romilly, who was killed in 1941. They had one child who died in infancy.

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In her last interview on December 1, 1992, in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Mitford shocked and stunned her anti-funeral and anti-funeral director disciples with this statement: "I want six black horses with plumes and one of those marvelous jobs of embalming that take 20 years off. But I'm terribly afraid my survivors will plunk me into the cheapest box and have me cremated. You know, 'forget Jessica, give us the money!'"

Mitford died of cancer on July 23, 1996; she was 78 years old. Here is what was done upon her death:

- Mitford was embalmed.
- Her remains were viewed by hundreds of mourners.
- More than 600 people attended her funeral service at the Delaney Street Foundation Hall in downtown Oakland, California.
- The interior of an antique, horsed-drawn hearse displayed the books and articles written by Mitford.
- There was a registration book and printed memorial folders.
- Two open bars served adult beverages.
- There were 12 uniformed funeral attendants.
- A New Orleans-style funeral marching band played old funeral hymns on the street in front of the hall.
- There were eight speakers, including poet laureate of the United States Maya Angelou.
- There was more than an hour devoted to open testimonials.
- More than 200 floral tributes were displayed.
- The funeral band played *When the Saints Go Marching In* as Mitford's solid-oak casket was taken from the hall and placed in the horse-drawn hearse.
- The funeral coach was drawn by three teams of black Belgian horses.
- Mitford was cremated following the funeral rituals and ceremonies.

Stephanie then started to talk and did not stop until the plane landed in Dublin. About what, you ask? About her life story, which was all about the losses she had experienced. She had a lot to talk about.

I once engaged Mitford in a pro/con debate concerning the value, purpose and benefit of the funeral ritual. It was a kind of point/counterpoint session, and she was witty, charming, polished, highly intelligent and articulate. At the end of our session, she came up to me, graciously extended her hand and said, "Do you know what the main problem is with funeral directors?"

I said I didn't, and she replied: "Funeral directors stop believing in what they are doing, and when they do that, it opens up the door for people like me."

Ah, the value, purpose and benefit of the funeral. What nuggets of service to humanity reside in those three words.

Getting back to the story I noted at the start, after telling Stephanie what I do, she tried everything to avoid me. She put on her headset, which did not work, then started reading the in-flight magazine.

About 30 minutes into the flight, she leaned over again and said, "So, you are a funeral director." "Yes, I am," I responded.

Stephanie then started to talk, and she did not stop until the plane landed in Dublin eight hours later. And then she kept talking to me through customs and then introduced me to her husband, and she kept on talking. About what, you ask? About her life story, which was all about the losses she had experienced in her life. She had a lot to talk about.

Because I am not a rookie at this and have learned the skill of listening to the bereaved, all I did for eight hours was say minimal encouragers such as, *yes, oh, hmm, go on, wow* and the like. I did not actually say a complete sentence to her for eight hours.

When Stephanie introduced me to her husband, she told him I was one of the smartest people she had ever met (which truly was an exaggeration).

A good question to end this essay might be this: Has the funeral profession gotten beyond the stereotype created by Charles Dickens well over a century ago?

My answer, though I will be accused of bias, is a resounding yes. My observations during my career are that funeral directors are diligent laborers in the vineyard and are keenly sensitive to countering at most every juncture that image of us so masterfully created by the masterly Charles Dickens.

Yes, the movies remain stuck on the image created by Dickens – that undertaker in the Old West, always in black, always with a measuring tape hanging out of his pocket and always wringing his hands, with a smirk of artificial sincerity on his face. But that is Hollywood, not real life. This image is on celluloid film, presented by people who are in costume, wearing makeup, saying memorized lines. Nothing could be phonier.

Funeral directors deserve high marks for their dedication to duty, for serving their communities and for being asked to confront some of the most utterly distasteful occurrences while consistently doing so with quiet dignity and kindness.

In my career, I have not encountered one funeral director who aspired to be a "scourge." None!

The value, purpose and benefit of the funeral profession is not a tangible thing; it's what's in a funeral director's heart. I believe that nothing good happens in our beloved profession until something good first happens in a funeral director's heart.

Charles Dickens did not understand this, and neither did Jessica Mitford, but that makes absolutely no difference. You and I understand this truth, and that is all that matters.

Todd W. Van Beck is a longtime funeral director, funeral service historian, presenter, educator and author of hundreds of funeral service articles.

In the News: BRAVE Act Now Law

After years of support by funeral service, thousands of calls and emails from funeral directors and hundreds of congressional meetings during NFDA Advocacy Summits, President Donald J. Trump signed the BRAVE Act into law, ensuring equitable funeral and burial benefits for veterans.

Included in the Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020, the BRAVE Act updates veteran burial benefits in a manner that treats all non-service-connected deaths equally, regardless of where a veteran dies. Before the BRAVE Act became law, certain veterans who died in a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facility were provided greater funds to cover the cost of a funeral than veterans who died in their home or in another medical facility – a major inequity that sorely needed addressing.

“We would not have made it to this stage without the hard work of our members,” stated NFDA President Bryant Hightower. “Whether it was meeting with their members of Congress during the annual Advocacy Summit, making calls or sending emails, our members played a vital role by sharing the stories of veterans they have served, building awareness of the BRAVE Act and securing co-sponsors. Their persistence has paid off, and for that, I say thank you!”

Sponsored by Sens. Gary Peters (D-Michigan) and Marco Rubio (R-Florida), and Reps. Adam Kinzinger (R-Illinois) and Cheri Bustos (D-Illinois), the BRAVE Act is a big win for both veterans and funeral service.

Said NFDA member Anthony Guerra: “I felt that passing the [act] was critical for veterans, so rather than be a spectator, I wanted to be a participant.”

“I am very proud of NFDA members and others in the funeral profession who advocated for this important legislation,” said NFDA CEO Christine Pepper. “This is why we go to our nation’s capital each year and visit congressional leaders, talking with them face to face about changes we want made on behalf of funeral service.

“Passing legislation in Congress is not easy considering that



only about 1% of the bills introduced in the 116th Congress were enacted into law,” Pepper continued. “Nevertheless, members have been coming to our Advocacy Summit each year and walking the halls of Congress to help get this important bill passed for our veterans. I also want to thank the state associations and state executives for their hard work and support.”

“Being an advocate for funeral service means I choose to get in the game and have a positive impact on our profession,” said Anthony Guerra, NFDA member from California and chair of the Funeral Service Foundation. “I felt that passing the BRAVE Act was critical for our nation’s veterans and their families, so rather than be a spectator,

I wanted to be a participant. With the passage of this bill, I am walking away gratified and with a sense of accomplishment.”

Said Cason Hightower, NFDA member from Georgia: “As a former Congressional staffer and [as] a funeral director, I know the importance of advocacy. NFDA members have been tireless in advocating for passage of the BRAVE Act. I have witnessed funeral directors from across the nation come to Washington, D.C., to show Congress how much we care about the families we serve, and the BRAVE Act is one example of the impact we can have.”

NFDA first introduced the BRAVE Act in the 115th Congress in 2017. In addition to the provision in the BRAVE Act that updates veterans’ burial benefits, the omnibus veterans bill includes several other funeral or burial benefits for deceased veterans, including:

- Expanding transportation of deceased veterans to veterans’ cemeteries
- Extending the VA’s requirements for outer burial receptacles to cemeteries
- Authorizing the VA to replace existing VA-furnished headstones to add inscriptions for deceased spouses and eligible dependent children, and to allow for inscriptions on headstones furnished by the VA if the spouse or eligible dependent child predeceases the veteran
- Making grants to counties for veterans’ cemeteries via the Veterans Cemetery Grants Program
- Authorizing the National Cemetery Administration to furnish an urn/commemorative plaque in lieu of a headstone or marker to eligible individuals whose cremated remains are not interred in a cemetery.

Need Scholarship Money? Read This.

Kelly Manion

Let's be honest – there's no such thing as *just* going to school. Your course load includes family responsibilities, securing an apprenticeship and managing a career or side hustle. Covering the costs associated with pursuing your education in funeral service is an added stress, and applying for a scholarship during an already overscheduled semester might seem too daunting.

The Funeral Service Foundation is here to help. While we might not be able to run the kids to basketball, help your dad figure out the family Zoom call or pull our weight on the latest group project, we can help with tuition bills.

The application process includes answering five questions in no more than 250 words each and submitting a brief video. Students actively taking courses at ABFSE-accredited institutions or accredited Canadian institutions are eligible to apply for an academic scholarship. This year's application windows are February 15-April 1 and September 15-November 1. Scholarships range from \$2,500 to \$5,000, and awards are paid directly to the school.

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In 2020, a record 25 students merited academic scholarships. The Foundation Scholarship Committee noted that professionalism, strong character and poise in both essays and videos set the winners apart. Attention to detail can help you build a quality, scholarship-winning submission. Here are a few tips and tricks to help.

ANSWER THE EXACT QUESTION Offer thoughtful, specific examples to the exact question. For example, if you're asked, "What draws you to the funeral service profession?" answering, "I enjoy funeral service because no two days are the same" is a stronger, more specific answer than, "There are many things that I just really like a lot about funeral service."

Professional tip: *Really, just, so, very, many, things* and *a lot* are empty words. Avoid them to make your writing more



succinct and descriptive. (This is a great tip for your term papers, too!)

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION Creating a brief video is part of the application process. Your camerawork doesn't have to be Hollywood quality, but attention to detail will set you apart. Take care to record your video in an appropriate location. Even though the acoustics might sound great, your bathroom, for example, is not ideal for filming your video.

When you scout your space, check for adequate sound and lighting levels. Be sure the space is orderly and that your cat isn't in the frame. Dress professionally. Try a test shot prior to recording. Consider asking someone you trust to help you film and offer honest feedback before you submit your video.

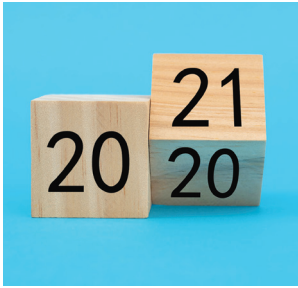
BE YOURSELF Funeral directors have been serving families and communities for generations amid a continually evolving professional landscape. The profession always looks to attract committed, focused individuals to carry the important work forward. The best applications come from students who are honest, confident and wholly themselves. Simply put, be the best version of yourself and tell your story from the heart.

Supporting the next generation of resilient, adaptable and compassionate leaders (you!) is central to the Funeral Service Foundation's mission of investing in people and programs to strengthen funeral service and lift up grieving communities.

Whether you are pursuing funeral service as a first, second or third career, our goal is to make your education accessible. If you've applied in the past but did not receive a scholarship, we strongly encourage you to apply again. Visit FuneralServiceFoundation.org for more information.

Kelly Manion is Funeral Service Foundation director of communication.

From the Editor's Desk



2020 Hindsight

Have you stopped to wonder how all those annual “prediction articles” from last year panned out?

At exactly one second past midnight on January 1, 2021, we could say “2020 hindsight” and be literally correct. Well, here’s to the new year, which, in reality, looks a lot like the old year. For all the “Thank God 2020 is over” talk, is the slate really clean? Has the turned page removed the angst and despair from a year that will be remembered as one of the most dreadful periods in our lifetime?

Obviously, no. Let’s imagine that during 2020, we were in a pool. On New Year’s Day 2021, we climbed out of that pool, but we’re all still soaking wet, and it will take some considerable time to dry off. At last check, coronavirus is still raging and deaths continue at an alarming pace.

When I was a child, one of the most popular board games I played with family and friends was “Life.” (Remember the little cars and pink and blue pegs?) Toward the end of the game, players came to a space called the “Day of Reckoning,” at which everyone was required to stop. Here, some big decisions had to be made on how a player wanted to spend the rest of the game. Do you go to the mansion? Do you wager on the wheel, hoping to win enough cash to beat everyone else?

In a lot of ways, January 1 is a day of reckoning for people. Are they going to exercise more, stick to a diet or come up with other methods of self-improvement? Will they perhaps update their professional goals?

The fact that on January 5 I consumed several little bags of peanut M&Ms does not mean my vow to make better food choices went out the window. After all, every day is a day of reckoning, and optimism is a choice. Discipline is also a choice when it comes to hashing out goals.

Already a number of funeral directors in most states have received the COVID-19 vaccine – a very positive development. And while funeral service was hit hard by pandemic protocols, many directors have been creative in their efforts to serve families and will continue to innovate into post-pandemic days.

There are a number of reasons people don’t always achieve their goals. One is clutter, i.e., there are too many things on the list, and the things on the list are not always specific. Last year taught us that people don’t always plan for interruptions. Often, they don’t prioritize their goals. There are no deadlines, time estimates or specifics.

For some, unfortunately, setting goals is an exercise in futility, but for those who seek change and who put their mind toward constructing a real list of objectives, setting goals will help.

If last year taught us anything, it’s to be prepared for the unexpected. And, also thanks to last year, we have a better idea of what the unexpected looks like.

EDWARD J. DEFORT
EDITOR

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