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Taking Stock of the Funeral Profession

By Todd W. Van Beck

Many years ago, I worked in a funeral home out West. I was terribly young, had graduated from mortuary college and was a lowly apprentice. I was at the bottom of the food chain, and no one cared about any thought I might have about any subject on earth. During that period in my life, my God-given right to freedom was singularly ignored, and if I had complained, that complaint would have been ignored or ridiculed. Such was my lowly state in life.

During this time, I worked with a gentleman who was always impeccable in his dress. He was bilingual, speaking Spanish fluently. He was a deputy county coroner (my boss

was the high coroner). He was detailed in making funeral arrangements and conducting funerals, people loved him, and he was kind, sensitive, compassionate, caring and highly concerned about our client families.

He had been on the staff of the funeral home for many years, having started right out of high school. He came from a terribly impoverished family, so the job in the funeral home was a lifesaver for him.

He went to church every Sunday and had three children and a lovely wife. In fact, he was so involved in the life of the community that he had built his own following. Many families requested him, and only him, to serve them when they experienced a death. He never once received a complaint from a bereaved family. Not once.

In addition to all of these stellar funeral director strengths, he was also excellent in the preparation room. Nothing



If you exclusively and firmly equate a license as the sole criterion to claiming professional status in funeral service, you can stop reading right now.

seemed too challenging for him. He could rattle off the chemicals from any chemical company, he excelled at restorative art and cosmetics, and he never cut corners when embalming a decedent. Never!

He was also very skilled in the presentation of funeral merchandise and consistently exceeded the firm's required casket averages.

I thought he was one of the most professional members in funeral service I had ever encountered. He was just good at what he did, and more than that, he loved his position. It was his mission in life.

But he did have one flaw – he did not have a license! He had never gone to mortuary school. He had never taken the national board examination. He had never served an apprenticeship. He had never taken the state law examination, and he was never, ever going to take any of these roads to licensure.

This story begs the question: Was this funeral director unprofessional?

If you exclusively and firmly equate a license as the sole criterion to claiming professional status, then you can stop reading right now. But if you feel this question is something to ponder, keep going.

I'll get back to the situation involving my friend later, but this is a good place for me to express my views. I personally believe in licensure. I believe firmly in the value, purpose and benefit of formalized mortuary education. And I believe in the concept of education for the simple sake of learning. In other words, all education is good.

AGE-OLD QUESTION

I was rummaging through my files when an article caught my attention. Published 107 years ago, in November 1915, in an ancient professional journal called *Embalmer's Monthly*, was a word-by-word account of an address Bradford Leavitt gave before the NFDA convention in San Francisco, California, titled "Lifting a Business Into a Profession."

As I read his thoughts and opinions, I was struck by an awareness that, in our present day, funeral service seems to be trying to tackle and determine, once and for all, the definitive answer to this simple but very old question: "Is funeral service a profession or not?" Leavitt, our noble professional ancestor, was trying to accomplish the same task way back in 1915 – more than a century ago!

I have read lots of information and sat in on many presentations in which this question is the main topic, and the readings and presentations are filled with genuine seriousness of intent in attempting to get hold of this answer.

I've also heard strong opinions expressed on both sides of the issue and have witnessed tempers flare and feelings hurt in an attempt to answer this nagging question. I mean, if a question that has been unresolved for 107 years doesn't qualify as persistent, then I don't know what the word persistent means.

In trying to find the answer to this question, I thought a good place to start would be the governmental agencies and authorities, such as state and federal governments, funeral service licensing agencies, accrediting agencies, civil service

bureaucrats and the like. Do government bureaucracies view funeral service as a true profession?

What I discovered was not overly surprising. The rules and regulations pertaining to funeral service from state to state included lengthy lists of egregious violations that could result in a license vanishing. There were myriad preneed laws, cemetery laws, cremation laws, licensing laws and funeral procession laws. Within this labyrinth of codes, statutes, rules and regulations, the words "profession" and "professional" were indeed used, but did any of these important authorities claim that a funeral director was indeed a professional? Well, there was some reference to that but not too much.

The closest piece of tangible information I found was under the federal Fair Labor Standards Act, also known as the Wage and Hour Law, which says that a funeral director can take an exemption as a "professional." But, as most of us old-timers know, this exemption was not always the case. Just a few years ago, funeral directors could not claim this exemption because a "professional," per the federal Wage and Hour Law, was then defined as a "learned" person, and funeral directors then were not recognized as learned people.

By this point in my research, I started to wonder whether looking to any governmental authority for professional validation of funeral service was even the right direction to take. As we all know, rules and regulations change, they are affected by political power, and they are at times too complicated to understand. I was also keenly aware that many individuals read the state law book just once in



Is funeral service a profession or not? Bradford Leavitt, a noble professional ancestor, was trying to answer the same question more than a century ago!

preparation for the state law examination and never revisit that valuable, informative publication again.

Because government rules and regulations are fluid and unpredictable, I decided that government authority could not be the final arbitrator concerning the professional status of funeral service. These agencies certainly had the power to be the final arbitrators concerning the licensing of both individuals and establishments, but does that power establish the work of funeral service as a true profession? I felt there had

While the public clearly likes and trusts funeral directors, directors are mighty hard on themselves. It's almost as if they can't accept the fact that the local director is popular and well-liked.



to be something more, so my search went on.

Next, I explored how the public perceives funeral directors. For instance, does my Great Aunt Tilly think funeral directors are professional people? Here, I ran into some good news, and I have shared this information frequently: People like funeral directors, people trust funeral directors, and people find funeral direc-

tors to be honest. How do I know this? The Gallup Poll, that's how. For several years, funeral directors ranked mighty high in Gallup's public assessment, which identified the top 10 most honest, trusted and admired professionals in a community.

Strangely, people in funeral service have argued and debated whether that piece of news is even good news. It's almost as if they can't accept the fact that the local funeral director is popular and well-liked. This motivated me to look at how funeral directors perceive other funeral directors.

What I found is that while the public clearly likes funeral directors, funeral directors are mighty hard on themselves and sometimes brutally critical of themselves. I even attended one meeting in which several funeral directors proclaimed, "We are our own worst enemies!"

All I could think was, "Are you kidding? We are our own enemy?" I did not agree with that assessment because I know there are few careers in which its members work so diligently and ceaselessly to satisfy their clients. Funeral service is a career and a way of life in which thousands work hard, every day, to do the right thing. Moreover, many have to deal professionally with some of the most heinous and distasteful circumstances that can ever happen in a community – and they must accomplish this monumental task with grace, dignity and confidentiality.

Thus, I concluded that those funeral director naysayers at the meeting were just venting their frustration concerning how significantly and permanently things have changed in funeral service. Unfortunately, that interaction gave me nothing

to go on concerning finding the answer to the ancient riddle of whether funeral service is a profession.

Thus, I decided to follow yet another avenue by exploring and making an evaluation concerning the basic mission of being a funeral director – a look at the real big-picture funeral stuff. Regardless of a license, regardless of an agency, regardless of personalities, territories and the like, I decided to zero in on the pure and noble mission, the worthy ideal of funeral service. I decided to peel back the DNA of two critically important subjects: the care of the dead and the care of the living.

As I journeyed down this thought path, I began to ponder the beauty and nobility of funeral service and was reminded of a beautiful sentiment written years ago by Jim Bishop in his great book *The Day Kennedy Was Shot*. In his book, Bishop makes candid and beautifully honest reference to the reality of what a funeral director must balance: "There is no profession which stands in such permanent delicate balance as a funeral home. It must be solemn but not doleful, helpful but not overly cheerful, competent but not morbid, spiritual but not hyper-religious, cordial but not intimate, ready to assist but not overbearing."

Even reading those words now, I tear up and feel in my heart something almost mystical. Bishop's thoughts concerning the funeral profession go far beyond a rule or regulation, or the opinions of the ever-present naysayers. This quote displays a professional awareness that is way beyond the confines of a mere certificate or degree or credential, as important and essential as they are; it harks back to an authentic, unqualified and indescribable love of funeral service. Can it possibly be that a genuine love of funeral service qualifies it as a profession?

Just maybe, this is the missing link that has eluded the attempts of so many to absolutely, definitively establish funeral service as a profession for so many years. Just maybe, the absolute professional identity is centered on the love of funeral service in the hearts of those who are called to this work.

The presence or absence of love is indeed a powerful qualifier when it comes to assessing the validity and purposes of a profession. For instance, I knew a farmer when I was a boy in Iowa who could not read or write, but he dearly loved being a farmer, and his love showed all the time by the fruits of his labor. He wasn't educated in the formal sense, but he had a Ph.D. in "experiential expertise." He loved the earth, he loved planting and he dearly loved the harvest. Would he qualify as a true professional?

Possibly, having a deep abiding love of funeral service is the ultimate watermark for us to lay claim to true, authentic and absolute professionalism. This doesn't ultimately revolve around a test or a book or a framed certificate; it revolves around the individual and what is present or absent in his or her heart. Based on this thinking, human beings who truly love what they do are the true professionals.

Todd W. Van Beck is an educator, author and frequent presenter at funeral service conventions.

Meeting in the Middle

By Lauren Budrow

Being a funeral service educator isn't just about facilitating classroom experiences and delivering content. A significant aspect of what I do requires mentoring students, encouraging them and advocating for them, and helping them find employment opportunities so they can serve families in the manner those of us who love funeral service expect.

It is also my responsibility to promote the university's program and listen to what employers are saying. One way I do this is by participating in conventions. Practitioners expect to see vendors while walking the exhibit floor, but once they see a funeral service program booth, they're drawn to engage in conversation.

It is always a pleasure to meet alumni I've taught, but I also meet practitioners who graduated from programs across the country. Licensees want to tell me what year they graduated, often smiling widely as they recall how it was during their time in their program.

We then find out what we, as funeral directors, have in common. Inevitably, the conversation quickly rolls into asking if I have any new graduates looking for a job, which is usually followed with a list of complaints about not being able to find "good" employees and how recent hires haven't worked out – as if it's the educators' fault.

I listen, silently acknowledging the disconnect between what an educator does and what employers expect them to provide to the workforce. Eventually, I realized that what many employers want are graduates who resemble themselves from decades ago.

Things change. Curricula change. This is yet another challenge for the funeral service educator – to uphold traditional values of the practice while watching state regulators debate the best way to assess an individual's competency for licensing in our profession, and then to teach specific content to prepare students for the National Board Examination (NBE). In the meantime, funeral homes across the country are desperately searching for apprentices and licensed practitioners who fit their ideal employee model to fill staffing shortages. There's a gap.

EXEMPLARY STUDENT VS. IDEAL CANDIDATE

As previously stated, the role of the educator is different than that of the employer. Before I can address what is considered an ideal candidate for hire, I want to explore what educators



consider to be an exemplary student.

I asked a handful of funeral service educators from across the country to participate in a Mentimeter activity that asked what they felt were the attributes of an excellent funeral service student. (Mentimeter is an app used to create presentations that provide real-time feedback from attendees.)

The resulting infographic descriptors (see graphic below) weren't surprising to me because these educators are also licensed funeral directors, some of whom still maintain a connection to a funeral home. While those traits we

want to see in exemplary students and what employers are asking for in ideal candidates match up, they don't necessarily provide the same result.

Where I find the disconnect between academics and practice is in comparing these desirable outcomes in different



contexts. Let's look at the descriptor "compassionate" from the graphic, for example. Educators want students seeking to become future practitioners to be compassionate. That said, educators must have course objectives that are measurable, so points or percentages can be determined and a grade assigned. A student's ability to demonstrate compassion leans toward subjective assessment, which can be problematic.

Employers, however, attempt to quantify an employee's compassion through post-funeral surveys. The families I served were asked to evaluate how compassionate they felt I was (on a scale of 0-10) while working with them, but the survey didn't consider the conditions under which I was

working; the support, or lack of, provided to me; or any other stressors imposed by the family I was serving. I might have been technically proficient and accurate in executing the details of their loved one's funeral, but if they perceived me as not being compassionate, it was counted against me.

Educators can't rely on their ability to know compassion when they see it or use a Likert scale to assess a student's demonstration of it without the risk of introducing biases, particularly when not everyone will perceive the characteristic of compassion in the same way.

Consider the ethical topic of physician-assisted death, for instance. Some people find it a compassionate way to bring about the death of someone who is suffering, while others have moral objections to it, regardless of suffering. On a physician's compassion scale, you'll get very different results depending on who completes the survey. Send that survey out nationally and the answers might further reflect dominant regional and religious customs, as well as political persuasions.

Likewise, I might have an excellent student academically who I find not overly compassionate. I can educate and mentor that student, provide guidance on how to best kindly approach and interact with a grieving family, and make resources available, but beyond graduation, I have little to no influence on that student. Now, does that student get excellent grades (dedicated), show up to every class (reliable), pass my assessments (teachable), pass the NBE (confident), secure an apprenticeship and then get licensed? Yes. Does that exemplary student embody the level of compassion I would want to see in a funeral director? No.

The opposite of this scenario also occurs. Licensees will feel excited to send their eager and friendly funeral attendant to mortuary school because they know in their gut this

There's a disconnect between what educators do and the "ideal candidates" employers expect them to provide to the workforce.

person will be an excellent funeral director. It might turn out that this person isn't an excellent student, though, and struggles with the content, doesn't attend class (unreliable) because they are working at the funeral home (dedicated to the work, not studies) and feels like he or she already knows how to do the job (unteachable) even though they are learning at the funeral home.

In this case, the student otherwise might be very compassionate but because the synthesis of information between the textbooks and practice doesn't happen, the student will prove unsuccessful on the NBE. Thus, this student can't go

beyond apprentice, or even get that far. The practitioner then comes to me to complain and demands to know what educators are doing wrong because this student is an ideal candidate to be a funeral director.

In both scenarios, I've done my job as an educator. I provided the same instruction, mentoring, encouragement and resources to each student, but when it came time to perform academically, the second student was unsuccessful. This doesn't mean something is wrong with the second student or the instruction, and it doesn't mean that this student won't be successful eventually. (Remember, exam scores also don't consider all that is going on in a person's life, but they still have consequences.) The initial outcome wasn't what the employer expected for this hopeful new hire, which might leave the employer wondering if they should keep the student if he or she can't get a license.

It is a mistake to jump to the decision to lower academic standards just to allow those who are perceived as potentially excellent practitioners to gain a license. Personally, I want someone caring for me and my family who has the academic knowledge and competency to do all facets of the job and to think critically when obstacles arise. For my money, knowledge will rank higher than compassion in this instance.

EMPLOYER EXPECTATIONS THROUGH A RECRUITER'S LENS

I wanted to know what employers were asking for in their job listings, so I reached out to Alexandra Kistler, search assistant and mortuary school liaison with Global Recruiters of Batesville, to see if she had any insights on this topic.

What are the most common characteristics employers are asking for in funeral director/apprentice applicants?

Kistler: "We see that, most often, employers are looking for applicants who are able to do it all. These people are able and willing to step in and help when needed and be a flexible part of the team. We often hear, especially with early-career funeral directors/apprentices, that they want to specialize. There are often fewer opportunities for someone as an applicant if they are not interested in working in multiple functions.

"Employers are also looking for people who are coachable. No matter your level of experience, every firm does things a little differently, and having someone on their team who is open to learning is very important."

"Lastly, I would say someone who is able to connect with families. Working with families on an at-need basis or interacting with people in the community is going to be a pillar of any position. Firms are looking for applicants who families feel comfortable with."

In your experience, what is the number-one reason employers don't hire an interviewee?

Kistler: "In my experience, the main reason firms pass on a specific candidate will have to do with not fitting in with their existing team. Funeral homes are looking to bring people in who will seamlessly fit in with their teams. You can train almost everything you need to do, but if a candidate does not

mesh well with the other members of the staff, it would be a very difficult fit.”

In your experience, does a willingness to move improve a new funeral service graduate's prospects?

Kistler: “Yes! Being open to where you find a job will greatly improve a new graduate's prospects. There are great jobs out there, but maybe not in the exact location you had in mind. Being willing to relocate will open up the opportunity to find a firm that is the right fit and not just the firm that is in the right place.”

Kistler's answers matched up with the characteristics provided by the educators, as well as what I'd been hearing from employers as I wandered through convention exhibit halls. Qualities like open-mindedness, teachability and the ability to relate to families certainly resonated with me. However, as noted earlier, not all desirable characteristics, such as compassion, can be taught.

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

NFDA sends out its Mortuary Science Student Expectations Study, and I encourage all students to complete it since it helps educators and practitioners know if expectations in pay and job tasks align with what employers expect to provide. I look at that information to make sure I am conveying an accurate picture of an entry-level job in funeral service to students. The survey also provides me with insight into any glaring differences between what I hear practitioners say they provide and what students say they expect.

Referring to those desirable characteristics listed in the graphic on page 4, students need to be open-minded about what a funeral home in their area can provide. If it isn't feasible for a low-volume firm to provide a \$40K first-year salary, then students might need to be willing to move to an area with funeral homes that can support it. If a small firm does offer \$40K a year, however, then students should probably also expect to be on call after hours and to work weekends, as that might be the trade-off.

Also, students should keep in mind that confidence is attractive in a candidate, but arrogance is not. Recent graduates have a lot to offer with their enthusiasm and ideas for the business, but they should still pause and learn from the experienced practitioners in the room.

Many of my students work at funeral homes while in school and most get offered a job during their clinical rotation in the program. The more interaction students have with funeral directors, the smaller that gap in expectations from both sides should be.

MEETING IN THE MIDDLE, AND THE FUTURE

The opportunities for employment are out there for graduates who want to take advantage of them. Moving away from their hometown or state might be a scary thought, but getting experience somewhere less familiar will only enhance a recent graduate's skills in funeral service. It will broaden the scope of cultural and religious funeral-rite experiences, and that variety is one of the more enriching aspects of being a funeral director.

That said, even embracing mundane tasks such as taking out the trash or vacuuming the chapel will build a deeper appreciation for all that funeral directors have done behind the scenes for families for years. Funeral service isn't a chore, it's a calling.

Once students successfully complete their programs and transition from the classroom to the funeral home, practitioners need to pick up where educators left off in mentoring and guiding in order to provide environments that foster those desirable qualities. Students must make a good-faith effort to meet current professional standards, and, in return, employers need to make a similar effort to accept that today's student is nothing like they were at that age. It might require work from both sides to meet the other's expectations of what being an “ideal candidate” means.

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

POST PANDEMIC

A Reimagined Funeral Service Profession

By Edward J. Defort



If we looked back at the Fortune 500 companies in 1955, what percentage of them do you think still exist? Back in the day, the list included such entities as General Motors, U.S. Steel, General Electric, Chrysler, DuPont, American Motors and Sealed Air.

In his presentation, “Post-COVID-19: A Reimagined Funeral Service Profession,” at the 2021 NFDA International Convention & Expo Chris Cruger noted that 60% of the 500 largest companies in the United States in 1955 no longer exist today.

Cruger, CEO of The Foresight Companies, reasoned that most people would think the 500 largest companies in the United States would have their act together. But there's more



to it. Companies that lacked innovation set themselves up for failure. Over the years, he said, we watched as Blockbuster was approached by an unknown company called Netflix, which offered a reimagined way to bring movies into the home. Blockbuster said no, and by 2010, the company had liquidated. Borders didn't think e-books had any longevity and ended up selling its customer list to Barnes & Noble.

"Without paying attention to what the consumer is asking for, any of us are vulnerable going forward," cautioned Cruger. He added, however, that he doesn't think there has ever been a better time to be in the funeral service profession, as long as you're willing to adapt and be a bit progressive.

Cruger told attendees that he would mention Amazon a few times in his presentation since we have become a society that can get just about anything we want from the comfort of home. Companies like Amazon, Apple, Google and DoorDash have become synonymous with innovation.

WHERE WE ARE AS A PROFESSION

For the past two years, The Foresight Companies has conducted consumer attitude and behavior studies. The first was completed in April 2020 during the first days of the COVID-19 lockdown. "We were trying to figure out what the consumer was thinking and how the consumer was changing as a result of this new behavior we'd all been exposed to," he said.

A second study of consumers 45 and older was conducted 12 months later. "We're trying to establish benchmarks about how the consumer's mindset is evolving [pertaining to] what we do," explained Cruger. "This is not my opinion but what the consumer is saying about what they expect from us."

Pre-pandemic, Cruger said, the role of the funeral director featured more face-to-face interaction with the consumer and was much more retail focused. As a result of the pandemic, directors were forced to go virtual and are now much more consultative with the consumer.

Secondly, Cruger said, technology today permeates every facet of the operating model – from marketing to aftercare.

"Those who ultimately adapted the technology are the ones who won," he stated. "When I look in the rearview mirror and think about the profession pre-pandemic, my opinion is that we were 15 to 20 years behind the times – at least."

It's not that the technology didn't exist; Cruger opined that it just hadn't been well embraced throughout the profession. Those who didn't embrace technology are suffering today.

In describing consumers, Cruger said they have evolved. "[Each] of us, if we look in the mirror, has to be honest and say that we're doing things differently today than we were 24 months ago," he continued. "Consumers want price transparency, they want convenience,

they want to preplan. It's a different consumer today than 24 months ago, and certainly different from 60 months ago."

Cruger suggested that there are clear winners and losers, professionally speaking. When he looks at the profession, he approaches it in thirds, stating that about a third of the profession has been incredibly successful over the last 18 months in terms of market share, call volume, revenue and cash flow. "The third that has been successful are progressive and technology-forward," said Cruger. "They adapted immediately when the pandemic hit and changed their operating model in a very short period of time. They're the ones who have won differentially."

Another third of funeral professionals adapted later. Cruger noted that it took a little time for them to pivot and do things differently, but now they are operating fairly well.

Unfortunately, there is a third of businesses that, for a variety of reasons, didn't embrace technology and have not changed their way of doing things. "They are steadfast in doing things just the way it's always been," he said. "The reality is these businesses have lost market share and call volume at a rate differentially to the high performers like never before.

"These people are looking at their balance sheet [and] their bank account, and they've got a bunch of money in the bank and think things are okay," added Cruger. "The reality is they are not. They've lost call volume and market share differen-

"The one-third of funeral businesses that have been successful are progressive and technology-forward. They adapted immediately when the pandemic hit."

tially to more progressive thinkers. Unfortunately, a lot of these people are going to cease to exist if they don't change their operating model dramatically in the near term."

CONSUMER ATTITUDES

Citing a study by global communications consultancy Ketchum, Cruger told attendees that 28% of consumers made permanent changes to brand preferences due to the pandemic. In the 2020 Wharton Baker WisePlum Consumer Loyalty Study, Cruger said the behavior driving customers away from a business is "store atmosphere," cited by 88% of respondents. Specifically, facilities aren't up to standards, grounds aren't maintained and they just don't have the right "curb appeal."

The second most cited reason turning people away is a difficult-to-navigate website. "It's the customer experience," said Cruger. "If you don't give the consumer the experience they're looking for, you're going to drive them away."

Looking specifically at funeral service, Cruger said that 32% of all consumers have changed their brand loyalty and preferences as a result of the pandemic. He pointed to one breakdown of those numbers, in which 21% of those 75 and older have changed their preferences. At first glance, Cruger said, that might not seem like a big number, but 12 months prior, it was 12%. "Over the last 12 months, consumers over age 75 have changed their preferences by 75%," he said. "This is what is impacting us each and every day."

Cruger's point was that "if funeral service does not evolve and listen to what the consumer is looking for, [we may not survive, as things are] changing at an even faster rate than ever before."

KEY FINDINGS

Cruger next turned his attention to key findings from The Foresight Companies surveys, acknowledging that during the pandemic, a number of funeral homes and cemeteries

Looking specifically at funeral service, Cruger said, 32% of all consumers have changed their brand loyalty and preferences as a result of the pandemic.

were forced to turn families away. Unfortunately, almost 20% of those turned away by a funeral home said they're never coming back. It was even more significant on the cemetery side, with almost 30% of consumers saying that if they were turned away, they wouldn't come back.

"I would suggest to you that as easy as it was to lose those consumers, it's just as easy to win them back if we do the

right thing," said Cruger. "The key is listening to what the consumer is telling us and embracing what they're asking for."

He cited a variation of a quote by Sam Walton, founder of Walmart and Sam's Club, who said, "Listen to what the consumer wants and give him a double portion of it. Listen to what they don't want and don't push it on them."

Cruger did offer one caveat: "We're a heck of a lot more understanding today than we were prior to the pandemic. We've all been put through the wringer as a result of this pandemic, and the community is a lot more understanding today than they have been in the past."

The Foresight survey also found that consumers don't think funeral service professionals are able to meet their budget or their needs.

The survey did offer a bit of good news, however: 63% of all consumers believe that a celebration of the life of a loved one is important. However, 49% of those don't wish to use a funeral home for that celebration.

Cruger suggested a couple of ways to approach this. Funeral homes can fight and try to force something on families, which obviously won't go over well. "Here's where we have to adapt the business model and embrace what the consumer is asking for," said Cruger. "Do we want to be a part of it, do we want to be a piece of it, or do we want to try to be it all? There's that old saying, 'Would you rather have 100% of nothing or a little bit of something?'"

"This is clearly where that's coming into play," he added. "The consumer still wants to have that celebration, but it's up to us to coach them through what the celebration looks like and where they're going to hold it."

The Foresight survey also revealed that during the pandemic, 43% of consumers said they experienced the death of a friend or a loved one, 75% didn't get to say goodbye, and 66% didn't get to see the loved one. "There's a whole lot of trauma involved there," Cruger said. "This is an opportunity for aftercare. There are families out there that are grieving and have unresolved issues."

Cruger, who previously noted that he believes funeral service as a profession is some 15 to 20 years behind the times when it comes to technology, suggested that it is getting fairly current as a result of the pandemic.

He also noted a curious statistic: 90% of all text messages are read within three minutes. Cruger said he was not suggesting that everyone has to embrace texting or any other technology; his point was to keep an open mind to the different ways available to communicate with families.

After Foresight conducted this survey, it followed up with six focus groups, each of which specifically focused on some of the most interesting findings, one of which was conve-



nience. “We asked how much they would be willing to pay for convenience, and we also asked what convenience means,” he said. “The point is people who want a different experience are willing to pay for it. They just want what they want, and they want you to be able to deliver it to them.” Convenience doesn’t mean it has to be cheap, and it doesn’t mean you’re missing out on a revenue opportunity – it just means you are making it easy for the consumer.

Turning the focus to technology, Cruger said it is permeating every facet of the funeral home business model – from marketing and communicating your brand and message to the community all the way to aftercare. For example, Cruger noted, telemedicine has increased 700%.

One significant change to the funeral service business model hastened by the pandemic is livestreaming. Foresight data suggested that 49% of consumers believe they can demonstrate how much they care for a family simply by viewing a livestreamed funeral or by going online to sign a digital register book. “This is how half of the people want to experience our service for their loved ones or friends,” said Cruger. “That number [in mid-2020] was 25%; it’s gone up 96% in one year’s time. The experience has changed in the population.”

The survey also revealed that 44% of those surveyed expect livestreaming to be part of a funeral home’s standard offerings. The problem, however, is that 79% of consumers say they aren’t willing to pay for it; they just expect it as part of the standard offering. “It’s what has to be part of our standard offering going forward, or we’re going to miss that opportunity,” he said. “If we’re not meeting their needs, they’re going to go somewhere else.”

To address consumers’ demands, Cruger said firms must seamlessly integrate technology into all facets of their business, whether it’s livestreaming or webcasting. Of course, it would be wise to have the staff trained to deliver this technology, but it doesn’t mean every single person has to become an expert on all aspects of it. What it does mean is that a firm should have someone on staff, or at least an outside resource, that can be leveraged to meet the demands of the consumer. As he said earlier, these are the fundamental expectations going forward. “If not you, then who?” Cruger asked.

Convenience is also changing the funeral service landscape. As a result of the pandemic, there was a year-over-year increase of \$2.1 billion in the commerce conducted for online groceries. “I would suggest to you that, in funeral service, we had far larger than \$2.1 billion conducted electronically because we were virtually starting with nothing throughout the pandemic,” said Cruger. “It is a different way of interacting with the consumer than it was before.”

Foresight data found that 15% of consumers expect funeral directors to come to them. “They’re looking for a house call,” he said. This is coupled with 41% of consumers who want to make their arrangements virtually. To be clear, Cruger is not saying “making arrangements” is just filling out a form. He was talking about interacting one-on-one with a counselor or funeral director, including some portion of the arrangement process, either over the phone or virtually.

“This is their expectation,” said Cruger. “If you take the 15% who want you to come to them and the 41% who want to make their arrangements virtually, [it suggests that] 56% of consumers don’t even want to step through your door to make an arrangement.”

Remember, the Foresight data found that 49% of consumers don’t want funeral directors involved in a life celebration or don’t want to hold it at the funeral home or cemetery. Plus, more than half don’t want to step inside the funeral home to begin with, which means funeral directors have to think about doing things differently. “That is what consumers want when they talk about convenience,” said Cruger.

The data also found that 74% of consumers expect to find a



Convenience doesn't mean it has to be cheap, and it doesn't mean you're missing out on a revenue opportunity. It just means you're making it easy for the consumer.

funeral home’s pricing online. This does not mean they want to see the General Price List. “What they’re saying is they want to understand what they’re getting themselves into; they want to know directionally how much it’s going to cost when they engage our services,” he said.

Another aspect to consider: If 74% of consumers say they expect to find pricing online, how many people are actually looking online? At least 74%, right?

Furthermore, 65% of respondents said they want to see products online. Cruger explained that it really wasn’t caskets and urns they wanted to see. “What they want to understand is what the value proposition we’re offering is,” he said.

With Google, we can pretty much find out whatever we want to know these days. Thus, said Cruger, “If we don’t educate [consumers], they’re going to go somewhere else. We have to create that level of transparency and trust among consumers because by the time they get to us, they’ve already got a first impression. We have our opportunity once – when they come into our care and sit down in front of us.”

Cruger framed one statistic as both scariest and most exciting: 47% of consumers said that if you don't make it convenient, don't do what they are asking, don't meet their basic needs, they'll go elsewhere.

Cruger then framed one Foresight survey statistic as both the scariest and most exciting: 47% of consumers say that if you don't make it convenient, don't do what they are asking and don't meet their basic needs, then they will go somewhere else to the extent that there's another option.

"Here's where I go back to, 'If not you, then who?'" he said, "because even if there's no competitor today, you are vulnerable to one being there tomorrow."

Cruger added that even if attendees expressed skepticism at the 47% figure, imagine if the number were only 20%. While that might seem more palatable, it is still 20% of call volume disappearing and taking 20% of cash flow with it. "Probably times three," Cruger added.

He continued: "At the end of the day, if we lost 20% of our call volume, our profitability goes into the tank. We have a very high fixed-cost infrastructure, and if we lose call volume because we're simply not willing to do what the customer is asking, we are susceptible to losing up to 50%."

"I think it's an opportunity," Cruger said. "As long as we continue to meet [consumers' expectations], you're going to continue to serve these families and more because there are going to be [others] out there who just refuse to do so."

When it comes to winning behaviors, Cruger advised directors to be customer focused and to listen to what families ask for and what they need. It has to be a transparent experience for consumers that includes educating them along the way and simply acquiescing to their needs. "One of the keys to all this is... train[ing] our people to understand what this means and how we must interact with the consumer," he said. "Staff has to understand that as we serve families, we have to be transparent, we have to communicate and we have to go above and beyond to meet those needs of the consumer."

PRENEED

Most attendees said they have seen a surge in preneed. Did people become more aware of their own mortality? Perhaps people have felt more vulnerable because of the pandemic and the loss of family and friends. As the Foresight survey found, 42% of respondents lost a friend or loved one during the pandemic. It also showed that 75% of respondents are

inclined to prearrange and prepay for their funeral today.

"That 42% who experienced the death of a loved one are even more inclined to do so," said Cruger. "They're the ones who are hyper-aware of their own mortality right now and want to make their arrangements. And here's the other thing – they're willing to pay for it."

With many in the audience also experiencing a significant increase in virtual interaction with families, Cruger noted a key component: Each interaction should be the same regardless of whether you're speaking in person or virtually. "With this new advent of technology, there's also a whole new set of responsibilities on each and every one of us," he stated.

He also suggested that firms embrace preplanning. "It is absolutely a critical aspect to what the consumer is looking for today. But more so, it is a way to lock in your future success like never before," Cruger said. "They want to hear from you, they want to hear from you now, and they're willing to pay up for it as well."

WINNERS AND LOSERS

So, who were the winners and who were the losers since the pandemic outbreak? If you didn't embrace technology, in all likelihood you're probably struggling a bit right now. Cruger also noted the same for firms that didn't adapt to their experience. "You were going to do it your way or the highway," he said. "Those firms are ones that are struggling right now." Furthermore, firms that haven't been embracing preneed have missed an opportunity.

"The winners, first and foremost, are each of you, as well as the funeral service profession," Cruger said. "Because of all the hard work and selfless care you gave throughout this period of time, there is now a heightened awareness of this profession. Thanks to your hard work and the hard work of the state and national associations and NFDA, [you were] recognized for the services you perform. There is more respect for this profession than ever before, and that, folks, you all should take quite a bit of pride in."

Also on the winners' list are firms that embraced and adapted to technology. They are probably in a pretty good spot right now, surmised Cruger.

He added that businesses that made funeral service a customer-centric experience and adapted to offer what the consumer was asking for and wanted are also probably in a pretty good place today, as are those firms that focused on the preneed opportunity.

What does all this mean for the profession going forward? Well, 67% of consumers said their attitudes have changed as a result of experiencing new ways to do things. Moreover, a survey of Cruger's workshop attendees revealed that no one is doing things in their daily lives the same today.

Perception is reality, and funeral service professionals are the trusted advisers that can bridge perception and reality right now. "I'm sure we've all heard the statistic that an individual is intimately involved with the arrangement of a funeral slightly more than two times in their life," Cruger said. "You are the trusted professionals who get them through

“We absolutely must continue to change. And just because we make a change today doesn’t mean we’re not going to have to change tomorrow. We must continue to adapt.”

that experience... You are the ones who take their attitudes, their wants and their needs and make their dreams to celebrate loved ones a reality.”

Cruger postulated that the entire profession has been a winner throughout the pandemic, pointing to consolidators whose market cap increased substantially during this time. This is representative of every business in this profession, he said. “With the higher profile we have in the marketplace, the value of what we do has gone up dramatically. If you’re an owner, in all likelihood, the value of your most significant asset in life has gone up considerably because of this improved profile and our ability to meet the needs of the consumer.”

The pandemic, Cruger emphasized, was not just a blip in time. The way funeral homes operate has changed forever. “[T]here might be a little bit of a rebound, but the reality is the profession is different and consumer attitudes have changed and won’t go back. Preferences of consumers are different, technology is different. People are going to interact with you, your counselors and your employees in a different way.”

“All of this is to say that we have to constantly be evolving,” he continued. “We absolutely have to continue to change, and just because we make a change today doesn’t mean that we’re not going to have to change tomorrow. We must continue to adapt throughout this process.”

Equally important is transparency and making things easy

for consumers. “Communication is key,” said Cruger. “People just want to know what’s going on. Part of that communication is giving them that transparency. The more you interact with consumers through this process, [the more] you are going to have happy consumers...”

When discussing staffing – a hot topic right now not only in funeral service but across the employment spectrum – Cruger suggested looking at what the consumer is asking for and augmenting your staff. Hire the right people for the right positions – those who can support people and others who embrace this new level of technology.

“We don’t need all people to be all things. What we need are people to support our organization so we’re meeting consumer needs, whether it’s in digital marketing, virtual arrangements, livestreaming or aftercare,” he said. “And we have to make sure that if we don’t do it internally, we have the right partners externally.”

Ongoing training is also critical. As consumer needs continue to change, funeral homes must continue to train.

As he closed, Cruger reiterated the finding that 49% of consumers said they can demonstrate how much they care by livestreaming a funeral and signing a digital register book. “What does that say about your facilities and needs going forward?” he asked. “It’s not to say some people don’t need a 400-person chapel, but when you’re looking at buying a new facility or adding on, the question becomes, ‘Are you going to spend your money building a large chapel right now?’”

Directors must be flexible and monitor their markets to understand and evaluate whether changes will be short-lived or may become permanent. “It’s a continual learning process,” said Cruger. “[We] continue to evolve and pivot when we need to, [knowing] it’s going to continue to evolve this way until the end of time. Just because we do something today and shift gears does not mean it’s a permanent change. The future of the profession also must be flexible.”

Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.

Joining the Workforce and Setting Your Expectations

By Daniel M. Isard

Living up to an employer’s trust and expectations is all about *their* expectations, not yours. These expectations should be contained in a written job description and employee manual.

The challenge should not be about your age, personal beliefs or fashion – it’s about communication. When making service arrangements, for example, you want family members sitting across from you to “hear” you and know that you understand them. If you keep this in mind, you will be able to communicate well.

That said, we communicate with both words and body language. Part of the latter includes how we stand and how we dress when meeting with a family. In other words, dressing properly is a critical part of communication.



Imagine that your driving passion, for instance, is to make the world a better place by making hamburgers, and a company notable for its yellow arches hires you. What might your first day on the job be like if you show up in a tie-dyed shirt and clogs only to hear your new boss tell you that you're not dressed appropriately because they use uniforms?

Funeral service requires uniforms, too. Maybe these are designed by a conventional haberdashery, but they're still uniforms. Therefore, you must understand the three purposes of a uniform:

1. Consistent appearance: All employees present themselves in a fashion the owner wants to portray.
2. Functionality: Clogs around grease and oil? A uniform focuses on safety over fashion.
3. Meets expectations: Consumers will not hear you if they are distracted. A dress code helps eliminate one potential negative distraction.

That said, the very concept of a modern-day uniform in funeral service continues to evolve. Once a blue suit, white shirt and black shoes for men, and comparable attire for women, the 20th century's fashion rules have disappeared.

So, what should you do?

First, I recommend that you dress for work as if you actually lived in the 20th century. Remember, you should dress for the people with whom you meet, and the ones making the decisions are generally not millennials.

When in doubt, dress up as opposed to appearing more casual. Dressing up does not necessarily mean dressing fashionably. For example, wearing a black suit with a black shirt and a silver tie might seem fashionable for going out, but it's not fashionable when meeting with a grieving family. You are allowed to have a work wardrobe and a personal wardrobe – just don't try to blend them.

Another key point of communication involves language. With English, for example, there is “youth” English, “street” English and “business” English. So, just as you wouldn't wear personal fashion statements to work, keep your tone of voice and choice of words with a grieving family on a more formal level. Remember, it's part of your job to help them feel at ease.

If you face the (enviable) need to choose between potential

employers, remember that while they have to decide to hire you, you also get to hire them! Therefore, walk through the business location. Interview existing staff. Read the job description for the job they want you to perform. If you have two choices and one offers a written job description and the other doesn't, vote in favor of the company with the job description if all other things are equal.

Moreover, think about your motivation for entering the profession. If your wish is to join for the money, then please

When you dress for work, dress for the people with whom you meet, and the ones making the decisions are generally not millennials. Also, dressing up does not necessarily mean dressing fashionably.

leave now. I have rarely seen an overpaid funeral director, and those who are highly compensated are paid more because of their responsibilities and/or ability to direct patronage. Ultimately, being able to drive consumers to a business because of your personal goodwill is the highest compliment and will generally earn you the highest compensation.

Finally, always remember your motivation for entering this business, but please don't leave the profession because of a negative employer experience. You will meet many people – some will teach you what to do, but most will teach you what not to do. If you're passionate about this calling, stay focused on your drive and do not feel discouraged.

Dan Isard is founder of The Foresight Companies, which has served thousands of funeral homes nationwide for the past four decades. Contact Isard at 602-274-6464 or danisard@theforesightcompanies.com.



A Career and a Calling

By Amber Perez

There never seemed to be a career that I felt passionate enough about to do for the rest of my life until I saw the words “funeral director” on a personality test. For context, I was a junior in high school with amazing grades and a great ré-

sumé, so, naturally, my guidance counselor asked what my next steps were after high school.

I had no clue. She had me take a personality test to see what careers I would be interested in, and there were the words “funeral director.”

I took a few days to reflect, and after that reflection, I knew this was the career for me and decided to begin my journey

Ultimately, I want to wake up every day, love what I do and continue to find inspiration to work in this rewarding industry, even in the hardest of moments.



of becoming a funeral director.

Although I did not officially pursue this career until high school, I believe the seed was planted very early in my life. When I was 9 years old, I suddenly and tragically lost my best friend, my Uncle Tony. While his

death was the worst thing to happen to me, it has played an important part in my journey – not only in life but, specifically, in my journey to becoming a funeral director.

The memory I believe to be the seed is one in which my siblings and I were waiting for my mom to pick us up from school. She ended up being very late due to planning my uncle's funeral. When she finally got there, she kept apologizing to us for being late. I was very confused because she was apologizing for doing something so important for my uncle, and for us. I have often thought of this moment while doing the work of planning and organizing a funeral, and it warms my heart to know that this work is just as important to people as it was to my 9-year-old self.

That's the beginning of my story, but fast-forward to me preparing for the funeral service program. I decided to first attend the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay (UWGB; 2020) to pursue degrees in human biology and Spanish before attending funeral school. I wanted to be prepared and have a bachelor's degree to fall back on in case, for some reason, funeral service did not work out for me.

I initially chose to study human biology because it would help me fulfill the prerequisites for the funeral service program at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. I later discovered, however, that Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) offered a funeral service program and decided to go there after graduation to be back home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

At the same time, I was studying Spanish as a minor, which then changed to a major when I had the chance to

study abroad in Spain. This would prove useful for my future goals in funeral service.

Going to UWGB helped me prepare for funeral school academically because it taught me how to study at a collegiate level, as well as organize my time with school, work and extracurriculars while still having a social life. My experiences outside of the UWGB classroom also helped sharpen skills that I would use in the world of funeral service. I was involved in leading extracurriculars and worked in customer service, so I communicated and worked with all sorts of people.

Also, during my last two years, I worked at the Richard Mauthe Center, UWGB's social justice center, where I planned events that raised awareness about mental health. The skills I used to plan those events (organization, timing, communication, etc.) are the same skills I use every day in this field.

After graduation, I started working at a funeral home and then attended MATC for one year in the funeral service program. Working full time at a funeral home a few months before school started was the best decision I could have made. Having real-life experience in the field made learning about it so much easier.

I still studied more than I ever did before, however, because I knew that learning the information in the funeral service program was crucial not only to pass the National Board Exam but also for me to become the best funeral director I can be. Being knowledgeable is definitely a powerful advantage in this field, I have come to see.

This brings me to the present. I am a recent graduate of MATC (2021) and finished my apprenticeship at the end of February 2022. I received my funeral director license at the beginning of March and have been blessed to work at a great funeral home with many supportive individuals rooting for my success while also teaching me how to become a great funeral director and the ways of the industry. I am confident in the foundation of knowledge I have gained as I start my career as a director.

Even though I have only been in the profession for two short years, I have seen the evolving changes within it require more technological savviness, provide more personalized funerals and become more female dominant. One of the prominent changes I have seen is in the selection room. Funeral homes are changing the ways of presenting caskets to become more digitized rather than through books and showrooms. The funeral home for which I work has not gone down that route with its selection room, but we shall see where time will take them and what changes might come.

Currently, I feel like they have been working on slowly becoming more technologically savvy, involving small changes in the funeral home, such as having a computer in the prep room, a greater online presence and more technological ways to serve families. For example, we use a program to make tribute videos, and instead of the family having to bring in photos for us to scan, we are able to send them a link. From there, families can add photos and music, choose

a theme and organize the photos how they would like them to be displayed. This adds to the personalization of the funeral as well.

I think funerals are able to be personalized more than ever before. One example from my own experience is when I got to help a funeral director serve the family of a local rock star. The family wanted to bring in all of his memorabilia, guitars, awards and pictures. We were pretty excited for this funeral because the set up was going to be amazing with everything they were bringing in.

We also had a couple of surprises in store for the family. The decedent absolutely loved Mötley Crüe and played the bass guitar, so we decided to wear Mötley Crüe shirts under our suit jackets and ordered personalized bass guitar picks for people as a takeaway. The family was ecstatic and loved the extra effort we put in.

Finally, I think the biggest change that I have seen is how more women are working in the industry. When I first told people that this is what I wanted to do, I was greeted with comments such as, “Do you know that’s a man’s job?” or “That’s a male-dominated industry.” Now that I am working in the profession, however, I have somewhat seen the shift from male to female dominance. Most of my class in funeral school were female, and a majority of my co-workers are women. All the apprentices we have and have had the entire time I’ve worked at the funeral home have been women. Overall, I hope the changes I have seen continue to evolve to the betterment of the funeral service industry.

What’s next for me and for funeral service? I am going to continue to work and learn how to become a better funeral director. One goal I have is to sharpen my Spanish skills in order to better serve the Spanish-speaking population of Milwaukee. More bilingual funeral directors serving families is a change I hope to see in the future of funeral service, whether that language is Spanish or whatever language(s) are prevalent in one’s community. Planning a funeral is hard

enough, but planning it in a foreign language is something that I cannot imagine. What a comfort it would provide to families to take that extra stress off.

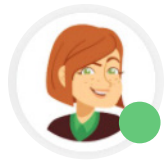
Additionally, I one day hope to own a funeral home, but that is a distant thought right now. I believe I still have a lot to learn before I can even think about making such a big change.

Ultimately, I want to wake up every day, love what I do and continue to find inspiration to work in this rewarding industry, even in the hardest of moments. I have had a few hard moments in my career already, and the hardest one was taking care of my friend after he suddenly died. Helping his family ended up being one of the most rewarding moments in my career thus far, however. Even in my own grief, I was able to excel to help them and was reminded that this is the career I am meant for.

I spent a lot of years at school and working to get to where I am today. My way is not necessarily the “right” way, but it was the way that worked best for me. I think the most important takeaways from my journey are to continue to fall in love with what you do every day because, then, the victories, the hardships and everything in between will be worth it in the end.

I met with a lot of pushback when I chose this career, but I followed my passions and did what I loved. I think that mindset is one of the keys to being successful in this profession. Success here means being rich in the experiences we provide through funerals to families and the appreciation and love from those we serve.

Amber Perez is a recent graduate of Milwaukee Area Technical College (2021) and the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay (2022). She recently received her funeral directors license and is currently serving as a funeral director with Heritage Funeral Homes in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



SUPPORT FOR EVERYDAY ISSUES EVERY DAY

NFDA Launches New Member Assistance Program

To help members be their best so they can effectively support families, NFDA has partnered with SupportLinc to launch a new member assistance program.

During the pandemic, as has been widely reported in the media, Americans have struggled with their mental health. According to Mental Health America, 4 in 5 employees feel emotionally drained from their work, an early sign of burnout, and 9 in 10 employees report that their workplace stress affects their mental health. Beyond the challenges posed by

a person’s work, Mental Health America reports that more than 17 million adults struggle with depression, 19 million deal with substance abuse and 9.8 million have experienced suicidal thoughts.

NFDA’s SupportLinc program, administered by CuraLinc Healthcare, is available at no charge to association members and their immediate family (spouse and children). All requests for information and assistance are confidential, available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and include:

NFDA's SupportLinc member assistance program is totally confidential and available 24/7 at no charge to members and their immediate family.

- In-the-moment support and short-term counseling by phone, web, text or mobile app with a licensed clinician who can provide support for work-related pressures, depression, stress, anxiety, grief, relationship problems, substance abuse or other emotional health concerns. NFDA members and their immediate family can also receive up to three in-person or video counseling sessions each year.
- Free, 30-minute legal consultation per issue with a local attorney by phone or in person.
- Through Virtual Support Connect, members can take part in digital support group sessions hosted by licensed counselors on such topics

as grief, mindfulness, preventing burnout and others.

- SupportLinc's knowledgeable specialists provide referrals that help address a wide range of challenges, such as child or elder care, adoption, pet care, home repair, education and housing needs.
- Receive expert financial consultation and planning with pressure-free, personalized guidance.
- The SupportLinc website is your one stop for support, resources, self-assessments, information and more. Members can also find on-demand training to boost well-being, financial calculators, career resources and retail/service provider discounts.
- Click the Mental Health Navigator icon on the SupportLinc website or mobile app to complete a short survey and receive personalized guidance for accessing program support and resources.

NFDA members can learn more about all the tools, resources and information available to them and their immediate family at nfda.org/supportlinc or by calling their member services representative at 800-228-6332.

To apply for an NFDA student membership, visit nfda.org/membership/become-a-member or call 800-228-6332.

From the Editor's Desk

Hitting the High Notes

We've all heard the term "baby boomer spike" in reference to the anticipated increase in the number of deaths that would cyclically come at the end of the baby boom years. For a variety of reasons, not the least of which is improvements in healthcare that extend life expectancy, this spike will most likely take the shape of a gradual increase.

However, a subset of the baby boomer group, the "classic rockers," has definitely seen a bit of a spike over the past couple of years, including, more recently, Michael Nesmith, best known as one of the four Monkees, and Charlie Watts, Rolling Stones drummer. And the music community was rocked when Taylor Hawkins, a Gen-Xer and drummer for Foo Fighters, died suddenly while on tour in South America.

There are a number of celebrity funerals that have stood out in my mind, but I always go back to one I read about more than 15 years ago.

I did not attend this funeral, but one of it has stayed with me. The funeral was for Bobby Cotoia, a musician in a band I had gone to see hundreds of times over the last 40 years – John Cafferty & The Beaver Brown Band. Some might recognize it as the band behind the *Eddie and the Cruisers* movies. It achieved a degree of national and global success on the strength of the movie soundtracks and the band's own albums. From Rhode Island, The Beaver Brown Band was one of the bigger attractions on the Jersey Shore club scene, particularly in the 1980s and '90s, and the keyboard player, Bobby Cotoia, was a founding member.

In an excellent *Providence Phoenix* article called "Brothers in Arms" (still online), writer Bob Gulla described the wake and funeral, which brought together past and present band members as "*The Big Chill* with the backdrop of a band – rather than a class – reunion." Hundreds came to pay their respects and ended up telling some of their favorite stories involving Cotoia. Gulla wrote: "At the wake, [band members] got up to share some stories about Bobby, who was lying just behind them, resting painlessly for the first time in years. Awkward at first, the band imparted a few of the funny, poignant and revealing Bobby stories they had experienced."

This makes me think of a number of wakes I've attended. It was always a challenge to get the first few people to loosen up and tell their stories, but when it finally happened, the mood in the room changed from "When should we leave?" to "Oh, let me say this..."

Later in the article, Gulla wrote: "After the wake, the entourage headed to the cemetery to lay Bobby to rest." The funeral, in the words of one of the band, was "incredibly moving and celebratory." The article describes the graveside scene when, at the end of the service, the band's saxophone player played "Tender Years," one of the band's best-known songs. In recordings and live performances, the soaring sax solo fades out into a quiet piano solo. Wrote Gulla: "Only this time, Bobby wasn't there to play his part, and the cemetery remained shrouded in silence. Each person at the gravesite finished Bobby's notes in quiet, tearful tribute."

After rereading the article years later, I still smile at some of the stories told at the visitation and still feel the emotion of the description of the cemetery scene. And in that poignant scene at the cemetery, I don't think there was a more powerful way to communicate that he'd be missed than to hear silence when attendees should have heard him playing. Too often, that simple message of letting the loved ones of the deceased know that he or she will be missed is not communicated effectively.

In this case, a classic funeral simply hit all the high notes.



Edward J. Defort
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