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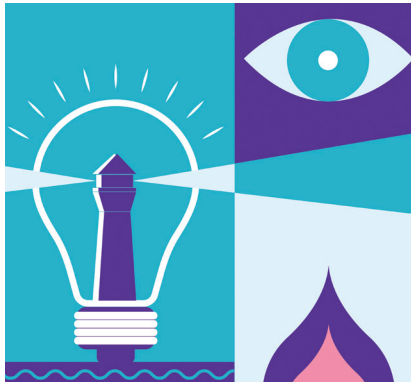
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Inside NFDA's Meet the Mentors: One Attendee's Journal

By Allyse Worland

Editor's note: The NFDA Meet the Mentors program launched in 2011 to give young funeral professionals a chance to learn from some of the profession's top experts and network with like-minded peers. Each year since, NFDA has randomly selected a group of interested licensed funeral directors and embalmers under age 40, or those new to the profession (first licensed within the last five years), to attend this transformational program.

Wholly funded by the Funeral Service Foundation since its inception – includes registration fee, two nights' lodging and select meals – attendees travel to Emory University in Atlanta to meet, learn from and talk with some of the profession's leading funeral directors.

For the most recent gathering March 12-14, Allyse Worland, a funeral director in Indianapolis, was asked to journal her thoughts and experiences as an attendee. Worland is a first-generation funeral director and embalmer licensed in Kentucky and in her home state of Indiana. She is current vice president of Marion County Funeral Directors Association, a member of the NFDA Leadership Development Committee and serves on several other state and national committees within the profession. She is part of NFDA's 2022-23 National Emerging Leaders class and will present at the NFDA International Convention & Expo in Las Vegas in September.



Allyse Worland

JANUARY 1, 2023 NEW YEAR'S DAY

Positively determined to finish off another decade of life with as much knowledge and inspiration as I could possibly drink in, I began to write down my goals for the new year. I sat in my hotel room in southern Indiana on New Year's Day

after indulging in celebration the evening before. I was jotting down my ambitious visions in between taking calls from the families I was serving that week.

My first goal for the year was to enter and earn the chance to go to Meet the Mentors. As I began writing, I felt an overwhelming sensation that I would reach my goal, and I was overjoyed when I received the email a month later stating I had been chosen.

As I began writing, I felt an overwhelming sensation that I would reach my goal of being chosen to attend Meet the Mentors.



MARCH 12: ARRIVAL IN ATLANTA

The flight had been turbulent getting to my destination, but I arrived unscathed. I quickly went to my hotel room, unpacked a few of my belongings, grabbed my journal to write down my experiences and headed to the welcome reception.

I stepped out of the hotel elevator and immediately saw a familiar face, followed by several other beloved colleagues. I was enveloped by a happy reunion with friends I have known for several years. However, being the social creature I am, I began to make other conversation and make new friends.

I found myself at a little cocktail table with a group of other directors from all over the country. Naturally, we began comparing our different state laws and recounting notable stories from our careers thus far. The conversations were immersive and comforting, knowing I was among others who were also passionate about our profession.

A spirited game of billiards ensued after dinner. I confess I am no good at bowling, so the pool table seemed to be the most logical choice. Between pool shots, I gazed around the room. Not only was I hearing laughter and seeing smiles, but I was also looking at my funeral service family – the happy family I had always dreamed it would be since I was a 9-year-old who had chosen to chase the dream of becoming an undertaker.

Listening to the opening remarks, I felt an overwhelming amount of support, and it was incredible to be acknowledged as the future of funeral service.

MARCH 13: THE CLASSROOM

Late nights and early mornings are a constant theme in funeral service, and conferences are no exception! My alarm went off with a shrill urgency for me to awaken. I began get-

ting ready for the day, excited to absorb as much information as I could.

The opening remarks at conventions are usually a highlight for me, and NFDA President Jack Mitchell's words were the best way to begin the event. "You are demonstrating your desire to be great," he said.

Listening to the opening remarks, I felt an overwhelming amount of support and acknowledgment. It was incredible to be acknowledged as the future of funeral service. I recalled the words of NFDA Immediate Past President Randy Anderson, who told me, "Be like a sponge!" I intended to do just that.

The first speaker, David Hernández Jr., spoke on who is successful in funeral service and why. He urged us to create our definition of success and to be a student of the game. He also urged us to practice self-discipline, stating that the undisciplined are slaves to their emotions. His speech reminded me much of the teachings of Andrew Carnegie and Napoleon Hill, both of whom I consider my idols.

Hernández also spoke about delegating the tasks that drain us of our passion, as well as about the dangers of micromanaging. "Purpose is key to success," he said. "Death-care is trying, and it is a marathon in so many ways." His final remark was "Do for your people."

Next up was Duane Hills. I had the pleasure of meeting him at the NFDA convention in Baltimore last year. I had purchased his book, *One Block West of the White House*, and he had graciously signed it. Today, his topic was the value of listening in order to better serve families. He stressed the importance of picking up tidbits of personal information to heighten the value of the experience. Creating that unique moment that they will get nowhere else is truly an art. The opportunities to do this are there; we just have to learn to look and listen for them.

I was delighted to hear Hills give advice on difficult arrangements, which most of us are getting more of by the day. He coached us on how to avoid joining in any unpleasant disputes or conflicts. Remaining neutral was key, as well as going silent while putting down your pen until the heated



discussion was over. He stated that leaving the room and letting the family work it out was a wise move, too.

He then came to the topic nearly everyone in the room had waited for – the high-profile funerals. His experience in this was fascinating. He told us that usually with these cases,

he and the location manager would be the ones making the transfer of the loved one into their care and that he personally met with the individual making the arrangements.

I was surprised to hear that it usually isn't the family he is meeting with but, instead, a third-party representative of the family. It could be an attorney, chief of staff or appointed personal representative. This individual would most likely come back for a second meeting after they had arranged the details with the family.

Hills let us know that with these kinds of services, deadlines are generally an issue, along with security concerns. His firm would most likely have Secret Service and several members of support staff that would be brought in. While listening to the stories about his high-profile work in Washington, D.C., was wonderful, I found his passion for the profession to be the true gem of his time with us.

To end the morning sessions, Annette March-Grier spoke. I had also made her acquaintance at NFDA's Professional Women's Conference last year and was I grateful that I got to listen to her speak again. Her topic was self-care. I felt that she was the perfect person to speak to us given that her family grief-support center, Roberta's House, was so successful.

"Mental health is a real issue," she stated. This seems to be a taboo subject in our profession, but she said it with conviction. "Don't get caught up in the treadmill of madness that you can't get off of. Remind yourself to step off."

Her voice and words were comforting to many of us who could relate to this "treadmill." March-Grier spoke of how our stressors are due to the fact that, as funeral directors, we wear many hats. We must be flexible and in a constant state of preparedness. The pain of expectations taps into our reservoirs, and we become attached to the families we serve.

There was a wide range of terms covered: compassion fatigue, secondary traumatization, vicarious grief and pandemic fatigue. "Stress is the true cause of death," she stated. We must gauge the amount of burnout and our fatigue level.

We then participated in an activity where we rated ourselves based on the stages of burnout we felt. Gratefully, I scored extremely low.

Two of the most important things March-Grier shared included the fact that "self-care is not selfish" and "If I don't take care of myself, I cannot take care of others." Being proactive in stress management is key, as is realizing that it is unrealistic to expect we will not be impacted by our work. She thanked us for listening to her, and we then broke for lunch.

After returning to our classroom, we were greeted by the beautiful grief therapy dog, Ruby. All of us wanted to pet her and let her know what a good girl she was. As always, her owner, NFDA Past President Bryant Hightower, delivered remarks that were thought provoking but Ruby naturally stole the show. At the end of his talk, everyone wanted to sprint back to their funeral homes and beg them to invest in a grief-therapy dog.

MARCH 13: ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

Next, attendees broke up into groups to attend a series of roundtable discussions. I began at the NFDA roundtable, which featured Mitchell, NFDA CEO Christine Pepper, Lisa Baue, Sara Moss, Kelly Manion and Marissa Keller. I loved that NFDA made it very clear that they seek to find the gaps in our service to families. Being so data driven allows the association's members to see what consumers want. They also explained the structure of the NFDA board and staff, which most participants were unaware of.

The next roundtable featured Hernández, who spoke of the journey that led to him running his successful business. He attributed it to luck and how he desired to build wealth. He also talked about how he runs his operations and how he has innovated his locations, whether that involved rewriting a vitals sheet or asking basic questions in a different way.

We then traveled to Hills' table. He shared with us some of the most iconic tales of high-profile funerals that he had been involved in, and told us about the steps he took in order to get where he is now in his successful career. Learning the history of his firm [Joseph Gawler's Sons] and the stories he told seemed to mesmerize the table. "If you have true compassion and are genuine, you can't go wrong," he said. "Pour yourself into your profession." Those words alone will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Annette March-Grier suggested that grief education begins with us and encouraged us to get out into our community to share our knowledge. "This is heart work, not head work," she said.

Finally, we came to March-Grier's table. She took a more in-depth dive into her work at Roberta's House and how their sacred work served their community. A few attendees asked her about how they could start something similar in their own communities. She suggested that grief education begins with us and encouraged each of us to get out into our community to share our knowledge. "This is heart work, not head work," she said.

These roundtables were such a unique part of NFDA's Meet the Mentors – something I had not experienced at any other

conference I have attended. (And I have been to many!)

After the program concluded for the day, we all sat down to dinner together and were able to connect with each other in an even more relaxed environment.

MARCH 14: THE FINAL MORNING

Our final few hours together were bittersweet, as it is with most conferences for me. The last session focused on compassion fatigue, presented by Lynda Cheldelin Fell. I was pleased that we were acknowledging the very real struggles we face in our beloved profession. Funeral service is not for the faint of heart nor the weak in spirit, which is why I was not surprised to learn that there had never been a study done on funeral professionals and compassion fatigue.

As directors, we are expected to keep taking on more than we can handle. “It comes with the job” some would say. But if there is one thing that Meet the Mentors really stressed, it’s that we cannot give to others if we are empty ourselves. “You can’t pour from an empty cup,” and I assure you that I have attempted to do so in the past. For someone like me, who lives and breathes funeral service, I have convinced myself that I can always give more. But we must accept that, sometimes, we can’t.

There were some very difficult questions asked during this session, such as “Which cases do you take home with you?” and “What factors cause you to identify with that family?” These questions were hard because they forced us to think back to those painful experiences we have had. I understood the reason behind asking these questions, and I became aware that the trauma is still there. “Decontamination is key in order to separate yourself from the day,” Cheldelin Fell said.

It was also fascinating to revisit a few key terms in human anatomy and how certain hormones can hijack our brains. Our critical thinking can be disabled, and we can cause permanent damage.

Learning resilience strategies was an exciting concept, as well. One of my personal favorites was “trauma filtering,” which involves listening to a family’s story as if it were an episode of a television show. This was a new idea for me and one I will certainly practice.

Ultimately, this program ended where it began for me – surrounded by my beloved colleagues and now my friends.

I had also never heard of “havening,” which is the act of moving your eyes from left to right and then hugging yourself.

A crowd-favorite concept was the “Zen Zone,” which is a designated room within the funeral home that is simply for relaxing and regaining inner peace after a stressful situation

or case. To my surprise, some funeral homes were already implementing these rooms for their staff.

We then developed a self-care plan that we could begin working on once we returned home. At the top of my list was “cognitive reappraisal,” which is the process of turning a negative thought into a positive one. For me, even though I have people who criticize me for one reason or another, I am able to find a “gift” within their words that I can use as fuel to help me press on.

Our time together concluded with a wrap-up session, and the following are the closing remarks that stood out to me: Manion confidently said, “You matter, you are the future and you are worth it.” Pepper reiterated, “Do what you love to do.”

Finally, Mitchell shared the story of [hockey great] Wayne Gretzky and “You don’t skate toward the puck, you go where it’s going.” And with that, he assured each of us that NFDA will always be innovative and look to where the profession is going next.

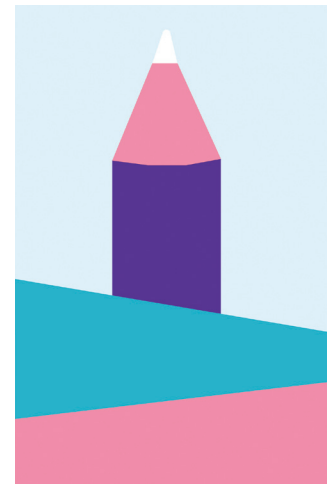
He then pointed to the pin on his lapel and said: “Randy Anderson passed this pin to me when I became president of this association, and this year, I will be passing it to Dutch Nye. It is my hope that one of you in this room will also get to wear this pin.” At that very moment, I knew wholeheartedly that I would wear that pin at some point during my career.

Although I wished I had more time at Meet the Mentors, the valuable lessons and connections I made will be carried with me throughout my career. As I packed away my belongings and headed down to the lobby for the final time, I was able to catch a cab to the airport with the same group of ladies that I had met at the cocktail table on that first evening at the welcome reception.

Ultimately, this program ended where it began for me – surrounded by my beloved colleagues and now my friends. After great conversation over a few drinks, we walked each other to our respective gates at the airport, not wanting our time together to end. My little cocktail table of strangers became my long-lost sisters in funeral service. To this day, we have an ongoing group text, checking in on one another and making plans to see each other again.

A wave of gratitude washed over me as I gazed out the window of my homebound plane. I thought of funeral service and the abundant blessings it has given me. Amazing friends, endless knowledge and, above all, a purpose.

For more information about the NFDA Meet the Mentors program, visit nfda.org/mentors.



An Old-School Approach to Recruitment

By Edward J. Defort



At a time when businesses across the spectrum are pressing to attract the best and brightest to their firms, getting a head start telling their story to that talent pool would give any company a decided advantage over the competition. There are certainly challenges facing

funeral service in terms of attracting and retaining skilled workers, and this might require new approaches in order to address these issues and ensure that the profession has a sustainable supply of talented professionals in the future.

Where to look? How about starting in your own backyard? Funeral homes have been participating in “career days” at local schools, giving students an opportunity to discuss the possibility of a career in deathcare.

For many years, Heffner Funeral Chapel & Crematory in York, Pennsylvania, has participated in career days at its local schools. Last month, Dallastown Middle School held a career day. John Katora, vice president at Heffner’s, would have normally participated in the event but couldn’t due to an out-of-town commitment. Thus, he decided to ask Isabella Null, an intern funeral director at Heffner’s and a Dallastown graduate, and Liam Tomsic, the company’s youngest funeral director, to participate.

This proves to have been a savvy decision on Katora’s part as he received the following note from Null after the event: I wanted to let you know that career day at Dallastown was a success! We did get a decent number of students interested in the profession. Many had funeral directing at the top of their lists, right beside the construction company that came in to speak, as well. They asked many good questions regarding cremation and meeting with family members. Liam and I had a great time working with the students.

Katora said: “I believe that they both presented the value of funeral service in a positive light and might have even planted a seed or two about a career in funeral service. What more can you hope for from Career Day?”

For many years, mortuary colleges have encouraged the profession to seek and refer up-and-coming students for funeral service careers. Some firms have followed through on this recommendation, but many have not. Now, the profession faces a shortage of quality people entering the profes-

sion as the number of licensed funeral directors continues to decline.

“Honestly, local career days and encouraging those with interest to pursue mortuary education is what everyone in the profession should be doing,” said Ernie Heffner, president. “I sincerely believe our long-term, proactive approach is why we haven’t felt the alleged nationwide shortage of quality staff.”

To get their stories, we spoke with Tomsic and Null about their experiences shortly after the Dallastown Middle School Career Day, what steered them into funeral service, and their thoughts on their futures and the future of funeral service.



Isabella Null

Thank you both for agreeing to speak with me. Please tell me about how you came to be a funeral director.

Null: Throughout my life, my aunt was in the healthcare industry. Now working as an ICU nurse, I always looked up to her passion and drive to care for people. Her work ethic inspired me to work in a similar industry. As a teenager, I lost young people in my life, and this also showed me the importance of deathcare.



Liam Tomsic

Before I started studying mortuary science, I had a prior interest in chemistry, anatomy, physiology, etc. I didn’t know exactly what I wanted in a career, but I knew I wanted to do something meaningful and rewarding. When I was looking at colleges, my mother mentioned autopsy work or becoming a mortician. She pushed me here.

“I believe they both presented the value of funeral service in a positive light and might have even planted a seed or two.”

It was somewhat of a last-minute decision, as I wanted to work on the other end of the healthcare industry, but now I can’t imagine doing anything else. It was everything I could have possibly hoped for in a career, and my interest was solidified when I started college. Now that I will soon finish my internship, I hope to move forward and continue in this profession.

Tomsic: While I was in high school, I started working at a local funeral home in Finleyville, Pennsylvania, where I grew up. I started my college career at California University of Pennsylvania with a major in biology, with the intention of becoming a microbiologist.

Shortly after, Tim and David Kegel, the owners of the funeral home I was working at, asked if I would be interested in learning more about the industry. Tim and his son David took me under their wing, showed me the ropes, took me on a few transfers, and had me as involved as I could be with my other job and college classes. After some time helping them, I realized I was studying the wrong thing.

Were there any specific moments that steered you in this direction?

Tomsic: After seeing the impact that Tim and David had on the community – how they were able to help people, their willingness to help people – I knew I wanted more than to sit in a lab and look down a microscope. I wanted to go to work every day knowing I have the potential to help someone through the worst time in their life.

Null: My aunt, my mother and those whom I have lost steered me in this direction. There were many circumstances that led me here.

“Four years of college to get my bachelor’s degree was like nails on a chalkboard, but when I finally got to mortuary school, I knew I was in the right place.”

Take me through your own mortuary science education.

Tomsic: I attended Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science (PIMS), the one and only mortuary school, and graduated in January 2020. Mortuary school was the first time in my life I actually enjoyed school. Four years of college to get my bachelor’s was like nails on a chalkboard, but when I finally got to mortuary school, I knew I was in the right place. I enjoyed learning all that I could from the professors at PIMS. The coursework was heavy but manageable.

Null: I went to PIMS, and I graduated in 2021. Being hours away from home, in a city I didn’t know, with nobody I recognized, threw me in for a real-life experience. It was a moment for me to learn, grow and focus on my education and myself. This circumstance made me even more passionate about the profession because it was all I had to focus on. I fell in love with the industry. I made Dean’s List and was on the college’s student senate. These opportunities kept giving me more and more of a drive. I learned a lot about myself during

this time, and I am very thankful for the professors at PIMS who kept pushing me.

Was there any moment in school that solidified your decision to become a funeral director?

Tomsic: I wouldn’t say there was one moment in particular, but it was the combination of the coursework, the professors and the hands-on learning that made me realize I was on the correct path.

Null: Yes, there is a distinct moment in my college career that solidified my choice. It was actually the first time I embalmed an individual. I was very nervous because I didn’t fully know what to expect. We walked into the lab and a young woman was on the table, only a few years older than me at the time, who passed tragically. She’d also had an autopsy earlier that week. This moment solidified my decision because it shocked me. It was a reality shock. She was beautiful and young, and it made me realize the importance of my job, once again.

How did you end up with Heffner’s?

Tomsic: A few times a year, Ernie travels to PIMS and presents to the current class. When my professors told us about the opportunity, I asked them some questions about who he was as I looked for some general information. The responses they gave me really sparked my interest.

While he is there, he offers interviews to anyone who’d like to have one. Being newer to the industry, I wanted to interview with Ernie to gain some experience and get a better understanding of the funeral homes he operates. I interviewed with him and, a few days later, received an email asking if I would be interested in a second interview at his funeral home.

At the time, I wasn’t sure where I wanted to end up. But after visiting Ernie’s funeral homes and meeting the other directors I would be working with, I knew I wanted to work at Heffner’s. I knew after my interview that it was going to be a place where I could grow my potential.

Null: Mr. Heffner came into PIMS to introduce himself to the new class. He shared his morality and his business. At first, I was very intimidated. He is a very successful man with great business ideas and an incredible work ethic. His ideas of modernization, his morality and his business were everything I could have dreamed of.

I ended up nervously speaking with him, completely intimidated, and the first thing he did was shake my hand and sit down. He started having a normal conversation with me, cracking a couple jokes and, from then on, I knew exactly what I wanted. He is incredibly humble, selfless and kind, and I could not ask for better employment to complete my internship.

What was your first thought when you learned you would be representing the funeral home at the career day in Dallastown?

Tomsic: Isabella was the main character for the career day. I was there as backup, so to speak. She did all the presenting, and I was there at the table to talk and answer any questions the kids might have.

Null: When Mr. Katora asked if I would be interested, I was honored. It was such an incredible opportunity as a young woman in this profession.

And, Isabella, how was it going back to your alma mater for this?

Null: It was incredible to go back to the middle school I attended. I recognized many teachers, and they were happy to see me in such an important profession.

Have either of you done anything like this before – being a representative of funeral service at a public event?

Tomsic: I have not, but I was honored to be involved. The way I see it, every time I drive a company vehicle, or interact with anyone outside of the funeral home, I am publicly representing the funeral home. It does not matter if I am standing in the lobby greeting a family, out at 2 a.m. on a transfer or answering questions for kids. I always try to conduct myself in a manner that represents our funeral home well.

Null: In college, I worked many community service events and represented the student body. It was not the same as career day, however, which was much more in depth and informative – only focusing on the industry rather than also helping a community.

Did you attend any career days when you were in school?

Tomsic: My school experience was different than most: I was homeschooled, K-12. With this, I did miss out on some things that other kids would have had, but it did allow me to start my college education early. I started my college career as a senior in high school.

Null: I did attend many career days in middle school and high school. Personally, I really enjoyed them. They showed me how many options I had and opened my eyes to life's full potential.

Tell me about your experiences at the Dallastown Career Day. How many students were at the event?

Tomsic: If I remember correctly, there were roughly 500 students throughout the morning we were there. We didn't get to interact with all of them, but I was glad to see the amount that came to our table. I was honestly surprised about the number of students that were curious about the profession and wanted to know about schooling and state requirements.

Null: I got to talk to the students about the profession and how special it is. Many of [them] had funeral directing at the top of their list, in competition with the construction company beside us. Liam and I brought in different cremation jewelry and urns to show the students, and many of them asked insightful questions about the options with cremation. Many were interested in the actual process and what the difference was between burial and cremation. There were a few students who recognized Heffner's name because we had served their family. A few students even felt comfortable enough to confide in us about the loved ones they have lost, what options their family picked and how they currently felt.

As a funeral services representative, what were you looking for in the students you saw?

Tomsic: What I looked for was just general curiosity. Being in eighth grade, it's rare for students that age to actually know what they want to do. But the ones who showed interest and weren't afraid to ask any questions were the ones I looked for.

“A few students even felt comfortable enough to confide in us about the loved ones they have lost, what options their family picked and how they currently felt.”

Null: At their age, all I was really looking for was genuine curiosity. I understand it would take a lot as a child to talk to a mortician, especially if they were a little nervous about the subject. Everyone we spoke to was interested and intrigued with the idea of funeral directing. Even being nervous with the topic, and approaching Liam and I to ask a couple questions or to start a conversation, was all I could have wanted out of the students. That is a big step for a middle schooler and showed us their brain was working to comprehend the subject while still being nervous.

If you'd like to share any unique experience you might have had at the career day, please describe it.

Null: The unique experiences I encountered at career day were the children who confided in Liam and me about their own losses. This showed us that they were comfortable enough around us to be so vulnerable. It was incredible to talk to these children, who needed to be heard.

And, Liam, I hear you are going to join your bosses when they visit PIMS. What are your thoughts on being a funeral service ambassador?

Tomsic: I am thrilled to be a part of this with Ernie and

John. I am proud that they have asked me to be there and represent the company. It gave me a sense of pride that they trust me to represent the funeral home.

In your opinion and experience, has funeral service done enough to attract students to the profession?

Tomsic: In my opinion, no. I feel like most of the public sees the funeral industry as something scary, creepy or weird. I feel the importance of this profession is oftentimes overlooked. Job fairs and hosting events are great ways for students to see what we do.

Null: I believe Heffner's does a lot to attract students. We participate in career days, continuing education trips and go to mortuary science classes to speak to college students. I do not know about other funeral homes, however. I know when I was in middle school and high school, I didn't have the opportunity to hear from a funeral home and learn about the occupation.

What else can be done?

Tomsic: Local outreach is something I think is great. A funeral home is more than a place people go when they die. We need to be a part of the community, letting people know we are there to help and serve them.

Null: Talk! I truly believe the stigma behind this industry needs to be recognized and overcome. We all need to talk about the profession and its importance and introduce it to more students. I truly believe many students would benefit by coming face to face with a funeral director and having a simple conversation.

"I believe many students would benefit by coming face to face with a funeral director and having a simple conversation."

What are your goals as a funeral director?

Tomsic: My goal is to serve every family I come in contact with with the same level of quality, dignity and respect. I want to make an impact on people's lives, letting them know there is purpose in a funeral. There is a lot of closure that can come from a funeral.

Null: My goals include helping those who have lost a loved one find closure and helping them through their individual grieving process, becoming a better intern than the day before, learning more and more, constantly modernizing my ideas as the world changes, being open-minded and showing women that we can do this job!



Are there things that you would like to see funeral service change as a profession?

Tomsic: With peoples' everyday lives, not many are still looking for a day or two of viewing and then burial. With the increase of cremation, I have noticed that people are not aware of all the options that come with it. After all, direct cremation is not a service, it is a disposition. The amount of people that I have met who say they "just want a cremation" is surprising. People don't always know that you can do a viewing and service prior to the cremation, or have a memorial service. I would like to see more education to consumers.

Null: Yes! I want people to talk about the profession and rid the occupation of being taboo. Death might be uncomfortable but it is not a taboo subject, and I believe people need to talk about it to truly understand the importance of our jobs and grieve properly.

If someone came up to you and said, "I'm thinking about becoming a funeral director," what would you say to them?

Tomsic: My first response to this is always "What makes you want to become a funeral director?" I noticed a lot of the students in mortuary school seemed to be there because they always found it "fascinating." While you have to have a certain level of fascination to work in this profession, I think many forgot that working in the prep room is only a small portion of this job. Most of our time is spent helping families.

Null: I would tell them it is a great idea. I would speak with them about the rewarding aspects and our importance in society. I would also mention, however, the hardships we come face to face with. This is just as important as the positives.

Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.

Communicating the Value of the Funeral

By Edward J. Defort

As a certified thanatologist, Sara Murphy, Ph.D., has expertise in death, dying and bereavement as a scholarly field of study. As a death educator at the University of Rhode Island, she works to bring that knowledge to both students and professionals, such as funeral directors.

“When we’re talking about thanatology and understanding the role of funerals, what we’re really talking about is the way in which scholars, researchers and historians understand the way in which funeral services – across cultures and over time to our contemporary moment – have an impact, specifically on grief,” explained Murphy.

Speaking at NFDA’s Cremation Success Seminar, February 16-17, 2023, she focused her presentation on consumer attitudes toward funerals in regard to cremation. “I perceive the needs of these families to be that they might not always be ‘receiving’ in terms of options for funerals and memorial services,” said Murphy. She also addressed practical strategies for communicating the value of these service options so families know what is available to them to assist them in their grief journey.

Funeral rites and rituals have been enacted and practiced as both religious and secular ceremonies across all cultures. Said Murphy: “The nature of these rights and rituals has changed from place to place and time to time, but we have archaeological evidence that forms of funeral rites have been in practice as long as we have had human existence. [There is] even evidence predating Homo sapiens that funeral rites and rituals were happening in the Stone Age, some 300,000 years ago.”

These rites have been enacted across time for many reasons; from rituals meant to please the gods to those made to assist someone in crossing over to another side. “Regardless of time and place, [they] reinforce community and individual awareness of mortality; honor the dead, of course; and communicate grief and loss while continuing a bond with the deceased,” she said.

Those outside the funeral space might think of cremation as something more modern, though it began around the mid-19th century, gained popularity in England and Europe, and then spread to the United States.

Explained Murphy: “I was very interested to learn, not too long ago, that formal cremation practices go back about 3,000 years and that we have evidence in Europe, the Near East, Australia and parts of Africa of cremation being enacted very formally by communities. Even in ancient Greece, about 800 B.C., there is evidence that the Greek government encouraged cremation among the populace as a means of slowing down perceived health issues.

“If we reframe and think about cremation – in addition to different kinds of funeral rites and rituals – as something that’s been going on for years and years, then the recent rise in cremation rates, while maybe seemingly new, is actually a reenactment of cultural trends that have happened across history,” she said.

Of note, Murphy shared that, historically, cremation was never a replacement for enacting funeral rites or holding services. It was simply a different means of body disposition that would happen in conjunction with those services or rituals.

“Regardless of time and place, funeral rites and rituals reinforce community and individual awareness of mortality and honor the dead...”

THE IMPACT OF FUNERALS ON GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT

“It’s incredibly important to consider the impact of all these funerals across time – and in our contemporary moment – on grief,” said Murphy. “I spend most of the hours of my waking life talking about grief and bereavement.”

Murphy said that since there is a lot [of information] about the value of funerals, both to businesses and to families, she instead wanted to reframe the conversation to talk about the impact of funerals on grief and bereavement.

As someone who has studied grief extensively but who also works individually as a consultant with grieving individuals and families, Murphy shared that some of the most memorable and meaningful factors that influence the grief experience are centered around choices having to do with funeral services. “We know in the field that no two people’s grief will look exactly alike, and no two people’s grief will feel exactly alike,” she said. “In the field of thanatology, we’re about 30 years past believing that people go through linear stages of grief. These are very outdated and classical theories about bereavement that fail to embrace the complexity of what a grief experience might be.”

No one can make assumptions about what someone’s grief



will or should look like. Grief manifestations will vary from person to person, as well as from one grief experience to another. Even in a family system, every individual will experience grief that looks and feels different, and they will have needs in relation to their grieving that will differ, as well.

Murphy offered three components that can make grief processes more navigable for individuals in the early days of grieving:

- Being assisted and accepting the reality of the loss.
- Being supported in validating the loss by helping professionals and friends, family and peers.
- Being given opportunities to make meaning out of the loss.

“If we consider these three components, we can see pretty easily that both funeral services and funeral service professionals have a tremendous opportunity to meet all these needs and make that grief trajectory a little less hard,” said Murphy.

She added: “I typically say [a little less hard] instead of a ‘little easier’ because grief is not easy and loss is not easy. [But] there are opportunities through funeral services to make grief a little less hard for individuals and families.”

Something else Murphy believes is commonly overlooked but is also important to reinforce to families is that funeral services have been found to have psychosocial benefits for survivors.

Murphy calls herself a psychosocial thanatologist, meaning she understands that everything having to do with the grief experience has both psychological and sociological components. Psychology, she said, has everything to do with our relationships and our minds, and how we think about things. Sociology speaks to our relationships with society and with others, and how we feel about ourselves as part of a larger community.

“Really thinking about mortality is pretty challenging because we’re not often given opportunities to do that. Yet funeral service compels us to do that.”

“Grief is incredibly psychosocial – there’s the psychological component [and then] there’s this sociological component,” said Murphy. “The benefits here, in terms of funeral service, balance across these two dimensions of grief.”

“Psychologically, funeral services allow individuals to meditate on the often-challenging concept of mortality,” she continued. “We are a very death-denying, death-anxious culture, and that is taught and reinforced for us through all kinds of cultural institutions. As a result, being able to undertake a task like really thinking about mortality is pretty challenging because we’re not often given opportunities to do that. Yet funeral service compels us to do that.”



In addition, as a symbolical benefit, funeral services allow people to accept the reality of a death, she added. “That’s something that someone who chooses not to have a service might actually struggle with.”

Murphy sees via consumer research studies that people who do not or cannot attend a funeral service, or who don’t hold one, might experience more of what is called “seeking and longing for the dead.” They might be more apt to feel a yearning for the presence of the deceased and might experience a phenomenon in which they believe they are seeing their loved one out in public, or mistake someone for the deceased, because they didn’t have that ritual of coming together to collectively accept the reality of the loss itself.

Funeral services allow people to take the first steps in emotionally responding to the loss, which is grief. “We know they’re all different, but we also know that a memorial service or a funeral service, or any of these types of rituals, also give permission to survivors to emotionally ventilate [and] talk about how they’re feeling, to hug one another, to cry together or laugh together,” said Murphy. “All of that is really important and [the] beginning [of the] steps in the grief journey.”

Sociologically, funeral services also encourage survivors to share loss with one another. This was a community component, Murphy said, that took a hit during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when there were restrictions on gathering.

“When we can have funeral services, and we choose [to have] funeral services, we also know that having that sharing, having a classical testifying [of a] loss, and then having people bear witness to that loss has a tremendous impact on the sociological component of grief,” Murphy said.

There’s also something to be said for the comfort that individuals take in enacting rituals together, she noted, because it strengthens interpersonal and community bonds, especially when people are at their most vulnerable in terms of suffering a loss. “All of these benefits can be immeasurable to the grief process,” said Murphy.

She sometimes hears from laypeople about other assumptions concerning the ways in which funeral service can have an impact on grief. Some are very sound, supported by observation, and others are cultural myths that have been reinforced over and over again.

To that end, Murphy invited attendees to play a game of fact or fiction in relation to funeral service and grief trajectories. For example:

- *It is essential to grief outcomes to view a body: fiction.*

“Anytime we’re making absolute statements about what can help someone in their grief, we are already stepping into really murky waters,” Murphy said. “We know that viewing a body after a death can be a really important step in recognizing that the death happened. But we also know it is not necessary for everyone. Many people navigate their grief journeys without them being complicated by not seeing a body.”

She added, “As a thanatologist, when I am asked by people if it is important to view a body, my answer is that it depends on the person. What’s really important here is giving grievors the option to see the body. That’s also something I try to reinforce with survivors who are planning funeral services; they might not feel like they need to view a body, but there might be others in that family system who really would benefit from seeing the body. That is one of the reasons I so strongly support viewings even if there is going to be cremation.”

- *Funerals are more beneficial to grief outcomes than memorial services: fiction.* “We actually do not have any research that supports the idea that memorial services are any less or any more impactful to grief experiences. What we do know is important here is that survivors are empowered to make these decisions, and that they are presented with options they can individualize and personalize in terms of what kind of service they have,” Murphy said.

- *Rituals with cremation can’t be as impactful on grief experiences as traditional funeral rituals: fiction.* “Very similar to the last cultural assumption or myth, this speaks to a lack of understanding of the needs of grievors by our dominant culture. The idea that there’s a one-size-fits-all kind of service or ritual that will assist all grievors is something we really need to move away from,” said Murphy. “The most important component here is having options for rituals, and what I would encourage funeral directors to consider is having a list ready to go of the kinds of rituals that could benefit survivors.”

- *Funerals provide closure to grievors, survivors or families: fiction.* “The term ‘closure’ is not a term I use in my own work, the reason being that everybody has a different definition of what closure means,” Murphy said. “Frequently, I’m asked even in my work as a legal expert witness what constitutes closure. Does seeing a body mean closure? Does having a funeral mean closure?”

She continued: “The problem with that is it perpetuates the idea of a one-and-done event for grieving. If we say funerals assist in accepting the reality of a loss, that’s a fact. Funerals assist in beginning to navigate the grief journey? Fact. Closure? No. It is way too much of a responsibility for either a funeral or a memorial service to take on. Everyone’s grief journey will last a different amount of time, and some might never feel what we think of as closure in relation to a death.”

WHAT CONSUMERS ARE FEELING

Next, Murphy noted NFDA’s 2020 and 2022 “Value of a Funeral” Consumer studies, saying there were a few numbers she wanted to pull from those results. In 2020, of the re-

spondents who either held a direct cremation or immediate burial, or who experienced one where there was no service, almost half (48.2%) believed that it is “very important” or “important” to have a funeral or memorial service to commemorate the life of a loved one. In this same group, 38.4% indicated wishing they had held a service.

“As a thanatologist, that’s heartbreaking to me,” she said. “That’s a massive regret that might also provide some inspiration to do things differently in the future. Indeed, over 45% of them said they would likely plan a service in the future if they had the option to do so again.”

The numbers in 2022 were slightly different, with more respondents citing price as their main reason for not holding a funeral or memorial service. “It was 37.1%, so that’s something to pay attention to, up from 10.7% in 2020,” Murphy said. “These are the numbers that, as a thanatologist, make me sit up and pay attention – about 39% felt that it is important to hold a funeral or memorial service.” (Of note, this includes just people who had planned a direct cremation with no service the year before.)

“If we say funerals assist in accepting the reality of a loss, that’s a fact. In beginning to navigate the grief journey? Fact. In bringing closure? No. It is way too much of a responsibility for a funeral or memorial to take on.”

“These numbers might tell us how cremation-choosing individuals are feeling, but when we interpret these numbers through a contemporary understanding of the impact of services on grief, these numbers are also telling me what consumers need,” she noted.

Murphy delineated three specific needs she believes should be foregrounded in working with families who come in and say they want cremation.

- *The first need is choice.* “Grief makes survivors feel instantly powerless,” she explained. “Loss is something that happens to us, it’s not something we ask for. Frequently, it’s not something we can plan for and, even for those who spend their days working in this field, when loss happens to us, we might still not feel particularly prepared for it. I would recommend any funeral director have a pretty comprehensive list of the options they can offer families beyond traditional burial and beyond traditional funeral service. And also be incredibly flexible.”

- *The second need is nonjudgmental responses.* “I am not judging anyone in this profession; I know many people have been somewhat blindsided by the rising cremation [rate],” she said. “I think it’s really important that even unconsciously, we’re not treating cremation as other than the norm, es-

pecially because cremation is now as normative statistically.”

• *The third need, often overlooked, is education.* “I think that because survivors are often so overwhelmed or confused or debilitated to some degree by their grief in the days following a death, they might not have the knowledge or tools to understand their own grief,” said Murphy. “I hope what you take from this session is being able to employ language that demonstrates to a consumer that there is a real, demonstrated, studied and proven role of funeral service in grief and how we journey through our grief. I think this gives funeral directors the opportunity to be empathic educators as they work with families planning rituals and services with cremation.”

STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATING

When meeting with families, Murphy advised keeping communication factual, saying it’s important to focus on what you know – what is demonstrated, what is researched and what is supported – about the value that funerals bring to psychosocial grief experiences.

“I also think it’s important to resist cultural myths or outdated understandings of the impact of funerals on grief,” she said. “Again, to use the example of viewing a body, ethically I could but would never say to someone... that it’s important for them to see the body. I don’t know that it will be for them. What I can absolutely, ethically say to them is ‘it’s really important that survivors of your mother have the option of whether or not to see the body’ and explain what seeing a body does for some people.”

Murphy also recommended that we check our own biases. “I think it could be challenging when we are checking our biases, and it can also be challenging to maintain patience with consumers who are citing issues like price as their primary motivator in choosing cremation,” she said. “I understand that everyone’s running a business, and I am frustrated also by that kind of response as a thanatologist because I just want to say, ‘What price are you putting on your grief?’ But I also understand empathically that price is very important to people, so I think, to that end, it’s really important

to validate the feelings behind those concerns families have without unintentionally passing judgment [and by] asking really open-ended questions.”

Examples of questions Murphy recommends asking:

- “How did you [or a loved one] arrive at the decision to choose cremation?” instead of just, “Why cremation?” She said, “Really listen and validate what they’re saying.”
- “What is most valuable for you and your family in honoring your father’s legacy?” She explained: “That’s a question you can ask of anyone, obviously, but asking it of a cremation-choosing family or survivor is already setting up the assumption that you are there to help them and that you’re going to have options for them in honoring the legacy.”
- “Have you thought about what kinds of services or rituals you would find most meaningful in paying tribute to your [loved one]?” Murphy said, “Questions like this encourage the consumer to consider not whether or not to do something but what different kinds of things would be beneficial to do.”

To expand on this kind of communication, Murphy suggested cultivating not only a more expansive list of options of the types of services offered but also the kinds of cremation-specific rituals available, including nontraditional kinds of rituals, such as offsite services, scattering or interment. “I do think it would be beneficial to grief trajectories to partner with companies offering different kinds of options for things to do with cremated human remains,” she added.

Still, some people might choose cremation with no service. “I really, genuinely believe that given the high percentage of people surveyed by NFDA who chose to forego a service and regretted it, there is a large number of grieverers that are not benefiting from services... and I think with some education and clearer communication, they can be better served in their grief and in their processing of grief.”

Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.

Conveying Value: Are You Prepared?

By Edward J. Defort

What is your definition of value? This is the question that opened a session at NFDA’s Cremation Success Seminar, held February 16-17, 2023. The session, “Conveying Value: Are You Prepared?” was co-presented by Melissa Posey Loose, NFDA training and development manager, and Mike Nico-demus, NFDA vice president of cremation services.

In general, value is the regard that something is held to



deserve; the importance, worth or usefulness of something.

“But it is also the concept of a person’s principles or standards of behavior – one’s judgment of what is important in life,” said Loose. “So, with that in mind, we want to let you

know that we need to do a better job, we think, of conveying this concept of value to the families that we serve.”

She added, “Families are coming to us with some basic care needs because of the trauma and grief they’ve experienced from a loved one’s death. Families also come to us with budget concerns, [with] an essentials-dictated lifestyle.”

Loose suggested that a family’s choice of funeral home is driven by things that are important to them, as well as their perception of the worth or usefulness of the providers they are considering. “We often get shoppers because they are seeking a truly valuable experience,” she said.

Nicodemus noted that everyone’s values are different. “Some wear a Timex, some a Rolex. If people see value in Rolex, they’re going to buy one,” he said.

“People will also see [different] value in what you offer them as a funeral home. Everyone who comes through your door has different values, and you have to be able to read those and move forward during the arrangement conference,” he continued.

Loose cautioned funeral directors to be careful not to operate on their preconceived value assumptions but to go through the arrangement conference and ask appropriate questions to help really uncover what a family is looking for.

Loose then asked the audience: “According to NFDA’s 2022 Consumer Awareness and Preferences Study, how many respondents called or visited more than one funeral home when they planned a funeral in 2022?” The answer is 33.5%.

But that’s just half of the story, she noted. The other half is based on the responses to the study’s next question: “Why did you visit or contact more than one funeral home?” The survey found that respondents did so to check on the availability of a funeral home; to check its available service options; to find a convenient location; and/or the reputation of the firm itself.

“It’s not about price; there are a lot of different reasons people will come to your funeral home,” said Nicodemus. “I tell everyone it’s not about the money – it’s about the value people put on your service. You [must] show them the value. Don’t take it for granted that people who come into your funeral home know what they’re looking for. They don’t.”

Added Loose: “You’ve got to see yourself as an educator in this process, and as a leader.”

When it comes to demonstrating the value of your service, two questions come to mind: how and where are you communicating this value? “Do you wait until they come through the door to give this information, or is it available, for example, on your website?” posed Loose. Better options include holding community presentations or when speaking to local organizations and groups.

“Have you tried to open the doors to have those conversations and build a connection with people in your community?” she asked. “The concept of relationship and personal touch is so important here,” she said. “They are going to come to you for prices – are you ready?”

Nicodemus agreed and asked, “Are you prepared to answer the question a consumer might have about the \$4,000

price of cremation on your website, compared with a \$2,000 price elsewhere and \$995 on billboards?”

Nicodemus, who asks this question often, said he invariably gets the answer, “We provide good service.” He shrugged and said, “What does that mean? You and your staff must be prepared so that when someone asks that question, you have a solid response.”

He suggested saying, “Well, I can’t speak for ABC Funeral Home, but here’s what we do at XYZ.’ Be ready to go so that people will stand back and say, ‘I had no idea it was so involved.’ People don’t know... and they certainly don’t know what it costs to cremate.”

Everyone’s values are different. “Some wear a Timex, some a Rolex. If people see value in a Rolex, they’ll buy one. People will also see [different] value in what you offer them as a funeral home.

Next, on the question of how consumers are obtaining price information for planning a funeral, Loose noted that fewer are coming to the funeral home in person – just 40% according to NFDA’s 2022 survey, compared with 50% and 66.1% in 2021 and 2020, respectively. Also, fewer people are contacting firms by phone: 31.8% in 2022 versus 39.5% in 2021.

When speaking with consumers, Loose said that funeral directors and staff must speak in layman’s terms. “If you rely solely on what the FTC dictates you have to say in a General Price List, people are confused,” she said. “You’ve got to be able to speak to them in terms they value and understand.”

Loose shared that some funeral homes even have an FAQ sheet next to the phone so that they can have the information right at hand. “Make sure you train properly and [staff] have the tools they need to be able to respond,” she said.

In NFDA’s 2022 consumer survey, by a very narrow margin, affordable price topped the list of reasons consumers choose a funeral home. Location and an existing relationship with a funeral director were within two percentage points.

“The personal touch with people inside and outside the funeral home is so important,” affirmed Loose, “because when they get in that space of death and they’ve lost someone, in the end, yes, price is important, but they’re going to call somebody that they feel comfortable with. If you have provided education to them, no matter how small or large, [and] if you’re giving them the information and they don’t feel like you’re trying to hide something, that’s part of easing [and] comfort[ing] them.”

A FUNERAL HOME’S CALLING CARD

Several things make up a firm’s “calling card,” and foremost

“Are you saying that if you have a burial, you don’t ask them what cemetery? Of course you do. Carry it one step further with cremation.”

are its employees. “The funeral home staff is one of the best things you’ve got going – or it should be,” said Loose. “That means you’ve got to really invest in training that’s important to them, including answering phone calls and the way they look. It’s important to impress upon them that they’re not only seen inside the walls of the funeral home but outside, as well. You cannot control their personal lives, and that is not what I’m saying, but it is important for you as an employer in the service industry to impress upon them that their character matters, their integrity matters.”

Also, the integrity of your firm matters. Is your funeral home show-ready before a service, and even on a day when there are no funerals scheduled? “Are you ready for somebody just to walk in and say they’ve had a death?” Loose asked.

People use the internet for all kinds of things, so your website should be easy to navigate, user friendly and updated regularly. “Don’t make it difficult for them to find the information they might want on cremation,” Nicodemus offered. “Put it front and center; we’re doing more cremations front and center.”

Social media makes up an increasingly big part of a funeral home’s calling card. “Does the homepage of your website, or the social media messages you’re putting out, say anything about hope amidst grief?” Loose asked. “Do they talk about the programs your firm offers to the community? Is the funeral home’s visual brand dark and unappealing or bright and engaging? This is all part of your calling card, and part of how people come to assume whether or not they value you and the services you provide.”

When speaking to families making inquiries over the phone, highlight credibility builders, such as the fact that your firm has an onsite crematory and that both the crematory and its operators are certified.

NFDA offers phone training, Loose shared, that uses a four-step process:

- Focus on the caller’s needs. Use names, get the caller’s name and make sure you’ve introduced yourself, as well; understand why they are calling and listen to them.
- Relate to the caller. Be compassionate and show sincerity and seriousness.
- Engage through effective discovery questions. “Has anyone taken the time to explain...?”
- Reflect on your performance. In an innovative culture,

the ability to step back and assess the manner in which things are handled is key.

“This takes preparation ahead of time,” advised Loose. “You can’t just do it on the spot. This is where training is so important with your staff.”

Are you asking the right questions? Loose suggested a few to ask on the phone or during an arrangement conference:

- “What thoughts do you have about how you’d like to publicly remember your father?”
- “Has anyone else taken the time to explain the different choices included with cremation prices?”
- “What arrangements have you considered for the final placement of your mother’s cremated remains?”

Too many funeral directors, added Nicodemus, don’t ask families about their plans for the disposition of the urn. “[Are you saying that] if you have a burial, you don’t ask them what cemetery? Of course you do,” he said. “Carry it one step further with cremation.”

According to Nicodemus, the reply to someone who tells the funeral director directly that they don’t want any service should be, “I understand, but I would be remiss and not doing my job as a funeral director. The last thing I want you to do is have a death in the family out of state and go to that service and see that they have videos, they’re playing music, they have a dove release and, because I thought you didn’t want anything, I didn’t tell you about any of your options.”

He continued: “The last thing I want for you is to have to come back to say, ‘Why didn’t you tell us we could do this?’ or ‘You never mentioned that.’”

Remember this, said Nicodemus: “Every family, every option, every time.”

Loose agreed and said, “Once you’ve done that, leave it there and listen. You don’t want to be pushy, but you do need to offer the options.”

“You have to be engaged and get people involved,” said Nicodemus.

Loose offered several more points from NFDA’s latest consumer survey before closing, including a question that revealed that nearly 60% of respondents felt some level of comfort in planning and executing a funeral or memorial service without the help of a funeral director.

That could be a little disconcerting, she said, but the majority of those people would still contact a funeral director to get help with planning those services. “To me, that says that although the confidence level might be declining right now, [consumers] still really trust funeral directors,” continued Loose. “Right now is a very important moment in our service industry. We must communicate to figure out how we can listen and respond better to them as we lead them into these waters that are often unknown.”

Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.

The Dirt on Natural Organic Reduction

While the technology is new, Return Home's "terramation" process breaks down the body the same way nature always has.

By Edward J. Defort



Natural organic reduction has been gaining interest across the consumer spectrum. A number of articles have appeared in consumer media about the process, and, at present, six U.S. states permit natural organic reduction, another 15 states have bills pending, and several others are considering bills.

In 2019, Wash-

ington state passed legislation, and Return Home opened for business in the state in June 2021. The company provides a service legally known as "natural organic reduction" but Return Home uses the term "terramation," which it describes as the process of "gently transforming human remains into life-giving soil."

NFDA's own research has found that consumers are curious about the process. How curious? Well, a look at Return Home's presence on social media would explain why articles on the process pop up from time to time. Each post garners thousands of likes, with one actually receiving more than 50 million likes.

During NFDA's Cremation Success Seminar, February 16-17, 2023, Return Home COO Brienna Smith, and Services Manager Katey Houston, discussed their business model and how it fits into today's end-of-life discussions.

Smith began by explaining the origin of the term terramation. "We do not call cremation 'human incineration' and, for us, the term 'human composting' is just a little bit difficult to take," she said. "It's easier for us to talk to our families about having this earth transformation, or the process of becoming, so terramation covers that and makes it a little bit easier to talk to families about."

Return Home built an 11,500-square-foot facility in Auburn, Washington. It is a licensed funeral home and natural organic reduction provider in the state. "We have a lot

of visitors, sometimes even multiple families at once," said Smith. "We have a 74-vessel capacity... so we are the largest in operation as far as our space."

She added, "We are able to serve families not only from Washington but from all over the United States and even Canada [because] our facility is so close to an international airport."

Return Home is also just like a normal funeral home in that visitors can walk in Monday through Friday from 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

THE TECHNOLOGY

According to Smith, everyone who offers this service has different technology. At Return Home, QR technology is used to track every person through every single step of the process. "We have 24/7 cloud uploads, which means everything that's being tracked inside of our vessel[s] is constantly streaming to a device or software that we're able to have our hands on basically 24/7," she said. "So, if something happens on an evening or a weekend where we might need to make adjustments to the vessel, we have the knowledge [to] do that and we'll come in to make those adjustments."

The facility also has an HVAC system similar to those used at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. "It is extraordinary and actually literally made by the same people who produced [the airport's] systems," Smith added. "Everything we do is about moving oxygen; for us to be able to maintain an odorless facility is essential to families' ability to visit us."

Return Home uses the term terramation, which it describes as the process of "gently transforming human remains into life-giving soil."

A biofilter attaches to the HVAC system, as well. "Our outputs are very, very low and everything goes through multiple filters. It's pretty incredible technology created by our soil scientists and 'Ph.D.s' in composting, who are experts in these types of things. We monitor constantly the temperature, the moisture level and the oxygen that flows through the vessel."

"[The] system takes care of all the odor, taking it directly out of the vessel and through the biofilter so it is completely odorless," added Houston.



“Anything that happens during the process is uploaded to the cloud so we can adjust as needed throughout the 30- to 60-day process where people are in their vessel,” Smith said.

“Return Home is quite different in multiple ways, but I’m here to talk about how we’re different technologically,” she continued. “We pride ourselves in being very transparent about the process. When legislation was passed, we knew that in order for families to be served in the best way they can be, they needed answers to the questions they asked.”

“Being transparent and totally honest about our process is a huge priority for us,” Smith said. “We think it not only helps the end consumer, but it also helps funeral industry professionals understand this kind of new technology. Really, the breakdown of the body is as old as time itself, so there’s not a lot to hide.”

Smith described the vessel in which the body is placed as fairly simple, with nothing inside to alter the body, break it down or expedite the process in any way. “That makes us different,” she said.

“We also have separate stations for each vessel, so they have an individual space on our racking system. They’re individually rotated with an external rotator about three or four weeks into the process, and then, at the end, they’re in their own cube as a resting vessel, where they stay for the last 30 days to release a little bit of oxygen and moisture before being returned to the family.”

Return Home also has a screening room available for use halfway through the process, when the body is completely broken down inside the vessel and only bones remain.

Smith said that the process of terramation is quite simple. While the technology is new, the way the body breaks down is the same. “We place the body inside a sealed, environmentally controlled vessel and surround it with straw, alfalfa and sawdust,” said Smith. This mixture of organics is used because straw is insulating, sawdust has absorbing qualities, and alfalfa is rich in nitrogen. She added that the microorganisms in the body appreciate the nitrogen-rich alfalfa, which helps aid the expedient process the body undergoes once it is placed in the vessel.

“Oxygen flows through the vessel and stimulates microbes in the body to break the body down quickly,” Smith said. “Those microbes are the same ones that digest our food when we eat and they are the same things that ultimately would return us to the earth if we were to die out in nature somewhere.”

“The microbes rapidly transform the body into soil and, once that takes place, we go into screening,” she added, explaining that it is basically like a cremation processing station but larger.

“Everything we do is on a different scale because when we place people in the vessel, we’re placing them at about a 3:1 ratio of organics to body weight,” Smith continued. “So, if a person weighs 200 pounds, 400 to 600 pounds of organics are added to the vessel with them. After the body breaks down and lessens in moisture, there would be about 250 pounds of compost.”

She likened the processing system to a crematory, but up-

sized. “We’re removing things that were in the body, such as titanium rods, stents, screws and plates, and recycling those the same way as after cremation. The compost and bones go through a proprietary piece of machinery, very similar to a cremulator, that makes everything uniform. Then we go to the breathing phase.”

There is still microbial activity since the bones have been broken down and are now porous, Smith explained, and the microbes consume the porous bone – thus explaining the additional 30 days. “The total of our process is anywhere from 60 to 90 days by the end when we’re returning loved ones to their families,” she said.

The company spent more than two-and-a-half years in research and development before opening to serve families, shared Smith. “We’ve got a ton of research and extensive testing done through the state of Washington on the soil, as well,” she said. “Everything we’ve produced and provided has gone right according to plan.”

“This very new, uncharted territory was pretty intimidating, and being one of the first to place a person inside their vessel and see them off and not know what’s going to happen for 30 to 60 days was kind of an overwhelming prospect,” Smith added.

After discussing the science, Smith and Houston talked about the impact on families.

Terramation is gentle and noninvasive, it restores and preserves land and conserves energy.

Before she joined Return Home, Houston was a traditional funeral director/embalmer. She described it as a very interesting process to go from handing an urn back to a family to handing back 250 pounds of compost.

Of the benefits of terramation, Houston said it restores and preserves land and conserves energy, using about 90% less energy than a single cremation. “We’re able to retain the carbon in the soil instead of it going up the smokestack,” she said. “It’s gentle and noninvasive, which I have found has been the most popular reason families have chosen us.”

The terramation process does not involve formaldehyde, meaning there’s no embalming. “We do unembalmed viewings very often,” confirmed Houston, who added that the process also has no inoculants. “We do not add anything to speed up the process; it is the microbes in your body and on the alfalfa and straw that propel the process,” she said.

As nothing woven can go into the vessel, Return Home created the WISP (wrapped in swaddled protection), which Houston described as a pressed-cotton garment in which each body is dressed. “That can be an issue for some who have spiritual clothing they need to wear,” Houston noted. “We’ve made some alterations and have been able to accommodate families so they can have [the special clothing] for

the viewing, but those items are later removed and the WISP placed over them.”

The time consideration is likely the biggest adjustment a family will need to make when using Return Home. Traditionally, a family that experiences a death would have an urn back in a week or so, said Houston. “For us, 60 days seemed like a long time, but we found families love it,” she said. “It is time for them to decompress [and] slow down the separation from their [loved one].”

Houston also thought that delivering 250 pounds of terramated remains was going to be a bigger issue. “What we did was purchase an eight-acre green belt property we call Woodland, where families may spread the terramated remains they can’t take home with them.”

“We made a decision from the beginning that we were going to be love-focused – that was really important,” Houston said. “Family participation is important, as is personalization of services.”

Since Return Home is on the leading edge of terramation, the company set out to set the bar high with industry-leading staff standards. “We wanted to be out there at the front of this movement, creating standards that everyone after us would have to live up to,” shared Houston.

As far as demographics, Return Home has served people from 18 weeks old to 101 years old, representing a variety of races and religions.

How is Return Home different? “Every person who comes into our care is given a bath; we believe that it is just basic human dignity for people to be clean when they go into their vessels,” she said. “It’s comforting for their family members to know their body is being cared for. We do still believe in disinfection without preservation. We are embalmers at heart, so we do know how to care for a body and make it safe for a family to be with.”

Vessels can be decorated inside and families can place with their loved one the things important to them in life (which must be edible or compostable). “We have had some truly beautiful services where families have completely covered their person in beautiful flowers,” said Houston. They can also decorate the outside of the vessel, which gives them time to spend with the vessel.

“It’s like a temporary mausoleum; families can visit whenever they want,” she continued. “We have come in on Christmas and Thanksgiving to let families in, and we have certain families that we’re comfortable just buzzing into the building because they’re here so often.”

Return Home offers an all-in-one celebration space. “We can have the facility set up into two or three different parts so they can have their viewing in one space, their service in an-

other and their reception around the corner,” Houston said.

Houston has also learned that if you change the name of what you’re offering, families will say yes. She said families often say no to a viewing, preferring the lay-in (the company’s term for a viewing). Return Home has a 76.2% lay-in rate. “In their minds, they have a different vision of what a lay-in is [as opposed] to a viewing,” she said. “Over 70% of our families are viewing their person for two or three hours, not 10-minute ID views. These are legitimate viewings where people are saying real goodbyes.”

Houston noted that 56% of families take all the remains. “They are taking at least 250 pounds of soil home – that’s incredible,” she said. “I thought it would be way less than that.”

The company is also setting new traditions. Over 50% of families have more than one service. “They’ll have one at the beginning of the process,” said Houston, “and once their soil goes home, they’ll have another, where they share that compost, or they just celebrate the life in a different way,” she said.

As far as demographics, Houston said the firm has served people from 18 weeks old to 101 years old, representing a variety of races and religions.

California, Colorado, New York, Oregon and Vermont have also legalized natural organic reduction, and Return Home has served families from 27 states. “There are people who really want this service, and you have the opportunity to offer it to them, even if you’re not in a state that has legalized the process yet,” Houston said.

As mentioned earlier, family participation plays a big role. “Families have participated all the way from the beginning of the death call,” shared Houston. “We’ve had people drive their person from California, and when they get here, they participate in the bathing process.”

How is the soil delivered? The compost is packaged in burlap sacks that allow it to continue to breathe and make it easy to transport. “If a family is taking the entire amount, we have 20-pound sacks, but we can break it down into smaller, urn-sized portions for a family if they just want to keep a small amount,” said Houston.

The full remains come in 12-15 burlap sacks, which Houston said can be accommodated in a Honda Fit. “It sounds like a lot, but when you actually see it, it’s less than people think,” she said.

Houston said funeral homes interested in terramation can hold the services they normally would and then send the remains to Return Home, as they would to a third-party crematory. “We always ask that your question in an arrangement not be, ‘Will this be burial or cremation?’ but ‘Will this be burial, cremation or terramation?’” Houston said.

“If you’re not having the conversation, people are not going to pick it. If you’re waiting for people to come in and ask for it, you’re probably going to get two or three calls a year at most. But if you’re actively offering this and have enough knowledge, then I believe you will see a lot of families at least taking you up on the offer of information.”

Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.



Critical Skills for The Workplace

A recent survey of managers and executives shows there's room for improvement.

By William E. Ford

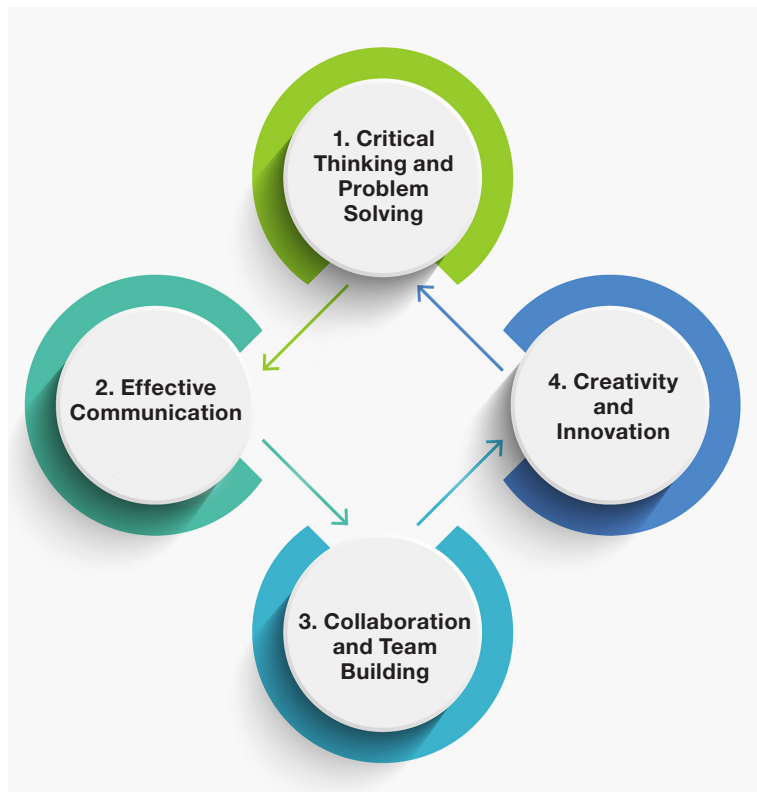
Thinking critically, solving problems, innovating and collaborating are highly valued at every level within an organization. According to a recent survey by the American Management Association, however, more than half of executives polled said there is significant room for improvement in these competencies among their employees.

According to the survey results, a majority of respondents said that the “Four Cs” (detailed below) have been articulated within their organizations as priorities for employee development, talent management and succession planning.

Furthermore, a majority agreed that their employees are measured in these skills during annual performance appraisals, and that job applicants are assessed in these areas during the hiring process.

THE “FOUR Cs” DEFINED

- 1 Critical thinking and problem solving: ability to make decisions, solve problems and take action, as appropriate.**
- 2 Effective communication: ability to synthesize and convey ideas in both written and oral format.**
- 3 Collaboration and team building: ability to work effectively with others, including those from diverse groups and those with opposing points of view.**
- 4 Creativity and innovation: ability to see what is not there and make something happen.**



The survey revealed that responding managers/executives believe it is easier to develop these skills in students and recent graduates (59.1%).

Three of four said they believe these skills and competencies will become even more important to their organizations in the next three to five years, offering the following reasons:

- Pace of change in business
- Nature of how work is accomplished today
- The way work is structured.

The survey also revealed that responding managers and executives believe it is easier to develop these skills in students and recent graduates (59.1%) than it is to develop them in experienced workers (27.1%). This suggests that students and recent graduates might be more open to new ideas than experienced workers with established work patterns and habits.

Mentoring and in-house job training were offered as the most effective methods to improve skill levels, followed by individual coaching, job rotation and professional development.

William E. Ford is president and CEO of SESCO Management Consultants in Bristol, Tennessee, an NFDA Endorsed Provider for human resources.

I Stress, Eustress, We All Stress

You care for families, but who cares for you? NFDA, of course, as it's "Take 5" self-care series demonstrates.

By Chris Raymond

Like love, the concept of stress is difficult to define. First of all, some types of stress are actually beneficial, such as the fight-or-flight response (aka "acute stress"), a short-term physiological response triggered when we face a deadline or dangerous situation. There's also "eustress" (pronounced you-stress) – the positive, fulfilling, sometimes euphoric feelings experienced after certain types of stressful events, such as graduating from mortuary school, passing the national board exam, finding an apprenticeship or first job, relocating somewhere, etc.

In addition, stress lies in the eye of the beholder. Consider divorce, for example. Yes, the legal dissolution of a marriage is sad and unfortunate, but it's unrealistic to think that both parties, in each instance, feel stressed to the same extent. Some may find the decree devastating, some liberating and others something in between. Other events eliciting widely disparate views about their stress worthiness include public speaking, medical/dental appointments and air travel.

Seeking guidance, I turned to The American Institute of Stress, whose site offered the succinctly titled article "What is Stress?" After wading through numerous definitions – from basic "physical, mental or emotional strain or tension" to ponderous ones filled with medical mumbo jumbo – the author stated: "Since stress is such a subjective phenomenon that differs for each of us, there really is no satisfactory definition of stress that all scientists agree on."

In 1964, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously wrote that while he would not attempt to define hard-core pornography, "I know it when I see it." Paraphrasing the good justice, perhaps the second-most important thing about stress is that we "know it when we feel it," even if it defies explanation.

The most important thing, of course, is taking steps to alleviate that stress once identified. To help you with that, NFDA offers its "Take 5" self-care program.

HOW THIS BENEFIT CAN HELP YOU

"Take 5" can help existing licensees and those seeking to enter funeral service proactively assess, identify and manage the stresses encountered on the job, at school and/or personally. Unfortunately, funeral professionals too often sublimate



their personal needs to those they serve, failing to make self-care a priority. This can lead to compassion fatigue, burnout, alcohol and/or substance abuse, and myriad other unhealthy physical, mental and/or emotional manifestations of stress.

Based on the Funeral Service Foundation's Caring for Families and Caring for Yourself: A Self-Care Handbook for Funeral Service Professionals, NFDA's "Take 5" series features short videos, quizzes, self-assessments and self-care tips. Purposefully designed to fit your schedule and needs, you can access this program 24/7 to:

- Assess the stressors impacting you on the job, at school and/or at home, as well as your burnout level.
- Identify the symptoms of stress affecting you, along with any unhealthy coping mechanisms.
- Manage your stress by developing a personal self-care plan that uses small steps and a wide range of free resources.

ACCESSING THIS BENEFIT

Caring for the dead and the living is a definitely a calling, but those choosing to enter this high-stress profession must care for themselves, as well. NFDA believes so strongly in this that the association not only launched its "Take 5" self-care program but also chose to make it available to everyone, member or not.

One last thing: There's no need to stress about the cost because "Take 5" is totally free at nfdanet.org/take5.

Chris Raymond is the former editor of The Director magazine and runs funeralhelpcenter.com.

JOIN NFDA FOR FREE

As a student at an accredited U.S. mortuary school/program, you can tap into NFDA's tremendous resources and exclusive benefits for free.* To become a member of the world's largest funeral service association, visit nfdanet.org/membership, hit "Join Now" and fill in the simple form. (* Add \$35 if you'd prefer to receive *The Director* magazine in the mail instead of digitally.)

From the Editor's Desk

It Starts With a Conversation

By Edward J. Defort

We've all heard the admonition that while we work *in* our business, we can't neglect to work *on* it as well. A lot of that involves what happens within the walls of the funeral home, but equally important is what happens outside.

For example, we tell ourselves that it's hard to talk to people about a topic they don't want to discuss. But, for a subject not many generally want to talk about, death, dying and grieving have again become hot topics in pop culture these days.

Earlier this year on Apple TV+, for example, a show called *Shrinking* premiered to very positive reviews. The plot revolves around a 40-something therapist dealing with severe grief following the sudden death of his wife. His grief causes him to say just what's on his mind, and his patients are deeply impacted by what he tells them. He also must fix the relationship with his daughter, from whom he has become detached in his grief.

On ABC, there's a new show called *Not Dead Yet*, which focuses on a journalist who left her job at a newspaper five years earlier but returned and has now been assigned to writing obituaries. The twist here is that each time she is given an assignment, the ghost of the deceased appears and follows her around to help her write the obituary by telling her their stories. And if the first drafts aren't good enough, the ghosts hang around until the obit is deemed worthy to be published.

In the music world, I have been fortunate to see Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band on their current concert tour, and the 73-year-old Springsteen rocked the house. "I hope I have his energy when I'm 73" is a comment often heard. It was a jubilant performance, especially considering that the centerpiece to this show was his 2020 album *Letter to You*, inspired by the death of George Theiss, a singer in Springsteen's first band, the Castiles. When Theiss died in 2018, Springsteen became the last surviving member of that early band. Following his death, Springsteen put forth *Letter to You*, which focused on loss. Songs included "One Minute You're Here," "Last Man Standing," "Ghosts" and "I'll See You in My Dreams."

Upon the album's release, Springsteen spoke deeply about loss in a *Rolling Stone* interview: "The loss of former E Street Band members Clarence [Clemons] and Danny [Federici] still echoes every day in my life. I still don't believe it. I'm like, 'I'm not gonna see Clarence again?' That doesn't sound quite possible!"

He continued poignantly, "I live with the dead every day at this point in my life. Whether it's my father or Clarence or Danny – all those people sort of walk alongside you. Their spirit, their energy, their echo continue to resonate in the physical world... A beautiful part of living is what we're left by the dead."

Perhaps people seeing these kinds of positive expressions of grief and loss will make such conversations all that more common. We can certainly hope so.

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