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The Long Game of the Funeral Service Profession

To transform the profession, funeral directors must not only serve the family in front of them but also shape the intern and apprentice beside them.

By Calvin Amato

There was a time when learning the funeral profession meant observing in reverent silence as your mentor stood at the head of a casket. You watched. You learned.

You swept the floors, not because you were unworthy of higher tasks but because every inch of that building was sacred ground, and keeping it clean was part of the lesson. You arrived early, stayed late, and absorbed every correction,

every nudge of the shoulder and every post-service conversation that dissected what had just unfolded.

There was weight to that quiet and powerful model. But for all the nobility of its intention, apprenticeship – once a rite of passage rooted in teaching – has, in many cases, grown into something misaligned. What was once a lesson in stewardship has become a test of survival. When we ask why good people are leaving this field – or never entering it in the first place – we must look there first.

Apprenticeship is not the problem. In fact, it is one of the most beautiful tools we have. The problem is that we have allowed the process to devolve from a path of development into a proving ground of punishment. We tell our interns to pay their dues but rarely define what they are actually buying into. We speak of building character but forget to ask

To reimagine the apprenticeship model is not to discard discipline or tradition. It is to marry it with intention, mentorship and ... wisdom.



whether we also are building competency. Week after week, we assign the same menial tasks – vacuuming, washing cars, setting up chairs – without ever connecting them to the greater purpose of the profession.

Yes, it is essential to earn one's keep. Yes, it is a privilege to serve before it is a right. But, somewhere along the line, we stopped elevating our apprentices. We train them to be workers, not professionals. And, in doing so, we risk losing not only their interest but also their inspiration.

We must rise up, not in rebellion but in renaissance. To reimagine the apprenticeship model is not to discard discipline or tradition. It is to marry it with intention, mentorship and the wisdom to see apprentices as the future custodians of our calling.

Here is the hard truth: This profession will not survive on reputation alone. Its value must be actively earned, learned and lived through the people we are shaping today. Every embalming we explain, every arrangement we coach, every graveside we prepare teaches technique and trust.

When they walk through our doors, the public trusts that we are prepared in body, mind and heart. If our apprentices do not feel that level of preparation from us, how can we expect them to deliver it to those we serve?

There also is a practical urgency. The average age of licensed funeral directors is climbing, and the number of mortuary students is not keeping pace with the number of those retiring. Within the next 10 years, this profession will face a crisis. Either we will have trained a new generation to carry the torch, or we will watch the flame dwindle.

The answer to this dilemma is not better advertisements or trendy slogans. The answer lies within day-to-day training. How we greet students on their first day. Whether we allow them to witness an embalming during the first week or make them wait six months. Whether we explain the reason behind every form, every call, every casket selected. We prepare for the future by preparing *them*. Not just through repetition but through conversation. Not just with checklists but with context. That is how we evolve – by investing in one person at a time.

Mentorship is not condescension masked as guidance. It is a relationship. It is walking alongside someone, not above them.

We also must take a look at what happens when apprenticeship drifts from its intended purpose. In some cases, whether through needless oversight, outdated habits or pressure-inducing daily operations, apprentices find themselves in a role that leans more heavily on labor than learning. They might be asked to assist with removals or transportation at all hours, and then not be invited to observe or participate in the restorative work that follows. Some might go months or even years without witnessing



a full arrangement conference or being coached through a meaningful conversation with a family.

This is not necessarily the result of malice or misconduct. Often, this stems from understaffing, time constraints or an unclear understanding of what apprenticeship can and should be. However, the result is the same: The opportunity for mentorship quietly slips away.

If we are not mindful, we risk allowing these poor or underwhelming early experiences to shape how the next generation sees our profession – not as a vocation of dignity and growth, but as a series of tasks to be completed without deeper purpose. That is not the legacy most of us wish to leave behind.

If we wish to inspire apprentices to become more than just competent employees, we must invite them into the craft itself. When we assign them a list of tasks, we then must show them the meaning behind those tasks. We must teach them that every action, no matter how small, touches someone's grief. When we vacuum the chapel, we are preparing the space for a final goodbye. When we clean a hearse, we are honoring the last ride of a life. When we call a family to confirm a detail, we are preserving peace of mind in a time of chaos.

It is this lens that helps apprentices develop the muscle memory of care. We show them not just what to do but also why it matters. This is how we build professionals who embody purpose.

Mentorship is not condescension masked as guidance. It is a relationship. It is walking alongside someone, not above them. It is asking not only whether they got that embalming done but also how it felt to be in that space. It is not assuming competence but nurturing it.

This requires something from the seasoned professionals: humility. The humility to remember what it felt like to fumble with a death certificate. To second-guess yourself when searching for an artery. To wonder if you're strong enough, wise enough, ready enough to carry a family through their darkest hour. If we can bring that humility into the way we mentor, we can unlock the greatest form of leadership – the

kind that empowers others to rise even higher than we did.

We also must challenge ourselves to broaden the scope of our preparation. Today's funeral director must be more than a technician. They also must be a counselor, creative, communicator and community builder. The work is no longer confined to preparation rooms and chapels. It extends into community outreach, educational events, grief support and cultural navigation.

The families we serve today are more diverse in background, more informed in their choices and more expressive in their grief. They are not looking for a cookie-cutter service. They are looking for someone who can help them tell the story of their loved one's life in a way that feels real. That means our apprentices must be prepared not just to meet but to exceed expectations. So, we must be willing to evolve our teaching methods just as the profession itself is evolving.

This will require a structural shift in how we evaluate apprentices. We no longer can afford to define success solely by logged hours and completed tasks. Instead, we should be asking: Has the apprentice been guided through the full spectrum of care? Have they had exposure to both embalming and arranging, preneed and aftercare, direct cremation and full traditional services? Have they been given the chance to write obituaries, lead processions and speak with families under supervision? Are they emerging with knowledge as well as confidence?

To ensure these goals are met, some states and institutions have begun implementing mentorship benchmarks or structured-learning objectives. This should be the rule, not the exception. An apprenticeship should feel like a scaffold, not a scramble. And the only way to guarantee that is through intentional oversight and reflection.

For apprenticeship programs to thrive, the profession also must invest in the people who make them work: the mentors. Too often, we assume that the ability to do a job well translates into the ability to teach it well. But mentorship is a skill of its own. It requires patience, communication, emotional intelligence and a willingness to explain things that now feel like second nature.

Mentors should be supported with training, resources and, perhaps most importantly, time. A mentor who



is overwhelmed by their caseload and burdened with operational duties cannot be expected to offer thoughtful instruction. Just as apprentices must be nurtured to become excellent funeral professionals, mentors must be equipped to guide that growth. This reciprocal investment strengthens the profession on both sides. It ensures that wisdom is not only passed down but also elevated with every generation.

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To create meaningful change, we also must examine the culture within our funeral homes. A workplace that nurtures learning must be built with intention. It is not enough simply to take on an apprentice and hope they absorb their surroundings. Culture is conveyed in the way we speak to one another, the way we include or exclude people from decision-making, and the way we acknowledge both progress and missteps.

Apprentices who feel seen, heard and valued are more likely to develop not just skills but also loyalty. In a profession as emotionally demanding as ours, loyalty is a currency more valuable than gold. When we invest in people, we cultivate stewards of our reputation, our standards and our shared humanity.

The future for which we are preparing apprentices is still unwritten. That is precisely why we must prepare them not just for what is but also for what might come. In the coming years, the funeral service profession will continue to face shifts in disposition preferences, economic pressures, technological disruptions and spiritual decentralization. More families will seek alternatives to traditional ceremonies. More will bring with them interfaith beliefs or no religious framework at all.

These changes are not threats. If we have professionals ready to meet them with creativity and grace, the changes are opportunities. Preparation begins at the apprentice level. We must teach them to be not only practitioners but also visionaries with skilled hands and adaptive minds. When the moment comes that a family asks for something we have never done before, it might well be the apprentice – the one we once dismissed as inexperienced – who leads us to new understanding.

We also must honor the emotional labor of this work and prepare apprentices to carry it with strength and softness alike. Too many funeral professionals burn out because no one prepared them for the weight of cumulative grief. No one told them what it feels like to sit with a family that lost a child; to embalm someone they knew; to plan services during holidays, disasters or moments of national tragedy.

Apprentices need more than technical training. They need emotional mentorship, too. They need to know that it is OK to

feel and to seek support. Strength in our field is not stoicism; it is the ability to show up again and again with integrity. The future of this profession does not belong to those who never flinch – it belongs to those who know how to bend without breaking. We must teach resilience, not as armor but as art.

Accountability must be part of this reform. If we are to rise to a higher standard, we must be willing to hold ourselves and our institutions to it. Schools must do more than provide textbooks. They must prepare students to enter real-world apprenticeships with clarity and confidence. State boards must not only certify competency but also ensure that internship programs are structured, fair and meaningful. Funeral homes must commit to treating apprentices with the same respect they show families because both are entrusting them with something sacred. And professional associations must offer more resources and professional development to those entering and guiding others through this field.

Reform is not about blame; it is about responsibility. The moment we embrace that responsibility together is the moment our profession begins to transform.

What will emerge if and when we do this work well is a generation of funeral professionals that is not only capable but also inspired. Individuals will enter this profession with reverence for the past and eyes fixed on the future. They will not need to be told to serve with excellence because they will have seen it modeled. They will not shy away from hard cases, complex arrangements or grieving families because they will have been prepared not just to act but also to understand.

And when they, in turn, become mentors, they will remember what it felt like to be taught with dignity, to be trusted with responsibility, to be invited into the fold rather than kept at the edge. We should seek to build *that* legacy – not one rooted solely in name or tenure, but one that lives on in the lives we shape, the service we offer and the standards we set anew.

This profession has always been about people. The people we bury. The people we comfort. The people we become. Apprenticeship and internship, when done right, are not sidenotes in that story. They are the prologue. The chapter where someone who once sat in a classroom, unsure and unseen, is invited into the heartbeat of our work.

There will always be rites of passage in funeral service. There will always be long hours, tough cases, difficult conversations. Yes, there is deep value in earning one's keep, in being initiated into this field through honest labor. There is something noble about the overnight shift, about driving the hearse alone in a torrential downpour, about washing blood from your hands with reverence rather than

Funeral homes must commit to treating apprentices with the same respect they show families because both are entrusting them with something sacred.

revulsion. These are not things to be erased; they are things to be contextualized. The goal is not to make apprenticeship easier – it is to make it more meaningful.

I am not calling for the death of tradition. I am calling for its rebirth. For a return to the heart of mentorship – the passing down of wisdom and not just the delegation of tasks. For a future where no apprentice feels like a ghost, seen only when needed. For a culture where seasoned professionals look not just to protect their rank but also to extend their reach and reinforce that their greatest legacy is the lives they have shaped along the way.

There is no shame in remembering how hard you had it, but there is pride in ensuring the next generation does not have to stumble where we did. That is not weakness; it is wisdom.

There is no greater gift you can give back to this profession than sharing what you know – not sparingly but freely, as it was once given to you.

We must be the kind of professionals who pull up chairs, not pull rank. Who teach by showing, not scolding. Who speak the names of their mentors with gratitude, and who live in such a way that their own name will one day be spoken in the same manner. That is the long game of this profession – not just serving the family in front of us but also shaping the person beside us. The profession will not be sustained by nostalgia. It will be sustained by renewal. And that renewal begins the moment we choose to become funeral directors *and* mentors; technicians *and* teachers.

To the funeral home owners and managers reading this: Look at the apprentices you have. See them. Hear them. Ask what they hope to learn, not just what they can do for you.

To the state boards and schools: Examine your metrics. Are you measuring growth or merely hours? Are your standards encouraging development or simply checking boxes?

And to the professionals who have walked this road for decades: Know that the torch you carry is still burning and the way you choose to pass it will determine the brightness of what comes next. There is no greater gift you can give back to this profession than sharing what you know – not sparingly but freely, as it was once given to you.

Where we have been matters. The floors we mopped, the removals we conducted, the hands we folded in prayer – those carved something in us. But where we are going matters even more because the next generation is already watching. In the prep room, in the chapel, in the office, they are listening to what we say and, more importantly, watching how we live. They are not looking for perfection; they are looking for purpose.

If we give them that – if we rise to the challenge of teaching, guiding and mentoring with courage and grace –

then the future of funeral service will not only survive but also flourish.

This is not a call to abandon the old ways. It is a call to remember what they were meant to do. And to have the courage to shape new ones that honor their same spirit. The future is upon us, and it is asking: Will we prepare the funeral directors of tomorrow? Or will we leave them to find their way alone?

The answer, dear colleagues, is ours to write.

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THANK YOU

WHAT I DIDN'T SEE THEN: A Funeral Director's Gratitude

By Kora Michaud

In the early days of my apprenticeship, I felt crushed by the weight of expectation – a weight my sponsor had bore for decades. The long hours, the emotionally charged scenes, the pursuit of perfection – it all felt insurmountable.

My sponsor, the owner of the funeral home where I trained, appeared to walk a far easier path. I was the one handling the physically grueling work: late-night transfers, full-day embalmings, back-to-back services and the constant emotional toll of death. In contrast, he seemed removed from the trenches and unaffected by the weight I carried. I felt underpaid, overworked and, perhaps most painfully, undervalued.

What I didn't understand then but see so clearly now is that he once had stood exactly where I was standing. He had been the apprentice – unproven, unpolished and unsure – carrying the burden of duty while trying to earn trust. His calm exterior wasn't indifference; it was the practiced composure of someone who already had endured his share of hardship, sacrifice and sleepless nights, all in service of the community he deeply loved.

I realize that I missed the intentionality of small moments:

- The phone call immediately following my first traumatic transfer from a suicide scene
- The check-in after a late-night transfer of decomposed remains

- The sit-down to ask me if I was truly OK after my first infant transfer
- The wordless replacement of my blown-out tires to ensure I could continue safely serving others

He was always there, quietly supporting us, never boasting, never asking for anything in return.

What I also failed to see was the weight he never set down. When I couldn't be there due to classes, surgeries, childcare or my own emotional limits, he covered for me. There was no one above him on whom to lean, no "off" switch, no fallback. And yet, when he took a rare day to rest, no one gave him credit for the exhaustion he also endured. We all were tired. Blinded by my own fatigue, I mistook his strength for ease.

THE EVOLUTION OF UNDERSTANDING

Now, as a licensed funeral director myself, I see it all differently. My perspective has matured and been shaped by the very pressure I once resented. I carry his lessons now: his patience, his standards, his quiet leadership. I've come to understand that true leadership in funeral service isn't about delegation; it's about shouldering the weight with your team, acknowledging their sacrifices and ensuring no one carries it alone.

It is because of my intense apprenticeship – the sleepless nights, the unspoken expectations, the grace embedded

Leadership ... isn't about delegation; it's about shouldering the weight with your team, acknowledging their sacrifices and ensuring no one carries it alone.

in the grind – that I can fully appreciate the organization I serve today. My current employer has entrusted me with something sacred: their reputation, their relationships and their standard of care. They took a risk by welcoming a new face to represent what they've spent decades building, and that trust is not lost on me.

This is an organization that leads the field in both service and innovation. The team doesn't just aim for excellence; it sets the benchmark for it. We offer grief support that lasts long after services; we host annual memorial gatherings that bring together hundreds of families to remember and heal; and we invest deeply in community engagement and education. The honor of holding a seat at this organization's table awakened in me a profound gratitude for the journey that brought me there.

Today, I have the tools and the team to meet the high standard to which I hold myself. I've had the honor of handing teddy bear keepsakes to grieving siblings after the loss of their infant brother – not because it was policy but because our team creates space for empathy without hesitation. Those bears weren't just tokens; they were gifts of grace. A simple gesture, yes, but in that moment, they became symbols of remembrance, comfort and connection. We gave them freely, with no expectation, because grief calls for presence, not protocol. These are the quiet decisions that define who we are.

Our success is rooted in compassion and excellence: seamless transfers, a fully stocked fleet, deep collaboration with one another and a shared sense of mission. Each detail, each choice, reflects our commitment to serve skillfully and soulfully.

Behind every front-facing task is our administrative staff, the unsung heroes whose diligence forms the backbone of our operation. Their work is just as critical as ours. Without them, the standard of excellence for which we strive would be simply unattainable.

During my apprenticeship, I had the privilege of taking on some administrative roles, a responsibility I once saw as yet another burden layered onto an already heavy workload. But that experience gave me perspective, tools to better support the families I serve and the insight to truly appreciate my colleagues.

And it's not just those in the office; it's part-time staff, too. The ones who show up in silence but stand tall beside us through the hardest moments. They are the faces greeting families at the door, the hands carrying out middle-of-the-night transfers, the strength standing us at a cold January

graveside service, and the endurance holding vigil in the heat of a high-summer funeral. They don't always get the spotlight, but without their presence, our service would not shine.

I've learned that excellence in funeral service is never the result of a single person's effort; it's the product of a unified team, each role as essential and honorable as the next.

SACRED SERVICE

In the beginning, the emotional toll felt overwhelming and, at times, even cruel. The sleepless nights, the silence after tragedy, the loneliness of grief that clings to your clothes like formaldehyde.

But, over time, I began to see this work, this calling, as a form of sacred service. I no longer view it as something I must endure but rather something with which I am entrusted. I have the rare opportunity to hold space for others at their lowest, meet people in their brokenness and play a small part in how they begin to rebuild.

Embracing the calling of this profession is no longer something I resist; it is something I revere. We walk alongside our community in its most fragile moments, and that presence is a privilege. Without the heaviness of my early experiences, I never would have understood the true honor of this role.

Today, I've found more than just co-workers. I've found friends within the community I serve. I've sat at dinner tables with grieving families, met widows for breakfast to talk through their tears and shared stories that helped shift someone's grief toward hope. None of those interactions would have been possible without my sponsor taking a chance on me and entrusting me with his families, his reputation and his community.

TO DIRECTORS, FUTURE AND PRESENT

To every new apprentice or funeral director: Take a moment to imagine your sponsor, employer or mentor standing exactly where you stand now. They, too, fumbled through first removals, carried the emotional weight of an infant death, and juggled life outside of deathcare while being expected to remain composed and professional. Remember that, when you're unavailable, they often carry it all with no backup, no relief and no one to call.

This work is heavy because it matters. Every hard day you endure now implants the wisdom you'll need in the future when a family looks to *you* for grace, presence and strength. Carry it with humility. It doesn't stay heavy forever. Your shoulders widen, your heart deepens, and you rise.

The risk that a sponsor or employer takes when bringing someone new into their funeral home and trusted community cannot be overstated. For an apprentice, the experience can feel like carrying the world, but the truth is that the weight often rests heavier on the sponsor – the one who must entrust their name, relationships and reputation to someone still finding footing. Despite this, they offer us that chance anyway. The heavier it feels at the beginning, the lighter it

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becomes with time and the more capable of carrying it for others we are.

To those who took a chance on us: Thank you for your patience, your presence and your trust. You didn't just help us learn – you helped us lead.

And to those of us who now carry that trust forward: Don't forget to look around. Step back and acknowledge every person on your team. The administrative staff, the part-time workers, the directors, the assistants, the drivers and the

greeters – every role matters. Excellence is not an individual achievement but a collective effort. Their work makes your great work possible. Never let it go unseen.

And to funeral directors everywhere: Take the risk. Hire the apprentice. Invest in the youths who show interest in this sacred work. Hear them, guide them, and push them. Do not shield them from the weight; walk beside them with it. They need that experience. It will shape them, just as it shaped us. What you pour into them now will carry forward into every family they serve, every life they touch and every moment they stand tall in your absence.

Kora Michaud is a licensed funeral director and crematory operator in Massachusetts and New Hampshire with a background in hospice care and a deep commitment to servant leadership within the funeral profession.

Developing Gen-next

Participants in NFDA's National Emerging Leaders Program share their experiences and areas of personal expertise.

By Annamarie Higley



Bryce Giroux

Bryce Giroux and Sarah Ziesmer, members of the 2024-25 class of NFDA's National Emerging Leaders Program (NELP), became interested in funeral service after direct and indirect negative encounters with the funeral service profession.

Giroux's grandmother died when he was 16, and he felt disheartened by the service his family received. "I decided, 'I think I could do better than that,'" he said.

Ziesmer, an art therapist before entering funeral service, had worked with several clients who experienced unfulfilling funeral services.

Many young funeral directors often cite their own version of these stories as the catalyst for their career, but quality funeral directors fortunately can beget quality funeral directors, too. This is exactly why NFDA created NELP – to usher in and develop the

next generation of funeral directors to, ultimately, empower them to do the same for their successors.

NELP launched in 2021, and the program's fourth class

(2025-26) convened for the first time at NFDA's headquarters in June. Meanwhile, Ziesmer and Giroux's class will close out its session in early August during the NFDA Leadership Conference in Napa, California. Delivered via in-person and virtual meetings, the yearlong NELP curriculum covers relevant leadership topics, such as mentorship, strategic planning, communication, small-business ownership and employee relations, among others.

Both Giroux and Ziesmer cited their desire for continual self-improvement as the driving force behind their NELP application. "I knew [NELP] would be a fast track toward education," Giroux said. "For me, it was tools in my belt."

Said Ziesmer, a self-proclaimed lifelong learner: "Even though funeral service traditionally is viewed as something that isn't changing much, I think, as funeral directors, it's up to us to constantly be at the forefront of what's going on."

MEANINGFUL MENTORSHIP MATTERS

Giroux, president and managing director of Garden City Funerals & Cremations in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, has been licensed for 11 years and has owned the firm for almost five years. Although he has risen swiftly through the ranks, his entry into funeral service began with a false start.

After high school, despite having already volunteered for a funeral home, he was not accepted to mortuary school. In the meantime, he worked in construction. Partway through



Sarah Ziesmer



a winter of installing aluminum siding in the Canadian cold, he was determined to try again. This go-around, he was admitted early to Humber Polytechnic College for his deathcare education.

Giroux's atypical start in the profession was punctuated and defined by invaluable mentors. During his volunteering stint as a teenager, a young funeral director, licensed for just a few years, helped Giroux. "When I was 16 years old and interested in funeral services, there was a young funeral director who said, 'Hey, if you want to do this, let me show you,'" Giroux said. "He took me into the prep room, which he probably shouldn't have, and showed me the ropes. His point was: 'If this kid's going to go to school for this, I want him to know that he can do it.'"

Later as an apprentice, Giroux worked at a firm that served more than 1,000 families annually. There, he met additional advisors, particularly his embalming teacher. "They were looking out for me," he said. "I am so very fortunate for that."

"I knew [NELP] would be a fast track toward education... For me, it was tools in my belt."

– BRYCE GIROUX

Immediately following his apprenticeship, Giroux jumped into what he calls his "biggest passion" – mentoring other newcomers. He was hired at a family-run firm, then owned by now-current business partner, to lead its co-op program. There, two of the nine students with whom Giroux worked went on to become licensed funeral directors. One is still working as a funeral director, but the other has since pivoted to a position as an emergency operator.

Regarding this low ratio, Giroux feels unperturbed. To him, funeral directing is a calling rather than a job, so not everyone will have the passion necessary for the role. "Most of my [co-op] students didn't make it through [mortuary] school... and that's OK," he said.

Wrote Diana Kamminga, a co-op student of Giroux who

did graduate from mortuary school: "Bryce wasn't afraid to have honest, meaningful conversations with me, especially about the emotional challenges that come with working in funeral service. He talked openly about the realities of grief, burnout and the importance of self-care in this line of work."

For a period, Giroux left the family-owned firm to work for a large corporate-owned one. Again, he prioritized mentorship by heading the corporation's internship program for southwest Ontario. Although the COVID-19 pandemic barred him from traveling the region and counseling interns, he did develop a training manual that outlined professional expectations.

Now, as an owner, Giroux makes a concerted effort to facilitate the transition of new funeral directors into the profession. Acutely aware of burnout and underwhelming pay rates, Giroux underscores a different but critical benefit. "[When hiring new directors,] I've prided myself in... being able to provide work/life balance because that's something that is so important to me," he said. "It's a matter of being flexible as an employer to the employee's needs." Ideally, through this effort, Giroux's firm can motivate top young talent.

As the demographic and quantity of people entering the funeral workforce fluctuate, it's increasingly important to make earnest mentorship efforts at your firm. Meaningful mentorship encourages people to enter or stay within the profession and demonstrates their stake in employee contentment. To Giroux, his pedagogic desire is simple. "It's my way to give back from the positive experiences I had and pass them along," he said.

ACTIVE LISTENING FOR TRUE PERSONALIZATION

Ziesmer, owner and vice president of Heritage Funeral Homes in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, has made the funeral service profession her own in more ways than one. Similar to Giroux's sentiment, funeral directing isn't just a job for her – it's an integral part of her identity.

"Every person I meet, I ask them first, 'What do you do?' because I want to talk about what I do," she said. "It's my entire identity... I have funeral-related tattoos; my license plate is funeral-related. Everything." Her ever-growing

collection of deathcare antiques, a portion of which spans an entire wall of her office, is further testament.

In addition, Ziesmer makes funeral and memorial services her own by personalizing them on behalf of the families she serves. Ziesmer is realistic about the rise of direct disposition but remains steadfast regarding the importance of memorialization. “I think that there is such healing that can come from traditional services with the body present,” she said. Deeply customized services could be the solution, and she’s on the cutting edge of this trend.

Her planning process begins with the decedent’s obituary, from which she gleans useful information about the individual. Then, she sits down with the family – sometimes for as long as three or four hours – to learn about their life. “I let them tell all those stories that they want to tell, the stories they’ve told a million times between themselves,” she said.

During this conversation, she educates the family about the breadth of possibilities. “It’s our responsibility to let them know what’s available because they’ve gone to the same funeral their whole life,” she said. Sometimes, families “wall up,” and she respects their want or need for a standard service, or even no service at all. Those who entrust her with customization, however, are met with heartfelt intentionality and skillful creativity.

If possible, Ziesmer likes to walk through a decedent’s home in search of items to feature, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of their essence. “Trust is a huge thing, especially for [families] to invite me into their home and trust me with their items,” she said. “It means a lot to me that people are willing to do that.”

Equipped with mementos and the family’s blessing, Ziesmer crafts vignette-style displays that represent the decedent’s personality and passions. Often, she surprises family members, who are only aware of the theme or items she’s chosen to showcase. “[My favorite part of being a funeral director is] taking those bite-sized pieces of information and turning them into something tangible that people can experience or take home with them,” she said. “I never get sick of families walking in. Their eyes get big, and they start to cry, and they hug me. It’s that little bit of relief that families are able to have at that moment.”

One of Ziesmer’s favorite recent services involved the death of a woman who loved food and cooking. Ziesmer borrowed a binder of her recipes, scanned and laminated a few beloved handwritten ones, and then bound them to miniature whisks for attendees to take home as keepsakes. “There were lots of tears and hugs,” she said. “[The family] told me they expected the binder to just be sitting on a table and couldn’t believe what I’d put together.”

Other examples of her above-and-beyond customization include floral arrangements inside full-size tires to honor a young man who loved cars; lighting that resembled a night club’s for a former touring musician; and fishing equipment, including the late angler’s chair and old boots, mounted to a wall, alongside personalized take-home bobbers.

“I get to use my art background every day in my job, and

“I’ve learned how important it is to surround yourself with others who are just as driven, curious and passionate.”

– SARAH ZIESMER

that’s not something I anticipated when I got into this,” Ziesmer said. Any funeral director, though, regardless of their artistic abilities, can lean on their compassion and attention to detail to create special, moving tributes. According to Ziesmer, it all comes down to active listening.

PAYING IT FORWARD

Although Giroux and Ziesmer have left their mark on their mentees, colleagues and communities in the time since they were first licensed, they seek to do even more as leaders. Now that their time in NELP is ending, the pair can speak to its benefits. Both view the program as an invaluable avenue for networking and building community within the profession. “The camaraderie has been amazing,” Ziesmer said. “I’ve made a really good friend, and she doesn’t even live in this country; she’s from Canada. She has become such an amazing resource and sounding board.”

Through his NELP peers, Giroux has received much-needed validation. “You learn the struggles that they’re going through, and you can connect the dots to yourself, and you feel a bit more validation,” he said.

Ziesmer concurs. “In funeral homes, we’re in our own little bubbles a lot of the time. It’s comforting to know that I’m not the only one going through these struggles,” she said.

Giroux’s main hope for NFDA’s NELP program was to see active, enthusiastic participation from all parties. Having worked in a corporate setting, he noted that he has completed his share of mandatory trainings that felt uninspired and impersonal. “In those programs, [people] just want to get them done and over with,” he said. “There’s a lot more introspection and thoughtful conversations that happen in the NELP group. It’s been fantastic.”

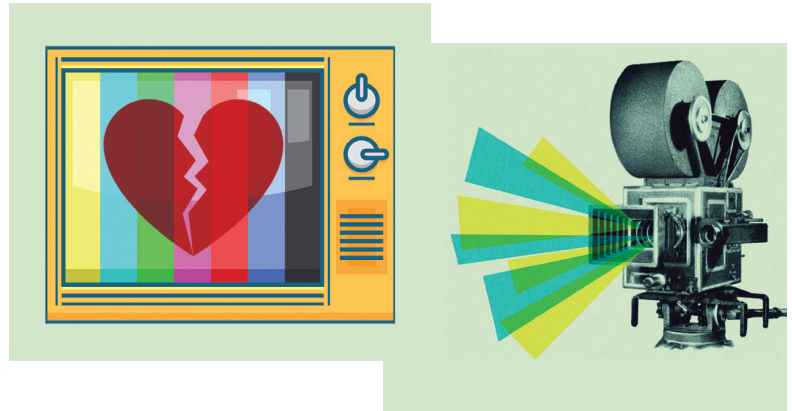
Although there are alternate means, as demonstrated by Giroux’s and Ziesmer’s motivations for joining funeral service, ideally, it is talent that fosters and uplifts more talent. Fortunately, NELP connects some of the top talent with the intention that, together, they will do even better. “I’ve learned how important it is to surround yourself with others who are just as driven, curious and passionate,” Ziesmer said. “This program felt like the perfect opportunity to learn from peers across the country, to exchange ideas and to be challenged in the best possible way.”

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Grief on Screen

What television and film teach us about mourning in modern times.

By Jennifer Muldowney



When we think of grief education as funeral service professionals, we think of seminars, textbooks and real-life experiences. Rarely do we look to the screen. But, as society increasingly turns to television and film for comfort and entertainment, and as a mirror to its own complexities, it's worth asking: What can we, as funeral service professionals, learn from pop culture's portrayals of grief?

Two early 2025 productions, *Adolescence* and *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy*, could not be more different in tone, setting and story. Despite this, they share a striking commonality: They both explore grief in its raw, messy and deeply human forms. Moreover, their depictions challenge us, as professionals, not only to expand our understanding of what grief looks like but also to reflect on how we support mourners through their individual journeys.

In the Netflix series *Adolescence*, we witness a family shatter from the inside when 13-year-old Jamie Miller is arrested for murdering his classmate. The premise alone is harrowing, but the show's real power lies in its depiction of the grief that follows. This is not mourning as we might commonly encounter it – death following illness or old age – but instead grief laced with shame, disbelief, societal judgment and the complex psychology of parenting in a digital world.

Funeral service professionals might recognize echoes of this grief in families affected by suicide, drug-related deaths or criminal incidents. These are the situations where there are no neat scripts, no standard condolences. What *Adolescence* does so well is peel back the layers of each character's mourning: a father grieving the son he thought he knew; a mother crumbling under the weight of public scrutiny; and a community reeling from violence. This is grief that isolates and demands a new language of support.

As celebrants and/or funeral directors, we often are called into the most tragic chapters of people's lives. Shows like *Adolescence* remind us that grief is not always accompanied by public sympathy. Sometimes it comes with stigma. How do we create space for that? How do we honor the complexity of such mourning in the services we arrange?

On the opposite end of the spectrum (in terms of tone) is *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy*. A continuation of the

beloved franchise, this film follows Bridget, now a widow and single mother (*spoiler alert!*), as she navigates life after the death of her great love, Mark Darcy.

Here, grief isn't front and center; instead, it weaves in and out of awkward dates, parenting mishaps and self-deprecating humor. It's subtle and, at times, even flippant. Yet, in its quiet moments, it delivers profound truths. Grief, the film tells us, isn't always expressed through sobbing fits. Sometimes, it's texting an ex, laughing at an inappropriate time or showing up at a party in order to avoid another night alone.

This portrayal is equally important. As funeral professionals, we encounter a wide spectrum of reactions to loss – some loud, some quiet, some surprisingly joyful. *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* gives us permission to acknowledge the absurdity that often accompanies grief. The story of the film's namesake character also reminds us that healing doesn't follow a linear path and that joy can coexist with sorrow. As we craft memorials or support families, are we making room for those contradictions? Are we normalizing emotional messiness?

WHAT POP CULTURE GETS RIGHT AND WHAT IT TEACHES US

Both *Adolescence* and *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* offer lessons we can carry into our professional lives:

- 1. Grief is multidimensional.** It's not just about the person who died; it's also about what dies with them, such as safety, identity, assumptions and routines. *Adolescence* shows us the collateral damage of loss, while *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* shows us how life persists.
- 2. Everyone grieves differently.** There's no right way to mourn. Some families want solemn silence; others want a dance party. Some choose ritual; others choose irreverence. Pop culture is increasingly reflecting that diversity and so should we. Grief is as unique as our heartbeat.
- 3. Humor belongs in grief.** Funeral homes can feel like sanctuaries, but they also can feel intimidating – especially to members of younger generations who are consuming media that mixes humor and heartbreak. It's worth asking:

How can we make our spaces feel more relatable, more flexible and more human?

4. Stigma shapes mourning. Stigma complicates grief, whether it's the grief of parents whose child committed a violent act or the grief of a widow navigating the dating scene. As professionals, we have the opportunity – and the responsibility – to create inclusive environments that do not judge a mourner for how or what they grieve.

5. Grief doesn't apply to just death. Divorce, job loss, pet loss, theft, assault, destruction of belongings, breakups and more can all create equally strong feelings of loss. It is not our place to judge what someone grieves.

One of the reasons pop culture has become such a powerful tool for grief exploration is because it creates “emotional permission.” Viewers see themselves in the characters, and through that connection, they feel validated. In a way, television and film are doing what we strive to do in every memorial: tell a story that makes mourners feel seen.

But we can go a step further. We can use these narratives as conversation starters, especially with younger generations that might not relate to traditional mourning customs. Imagine a funeral home that hosts a community screening of a movie like *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy*, followed by an open discussion on widowhood, resilience and starting over.

Watching and analyzing these films also can sharpen our skills as celebrants and funeral directors. They help us recognize underrepresented expressions of grief, broaden our empathy for complex family dynamics, and inspire more creative, personalized ceremonies. TV shows and movies give us fictional yet powerful examples of grief that can and should influence how we approach eulogies, engage with reluctant mourners and even frame our own language around death. By reflecting on these portrayals, we can deepen our understanding of the emotional spectrum our clients might be navigating.

We often hear, “Grief is universal,” but universality doesn't mean uniformity. Pop culture reminds us just how uniquely individual grief can be.

We often hear, “Grief is universal,” but universality doesn't mean uniformity. Pop culture reminds us just how uniquely individual grief can be and how important it is to honor those nuances.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, COMPASSION

As funeral service professionals, we have the rare privilege of walking alongside people during their most vulnerable moments. Our training prepares us for the logistics, but it is empathy and curiosity that help us serve with excellence.

Watching *Adolescence* and *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* might not count as continuing education, but perhaps it should. These stories challenge us to be more aware, more imaginative and more attuned to evolving expressions of grief. They remind us that the tools of our trade are not just embalming fluid and urns, but also empathy, adaptability and storytelling.

The next time you sit down to watch a film or television series, pay attention. You just might witness a new chapter in society's understanding of grief – and learn something that makes you a better funeral service professional in the process.

Jennifer Muldowney is an awarding-winning funeral celebrant, memorial planner, speaker and author. She splits her time between New York City, Florida and Ireland, and brings a personalized, compassionate and cultured approach to her services. Follow her at muldowneymemorials.com or “The Glam Reaper” podcast.

How to Write Great Meta Descriptions

Ten tips to help you breathe life into funeral home blog posts and boost your SEO.

By Welton Hong

Let's face it: Most people don't want to talk about death, let alone click on a blog post about it. That's where intentional search engine optimization (SEO) comes in. Writing about deathcare might not be as glamorous as penning travel blogs or food reviews, but when your meta description makes someone pause mid-scroll and think, “Actually, I do need to know what direct cremation is,” then you've done something right.

One way to draw in people is with a strong meta description. Think of it as a eulogy for your blog post: short, heartfelt and meant to leave an impression. This article walks you through how to craft a great meta description for your blog posts – even if the content is six feet deep in a niche topic.

DO YOU BLOG?

Before getting into meta descriptions, you must understand

the purpose of blogging in the first place. The main reason is that it can help you retain and boost market share – as long as you do it strategically. Posting relevant content to your blog will help you:

- **Build trust and authority.** Funeral service is deeply emotional and personal. Regular, informative blog content positions you as a trusted adviser, not just a service provider.
- **Boost SEO and online visibility.** Google rewards fresh, relevant content. By targeting long-tail keywords (e.g., “how to choose an urn,” “Catholic funeral customs,” “cremation vs. burial in [city]”), your funeral home could be the one to answer curious consumers’ questions.
- **Drive more traffic (and leads).** Each blog post is a new opportunity to appear in search results. Plus, blog content often captures people in the early stages of planning, i.e., before they call a funeral home. A helpful article can turn a visitor into a client by building loyalty and familiarity.
- **Support social media and email marketing.** Blog posts provide valuable content to share on platforms such as Facebook or through email newsletters. This keeps your business visible even to those who don’t currently need your services.
- **Differentiate yourself from competitors.** A blog with answers to common questions, cultural considerations and grief support can position your firm as modern, helpful and community focused.

Think of [a meta description] as a eulogy for your blog post: short, heartfelt and meant to leave an impression.

WRITING EFFECTIVE META DESCRIPTIONS

Now that you understand the benefits of blogging, it’s time to focus on garnering clicks to your blog from the search results page. One of the most crucial fields to fill out when publishing a blog post is the meta description, which provides a brief summary of a web page’s content. It typically appears below the page title in the search engine results and is intended to give users a quick overview of what the page is about.

If you fail to fill out this field, the most likely outcome is that the search engine will pull the first sentence of your blog and cut it off mid-sentence. This can look clunky and unprofessional.

Writing a meta description that ranks high on search engines is crucial to produce a high click-through rate. For WordPress posts, whether you’re using a plug-in like Yoast SEO, Rank Math or another tool, here are best practices to follow:

1. **Stay within the ideal length.** The optimal length is 150-160 characters. This ensures your full description shows in the search results and doesn’t get cut off.

2. **Include target keywords naturally.** Place your primary keyword(s) toward the start of the description. This helps Google understand the relevance of your content to a search query and bolds the keywords in the results.

3. **Write for humans first and search engines second.** Make your meta description clear, compelling and benefit-driven. Think, “Why should someone click this post instead of another?”

4. **Summarize the content accurately.** Ensure the summary reflects the core topic or value proposition of the post. Avoid misleading users just to get clicks, which can hurt your SEO over time.

5. **Use active voice and a call to action.** Examples of the latter include: *Learn more...*, *Discover tips...*, *Read our guide...*, *Explore strategies...*, etc. All of these examples nudge users toward an action.

6. **Avoid duplicate meta descriptions.** Every page or post should have a unique meta description. Duplicate meta descriptions can confuse search engines and reduce your content’s visibility.

7. **Use structured plug-ins to manage them easily.** Use SEO plug-ins, such as Yoast SEO, which provides a meta box on each post editor; Rank Math, which is great for more advanced controls; and All in One SEO Pack, which is simple but effective.

8. **Match search intent.** Understand whether your content fills an informational, navigational or transactional need, and tailor the meta description accordingly.

9. **Preview how it appears on a search engine results page (SERP).** Tools such as Google SERP Simulator let you preview how your description will look. Some WordPress SEO plug-ins also offer a built-in preview.

10. **Avoid keyword-stuffing.** Don’t overuse keywords. It looks “spammy” and can hurt your rankings. Focus instead on natural language and clarity.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD META DESCRIPTIONS

The best practices above are great in theory, but how do they look in action? Here are some examples of meta descriptions for various funeral home blog posts:

- **Post about writing a eulogy:** Struggling to write effective eulogies? Discover 7 heartfelt tips for crafting a memorable tribute that honors your loved one’s legacy.
- **Post about general preplanning:** Learn how funeral preplanning brings peace of mind to you and your family. Explore the benefits and steps to take for a thoughtful, stress-free future.
- **Post about the financial benefits of preplanning:** Discover how preplanning a funeral can ease the financial burden on loved ones. Understand costs-saving options and smart planning tips.

- **Post about the emotional benefits of preplanning:** Funeral preplanning offers peace and comfort during a difficult time. Learn how early decisions can support your family's emotional well-being.
- **Post with a preplanning checklist:** Not sure where to begin with funeral preplanning? Use our simple step-by-step guide to make informed and compassionate choices.
- **Post about preplanning myths and misconceptions:** Think funeral preplanning is only for the elderly? Think again. We bust common myths and explain why it's never too early to plan ahead.
- **Post about preplanning documentation:** Learn which legal documents and personal information are essential for funeral preplanning. Make sure your wishes are clearly understood and honored.
- **Post about religious or cultural considerations for preplanning:** Respect your traditions through thoughtful funeral preplanning. Explore how different faiths and cultures approach end-of-life arrangements.

TYING EVERYTHING TOGETHER

If you're struggling to find topics to write about on your funeral home's blog, don't panic. Everyone goes through periods of writer's block. Sometimes, you can solve the problem by asking staff members for ideas, or you can ask friends what type of content they would go to a funeral home website to read.

Focus on stories that only your funeral home can tell, which often revolve around your involvement in the community, as well as the achievements of your staff. For instance, if a staff member has attended college part time for several years to earn a business degree, shine a spotlight on them when they finally graduate. If someone else runs a 5K to raise money for

Focus on stories that only your funeral home can tell, which ... revolve around your involvement in the community, as well as the achievements of your staff.

cancer research, consider highlighting them, as well. Publish anything that shows members of your community that you care about the same things as them and makes your business and staff members seem more approachable.

I also recommend investigating blog posts from other funeral homes, including those located outside of your coverage area. To get you started, consider the following:

- **How to Talk to Loved Ones About End-of-Life Wishes**
- **Understanding Cremation: What Families Should Know**
- **10 Questions to Ask When Preplanning a Funeral**
- **How Grief Affects Children – and How to Help**
- **Eco-Friendly Funeral Options in [City]**

The bottom line is that, in the funeral service profession, where timing, trust and relationships are everything, blogging isn't just content; it's a digital handshake with families before they even call.

Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing and author of Making Your Phone Ring With Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes (Second Edition). For more information, visit funeralhomeprofits.com.

First Look: NFDA's 2025 Consumer Awareness & Preferences Study

By Deana Gillespie and Edward J. Defort

Connecting with consumers is key to sustainability in funeral service, but getting inside their heads to assess what they desire grows more challenging every year for firms looking to stay ahead of the curve on memorialization trends and other preferences. And since there's really only one sure way to find out what someone wants, NFDA has asked consumers directly every year since the first incarnation of this survey in 2012.

With each passing year, the association has built a deeper database to help separate trends from aberrations and better reflect a statistical significance and high level of reliability.



The sampling method was designed to generate a good representation of different racial/ethnic groups.

Analyzing the 2025 data revealed some discernible shifts in consumer attitudes, particularly in the areas of online shopping and arrangements. The *Director.edu* will have more on this in subsequent issues.

The main objectives of NFDA's study remained the same this year:

- Measure consumer awareness and perceptions of funerals and the profession to help NFDA members improve the quality of service they provide to families.
- Track changes in consumer awareness and preferences since 2012.
- Learn more about consumer attitudes toward new trends in funeral service, prearranging and prepaying, as well as their awareness of NFDA's initiatives.
- Whenever possible, compare results to previous NFDA Consumer Awareness & Preferences studies.

METHODOLOGY

This year's study was conducted March 5-10. Survey invitations were emailed to an online consumer panel consisting of Americans, age 40 and older. The sampling method was designed to generate a good representation of different racial/ethnic groups:

- 816 surveys obtained from the general population (primarily White)
- 102 from the Black/African-American population
- 106 from the Asian population
- 102 from the Hispanic population
- 1,126 completed surveys were returned (includes other races not listed above)

Results for all respondents are projectable within a range of +2.8% (with 95% confidence). Please note that consumers who participate in online panels are typically higher-than-average internet users with higher income and higher education levels.

Respondents to the 2025 study were older and had lower income levels versus 2024 respondents.

OVERVIEW

As in past surveys, NFDA queried consumers on a wide variety of topics, including shopping for a funeral home, funeral planning, why one funeral home was chosen over another, social media, religion, clergy, celebrants, green funerals, body donation, preneed, cremation and memorialization.

When comparing to historical results, it should be noted that respondents to the 2025 study were older and had lower income levels versus 2024 respondents.

In 2025, a significantly larger percentage of respondents were over the age of 60 when compared to 2024 (32.2% vs. 24.8).

Also, in 2025, more than half of 2025 respondents (55.4%) earned less than \$50,000 per year compared to 36.5% in 2024, and 37.3% in 2023.

47.9% felt the online planning process was a good experience but still needed the assistance of a funeral director.

ONLINE ARRANGEMENTS

Almost half of consumers (48.9%) visited a funeral home's website when they planned a funeral or memorial service. Of those, 29.2% made all of their arrangements online, and 39.4% started the arrangement process online but followed up with a funeral director.

Significantly, 47.9% felt the online planning process was a good experience but still needed the assistance of a funeral director. Another 36.9% were satisfied with the experience and were able to accomplish everything they wanted online.

NFDA's survey found that 15% of respondents said their first interaction with a funeral home was online, 3.9% said it was through social media, and 50.1% said it was in person.

This year, 12.7% of respondents said they would prefer to make funeral prearrangements online versus speaking directly to a funeral director. However, 31.8% would prefer to make arrangements online in conjunction with planning with a funeral director.

FUNERAL HOME WEBSITES AND FACEBOOK PAGES

NFDA's 2025 study pointed to increased usage of funeral home websites and Facebook pages. Almost 74% of consumers have visited a funeral home's website, primarily to:

- Look for an obituary.
- Look for price information.
- Look for information about planning a funeral.
- Look for funeral/memorial service options.

When selecting a funeral home, more than one-third of respondents (34.8%) said an online review either solidified their decision and/or steered them toward a particular funeral home.

Of the 88.4% of respondents who use Facebook, 49.1% have visited a funeral home's Facebook page and, of those, 21.9% visited primarily to look for an obituary.

Significantly, 40.0% who use Facebook said they have used the services of a funeral home they found on Facebook (up from 21.3% in 2023).

COMPARISON SHOPPING

More than one-third of consumers (37.4%) called/visited more than one funeral home when they planned a funeral, down from 48.3% in 2024.

When planning a funeral, 66.9% obtained pricing information directly from the funeral home, and 20.7% obtained it by phoning the funeral home. In addition, 69.2% felt it was easy or very easy to obtain pricing information.

The main reason respondents chose a particular funeral home was because of its affordable price (18.1%), they had an existing relationship with a funeral director (15.8%), or its location (11.7%).

CONSUMERS AND THE GPL

Of the respondents who contacted more than one funeral home when planning a service, 52.6% received a General Price List (GPL), a significant drop from 71.2% in 2024. Otherwise, 22.5% did not know/remember if they received a GPL.

Among the more perplexing stats in NFDA's latest survey, 90.1% of respondents felt the GPL was helpful and easy to understand. This has been a much debated topic, especially during the FTC Funeral Rule hearings, where the Funeral Rule has been called "confusing" or "complicated."

Consumers are looking for transparency in pricing, according to NFDA's latest study, as 64.3% of respondents feel it should be mandatory for funeral homes to post their prices online.

When selecting a funeral home, 44.9% stated they would be much more likely to engage the funeral home if it had its GPL posted online.

Consumers are looking for transparency in pricing ... as 64.3% of respondents said it should be mandatory for funeral homes to post their prices online.

RELIGION

In 2025, 44.6% of respondents felt having a religious component as part of a funeral was very important. In addition, 60.6% of respondents identify as Christian, while 18.3% had no religious preference.

The percentage of respondents who feel it is very important or somewhat important to have the deceased's body or cremated remains present at a memorial service (73.6%) has remained essentially the same since last year.

Nearly six in 10 respondents have attended a funeral at a location other than a funeral home or place of worship.

Nearly six in 10 respondents have attended a funeral at a location other than a funeral home or place of worship, which is up from 52% in 2024.

More than half of respondents (51.2%) attended a funeral where a non-faith leader presided over the service, a decline from 56.1% in 2024.

The number of respondents who would consider using a celebrant declined to 36.3% from 44.5% last year.

LIVESTREAMING SERVICES

Livestreaming, one of the remnants of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, is still strong with almost two-thirds of respondents (63.6%) who would arrange for friends/relatives to participate in a funeral/memorial via a streaming service.

[63.6%] would arrange for friends/relatives to participate in a funeral/memorial via a streaming service.

PREPAYING AND PREARRANGEMENTS

When making prearrangements, 58.3% would prefer to make those arrangements by speaking directly to a funeral director, 12.9% would prefer to make prearrangements online, and 31.8% would prefer a combination of both. Only 11.3% have actually made prearrangements in writing with a funeral director and, of those, only 19.4% have prearranged and prepaid for their funerals. The main reasons include:

- So survivors won't have to pay for arrangements
- To guarantee the prices of products and services
- So survivors won't have to worry about making arrangements

The Autumn 2025 issue of *The Director.edu* will begin our deep dive inside the numbers of NFDA's 2025 Consumer Awareness & Preferences Study.

Deana Gillespie is the former research manager for NFDA. Edward J. Defort is publisher and editorial director for NFDA Publications.

Not Your Story But Still Your Problem

HBO's docuseries dramatizes an old scandal and reminds us that, despite the worst headlines, funeral directors always have the power to build trust and shape the story.

By Jessica Koth

Last month, I watched HBO's new "docuseries" *The Mortician*. To be honest, it was hard to watch and it's been bothering me ever since. Not because the storytelling was graphic or sensational (though it certainly doesn't shy away from sickening details) but because the man at the center of this three-episode series, David Sconce, represents everything that the funeral directors I know personally are not.

During the past 18 years, I've had the privilege of working alongside some of the most compassionate, ethical, community-minded professionals you could ever hope to meet. Sconce, by contrast, operated without integrity, exploited grieving families, and violated every standard of decency and care this profession holds sacred.

For those who haven't seen it, *The Mortician* revisits the story of Sconce, a California crematory operator who was convicted of grotesquely mishandling human remains in the 1980s. Among his many crimes: He cremated multiple bodies at once, extracted gold fillings from the deceased, stole the personal effects of decedents, and delivered mixed cremated remains to grieving families.

Reputation management is not just a business concern but also a professional responsibility.

Ultimately, Sconce turned his family's business into a high-volume, low-ethics operation, motivated by profit and carried out with shocking disregard for the dignity of the dead and their loved ones. He also found himself in hot water for making threats against other funeral service professionals



and paying people to beat up those who threatened to expose his horrifying secrets.

Unfortunately, I can't help but think about the way this story – which took place nearly four decades ago – has been reintroduced to the public in 2025. Moreover, I worry about how it might shape the perceptions of people who have never had the chance to meet an ethical funeral director or who already carry doubts about your profession. For some viewers of *The Mortician*, this could prove their first exposure to the funeral service profession. For others, it might reaffirm long-held misgivings or uneasiness about what happens behind the closed doors of a funeral home.

It might feel easy to dismiss this docuseries as sensationalism or "not your story," but the uncomfortable reality is this: When one funeral director's actions make headlines, the public doesn't see it as the rare behavior of a rogue funeral director; they see the event as a caution about the entire funeral service profession.

Following broadcast of its conclusion, it was reported that *The Mortician* was HBO's most-watched docuseries in five years. This means that funeral service professionals cannot ignore stories like this. Instead, they must respond by reaffirming who they are and what they represent. This is why reputation management is not just a business concern but also a professional responsibility.

BEFORE THE FIRST CALL

Criminal behavior like that portrayed in *The Mortician* can shake public confidence, but it should also remind you how important it is to shape the narrative before someone else does it for you.

Your reputation forms quietly, when someone drives past your building, glances at your website, reads an online

review or hears a neighbor's story over coffee. In that way, your reputation is always "on." In other words, it's being built – or broken – through every interaction, every impression and every moment of visibility. Although you can't prevent a dramatization such as *The Mortician* from airing, you can ensure that the story people believe about your funeral home is one of transparency, trust and care.

That kind of trust isn't built in a single day or from a single public relations or marketing campaign. It's built through consistent, everyday actions that reflect your values and reassure families that they're in good hands.

PRACTICAL WAYS TO STRENGTHEN AND SAFEGUARD YOUR REPUTATION

You don't need a marketing team or public relations budget to manage your reputation; you just need a consistent, intentional approach to how you present your firm and serve your community. Here are a few steps every funeral home should take:

1. Be transparent, even when no one's asking. Most consumers have no idea what happens during the funeral or cremation process – and what they don't know, they often fear. Transparency is the antidote.

Therefore, create opportunities to educate families, even before they ask. Gently walk them through what happens behind the scenes. Explain your process for identifying remains, tracking chain-of-custody and maintaining dignity and respect at every step. A little information can go a long way in calming anxiety and building confidence. And this is information families might share with others, further enhancing your reputation and that of the profession.

2. Communicate your credentials and affiliations. Many families assume that funeral homes are regulated, licensed and held to strict standards – and they're right! But assumptions aren't enough. Be explicit.

Ensure your licenses are prominently displayed in public spaces. If you're a member of NFDA or your state association, or have earned certifications or a Pursuit of Excellence Award, then say so loudly and proudly. These affiliations matter. They signal to the public that you don't just meet the minimum standard but instead strive for something more.

3. Introduce the people behind the business. One of the most effective ways to build trust is by humanizing your staff. On your website and social channels, share who you are, including your values, your experience and your role in the community.

To accomplish this, use staff spotlights, behind-the-scenes videos or photos of your team at local events. These personal touches remind the public that funeral service isn't a transaction – it's a relationship built on compassion and service.

4. Monitor and respond to online reviews. Whether or not you engage online, your community does. People are reading reviews. They're posting on local Facebook groups. They're turning to Google, Yelp and even Reddit.

So, take control of the conversation by claiming your online listings; encourage satisfied families to leave honest feedback; and respond to both positive and negative reviews with grace and professionalism. Don't let silence speak for you!

5. Turn community engagement into your reputation strategy. I've written a lot in recent months about the value of community engagement and outreach because every interaction is a chance to show (not just tell) your community who you are and what you represent.

Participate in community events. Host grief-support workshops. Offer tours of your facility for civic groups, churches and local students. The more your name is associated with service, compassion and education, the less likely your community will be swayed by negative portrayals on TV or online.

You and your colleagues prove every day that your profession is defined not by scandal but by service, integrity [and] compassion.

ONE BAD ACTOR, ONE WHOLE PROFESSION

When David Sconce committed his crimes, he tarnished the public's perception of every funeral service professional. Unfortunately, that perception still lingers. You can see it in the docuseries. You can observe it in internet comment sections. You can hear it in the uncomfortable jokes or skeptical questions that still arise when people learn what you do for a living.

Despite this, you and your colleagues prove every day that your profession is defined not by scandal but by service, integrity, compassion and the families who say, "I don't know how we would have gotten through that without you." That's the story the public needs to hear more often, and it's up to you to tell it.

Reputation is not a logo, a slogan or a plaque on a wall. It's not something you own. It's something you earn one conversation, one family, one moment at a time. So, even though *The Mortician* might cast a shadow, it also offers a reminder: You can't control the stories that make the headlines, but you can control the story you live every day.

That story matters, so make sure it's one worth telling.

Jessica Koth is NFDA director of public relations. You can reach her at jkoth@nfda.org.

From the Editor's Desk

I Don't Like Talking About Paper in My Free Time

Many years ago, as I was about to embark on a long car ride, I asked my passenger what kind of music she'd like to listen to. She told me, "I don't really like music."

I'd never heard anyone say that before and didn't know how to respond. What happened next is that she got out her iPad and her phone and made calls, answered emails and periodically asked me if I could "turn the music down."

All I knew was that if she didn't unplug, this was going to be one dandy car ride.

And it was. As I drove along in virtual silence, I recalled a quote by noted paper salesman Jim Halpert, who once said on an episode of *The Office* that he does not like to go to corporate functions because he doesn't like talking about paper in his free time. Kudos to Mr. Halpert for establishing early his work/life balance.

So did Al Czervic, the noted construction tycoon made famous by Rodney Dangerfield in the movie *Caddyshack*, who once said about himself: "If you keep busting your hump 16-20 hours a day, you'll wind up with a \$60-million funeral."

Putting the antics of fictional characters aside, self-care and work/life balance aren't just buzz words making their way around corporate America; they should be a part of your daily, weekly, monthly and yearly plan. And this is even more of an imperative for funeral directors who witness the impact of loss.

Self-care isn't about escaping your responsibilities; it's about sustaining them. Just like when scheduling viewings and services, block out personal time in your calendar and treat that as an unbreakable appointment. This means disconnecting – and stop peeking at your email. You must rid yourself of the mindset that the business will collapse around you if you take time off. If you think that, you have another serious problem to attend to.

No matter what profession you are in, sometimes we try to be all things to all people. Stop that. Saying "no" isn't selfish – it's self-preservation.

One of the more challenging aspects of funeral directing is the on-call part of the job. It is one of the aspects that new employees find the most off-putting. Managers need to explore rotating schedules to ensure consistent downtime.

When you are spending "quality time" with the family, make sure it is quality time. For me, one of the more difficult aspects when spending time with my family is when I'm really not there – and they can tell if my mind is still playing out a scenario from my day.

This "work/life balance" might sound like a mythical creature, but even the most dedicated among us eventually will hit a wall. Self-care isn't a template – it's different for everyone. You have to find your own little slice of sanity amidst the chaos.

Ed **Edward J. Defort**
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