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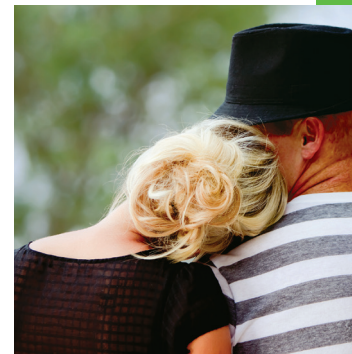
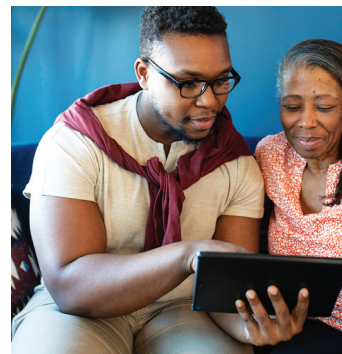
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NFDA Study Queries Consumers On the Value of The Funeral

By Deana Gillespie and Edward J. Defort

In late 2020, NFDA released the first version of its “Value of a Funeral’ Consumer Study” into the field. At that point, Americans were in their ninth month of the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, people were dying at a historic pace and funerals were truncated because of safety precautions. That debut survey offered a glimpse into the changing funeral service landscape forced on consumers by the public restrictions.

Now, NFDA has released the results of its second iteration of that survey to measure how the pandemic has affected

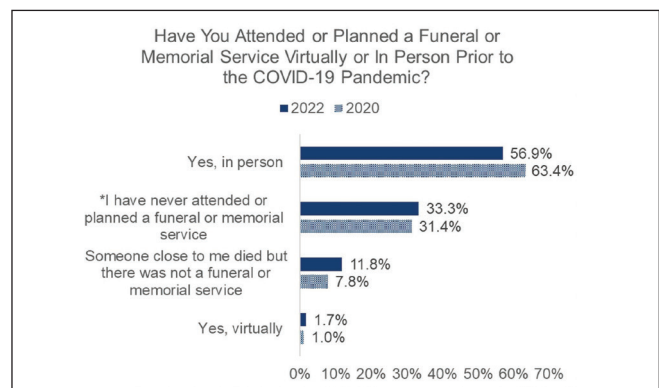
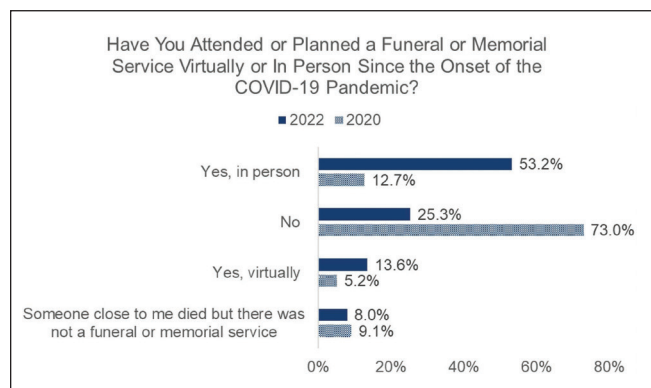


people’s experiences at funerals and/or memorial services and to examine whether the changes brought about will take root.

The study, conducted August 24-26, 2022, realized 1,029 completed surveys. Its purpose was multifold. NFDA intended to gauge how respondents felt about the funeral or memorial service helping to pay tribute, offer meaning and help loved ones say goodbye; assess respondents’ opinions of funeral service professionals and how important they are in making funeral arrangements and taking care to reflect families’ wishes; measure differences in feelings among those who



| | No Services | Virtual Service | Since Onset of Pandemic | Service Prior to Pandemic |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Number of Completed Surveys | 62 | 152 | 605 | 210 |



attended a funeral in person versus virtually, or those not holding a service at all; and measure respondents' opinions about holding a viewing of the deceased.

The "Value of a Funeral" study divided respondents into four unique groups based on their most recent experience at a funeral or memorial service. Of note, each respondent is a member of only one of the following predefined groups:

- Those who had an experience with a direct-cremation/ immediate burial (no services)
- Those who attended a funeral or memorial service virtually
- Those who attended a funeral or memorial service since the onset of the pandemic
- Those who attended at least one funeral prior to the pandemic

According to the latest survey, significantly more people have attended or planned an in-person funeral or memorial service since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic: 53.2%, which is up from 12.7% in 2020.

Of those who attended a funeral or memorial service, 46.9% attended a full funeral service with burial, up from 44.3% in 2020; 14% attended a memorial service with burial, an increase from 10.4% in 2020; 13.8% attended a full fu-

neral service followed by cremation, up from 10.4%; 13.7% attended a memorial service with cremation (defined as a funeral service without the cremated remains present), which is down from 16.3%; and 10.3% said there were no services (disposition involved direct-cremation or immediate burial), down from 14.6% in 2020.

Approximately 57% of respondents had either attended or planned a funeral or memorial service virtually or in person prior to the pandemic. Respondents who indicated they had never attended or planned a funeral or memorial service were excluded from the study.

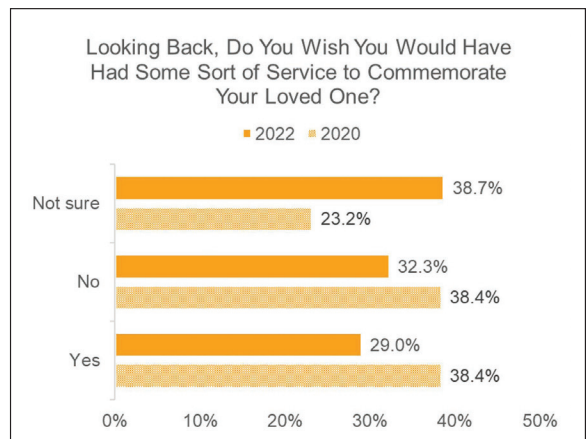
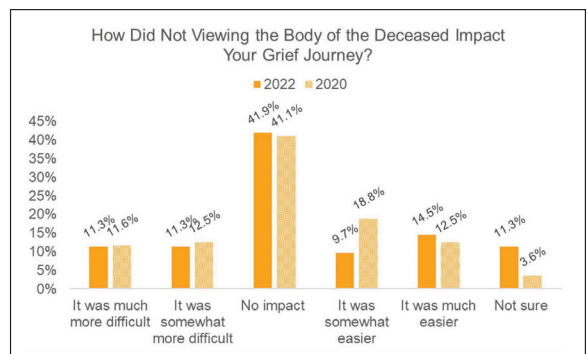
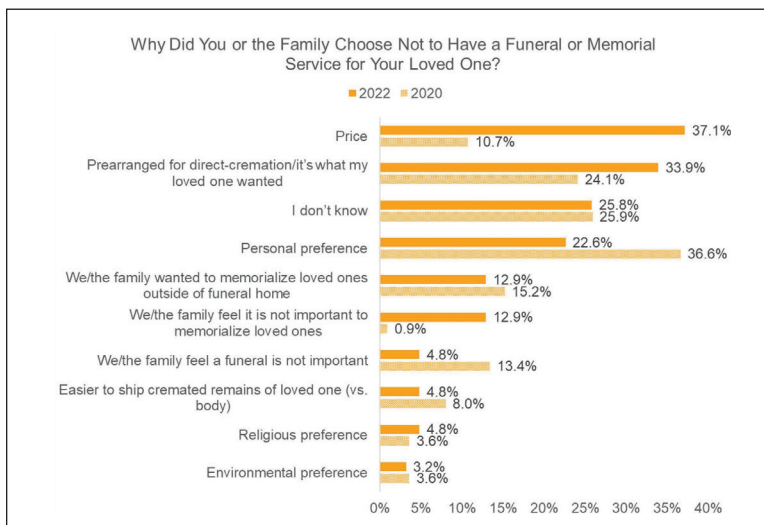
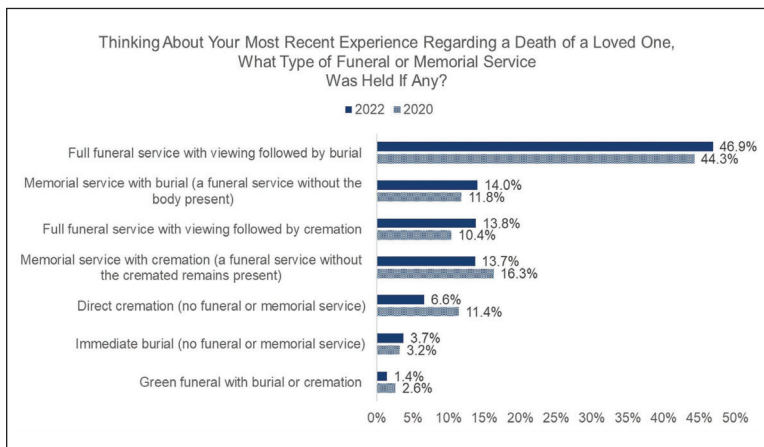
NO-SERVICE GROUP

NFDA's survey broke down the results from the 62 respondents (6% of total surveyed) who experienced either a direct cremation or immediate burial (no services). Not surprisingly, this group was far less likely to feel that funeral service professionals are important in making funeral arrangements.

Lacking a service for the deceased, this group also experienced a lower sense of "closure" compared to other groups. They were significantly less likely to feel that they had sufficiently paid tribute, found meaning and were able to adequately say goodbye to their loved one.

Those in this group were also divided regarding their feelings about holding a service. More respondents in 2022 (37.1%) cited price as their main reason for not having a funeral or memorial service for their loved one, up from 10.7% in 2020. Another 33.9% said they had prearranged a direct-cremation ("It's what my loved one wanted"), up from 24.1% in 2020.

Curiously, 25.8% said they didn't know why they



selected a direct-cremation, about the same percentage as in the 2020 survey. (It's numbers like this that point to the need for more community education and engagement by funeral directors.) Personal preference, cited by 22.6% of respondents, experienced a big drop from the 36.6% in 2020.

Despite not holding a service, 38.7% of those surveyed felt it is "important" to hold a funeral or memorial service to commemorate the life of a loved one, which was down from 48.2% in 2020. Breaking down the responses, 14.5% said it was "very important" (compared with 28.6% in 2020), while 24.2% said having a service is "important" (compared with 19.6% in 2020).

Unsurprisingly, among respondents who selected no services, 41.9% said that not viewing the body of a loved one had no impact on their grief journey, a tick higher than the 41.1% in 2020; 22.6% said that not viewing the body made their grief journey "much more difficult" or "somewhat more difficult," down from 24.1% in 2020; and 24.2% said not viewing the body made their grief "somewhat easier" or "much easier," down from 34.2%. The remaining 11.3% were unsure.

Those in the no-services category remained almost evenly split when it came to feelings of regret about not holding a service for their loved one: 29% wish they would have held a service, while 32.3% said they don't regret forgoing a service. Another 38.7% said they were not sure, again underscoring the need for funeral directors to put forth community educational initiatives. This is where testimonials from people who believe the service offered them comfort could have an influence on the undecideds.

When respondents were asked, "If you experience a death

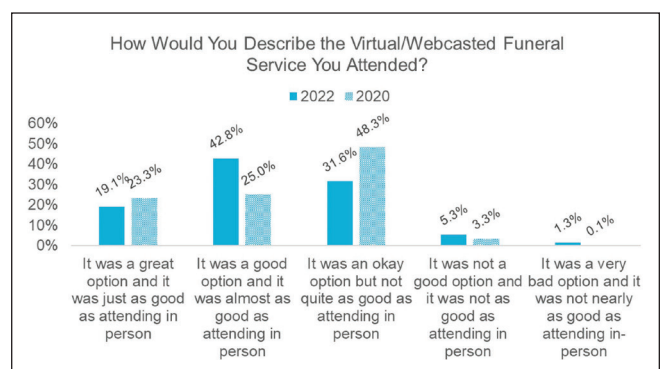
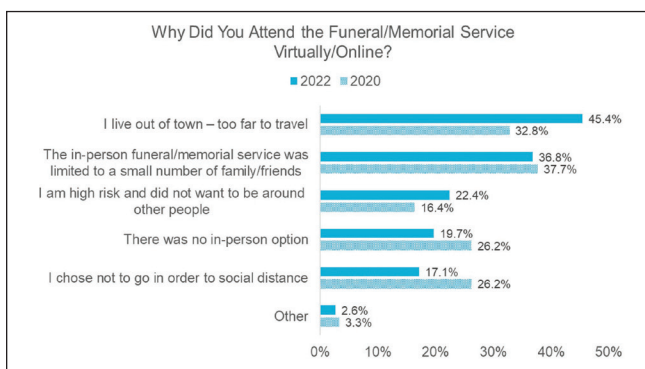
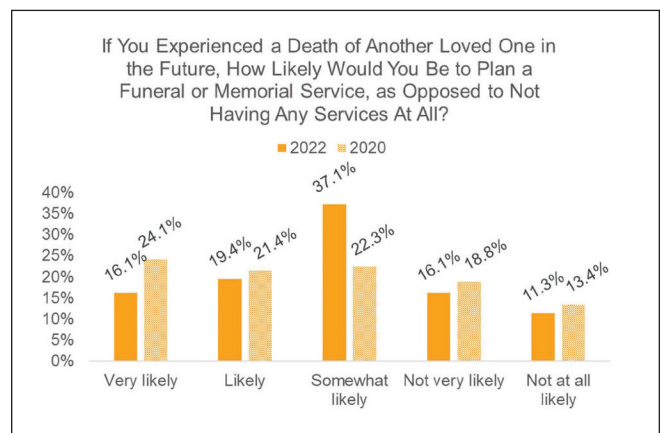
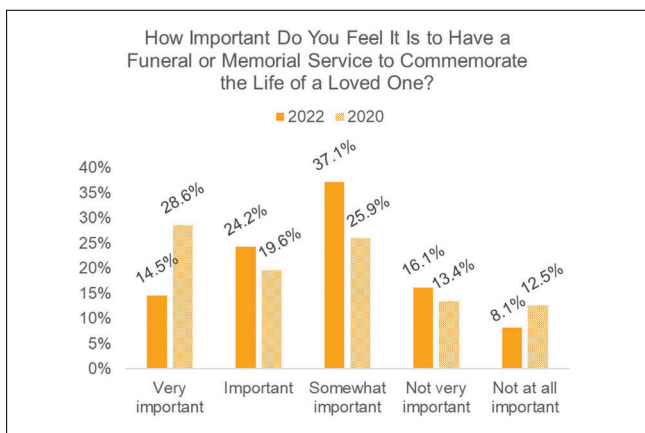
of another loved one in the future, how likely would you be to plan a funeral or memorial service?" 35.5% said they would "very likely" or "likely" plan a service, which is down from 45.5% in 2020; 37.1% said "somewhat likely," up from 22.3%; and 27.4% said they would be "unlikely" to do so, down from 32.2%.

For each of the four study groups, NFDA included some verbatim consumer comments. Those in the direct-cremation/immediate burial group commented:

- "The price for a funeral, wake and burial is nuts. Who can afford that these days?"
- "I would like to be able to have a funeral service to bring everyone together, but at the end of the day, what the loved one wanted is what I would do."
- "Our family is small... it would be a huge waste of time and money for no guests."
- "Honoring the wishes of the deceased by doing exactly as instructed."

VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE GROUP

The following results reflect the opinions of the 152 respondents (14.8% of the total surveyed) who attended a funeral or memorial service virtually. This group was far less likely to feel connected to the funeral or memorial service experience. In general, these respondents felt the least connected to the deceased and other friends and family members in attendance versus the three other groups. Furthermore, this group found the funeral/memorial service less meaningful compared to the other groups.



The main reasons respondents in this group attended a funeral or memorial service virtually (instead of in person) included: They lived out of town, cited by 45.4% of respondents and up from 32.8% in 2020; attendance was limited, 36.8% versus 37.7% in 2020; and they were at a high risk and did not want to be around other people, 22.4%, up from 16.4% in 2020. An additional 19.7% said there was no in-person option for the service, down from 26.2% in 2020; and 17.1% chose not to go in order to social distance, down from 26.2% in 2020.

Compared to 2020, more people felt that attending a funeral virtually was a good option – almost as good an option as attending in person. Nearly one in five respondents (19.1%) described the virtual service as a “great” option and just as good as being there in person. This was down from 23.3% in 2020. A whopping 42.8% said attending virtually was a “good” option and almost as good as attending in person, a jump from 25% in 2020. Another 31.6% felt it was “not quite as good” as attending in person, down from 48.3% in 2020.

Verbatim comments from the virtual group included:

- “It was a meaningful experience which otherwise wouldn’t have been possible due to the pandemic.”
- “It’s a safer option than being around other people in a close environment.”
- “It was tough not being there in person.”
- “Was good to have that option to pay respects.”
- “Seeing friends and family face to face at that time is important. Appreciate the fact that virtual is an option. Hope the option continues.”

ATTENDANCE-SINCE-THE-PANDEMIC GROUP

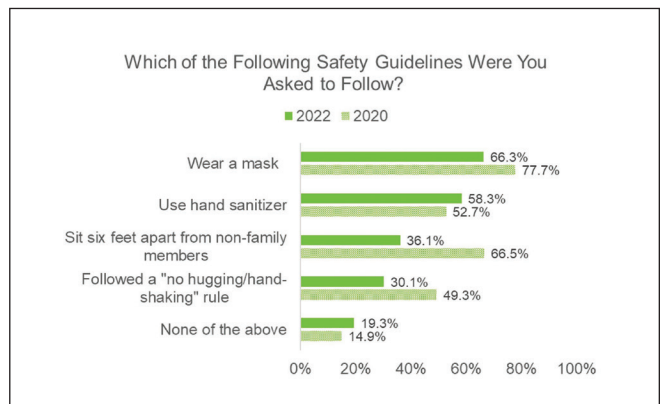
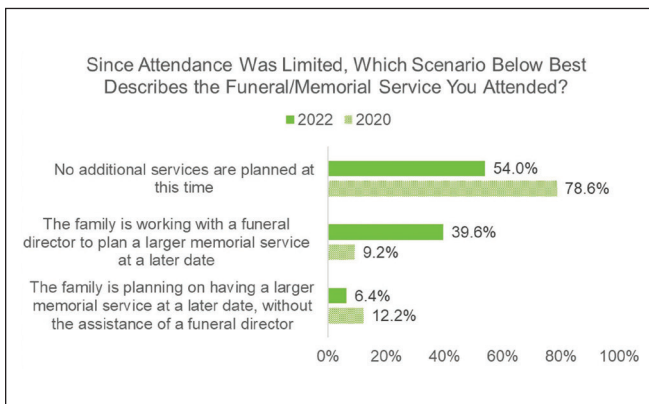
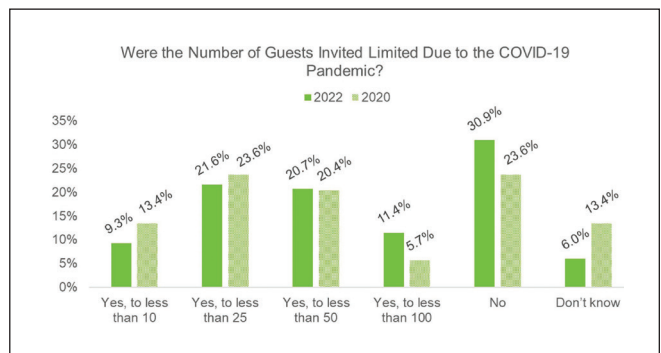
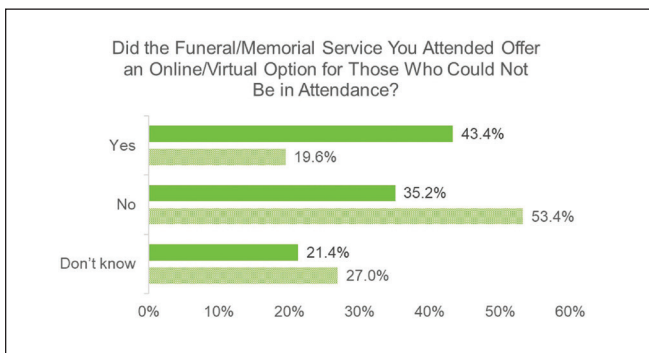
The following results represent responses from the 605 consumers (58.8% of the total surveyed) who attended an in-person funeral or memorial service since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This group felt more favorably toward funerals versus the other three groups. The pandemic appears to have made this group’s respondents more aware of their own mortality and how difficult it can be when you can’t comfort others when they are grieving.

This group was more likely to feel that it’s more important to attend a funeral or memorial service of a loved one in person (as opposed to virtually) and to find the funeral or memorial service meaningful. The group also believes that the viewing of their loved one made their grief journey easier; tends to feel more positive about the work funeral service professionals perform; and feels the service they attended helped in paying tribute, offered meaning and helped them say goodbye to their loved one.

Almost two-thirds of this group’s respondents (64.6%) said the number of guests was limited at the service – close to the 63.1% in 2020.

Of the 64.6% of group respondents who said attendance was limited, slightly more than half (54%) said no additional services were planned, down from 78.6% in 2020. Nearly 40% said the family is working with a funeral director to plan a larger memorial service at a later date, which is significantly higher than the 9.2% in 2020. Also, 6.4% of respondents said the family is planning to have a larger memorial service at a later date *without* the assistance of a funeral director, which is down from 12.2% in the previous survey.

A significantly higher percentage of respondents (43.4%) said there was an online/virtual option available to view the



service for the funeral or memorial they attended since the onset of the pandemic, up from 19.6% in 2020. This number is not surprising given the move to virtual solutions in lieu of face-to-face meetings. It also means that identifying the extent to which the virtual option might replace in-person attendance at funerals in the future is a key question for future surveys.

Most group respondents (66.3%) were still asked to take precautions – wearing a face mask, using hand sanitizer and sitting six feet apart from nonfamily members – at the funeral or memorial service they attended, which was down from 77.7% in 2020. In the new study, 19.3% responded that they were not asked to follow safety guidelines.

Most respondents in this group (81.9%) felt it was either “very important” or “important” to attend a funeral or memorial service of a loved one in person as opposed to virtually, which is down from 84.5% in 2020.

Verbatim comments from the group that attended a service since the onset of the pandemic included:

- “During the COVID-19 pandemic, many services were truncated in attendance if in person. This was not helpful. Missed saying goodbye to some because the family opted for no services. Not the way to say goodbye to old friends.”
- “It was hard to not actually comfort others, but it was nice being there physically present for them.”
- It was hard to have it limited to 25. My cousins couldn’t bring their kids. No kids came because of the limitation. It would have been a happier place with kids because little kids laugh and smile, and Mom loved kids.”
- “Honestly, it was great to see all my mutual friends who I haven’t seen for a long time.”
- “I attended because it was a close friend’s mother. However, I did not feel comfortable going to the celebration gathering afterward.”

ATTENDANCE-PRIOR-TO-THE-PANDEMIC GROUP

The following data reflect the responses of the 210 respondents (20.4% of the total respondents surveyed) who had attended either a funeral or a memorial service prior to the onset of the pandemic. This group expressed its desire to have the option of attending a service either virtually or in person.

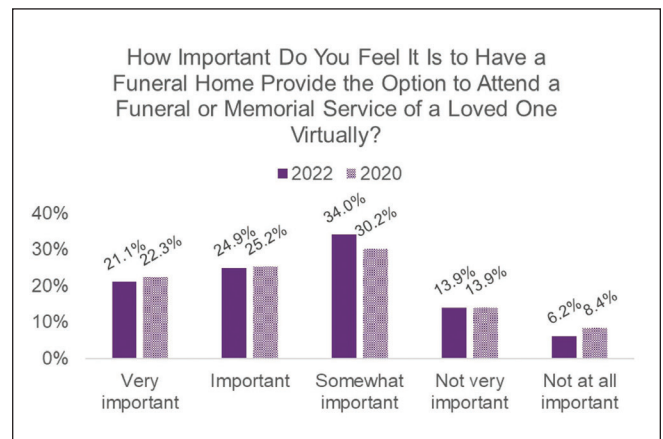
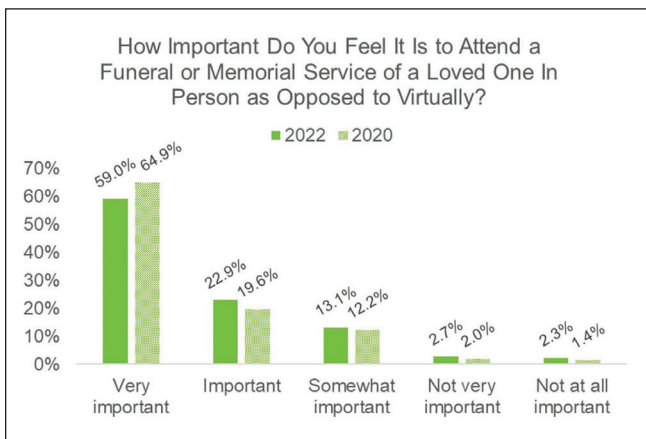
Keep in mind that this group’s last funeral experience was prior to the pandemic – before the exploding popularity of virtual funeral options. That said, 46% felt it was “very important” or “important” for funeral homes to provide the option to attend a funeral or memorial service of a loved one virtually, down slightly from 47.5% in 2020.

Verbatim comments from the group who attended a service prior to the pandemic included:

| I believe funeral service professionals... (% Strongly Agree and Somewhat Agree) | No Services | Virtual Service | Service Since Onset of Pandemic | Service Prior to Pandemic |
|---|-------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Take special care to make ceremony and arrangements that reflect the wishes of the family | 71.0% | 75.7% | 87.5% | 86.7% |
| Are professional and competent | 71.0% | 65.8% | 75.9% | 81.0% |
| Provide services that are valuable | 66.1% | 64.5% | 75.8% | 77.6% |
| Have the expertise to recommend the right products and services | 71.0% | 65.1% | 74.4% | 70.0% |
| Are important in making funeral arrangements | 67.8% | 64.5% | 76.7% | 80.0% |

| Funeral Service Attributes I believe the service... (% Strongly Agree and Somewhat Agree) | Virtual Service | Service Since Onset of Pandemic | Service Prior to Pandemic |
|---|-----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Was helpful in paying tribute to or commemorated the life of my friend or family member | 69.7% | 85.1% | 81.9% |
| Was an important part of helping me begin the healing process after the death of my friend or family member | 60.5% | 71.6% | 61.9% |
| Had meaning and value and reflected the deceased's life | 63.8% | 78.6% | 75.2% |
| Helped me remember the individual and helped me say goodbye | 64.5% | 77.1% | 71.4% |

| If there was a viewing at the funeral/memorial service, how did viewing the body of the deceased impact your grief journey? | Virtual Service | Service Since Onset of Pandemic | Service Prior to Pandemic |
|---|-----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Made it much more difficult | 8.0% | 21.7% | 14.5% |
| Made it somewhat more difficult | 34.0% | 25.2% | 29.0% |
| No difference | 22.0% | 23.9% | 35.9% |
| Made it somewhat easier | 24.0% | 17.8% | 12.4% |
| Made it much easier | 9.0% | 9.3% | 4.1% |
| Not sure | 3.0% | 2.2% | 4.1% |



- “I believe for those who can’t make it and would like to, it’s very important and helps healing to be connected, even if virtually. I would like to see most funeral homes offer this option.”
- “I think it’s very important for friends and family to gather together to celebrate the lives of loved ones.”
- “Virtual attendance is very difficult to replace the physical meeting.”
- “It’s a way of having closure and saying goodbye one last time.”
- “It gives honor to the deceased and shows love.”

MOST RECENT EXPERIENCES

The following results compare the four groups of respondents based on their most recent experience at the funeral or memorial service they attended.

When asked to share their feelings about funeral service professionals, most respondents agree that funeral service professionals are important in making funeral arrangements and that they take care to reflect families’ wishes. All four groups, however, gave funeral service professionals lower marks than in NFDA’s 2020 survey.

Not surprisingly, respondents who attended a service in person (either before or after the onset of the pandemic) rated funeral service professionals highest (87.5% vs. 95.9% in 2020); those who did not hold a service for their loved one, or attended a virtual service, rated them lowest, at 71% and 75.7%, respectively, which was down from 74% and 81.7% in 2020.

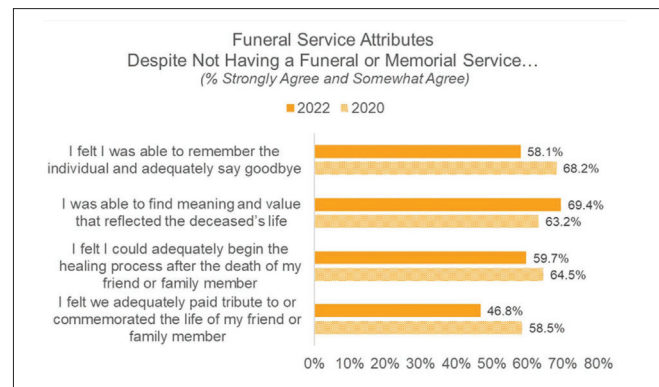
Most respondents felt the service was helpful in paying tribute, offering meaning and helping them say goodbye to their loved one. This was particularly true among those who either planned or attended a service since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Group respondents who did not attend or plan a service for a loved one rated funeral service attributes much lower than respondents who did attend or plan a funeral/memorial service. Those who did not attend

a service were significantly less likely to agree that they were able to adequately pay tribute, find meaning and say goodbye to their loved one.

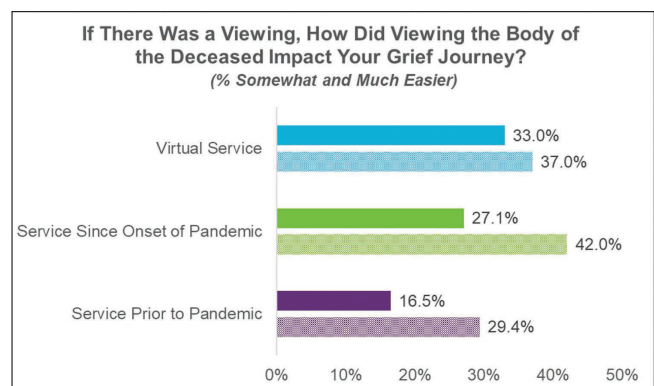
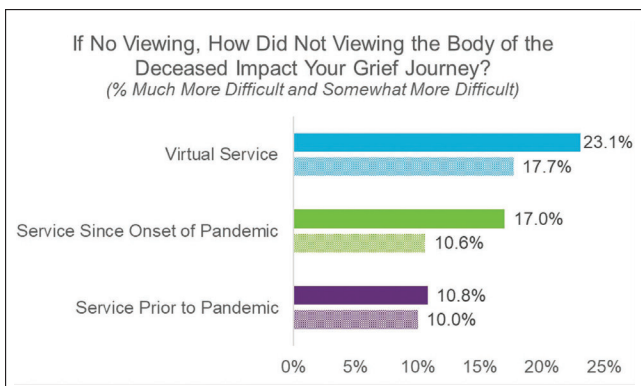
Comparing the two surveys, 69.4% of those surveyed strongly agree that they were able to find meaning and value that reflected the deceased’s life, up from 63.2% in 2020. However, 58.1% of those surveyed in 2022 felt that they were able to remember the individual and adequately say goodbye, down from 68.2% in 2020; 59.7% said they could adequately begin the healing process after the death of a friend or family member, down from 64.5% in 2020; and 46.8% said they adequately paid tribute or commemorated the life of a friend or family member, down from 58.5% in 2020.

Considering the decline in the percentage of those who believe that not holding a memorial service is an adequate op-



| If no viewing, how did not viewing the body of the deceased impact your grief journey? | Virtual Service | Service Since Onset of Pandemic | Service Prior to Pandemic |
|--|-----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| It was much more difficult | 5.8% | 2.8% | 1.5% |
| It was somewhat more difficult | 17.3% | 14.2% | 9.2% |
| No difference | 48.1% | 44.7% | 50.8% |
| It was somewhat easier | 11.5% | 19.2% | 20.0% |
| It was much easier | 11.5% | 13.5% | 10.8% |
| Not sure | 5.8% | 5.7% | 7.7% |

| When someone close to you dies, how important to you is viewing the body of the deceased? | No Services | Virtual Service | Service Since Onset of Pandemic | Service Prior to Pandemic |
|---|-------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Very important | 9.7% | 20.4% | 29.4% | 11.0% |
| Important | 8.1% | 23.7% | 26.6% | 15.8% |
| Somewhat important | 29.0% | 29.0% | 20.6% | 29.7% |
| Not very important | 25.8% | 20.4% | 14.6% | 23.9% |
| Not at all important | 27.4% | 6.6% | 8.8% | 19.6% |



tion for dealing with their grief, these numbers underscore the value of planning and/or attending a memorial service for a family member or friend.

Respondents who attended a funeral or memorial service virtually were slightly less likely to view the deceased as part of the service versus those who attended an in-person service pre- or post-pandemic.

Excluding the direct-cremation/immediate burial group, approximately 22% (virtual service), 23.9% (since the onset of the pandemic) and 35.9% (service prior to the pandemic) felt that viewing the body of their loved one made no difference on their grief journey. This compares with 25.9%, 30% and 29.1%, respectively, in the 2020 study.

In general, the percentage of respondents who said viewing the body of the deceased made their grief journey easier decreased since 2020. Among respondents who experienced a viewing of their loved one, those who attended a service virtually were slightly more likely to think the viewing made their grief journey easier. The other two groups demonstrated a dramatic decline – those whose last service occurred since the pandemic’s onset dropped to 27.1% from 42% in 2020, and those whose last service was prior to the pandemic sank to 16.5% from 29.4% in 2020.

One recurring theme from NFDA’s 2020 “Value of a Funeral” study was that consumers would miss the thing they couldn’t have – the viewing – because

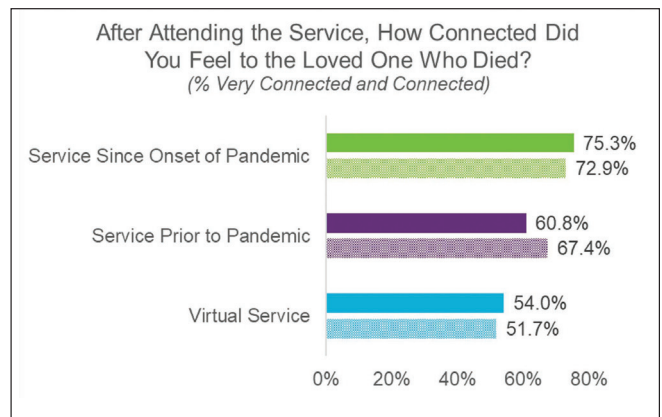
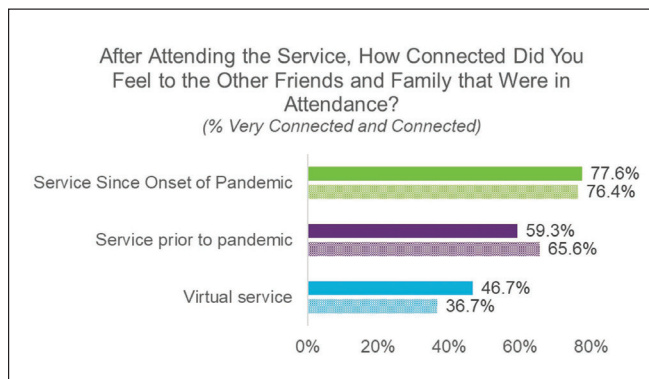
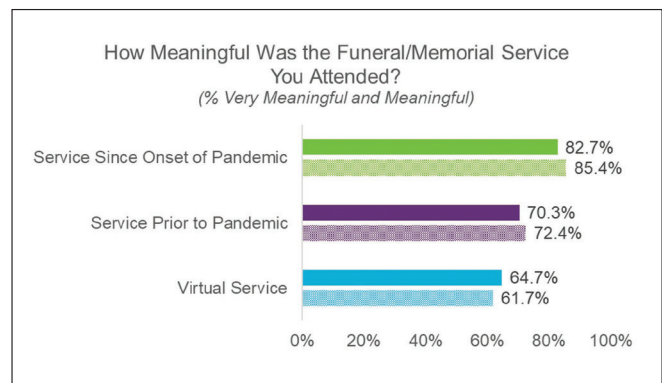
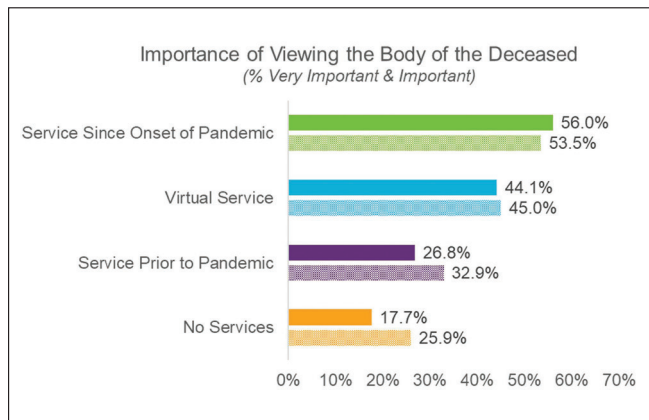
COVID-19 restrictions limited how many people could attend a visitation.

If that was the hope in 2020, it’s not panning out. Excluding the direct-cremation/immediate burial group, a significant portion of the remaining three groups in NFDA’s 2022 survey indicated that forgoing the viewing made no difference in their grief journey. Of those who have attended a service since the pandemic, 44.7% said that skipping the viewing made no difference to their grief journey (the same percentage as in 2020). This compares with 48.1% of those in the virtual service group (up from 41.2% in 2020), and 50.8% of respondents in the service-prior-to-pandemic group (up from 38.6% in 2020).

Correspondingly, 42% (virtual), 46.9% (service since onset of pandemic) and 43.5% (service prior to pandemic) said that

| How meaningful was the funeral/memorial service you attended? | Service | | |
|---|-----------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| | Virtual Service | Since Onset of Pandemic | Service Prior to Pandemic |
| Very meaningful | 25.7% | 51.0% | 34.5% |
| Meaningful | 37.5% | 31.7% | 35.9% |
| Somewhat meaningful | 28.3% | 12.8% | 26.2% |
| Not very meaningful | 6.6% | 3.7% | 2.9% |
| Not at all meaningful | 2.0% | 0.8% | 0.5% |

| After attending service, how connected did you feel to the loved one who died? | Service | | |
|--|-----------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| | Virtual Service | Since Onset of Pandemic | Service Prior to Pandemic |
| Very connected | 15.1% | 39.9% | 24.4% |
| Connected | 38.8% | 35.4% | 36.4% |
| Somewhat connected | 34.9% | 19.4% | 30.1% |
| Not very connected | 9.2% | 4.3% | 6.7% |
| Not at all connected | 2.0% | 1.0% | 2.4% |



viewing the body of their loved one made their grief journey “much more” or “somewhat more” difficult, compared with 29.6%, 23% and 33.7%, respectively, in 2020.

Conversely, 33% (virtual), 27.1% (service since onset of pandemic) and 16.5% (service prior to pandemic) said that viewing the body of their loved one made their grief journey “somewhat” or “much” easier, compared with 37%, 42% and 29.4%, respectively, in 2020. These are dramatic numbers that suggest families are not being comforted by the presence of the body at services.

Respondents who attended a service virtually and those who attended a service since the onset of the pandemic were more likely to say that not viewing the body of their loved one made their grief journey more difficult compared to the other group. Taking a group-by-group glimpse, 23.1% (virtual), 17% (service since onset of pandemic) and 10.7% (service prior to pandemic) said that foregoing the viewing of the body of their loved one made their grief journey “much” or “somewhat” more difficult, compared with 17.7%, 10.6% and 10%, respectively, in 2020.

Conversely, 23% (virtual), 32.7% (service since onset of pandemic) and 30.8% (service prior to pandemic) said that foregoing the viewing of the body of their loved one made their grief journey “somewhat” or “much” easier, compared with 26.5%, 38.4% and 34.9%, respectively, in 2020.

Respondents who attended a funeral or memorial service since the onset of the pandemic found the service most meaningful (82.7%), followed by those who attended a service prior to the pandemic (70.4%), and those who attended virtually (63.2%). This compares with 85.4%, 72.4% and 61.7%, respectively, in 2020.

Respondents who attended a service since the onset of the pandemic were far more likely to feel connected to the person who died. The 75.3% in 2022 is up from 72.9% two years earlier. This group was followed by those who attended a service prior to the pandemic (60.8%, down from 67.4% in 2020), and the virtual service group (54%, up from 51.7%).

Excluding the direct-cremation/immediate burial group, those who attended a service virtually felt the least connected to the deceased, compared to those in the other two groups who attended services in person.

Excluding the direct-cremation/immediate burial group, respondents who attended a funeral or memorial service (either before or after the onset

of the pandemic) felt far more connected to other friends and family members in attendance versus those who attended a service virtually. Not surprisingly, those who attended a funeral or memorial service virtually felt the least connected to those in attendance.

Group respondents who attended a service virtually were more likely to attend another virtual service in the future. Almost half (46.7%) said they would be “very likely” or “likely” to attend another funeral virtually (as opposed to in person); this compares with 48.3% in the 2020 study. Those in the group that attended a funeral in person, however, will continue to attend funerals in person (as opposed to virtually). Only 25.8% of respondents who attended a funeral in person said they would be “very likely” or “likely” to attend a virtual service, up a tick from 24.9% in 2020.

DEMOGRAPHICS

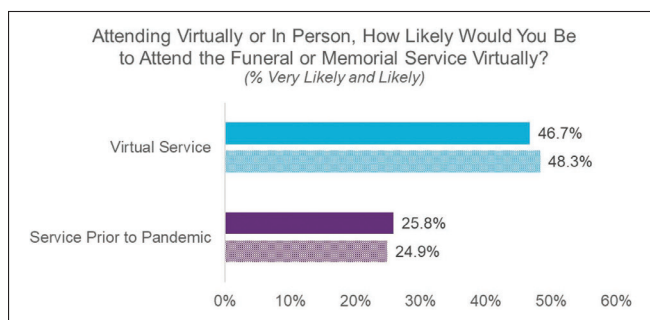
- 45% of study respondents were under age 40, and 13.7% were 65 or older.
- More than half of respondents (55.3%) were female.
- 16.8% of respondents did not identify with any organized religion (a significant drop from 27% in 2020), while 22.1% identified as Catholic and 21.5% identified as Christian.
- Approximately half of respondents (50.6%) were Caucasian/White, 15.0% were Black or African American, 14.2% were Asian or Pacific Islander, and 14.0% were Hispanic or Latino.
- Respondents represented all income levels, with the largest segment earning between \$25,000 to less than \$50,000 per year.

The study was conducted August 24-26, 2022.

Deana Gillespie is NFDA research manager.

Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.

| After attending the service, how connected did you feel to the other friends and family in attendance? | Virtual Service | Service Since Onset of Pandemic | Service Prior to Pandemic |
|--|-----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Very connected | 14.5% | 41.5% | 18.2% |
| Connected | 32.2% | 36.1% | 41.2% |
| Somewhat connected | 28.3% | 16.6% | 30.6% |
| Not very connected | 18.4% | 4.3% | 7.7% |
| Not at all connected | 6.6% | 1.5% | 2.4% |



| If you had to attend another funeral/memorial service in the future (post-pandemic), and you were given the option of either attending virtually or in person, how likely would you be to attend the funeral or memorial service virtually? | Virtual Service | Service Prior to Pandemic |
|---|-----------------|---------------------------|
| Very likely | 14.5% | 10.5% |
| Likely | 32.2% | 15.3% |
| Somewhat likely | 28.3% | 28.7% |
| Not very likely | 18.4% | 27.3% |
| Not at all likely | 6.6% | 18.2% |

The Art of The Storyteller

By Edward J. Defort

Billed as a “storytelling expert,” Kindra Hall admitted to attendees of her keynote presentation at last October’s NFDA International Convention & Expo that her title sounds a little made up – because it is. But she had a good story about it.

Hall said she came by the power of strategic storytelling when she was 17 years old, during her senior year of high school. She was in her physics class, which was her favorite class because she liked the teacher. “I remember sitting in those high school classroom desks with the hard plastic chair, and I wondered how this guy could be so enthusiastic about something as awful as science,” she said. “Unfortunately, my grades did not reflect my love of physics class.”

At the end of the semester, the class had to write a five-page paper on their favorite physics topic. “I came home the night before the paper was due, because that’s always when we do our best work – at the very last minute – and I started to write my paper about gravity,” she said.

After she had written everything she knew about gravity, the paper clocked in at four pages. Said Hall: “I’m not sure what happened at your high school, but in my high school, all that mattered was how many pieces of paper had words on them.” She tried the usual tricks, such as adjusting the margins, but she was still going to fall short.

“I would guess that... you’ve felt these ‘one-page gaps’ between you and your families. Those gaps should be filled with stories.”

“I decided to cheat,” she said. “I love roller coasters, and I would wait all winter long to be one of the first in line at the amusement park to get on ‘Wild Thing’ – this big, green, twisted-metal monster of a roller coaster. You would sit in those roller coaster seats and feel that heavy bar come over your shoulders.”

Explaining the dynamics of said roller coaster, Hall described going straight up in the air and then straight down. “That feeling you get in your stomach was a drug,” she said. “And it is the result of gravity, so I took that story – about



half a page – and added it at the front of my paper.”

She was sure her teacher would see through what she did in padding her report, but when she got it back, on the front was a big red A – the first one she had ever seen in a science class. On the back, the teacher wrote something Hall has never forgotten: “Excellent application of information to real-life stories.”

Turning to the attendees, Hall said, “I know what is at stake for you is much greater than gold stars and good grades on a paper. I also know that you’re not new to hearing about the power of story in what you do. And yet, I would guess that there have been those moments where, just out of necessity or your own desire, you’ve felt these ‘one-page gaps’ between you and your families.”

“Those gaps should be filled with stories – stories you already have. All you have to do is know how to tell them,” she continued. “Intentional storytelling, strategic storytelling, really good storytelling, the kind of story that makes a difference, is going to require an investment of your time and your energy, of your intentionality and, maybe, in some cases, an effort in your training to teach your team.”

Why does storytelling work so well? Because humans are attracted to story. “This is part of our biology,” she said. “This is what we want to hear; this is what we are seeking out.”

When it comes to marketing or brand differentiation, a story will get the job done. For example, a study was conducted to determine the best Super Bowl commercial of all time. Well, assuming you watched the broadcast in 2014, if someone mentioned “The one with the puppy and the horse” now, you’d probably know exactly which one it was. During this 60-second ad, Budweiser didn’t even mention beer; it was the story about what that product meant that resonated with viewers. [Editor’s note: Experience the power of Budweiser’s story at <https://youtu.be/dlNO2trC-mk>]

“No matter what your marketing budget is – you don’t need \$5 million – you just need to lean into the power of story,” Hall said.

“Additionally, the strength of your brand is no longer measured by how well you can explain who you are and what you do to your networks. The strength of your brand is your clients, your centers of influence and the ability to tell the story

of who you are and what you do. Since humans are drawn to stories, use stories to spread the value of your brand.”

Hall said that storytelling is such an important skill and strategy to develop because a story has the innate ability to illustrate the true value of something. “That is so extremely important for all of you and what you do in funeral service.”

When it comes to making buying decisions, Hall asked attendees to think about what people buy. What do they say “yes” to? Do they say yes to the thing, or do they say yes to the story? Using eBay as the source, Hall shared that anthropologists put some 200 items up for sale on eBay. Posting these auctions cost these scientists about \$250 total, but each item had its own story and the goal was to see what people would pay for each item.

One such item was a pink toy horse from the 1980s. Hall explained: “The story was of a woman who had recently dropped her daughter off at college. She’d come back home and was going through some of her daughter’s things and came across this horse. She remembered how her daughter would trot it across the windowsill as she waited for her and Dad to get home from work. That was always the first thing her mother saw when she got home after a long day at work.”

Apparently, the story struck a nerve with a shopper, who bid \$104.50. “That makes no sense, but what did they buy? The story!” she said. All told, the experiment netted researchers \$8,000 on their \$250 investment.

“You have real-life stories at your fingertips, walking through your buildings every single day – stories that express the value of [funeral service],” Hall said. “In those moments when you sense that ‘one-page gap,’ those gaps are meant for stories.”

Storytelling is such an important strategy, especially in funeral service, because stories have the ability, in the shortest amount of time, to build relationships, establish trust and create a bond between people. “When we are telling our stories, instead of just delivering information or expertise, we are more ourselves,” she said. “More than anything, the families you’re serving want to know and feel you as a person. That is far more possible if you’re choosing to tell stories.”

Putting it simply, stories are what stick in the minds of those with whom you share them. “The storytelling process has a leveraging point that no other form of information exchange or communication has,” Hall said. “It’s an extremely important leveraging point for all of you because the storytelling process is a co-creative one by default.”

Offering an example, Hall explained that while she was telling her story, attendees were creating their own version of it in their minds. “You’re taking my words, but you’re adding images and emotions from your own life,” she said. “As a result, we meet in the middle, and it becomes a shared exchange of information. And because you participate in the creation of that story’s message, it will stay with you longer.”

When Hall first mentioned her high school physics class, for example, many in the audience pictured their own high school classroom. When she told her roller coaster story, people recalled their own experiences getting strapped in and raising their hands as the car roared along the track.

“Imagine what that would do for the families you’re sharing stories with,” she said. “As you’re telling stories from your previous experiences, families can see themselves in them.”

“If referrals or community awareness is an important part of what you do, every story you tell becomes a tool,” Hall added. “You’re equipping the person who hears it to be able to tell that story forward because they will remember it.”

Storytelling is such an important skill because a story has the innate ability to illustrate the true value of something.

There is one problem with storytelling in that it has become a buzzword. That means we might think we’re telling stories but we’re not. Hall explained that a story is not:

- A logo, slogan or mission statement. (“A mission statement is a statement. [These] are born from stories, but you have to tell the stories for the mission to matter,” said Hall.)
- A history lesson. (Simply saying “We’ve been in business for 100 years” isn’t a story.)
- A bullet-point list of features, benefits or information.
- High-level jargon, or values or promise statements.

So, what is a story? Everyone knows that a story has a beginning, middle and end. “A story happens in a particular moment,” Hall said. “It happens the moment you’re sitting across from a family. It happens the moment you get an important phone call or someone says thank you. There are emotions in a story, not just the information, and I can’t think of any business more emotional than what you do.”

Hall revealed that the biggest storytelling mistake that happens in business is alluding to a story but not actually telling it. “I am not implying that you should take an already very sad situation and try to find the saddest thing that’s ever happened to you to make your clients cry more,” she said. “It isn’t the magnitude of a story that matters; it’s the decision to tell a story – the right story at the right time – that illustrates for them that thing they need most.”

“Put your video on the front page of your website so that they see you telling your story of why you care,” Hall said. “There’s a tendency to say ‘It’s not about me, it’s about the families,’ but they need to know that you are right there with them during this time.”

The storytelling process breaks down into three separate parts, and whether or not you consider yourself a natural-born storyteller doesn’t really matter. “Storytelling isn’t a talent; storytelling is a skill that can be developed and practiced, and one that you can get better at,” Hall said.

Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.



National Emerging Leaders on Ambitious Change for Funeral Service

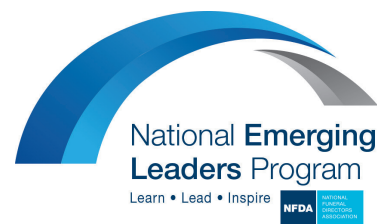
BY THE CLASS OF 2021-22

On December 17, 1903, two brothers – owners of a bicycle shop in Dayton, Ohio – achieved what mankind had been dreaming about since antiquity: powered flight. Over the windy, desolate landscape of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, Wilbur and Orville Wright achieved the seemingly impossible. The first flight was a culmination of three years of careful design and engineering work, and it lasted all of 12 seconds. But those 12 seconds proved the Wright brother’s ambition was not a pipe dream. Instead, their vision would trigger ambitious change and revolutionize the transportation of goods and people, as well as the way countries waged war.



On January 19, 2022, the inaugural class of NFDA’s National Emerging Leaders Program met and listened to a presentation by Jack Mitchell, then NFDA president-elect, and Anna Bernfeld, NFDA senior vice president of membership. The pair presented on NFDA’s strategy of “ambitious change” to promote the value of funeral service in society and to elevate NFDA’s influence and leadership in the funeral profession.

Mitchell and Bernfeld ended their presentation with a quote by German physicist Georg Lichtenberg: “I cannot say whether things will be better if we change; what I can say is they must change if they are to get better.”



After their presentation, class moderators Bruce Matza and Chad Weinstein broke the class of 20 into four groups. Each was tasked with identifying an initiative that could lead the funeral service profession toward ambitious change and then presenting it at NFDA’s 2022 Leadership Conference.

The following are the concepts of ambitious change identified by the inaugural National Emerging Leaders Program class – our “12 seconds” for the funeral profession.

1. MORTALITY AND REALITY IN THE METAVERSE

Imagine you’re on a tropical island beach at night. The beach is lined with glowing candles. Paper lanterns float overhead. You shuffle forward in line and say a silent prayer at the sight of a wicker casket, heaped with tropical flowers, such as hibiscus, bromeliad and anthurium. Soft calypso music plays in the background. At the head of the line, you embrace the widow.

“Alice,” you say, “I offer my deepest...”

After greeting the widow, you peel off your VR (virtual reality) goggles, get up off your couch and fetch a soda from your refrigerator.

Technology *will* change the way we funeralize our dead, and the biggest changes will likely take place in the metaverse. But what exactly is that? The terms metaverse and cyberspace can be used interchangeably; either is a virtual space where people can socialize, learn, play games... and perhaps soon attend funerals.

Our Emerging Leaders group surveyed 417 people to determine a baseline data set of consumers' current comfort with technology and funerals. The survey found that 55% of respondents said they'd watched a funeral online, and 58% had participated in a virtual meeting or gaming experience. Unsurprisingly, the majority (72%) comprised Gen-Xers and millennials. Clearly, our culture is heading in the direction of a more technology driven, or virtual, existence.

What about a funeral where the decedent offers their own eulogy? It's not science fiction.

Defining "metaverse," however, begs the question: What exactly is virtual reality? VR fully immerses users in a virtual world and engages their human senses through headsets and gloves. Note that this is different from "augmented reality," where the user's physical reality is supplemented by technology, such as a heads-up display on a car or airplane windshield, or when playing Pokémon GO.

The VR funeral detailed above is one example of a theoretical VR viewing. Our group was curious how receptive the public would be to virtual funerals, especially given the shift in technological expectations set by the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 4% thought attending a funeral by VR is "the same" as in-person, and 31% of respondents said it's "not even close." That left 65% in the middle, ready to be influenced.

But a curious thing jumped out at us when analyzing the data. When looking at the group that thinks VR attendance is "the same" and "close to being the same" as in-person attendance, the age distribution mirrors that of our total respondent pool. We had incorrectly assumed those respondents who favored VR would be Gen-Xers and millennials, but this is not strictly the case. This new piece of data led us to adjust our conclusion to the fact that technology during the pandemic has given older and more health-vulnerable people a way to safely communicate that they have embraced.

While VR funerals might be a decade or two away from being commonplace, virtual memorialization is already here. In the "Remember Metaverse" (*remember.place*), families can use cryptocurrency to purchase (digital) land and create one-of-a-kind monuments.

Perhaps one of the biggest factors currently driving VR access is hardware. For instance, 10 of our respondents said they had already participated in a virtual reality funeral. Of these, 80% were Gen-Xers and 20% were baby boomers. This led us to speculate that the high price tag of the technology is a barrier for younger generations that might not yet have the financial means to purchase expensive hardware. For example, the XTAL 8K VR headset, used for business, research and military applications, runs a hefty \$8,000. There are much cheaper consumer versions, such as the Meta Quest 2

at \$349, but the experience is going to reflect the cost.

As the technology becomes cheaper, there does seem to be an interest in moving to virtual funeral services, with 10% of our survey respondents committing to at least trying a VR funeral in the future.

But what about a funeral where the decedent offers their own eulogy? It's not science fiction and it might happen sooner than funerals in the metaverse. In 2020, for example, rapper Kanye West surprised his wife, reality television star Kim Kardashian, on her 40th birthday with a hologram message from her dead father. Robert Kardashian, wearing a tan suit and white shirt, offered his daughter this message: "You're 40 and all grown up." This appearance of a man who died almost 20 years ago is a harbinger of things to come for funeral service.

The possibilities are seemingly endless, not only at the service itself, but also to "conjure" the dead at their monument via holographic technology. According to Carl Minardo, CEO of Artistry in Motion Holographics, Inc., the price tag to create a hologram can range from \$2,000 to \$300,000, depending on the size of the projected image and the length of the message. But, like everything else in the tech space, a precipitous price drop is expected in the future.

With any technology, it's important to carefully weigh the investment and its return – especially with emerging technologies – and careful consideration of its motive and applicability are crucial. For many of us, however, it can be easy to remain passive and allow others to enter this new arena first. Unfortunately, private equity and venture capital firms are already pouring money into these areas in the hope of establishing their place in the death-tech space.

With any technology – and especially emerging technologies – it's important to carefully weigh the investment and its return.

So, how can we as funeral practitioners expect to engage? Do we stand idle and allow new industry entrants with little understanding of the funeral service profession and its intentions to control its commerce? Or do we make the critical investments in these technologies to secure our spots as leaders in the deathcare space?

At the end of the day, this technology is not coming, *it's already here*. It's our responsibility to engage accordingly.

2. RETAINING A QUALITY WORKFORCE

Businesses today are having a more difficult time finding employees to work – and retaining that staff – than ever before. This leaves owners/managers with the task of identify-

ing the key elements needed to retain a quality workforce in the midst of unprecedented times. Critical areas of exploration specific to funeral homes include:

1. *Balanced Work/Life Schedule* To help manage the 24/7 demands on funeral professionals, funeral homes might want to implement the following:

- Hire additional staff (employees might be willing to accept a lower salary for a more balanced schedule)
- Alternate weekends off
- Use of an answering service after hours
- Use of a transfer service for removals.

Said Melanie Carr, Ph.D.: “Fifty percent of funeral directors leave the profession in the first five years. This is mostly due to heavy workloads, with the most common complaint being, ‘I always feel like I’m on.’”

2. *Competitive Pay Structure and Benefits* It is important to look at the pay and benefits package offered. Is it competitive with other funeral firms, as well as other area businesses, to attract new employees and keep current employees satisfied? Funeral homes might examine/consider:

- A competitive pay structure that is not biased toward race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, disability, age, or genetic information.
- An attractive benefits package that includes health/dental/vision/life insurance; a 401(k) plan with company match; and paid vacations
- Perks and bonuses; a commission plan based on sales performance
- A uniform allowance
- A relocation allowance
- Recognition/awards for excellent job performance.

3. *Quarterly Staff “FUNctions”* Incorporate some fun in your funeral home! Offer quarterly “FUNctions” to build teamwork, boost relationships and create memories. These could include:

- Karaoke
- Barbecue or company picnic
- Bowling
- Pizza party
- Movie night
- Ballgame
- Paint party or paintball
- Bingo with prizes.

4. *Self-Care Programs for Employees* As funeral professionals, there are times the stress can become unbearable, which can cause compassion fatigue. It is important that

companies provide paid employee self-care initiatives to refresh, recharge and refuel staff. This enables them to provide the best care to the families they serve. Some ideas include:

- Massages
- Manicures/pedicures
- Concerts
- Sporting events.

5. *Childcare Assistance* Recruiting and retaining top talent means meeting them where they are. Employees expect companies to provide essential needs in ways that are meaningful for working families, such as providing accessible, affordable childcare. Meeting the needs of working families has a direct impact on your funeral home by improving attendance, job performance and employee morale while decreasing turnover rates.

While it might not be possible to provide childcare in the funeral home, utilizing the closest facility would enable a staff-parent to check on their child during a break or lunch. Knowing that their child is doing well will have a direct impact on that employee, allowing them to focus on their job.

Employees expect companies to provide essential needs meaningful to working families.

6. *Educational Opportunities and Reimbursement Plan* Funeral home employers should encourage employees to further their understanding of the latest trends in funeral service. This might include participation in funeral service organization opportunities, such as NFDA’s National Emerging Leaders Program, Meet the Mentors, conventions, and the association’s many podcasts and virtual trainings offered each month.

Tuition reimbursement for mortuary school would be another wise investment to help retain new employees and bring fresh talent to the table. As Benjamin Franklin stated: “An investment in education always pays the highest returns.”

7. *Training and Personality Evaluations* Thorough training programs are key to helping employees know exactly what their job responsibilities entail, the proper way to perform those responsibilities, and to encourage pride in a job well done. To know what to do and what is expected are far more important than being told “No, that’s not right!”

Personality and communication-style tests are also beneficial tools to educate the employer on their employees’ work and communication styles, as well as how to motivate them. This can prevent frustration and create a comfortable work-

ing environment where everyone feels heard, understood and valued in the role they serve at the funeral home.

8. Psychologically Safe Environment Harvard Business School's Amy Edmonson defined a psychologically safe work environment as one in which people believe "they will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes." It is very important for employers to create an environment conducive to the emotional well-being of their employees. They should not fear intimidation, bullying, gossip, harassment or other factors that cause emotional distress.

In summary, it is crucial that employers take time to get the pulse of their business. Are the employees happy? Are families being treated with compassion and respect? Are team members getting along? Is there noticeable stress? Taking inventory of those things and then implementing an action plan will improve the work environment.

A psychologically safe work environment is one in which people believe "they will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes."

The benefits of creating a happy workplace can include increased profits, improved job performances, a better retention rate for current employees and an easier time attracting new employees who will feel engaged and happy on day one.

3. LOSS 101

The goal of "Loss 101" is to diminish the negative stigma associated with death and grief, and to bring greater awareness to the valuable career opportunities associated with the deathcare profession. Topics include the psychological effects of loss and grief on an individual; the sociological factors that contribute to negative responses to death and grief, and how to counteract them; managing stress and anxiety; prioritizing self-care; and areas of employment.

Children lack the knowledge and education surrounding death and are ill-equipped to handle grief. In addition, kids also deal with many other sociological factors in today's society, such as:

- Poverty (37 million people live in poverty)
- Segregation
- Inequality
- Divorce (nationally, the divorce rate was 45% in 2021)

- Drug and alcohol abuse
- The COVID-19 pandemic and its massive social disruption.

There is tremendous social stigma surrounding loss, including addiction, imprisonment, familial estrangement due to life choices, suicide, drug overdose, and homicide. The feelings that go along with these stigmas can include shame, guilt and anger.

In today's culture, it is taboo to bring up a death socially or publicly. No matter the social class, culture, upbringing or social status, death education can bring everyone together to better understand one another. And that's what "Loss 101" aims to do; to create togetherness through education, thereby leading to better mental health.

Kids today are showing increases in:

- Anxiety: For ages 13-18, 33% have an anxiety disorder.
- Suicide: For ages 15-19, there are almost 12 deaths per 100,000 annually.
- Depression: 3%-9% of high school students suffer from depression.

According to the U.S. Surgeon General, there is a "youth mental health crisis." A recent Pew Research Center study shows 37% of high school students are experiencing "regular mental health struggles." The goal of the "Loss 101" program is to put names to feelings and to create safety. We don't want kids to feel alone in a process that's inherently centered around a community.

By educating children about grief and loss, they will also be able to recognize the stressors triggered by a death, develop self-care strategies, and recognize how grief and loss affect individuals.

Our recommendation is to begin offering this course at the 11th-grade level. As an asynchronous, online option, this allows students to learn on their own schedule, within a given timeframe. Students can access and complete lectures, readings, homework and other learning materials at any time.

The learning objectives for the "Loss 101" course would include defining critical grief and loss terminology; recognizing loss stressors; developing self-care strategies to minimize stress related to death; and identifying employment opportunities in deathcare.

"Loss 101" can be taught by any deathcare professional, such as a counselor, hospice nurse, therapist, funeral director or medical examiner. Those interested in teaching the course would complete a certification program that ensures well-rounded knowledge of death and grief to ensure uniformity for the program.

Let's start by taking care of the living, our community, and the next generation – the kids. Let's brighten their lives and be their life savers!

4. LIVING WAKES: "I WANT TO REMEMBER THEM THE WAY THEY ARE"

At O'Malley's Funeral Home, Bill signs the guest register book and slips a card with Tom's photo on it into his dark-

blue suit coat pocket. He hasn't seen Tom in at least 25 years.

Bill then shuffles past the photo collages and flower arrangements, which have too many gladiolas, before making his way to the front of the room to see his old fishing buddy.

"Tom, I'm sorry it's been so many years since I came to see you." After adjusting his oxygen tube and taking a sip of water, Tom extends a hand to Bill and says: "Well, Bill, at least you're not too late, old friend."

Tom calls his daughter over and introduces her to Bill. She then listens to their stories, including one she's never heard before involving a canoe, a trout and a lady's bathing suit.

This isn't a typical funeral at O'Malley's. It's a living wake. The event can go by many names – living funeral, funeral party, exit party or end-of-life celebration – but based on online usage, the most popular term seems to be living wake. The event centers around the soon-to-be deceased person, who is present and able to visit with their soon-to-be mourners.

Doulas, hospice, celebrants and DIY websites already tell families how to hold living wakes. Why should funeral directors not be involved in that messaging?

While family and friends often informally gather around the hospice bed of a loved one before death occurs, that is not the concept of a living wake. Instead, it involves a specific location (possibly the funeral home), on a specific date and at a specific time. The event is planned so family, friends, neighbors and acquaintances can gather to honor a person who is nearing the end of their life.

A living wake is certainly not for every person or every family. Rather, it is an additional option that funeral service providers can offer. It is not meant to replace the post-death visitation or funeral service.

Many cultures and religions require post-death ceremonies. A post-death visitation or funeral service is recommended for everyone, so those grieving the loss can experience the finality of the death. The fact is, however, that families are hosting living wakes already. The concept is becoming popular in Japan and South Korea, and starting to gain traction in Australia and England. After some online research, we found there have also been living wakes in Minnesota, Oklahoma, Virginia, Texas, Ohio and many other places in the United States.

If someone wants to hold a living wake now, they typically use a country club, hotel conference room, church, bar or a restaurant. Often, they will do this without the assistance of a funeral service provider. After the death occurs, they will

then visit a funeral service provider for a direct-cremation or immediate burial.

In other words, families should be asking us, the deathcare professionals, about a living wake but we don't have answers for them. We might say, "Oh, yeah, I heard about that once. You can do that wherever you want." Instead, we should be saying, "That's a great idea! Let me help you with that. I'll take care of all the details for you, and you can do that right here in my funeral home. And, by the way, I also want you to know about the importance of a post-death viewing and ceremony, too."

Some death doulas, hospice organizations, celebrants, and DIY internet websites already tell families how to hold living wakes. Why shouldn't funeral directors, the experts in death ceremonies, be involved in that messaging?

Ideally, we would work hand in hand with local hospice agencies to host living wakes, strengthening the ties between our funeral homes and the hospice organizations. This would help each see how the other works and allow each to get to know the other personally.

Offering living wakes will also increase the number of people in our facilities. We have great buildings designed for people to gather. We serve food and drink. We play music. We have celebrants. We display photos and other memorabilia. Sharing stories at this time would present an opportunity for the guest of honor to respond, laugh and cry. We often hear at the funeral service "I wish I could tell them this" or "I wish they could hear me say that." Well, here's the chance.

Many people in our culture are death-averse. They won't set foot in a funeral home or cemetery. They say, "I'll remember him how he was. I don't want to see him dead in a casket." This argument falls to the wayside when the person is alive and waiting to talk to them in the funeral home one last time.

In conclusion, we ask that you keep an open mind regarding living wakes. Ask people in your community if this is something they would like to see offered. Speak with your local hospice organizations. Do they see a desire for this in their patients? You might also mention living wakes when preplanning a funeral. If they were diagnosed with a terminal disease and had some time to prepare, would they be interested in the possibility?

The worst thing a funeral director can say is "No, we don't do that here." A family will find someplace to do what they want without you because the internet has changed the funeral service profession. Today, the average consumer can go on Google and find information about hosting their own living wake, guides for a home funeral, a kit on how to build their own casket, and anything else that renders a funeral director unnecessary.

Therefore, we need to be the experts in our community. We need to have answers on all subjects related to, or adjacent to, our profession. The funeral director of the future needs to be willing to work and learn in order to meet a family's unique and specific needs... even if that means getting involved before the death has occurred.

Don't Fear The Retort

By Mike Nicodemus

The year is 1974 and I'm about to graduate from the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science. I learned a great deal about anatomy, pathology, embalming chemistry and restorative art, among other subjects, but one thing I didn't learn much about was cremation.

All of the students were well aware of cremation, but there wasn't a whole lot of info out there for us to learn what cremation was all about. Not too many funeral directors in the 1960s and '70s wanted to talk about cremation because it certainly wasn't the most popular method of disposition, and, to be honest, they didn't like it. It was considered a passing fad.

Back then, cremation consisted of picking up the deceased, holding the body in the funeral home (without refrigeration) and transporting the remains to the crematory. That was pretty much it. No embalming, no services... no nothing, really. Funeral directors assumed that's all the family wanted because if they wanted embalming and services, they would have chosen burial.

Where did the term direct cremation come from? It came from funeral directors, not family members!

It's now 2023 and I want to fill students in on a little secret I discovered years ago: *Learn all you can about cremation!* Why? In case you haven't heard, 2015 was the first year that cremation surpassed burial as the preferred method of disposition in the United States. In fact, NFDA has projected that the national cremation rate will hit 59.3% in 2022 (once the data is finalized). That means for every 10 death calls you receive, roughly six of those will involve cremation.

Thus, you must get ready to answer the questions that will come your way, such as:

- How long does cremation take?
- How hot does it get?
- Does the body have to be embalmed if we choose cremation?

Let's examine that last question, which is one of my fa-



vorites. Years ago (and even today, unfortunately), when a family asked if embalming was needed, a funeral director typically replied, "Are you looking for a direct cremation?"

Now, where did that term come from? It came from funeral directors, not family members! If I've said this once, I've said it a thousand times: cremation families know one thing – they want cremation. Other than that, they don't know what they want. Therefore, we must be able to provide families with the answers when they ask about cremation.

So, how do we do that? Read, read and read some more. Because of NFDA's publications, such as *The Director* magazine, *Memorial Business Journal* and this publication for funeral service students, there is plenty of information out there to keep you up to date on many cremation issues. In addition, sign up for webinars, attend conventions and do whatever else it takes to find out all you can about cremation.

Now, I'm certainly not suggesting that you should ignore subjects that are near and dear to my heart, such as embalming, anatomy, microbiology, physiology, restorative art and a number of others. What I am saying is that you should not treat cremation as if it doesn't exist or as a fad. What if you end up working in a state that has a 70% cremation rate or even higher? There are more than a dozen of those states right now, so the chances that you will serve cremation families during your first week on your new job are pretty good.

And don't for a second think that cremation families somehow require less service. Ask any funeral director out there if it takes less time to make arrangements when a family chooses cremation instead of burial and you will hear a resounding, "No! It takes more time."

Cremation has become very litigious and in the United States, settlements in cremation-gone-wrong cases average \$350,000 to \$400,000. A few years ago, I conducted cremation training programs in two countries and in half the states in this country and I can unequivocally tell you that we still have a number of funeral directors who don't place

enough importance on cremation and documentation – in other words, “dotting their I’s and crossing their T’s.”

In October of that same year, I also received phone calls from three different attorneys around the country, each looking to see if I could help them by serving as an expert witness in the cremation-gone-wrong lawsuits they were handling. That’s three cases in one month.

I could speak on litigation for weeks, but for the sake of not taking up this entire publication, I’ll conclude by offering a few tips on cremation arranging. First, get to know the families you serve. Don’t just make it a Q&A session, make it *personal*. Ask them questions about the deceased, but don’t ask leading questions, such as: “So, you just want a basic cremation, right?” or “We offer direct cremation if that’s what you’re looking for.” Instead, try, “Has anyone explained your options when it comes to selecting cremation?” or “How do you plan on celebrating your loved one’s life?” Allow the family to decide based on the information you provide to them.

In addition, be ready to answer this question: “We saw that one of your competitors offers cremation for \$895, but you charge \$3,295. What’s the difference? Aren’t you both doing the same thing?” Many directors struggle with that question, so don’t feel bad if you do, too. The best answer you can provide is to communicate what makes you and your firm better and what makes you different. Help the families you serve see that *you* are the cremation expert in your area.

I often chuckle when I hear people in funeral service say, “Boy, the funeral profession sure has changed.” To me, funeral service hasn’t really changed; it’s people who have changed. We just need to keep up with the changes they want.

Will you be a “Well, that’s the way we’ve always done things” type of funeral director or will you look at things and say, “We need to change”?

It’s your call.

Mike Nicodemus is NFDA vice president of cremation services.

Children and the Grieving Process

By Elena Escalona



The grieving experience is often encountered during childhood, whether it involves the death of a relative, a pet or even a favorite TV character. Our experiences with grief at a young age will ultimately shape our perspectives on death and loss later in life. As grief educator Alan Wolfelt writes, “Our

responses to death in adulthood are based upon losses we experience as children and the models of grief we evolved during this vulnerable time.” Thus, the way we introduce mourning and ways of coping to children at this fragile age is incredibly important, as this will set the tone for healthy coping down the line.

There are countless blogs, podcasts and other resources available that discuss how to cope with the loss of a loved one, but most of that information about healthy coping is presented to adult audiences. It’s difficult to introduce the grieving experience and healthy coping mechanisms to children and adolescents.

There are various reasons for this, but one of the major underlying issues is the fact that America is a death-phobic society. It is becoming increasingly common for adults to avoid initiating conversations with the younger generation about grief when a death occurs in the family. In addition, we live in an era that witnesses less death in the family during our lifetimes than in previous generations because advances in modern medicine and healthcare have prolonged the lives of many.

Another contributing factor is that several generations no longer live under the same roof, as in older times. Families have become more disconnected, and grandparents usually end up in the care of hospitals or nursing homes. Taking all these points into consideration, it is not difficult to understand why it is harder for children to properly understand and experience grief.

Many resources discuss how to cope with a loved one’s loss, but most are directed at adult audiences.

Parents and primary caregivers play a vital role in helping children cope with loss and grief. An ideal way to start assisting is by first understanding the issues that adults themselves

face. Wolfelt presents a list of reasons why adults avoid children when a death occurs, including being too preoccupied with their own feelings, having difficulty processing death themselves, not wanting to upset children and the inability to handle the child's response to death.

Adults should not initiate a conversation with a child with the intent of avoiding a crisis. Rather, they should provide guidance and resources that aid in adequately reducing the stress arising from the loss of a loved one. Children and adolescents require tactful navigation through the grieving process, but only after an adult learns how to deal with their own discomfort will he or she be able to effectively assist children through grief.

Only after adults learn to deal with their own discomfort will they be able to effectively assist children through grief.

As a result of not confronting death early in their lives, children who do not learn how to properly grieve might exhibit negative behaviors when dealing with loss later in their lives. Furthermore, children who do not receive honest answers in response to their natural curiosity concerning the topic of death might develop confusing or upsetting thoughts on the subject. This inability to handle grief might result in angry outbursts, irritability and eating or sleeping disorders.

In more extreme cases, the outcome could include drug and alcohol abuse, instances of self-harm and even thoughts of suicide. Feelings of anger, depression and anxiety can develop and intensify. A child might even begin to blame him- or herself, other family members or even God for the death of their loved one. Tragic reactions to death such as these are examples of “disabling grief,” and all these instances ultimately contribute to our increasingly death-phobic culture.

In contrast to the pitfalls mentioned, there are numerous benefits to educating children about death and introducing healthy opportunities for handling loss.

The first step is to consider the age of the child, as well as his or her ability to comprehend certain information. After this is established, adults can think of ways that could contribute to healthy grieving and then initiate an appropriate conversation – keeping in mind that the child should understand that mourning does not mean “forgetting” or “letting go” of their loved one's memory. Instead, an adult should work with the child to plan ways of keeping his or her memory alive and honoring them in their everyday lives.

Rather than contribute to society's avoidance of death, funeral directors should seek to inspire their communities to introduce healthy coping strategies and positive perceptions

of death. This will ultimately positively impact the younger generation and how they deal with different kinds of loss as they grow older.

There are several different approaches to utilize, such as appropriate conversations and inclusion in services. Funeral homes should make it a point to provide guidance and resources to families with grieving children. Holding uncomplicated conversations about the death of a loved one with children present would be a positive step forward toward healthy grieving.

In addition, funeral service professionals could work with families to include the participation of the child in the service. Whether that involves writing a poem, taking part in the decoration setup or finding photos for a tribute slideshow, including children in any way would provide them a great start to healthy grieving.

Outside resources are also easily accessible. Sesame Street provides an online grieving assistance guide at sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief or families can access the Dougy Center (dougy.org), a nonprofit organization designed to support grieving families. The Funeral Service Foundation also offers its free booklet titled “When a Child Dies: Planning Acts of Love and Legacy.” There are many



Children who don't learn how to properly grieve might exhibit negative behaviors when dealing with loss later in their lives.

other beneficial resources that also concentrate on supporting grieving children and families.

Ultimately, by helping those we serve develop a healthy response to grief at any age, funeral service professionals can contribute to the development of a more death-accepting culture in this country.

Elena Escalona, a fourth-generation funeral service provider from Santa Rita, Guam, is a student at Worsham College of Mortuary Science. Her goal is to provide an elevated standard of care to her community and serve as a pillar of support for families.

Take 5 For Yourself

NFDA Offers Free Online Self-Care Series For Funeral Service Professionals

Those just entering funeral service, or about to enter, will find that this is a high-touch, high-stress career that potentially comes with a high degree of compassion fatigue and burnout. Too often, self-care is relegated to the back burner.

To help members of the profession understand when that on-the-job stress might be impacting them, and the steps they can take to better cope with and preserve their emotional well-being, NFDA has introduced “Take 5,” a free self-care series.

For students, the sooner they begin good habits, the better. “Between schoolwork, jobs and families, students have busy lives that can be difficult to balance,” said Carmella Hansen, NFDA director of education. As they prepare to enter a highly demanding and emotional profession, it’s essential for them to be mindful of caring for themselves and to integrate simple self-care habits into their daily routine. By making self-care a priority, students will be able to give their best to families and in turn get the most reward from their career in funeral service.

In preparing to enter a demanding and emotional profession, it’s essential for students to be mindful of caring for themselves.

“Effectively managing that stress is so very important because when we take care of ourselves, we’ll be better able to take care of the families that are depending on us,” said Randy Anderson, NFDA immediate past president. “The Take 5 self-care series is a free resource developed by NFDA to help anyone – regardless of membership status – identify and address the stresses in their life that come with being a funeral service professional.

“When we invite families to talk about how they would like to be remembered, that can sometimes be a little awkward as well, but often, once family members get started, the



conversation usually starts to flow,” Anderson added. “I find it’s the same when talking about mental health.

“And leading by example is a great place to start. If you’re feeling stressed or anxious about something, being open about it will let your colleagues know that they have a safe place to talk about anything.”

Available online 24/7, Take 5 is a series of short activities designed to give funeral professionals information and practices to better care for themselves. You might think, who has the time? Well, the best part is that it only takes five minutes.

The interactive series features short videos, quizzes, self-assessments and self-care tips. Take 5 is based on the Funeral Service Foundation’s “Caring for Families and Caring for Yourself: A Self-Care Handbook for Funeral Service Professionals,” written by Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D. It’s available free of charge at funeralservicefoundation.org/resources.

Take 5 viewers will learn:

- To identify sources of stress that personally impact them on the job and at home, and to gauge their level of burnout
- To recognize symptoms of burnout and common, often unhealthy coping mechanisms
- To utilize strategies for minimizing the impact of stress on the job, and tips to develop a personal plan for self-care
- To be proactive in prioritizing self-care using small, manageable steps
- To understand the wide range of free resources available to funeral professionals, such as articles, screenings and toolkits, to further explore self-care and mental health.

Access and explore the NFDA Take 5 self-care series at nfda.org/take5.

OTHER RESOURCES

Again, developing good habits early can help funeral professionals deliver the highest level of care to those who depend on them. To help funeral directors be at their best so they can effectively support families, NFDA has also partnered with SupportLinc to offer a member-assistance program. This confidential support service is available 24/7/365 at no charge to NFDA members, as well as their immediate family members (e.g., spouse and children).

Administered by CuraLinc Healthcare, SupportLinc offers in-the-moment support and short-term counseling by phone, web, text or mobile app with a licensed clinician. Available are digital support group sessions, legal consultation, financial consultation and more. Information about the tools, resources and information available to members can be found at nfda.org/supportlinc.

“Caring for Families & Caring for Yourself: A Self-Care Handbook for Funeral Service Professionals,” the booklet on which Take 5 is based, along with a companion “Self-Care Manifesto” in poster form, are available free of charge at funeralservicefoundation.org/resources.

“The Funeral Service Foundation is proud to offer ‘Caring for Families & Caring for Yourself’ as an important resource for funeral professionals,” said Allan Cole, foundation chair. “NFDA’s Take 5 series will help bring Dr. Wolfelt’s self-care guidance to even more people in the profession.”

“As a funeral home owner, I know that my funeral home can’t care for grieving families if we don’t have a strong team,” added Anderson. “I urge funeral home owners and managers to help their team be at their best by helping them access the Take 5 series and other self-care resources offered by NFDA and the Funeral Service Foundation.”

Lessons From Lou

By Lauren M. Budrow

My 17-year-old cat, Lou, died in June 2022.

His decline was heartbreaking, but because his fear of the vet’s office matched his terror of thunder, we decided to use a home vet as much as possible and not let his final weeks, days or hours be full of anxiety or fear. We provided him as close to a hospice situation as we could, so he could transition at home, where he felt safe with his family. We cared for his every need, cuddled him and made him comfortable – we could not euthanize him.

Those of us in funeral service have the luxury of knowing who to call and what can be done when death occurs, even for our pets. Thus, a few days before Lou’s death, I called a friend who owns a pet cremation service and explained the situation. I knew from prior experience that I could schedule a time to bring him to the crematory and that I could also request to wait and take him home at the end of the process. I had already decided that we would not return home without him.

Therefore, after handing Lou over to the people we trusted to care for him, we went on errands, shared memories of finding piles of unrolled toilet paper on the bathroom floor (among Lou’s other pranks), and waited for the call to say everything was ready for us to come back. It was healing for us to continue to care for Lou after death; we needed to be involved.

That day was exhausting, and we were already fatigued from the many prior days filled with sadness, tears, in-



Lou’s special urn.



What we wanted wouldn’t be on Etsy or Amazon, so we reached out to a friend who also knew Lou.

errupted sleep, and worry over doing the right thing. We weren’t in the frame of mind to select an urn at that moment, but I knew I didn’t want the typical paw print-on-the-front urn or a rectangular box with a nameplate. Even though I knew I would eventually buy him something permanent, I declined to even look at what was available at the pet cremation business. I knew that what we wanted wouldn’t be on Etsy, Amazon or through any merchandise provider.

Therefore, we reached out to a friend who also knew Lou and who happens to run a ceramics business. We asked her to create the urn. We didn’t ask what it would cost. We did not mind that the soonest she could make it was almost a month away. Instead, we just told her the size we wanted and the style we liked based on what she had made in the past, requested the colors of the glaze for it and asked that

she write his name on the bottom before firing it in the kiln.

We then went home and propped the velvet pouch containing Lou's cremated remains against the window, where a familiar sunbeam would fall every morning, and waited.

About three weeks later, the urn was ready. Our friend first sent us a video of her rotating it, lifting the lid, and showing the inside and his name on the bottom. It was perfect.

Five months later, in my funeral directing course, I gave my students a personalization assignment requiring them to design an urn based on a minimal description of a fictional person or pet. I allowed students to choose from the various craft supplies, boxes and tubes I provided, or they could buy their own. I gave no instructions on how the assignment should be completed; I just asked them to use our discussions on personalization, and the examples we had worked through in class, to guide them in capturing the essence of their person or pet.

The projects were fantastic – so much so I decided to line them up with no student names listed and ask attendees of our mortuary science open house to vote on their favorite.

At the end of the event, I tallied the results: two of the projects tied for first. One was a giant dog bone made from one of the tubes and papier mâché bone ends. The other was a boat made from one of the boxes and a cardboard mast, sails and anchor.

Funeral home owners are converting space for food service but what about for creative and interactive purposes?

People overwhelmingly gravitated to the projects that didn't look like traditional urns. They preferred the projects they could relate to that were familiar, just as I had wanted something for Lou that I could relate to and involved me in the creation process.

By providing a similar activity for my students, I saw the connections they made with these fictional decedents. They enjoyed the project. In one student's words, "It was fun to do something different."

Funeral practitioners constantly strive for personalization, but how far are funeral home owners willing to go to provide it? If families are choosing direct-cremation and fewer services, why not offer an alternative container- and urn-personalization space at the funeral home to *do something different*? The firm could provide a selection of supplies included in the fee for the room and personalization time. Families could have the option of personalizing the alternative container, or even the rental casket insert, prior to cremation. Why not provide unglazed ceramic jars that families can paint and customize for their loved ones? The funeral home could coor-



dinate with a local ceramics service to fire the finished pieces and bring them back for the families to pick up. The funeral home could also partner with local artists who would consult with families on custom designs.

Over a decade ago, I worked with families willing to spend more on keepsake jewelry and catering than they were on direct cremation and an urn, and I suspect it's still happening. I believe it's because jewelry (keepsakes) and food are what people can relate to; it's more personalized to their tastes.

I'm not suggesting doing away with standard urns, but for consumers unwilling to buy off-the-shelf products, there's an opportunity to still serve them by offering a different type of service that includes merchandise personalization. Isn't that better than sending families away to find what they want on their own?

Most people don't have the space or supplies to personalize containers or urns, and many don't know a ceramics expert to craft an urn from scratch. Funeral home owners these days are converting space to accommodate meals for large gatherings, but what about creative and interactive purposes? If families are using funeral home chapels less, could some of that space be converted to meet this need? If funeral homes are becoming life-event centers, this might be one more way that funeral practitioners could bring families together to honor their loved ones in a unique way.

My hope is that families will spend more time in funeral provider facilities and not see funeral homes as merely direct-disposition providers. At its core, funeral service is about serving communities and creating those spaces to grieve and celebrate life.

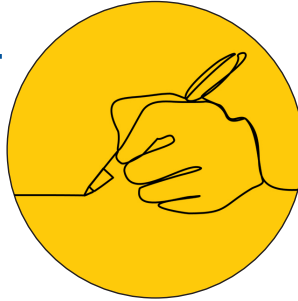
Lou just happened to be a cat, but the experience and emotional roller coaster caused by his decline and death were similar to what I have felt for family. It meant a great deal to me to be part of designing his urn. While the class personalization urns were for fictional people and pets, the students brought those fictions to life through their creativity, and the community saw what was possible when given the opportunity to be involved in that process.

Lauren M. Budrow is an assistant professor of mortuary science at Wayne State University in Detroit.

From the Editor's Desk

The Untapped Power of the Obituary

By Edward J. Defort



I worked my way through college on an internship and as a “stringer” for local publications. A stringer, if you don’t know, is just a freelancer who usually gets called in to cover the lesser municipal meetings – just in case something might happen. More often than not, nothing did. But it was good training for a journalist, forcing me to come up with stories from the meetings.

My first journalism class focused on the obituary, and I remember my first assignment was to write my own.

My first assignment with a newspaper following graduation was covering municipal council meetings, planning board meetings and zoning board meetings. When not covering these meetings, new graduates like me were chained to the obituary desk, where I would routinely speak with funeral directors. The conversations followed a pretty standard format, and I’d have been hard-pressed to say that any of them at the time demonstrated any degree of creativity.

Years later, after I made my way into covering funeral service full time, I heard more about these creative obituaries that went a long way toward painting a picture of the deceased and could even change the mood at a visitation. At least that’s what I had experienced on a couple of occasions when someone I knew had died – what the family included in the paper was a little different than most. In fact, I clearly recall on one occasion that the obituary was pretty much a focal point of conversation at the visitation.

Last week, while scanning Google alerts, I happened upon an obituary that included the following: “...No calling hours will be held. A private service will be held at the convenience of the family.”

I don’t know which caused me to recoil more – “no calling hours” or “convenience.” This is phraseology I never experienced in my early days on the obituary desk. While such a circumstance is certainly nothing new, it’s disheartening to see it in the obituary itself.

In casual conversations I have today with funeral directors, the consensus is that this is happening all too often. Families must be encouraged to be a little more creative, and directors should let them know that this notice to the public should not be overlooked.

Death has never been about convenience. That’s a strange concept to learn and I suspect it will be even more difficult for families to unlearn.

Edward J. Defort
Editor

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