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## The Passion and Professionalism of “Mr. Cremation”

Mike Nicodemus reflects on 50 years in the funeral service profession.

By Edward J. Defort

Mike Nicodemus’ career in funeral service is synonymous with excellence, dedication and a passion for education. For the past 13 years, he has served as vice president of NFDA’s cremation services division, which includes a certification program that gives consumers confidence their provider is among the best.

After more than 50 years in funeral service, Nicodemus will be stepping back (*not* stepping down) from his role as

*Nicodemus at the 2024 NFDA International Convention & Expo.*



facilitator of these NFDA programs. When you’ve dedicated 50 years of your life to promoting excellence in your profession, there is no switch you can easily shut off. More importantly, Nicodemus doesn’t want to.

Nicodemus is certainly one of the most recognized figures in all of funeral service.



But his story began in the small Pennsylvania town of Altoona. His early life laid the foundation for a future dedicated to service. After graduating from Altoona High School, he pursued his passion for athletics by attending Hawthorne College in Antrim, New Hampshire, on a dual scholarship for basketball and baseball.

“I grew up pitching a baseball around when I was about 5 years old,” Nicodemus said. “From grade school through high school, I threw a few no hitters and won a state championship at the age of 15.”

When Nicodemus was attending Hawthorne College, his coach had a few contacts with the Boston Red Sox. He invited one of the team’s scouts to watch Nicodemus pitch. “I threw a great game, shut out the opposing team and held them to three hits,” Nicodemus recalled.

“After the game, the scout spoke to me, and I can almost remember verbatim what he told me,” Nicodemus continued. “He said: ‘Son, I like the way you handle yourself on the mound. You’re a thinker and keep the hitters off balance, guessing at what you’re throwing. You have great stuff, but I’m afraid your fastball wouldn’t break a pane of glass. We can teach our pitchers to do what you do, but I can’t teach them to throw faster. Good luck in the funeral business.’ And



*In June 2016, Mike Nicodemus presented the Certified Crematory Operator (CCO) Program in Sao Paulo, Brazil.*

that was it. It was nice to be looked at, and I wasn't totally disappointed since my mind was set on attending mortuary school after college."

Following his collegiate years, Nicodemus was accepted into the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science (PIMS), where he now serves as a member of its board of directors.

His path into the funeral profession was deeply personal. It began in 1970 when his father, only 46, passed away suddenly from a heart attack during his son's senior year of high school. Struck by the profound guidance provided by the funeral director during this difficult time, Nicodemus recognized the essential, delicate nature of the profession – helping families accept death, navigate grief and begin to rebuild their lives. He found the role of funeral director demanding yet equally rewarding.

Upon graduating from PIMS in 1974, he completed his apprenticeship at Beinhauer Funeral Home, the largest funeral home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, at the time. In 1979, he relocated his family to Virginia Beach, Virginia, where he began his significant 35-year career at Hollomon-Brown Funeral Home.

Nicodemus expressed his appreciation for the late Louis Jones, who hired him and let him run the entire cremation operation as he saw fit. "It's because of him I became, in the words of Dr. Barry Lease, CEO of PIMS, 'Mr. Cremation.' I am where I am today because of Louis Jones."

At Hollomon-Brown, he ascended to the role of vice president of cremation operations. His expertise in this field led him to serve on the board of directors for the Cremation Association of North America (CANA). He eventually became the association's president. A key responsibility during his tenure at CANA was to provide the highly regarded Crematory Operators Certification Program to students, funeral directors and crematory operators nationwide.

### A PAIR OF SCANDALS

As someone possessing a great passion for funeral service, Nicodemus still shakes his head at the debacle of Tri-State Crematory in Noble, Georgia. The incident is one of the

most bizarre, unsettling stories in funeral service history – the discovery of 339 bodies that were supposed to be cremated but instead were unceremoniously stacked and strewn around the crematory's property.

What happened at the crematory was as confounding to investigators as it was damaging to funeral service. Ray Brent Marsh took over the operation of the crematory in 1996 from his father. It remains unclear why, six years later, the younger Marsh opted to keep the dead bodies on his property rather than doing what he was supposed to do with them. Marsh offered up the reason that the retort was broken, but subsequent tests found the unit was still functional, albeit not in perfect working order. Regardless, manufacturers offer regular maintenance programs.

"The Tri-State Crematory debacle was certainly a dark day in the funeral profession," Nicodemus recalled. "I was appalled at what I saw and thought how this could ever happen if any of the funeral homes that used this facility for their cremations went to inspect Tri-State."

He added: "I believe around 58 funeral homes used Tri-State because Ray Brent Marsh said he would pick up the body, do the cremation and return the urn back to the funeral home, all for around \$200-\$250." Many of those urns were filled with Sakrete concrete mix.

Nicodemus' good friend, Dr. Rick Snow, a forensic anthropologist, was tasked with identifying as many of the bodies as he could. He successfully identified about 226 decedents. "It certainly put a black mark on the entire funeral profession, but if anything good came out of this travesty, funeral homes started practicing due diligence when it came to cremation services," Nicodemus said.

**"You have great stuff, but I'm afraid your fastball wouldn't break a pane of glass. We can teach our pitchers to do what you do, but I can't teach them to throw faster. Good luck in the funeral business."**

Nicodemus thought there was no way something like this would ever happen again, but, unfortunately, he was wrong. "Not long after Tri-State, I was called upon to serve as an expert witness in the Bayview Crematory scandal in Seabrook, New Hampshire."

This scandal, uncovered in 2005, involved the crematory operating without a license for years, resulting in the mishandling of hundreds of human remains, fraudulent documentation and financial misdeeds.

In February 2005, state police raided Bayview and made several grisly discoveries, including a dozen sets of unidentified human remains, a woman's decomposing body in a broken refrigeration unit, two bodies in a single cremation oven simultaneously, and heaps of medical waste. In addition, employees and medical examiners had been signing off on cremation certificates without viewing the bodies, a required

legal step, and a former employee admitted to having forged a medical examiner's signature on dozens of certificates.

Ultimately, the facility was found to have operated for six years without being registered or inspected by the state. New Hampshire laws at the time did not require crematories to be licensed. The scandal prompted the state's legislators to pass much stricter laws and regulations, requiring licensing and regular inspections for crematories.

More than 5,000 bodies had been cremated at Bayview from funeral homes across New England (Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine, specifically). With questions lingering over whether they had received the correct remains of their loved ones, numerous families filed civil lawsuits.

"After these two travesties came to light, I started speaking ad nauseam in all my presentations on how easy it is to prevent things like this from happening," Nicodemus said. "Hopefully I've made a difference on how funeral homes now look at their third-party crematory."

### A NEW CHAPTER BEGINS

In 2013, upon retiring from Hollomon-Brown, Nicodemus and his expertise were sought by Christine Pepper, NFDA CEO. She personally requested that he join the association as vice president of its cremation services division. He accepted

## Nicodemus' Top 10

Asked to apply the phrase, "In a perfect world..." to cremation, Mike Nicodemus offered 10 tips to help you perfect your cremation business.

1. Have a picture-perfect facility.
2. Construct a viewing suite/room adjacent to the crematory.
3. Have an open-door policy so when someone stops by to look at your facility, you can show them whatever they want to see (unless you're cremating).
4. Invite families to the crematory to witness the beginning of the cremation procedure.
5. Buy top-notch equipment. If you can afford it, purchase the "best of the best."
6. Hire the best employees and pay them a living wage. An operator is your last line of defense!
7. Require all your operators to earn NFDA certification.
8. Have your manufacturer's rep pay you a yearly visit, whether you need it or not.
9. Follow a checklist on operational procedures.
10. Create and maintain an operations handbook specific to your crematory.



*In August 2024, the NFDA Cremation Certification Program had record attendance. There were 90 attendees at PIMS.*

the offer and has since solidified his standing as a leading cremation authority.

Nicodemus' dedication to the funeral service profession is perhaps most evident in his specialization and leadership within the field of cremation. In this capacity, he has become a globally recognized resource for NFDA members. His duties have included:

- **Content creation:** authoring numerous articles on cremation practices and issues
- **Member support:** answering hundreds of phone calls from NFDA members seeking guidance on complex cremation matters
- **Global training:** traveling internationally to provide NFDA's cremation certification programs and to ensure best practices are being upheld around the world

At the time Nicodemus joined the association, Bob Rosson, then-president of NFDA, said, "Our members appreciate all that NFDA offers in the area of cremation. However, as the cremation rate continues to grow and the needs of families that choose cremation evolve, it is important that we anticipate our members' future needs. I am personally looking forward to learning all I can from Mike about how I can better meet the needs of families in my community that choose cremation – now and in the future."

At the time, Pepper added, "As an association, we have an obligation to offer our members the programs and services they need to succeed in their businesses and communities. We are thrilled to have a passionate cremation expert like Mike join the NFDA team and help our members exceed the expectations of the families they serve."

Nicodemus' first order of business was to assess NFDA's current cremation-related products and services and to determine opportunities for expansion and growth. The centerpiece of NFDA's expanded offerings was a new certification program for crematory operators. NFDA's program would be geared specifically toward funeral directors who provide cremation services.

Among his other duties, Nicodemus helped develop cre-

mation-related continuing-education programs, staffed a free hotline to answer members' questions about cremation, and offered cremation consulting services to NFDA members.

In September 2013, NFDA unveiled its Certified Crematory Operator (CCO) Program at John A. Gupton College in Nashville, Tennessee. "Without question, this training program is the most comprehensive in the industry," said Nicodemus. "The information provided on legal issues, operational procedures and environmental issues, to name a few, has come from years of research, writing and experience. Whether you operate your own crematory or not, this program is tailored to meet the needs of funeral directors and operators."

The topics covered during the training program are:

- Cremation ethics
- Cremation and funeral service terminology
- Principles of combustion
- Maintenance and troubleshooting
- Right-of-disposition scenarios
- Due diligence
- Recordkeeping
- The cremation process, including special cremation procedures
- Safe crematory operations (OSHA)
- Liability
- Public relations

**"When I look back at the number of families that have relied on me to get them through one of the most difficult times in their life, it gives me great satisfaction to know I was there to help."**

The program took off immediately. In less than three months, the CCO designation had been conferred on 131 funeral service professionals. "If your firm offers cremation to your families, you and your staff need to participate in this program," said Nicodemus. "Whether you currently own and operate a crematory or use a third-party crematory, this training is critical."

Added Nicodemus: "Cremation litigation is on the rise, and the CCO Program will help funeral professionals understand how to protect their firm by implementing cremation due-diligence practices, such as authorization forms, chain-of-custody procedures and more."

In 2017, the NFDA Certified Crematory Operator Program changed its name to the NFDA Cremation Certification Program and began to offer two designation options. The name change and addition of a second designation option reflected NFDA's ongoing efforts to respond to the needs of cremation

providers. Attendees can choose their preferred designation based on their role in offering cremation to families.

"Some funeral homes own and operate crematories. Others partner with a third-party crematory to provide cremation services to families," said Nicodemus. "By offering two designations, the NFDA Cremation Certification Program better reflects the diverse roles funeral professionals have in the cremation process."

"During my career, I've been called on numerous times to testify as an expert witness in cremation litigation cases," said Nicodemus. "The mistakes I've seen have caused heartache for families and damaged the reputations of businesses. With cremation litigation on the rise, it is critical that you understand the steps you must take to protect your firm – from the moment a family walks in your front door until [the moment] you deliver the cremated remains to the family. And that's true whether you own a crematory or use a third party."

Although much of his time has been spent teaching funeral directors proper due diligence and how to care for their crematory, Nicodemus also has been able to appreciate outstanding facilities. "I have toured a number of crematories around the country, and they are not remotely close to being a Tri-State or Bayview," Nicodemus said.

"Just here in Virginia alone are two of the most beautiful crematories I've ever seen. One is Bliley's Funeral Home/Cremation in Richmond, and the other is Oakey's in Roanoke," he said. "If you ever have the chance to check those places out, do yourself a favor and stop by. More and more funeral directors and owners are taking pride in their crematory facilities, and I'm thrilled they are."

#### WHAT'S NEXT?

When contemplating the future of the funeral service profession and cremation, Nicodemus believes the majority of funeral directors have accepted the fact that they are not going to change families' minds on the topic of burial versus cremation. "I believe they now see it's all about personalization and options when it comes to cremation services," he said.

"In the cases I take on as an expert witness, the defendants are never NFDA members or I would be conflicted out, but litigation will never go away, so those who think it's foolish to attend the programs NFDA puts on to eliminate lawsuits or possibly reduce their severity had better wake up. Litigation is extremely expensive – not to mention the damage done to your good name and reputation."

As for the past 50 years, Nicodemus lamented, "Being a funeral director is certainly not for everyone. It's a calling, not a job. When I look back at the number of families that have relied on me to get them through one of the most difficult times in their life, it gives me great satisfaction to know I was there to help. Knowing what I know now, would I do it over again? Absolutely!"

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*Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.*

# A Letter to Young Funeral Professionals

Reflect, realign and, if needed, revise in the new year.

By Jay Jacobson

If I could sit across the table from you for a few minutes – coffee cooling between us, phones face down – this is what I'd want you to hear.

I've spent more than 40 years in funeral service. I've stood in prep rooms late at night, driven hearses before sunrise, sat with families when words ran out and watched this profession change in ways I never could've predicted. I've seen the best of it, and I've seen the parts we don't talk about nearly enough.

As this new year begins, it's worth pausing before the pace picks back up and spending some quiet time evaluating your own mission and vision. Ask yourself what kind of professional you want to be, what kind of life you're trying to build and what matters most to you right now.

**Lifelong learning isn't about collecting credentials or chasing titles. It's about staying curious, sharpening your judgment and honoring the responsibility that this work places in your hands.**

Then, take an honest look at where you are professionally and ask whether the direction you're headed actually aligns with your answers. If it doesn't, that's not failure. That's information. And information gives you the opportunity to adjust your compass before drifting too far off course.

Let me say this plainly: If you're not being treated well, if you're not being supported, if you're not being compensated fairly, then it might be time to make a change.

And if your work leaves no room for the rest of your life, that matters, too. Funeral service is not a nine-to-five profession. We all know that. But there's a difference between meaningful sacrifice and chronic depletion. Being available does not mean being consumed. Being dedicated does not require surrendering your health, your family or your sense of self.

You spend your days caring for people during their most vulnerable moments. That level of emotional and mental labor requires recovery time, boundaries and managers who understand you are a human first and a professional second. Without balance, even the most capable professionals eventually lose clarity, patience and joy.



At the same time, this profession asks something else of you: growth. If you stop learning, you burn out faster. If you stop growing, the work begins to feel heavy instead of meaningful. Lifelong learning isn't about collecting credentials or chasing titles. It's about staying curious, sharpening your judgment and honoring the responsibility that this work places in your hands.

So, seek out education that stretches you. Learn from people who have been in the profession longer than you and who see it differently than you. Read. Ask questions. Pay attention. The professionals who last are the ones who never assume they've arrived.

And, as you grow, there will come a moment when you realize that this profession survives because people give back. Mentorship is not an obligation; it's a privilege. Someone once took the time to show you how to stand, how to speak, how to care and how to carry yourself when things are hard. One day, you'll have the chance to do the same for someone else. When that moment comes, say yes.

There are funeral homes that understand all of this – places where balance is respected, learning is encouraged and mentorship is part of the culture. If you're not experiencing that where you are, don't assume that's all that's out there.

You spend too much of your life serving grieving families to feel stuck, undervalued or misaligned with your own purpose.

This new year is an invitation – to reflect, to realign, to make thoughtful changes that move you closer to the life and career you actually want.

This isn't about walking away from funeral service. It's about choosing to stay in it with intention, direction and a compass that points where you're truly meant to go.

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*Jay Jacobson is a licensed funeral director, business consultant and former NFDA Executive Board member. As founder of Jacobson Professional Staffing, he trains funeral professionals and business leaders in leadership, communication and the responsible use of artificial intelligence. He is also the author of Lead by Legendary Example, a book on leadership shaped by real-life experience.*



# The A to Z of Zoomers

**Generation Z has arrived. Here's how its members got where they are.**

**By Chelsea Cush**

Do you remember the first time you felt your age? I mean *really* felt your age, the first time the realization caught you off guard. Do you remember the first time you felt unable to relate to someone younger than you? The first time you didn't understand a slang term? The first time a fashion trend you never even realized was out of style made a comeback?

I was in my late 20s when I started teaching at the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science. Even at that relatively young age, it was clear to me that I was older than the majority of my students, but I didn't think much about the generational divide until a few terms ago. I was talking with a group of students about a show they'd been watching. One student was surprised that I hadn't seen it, and another turned and said, "Don't forget, Miss Cush *was* born in the 1900s."

If you were born in the "1900s" like me and have a Gen Zer, or "Zoomer," working with or for you, you might find it hard to relate to them.

And if you are a member of Gen Z, you might feel a disconnect when interacting with older generations, as well.

We are in the midst of a unique shift in funeral service. Some firms have employees from four or even five generations all in one place. The youngest members of the cautious and conservative Silent Generation (born between 1928 and 1945) are in their 80s and 90s currently. Although it's not too common, we all know a funeral director who's still running the show at 85 years old. The years from 1946 to 1964 gave us the traditional but confident baby boomers, who will be

between 62 and 80 years old in 2026. The "latchkey kids" of Generation X (1965-1980) are between 46 and 61 years old. Gen X was followed by millennials (1981-1996), who grew up during a time of very rapid technological expansion. And Gen Zers were born between 1997 and 2012. This year, the oldest will turn 29, and the youngest will be 14.

## WHO ARE ZOOMERS?

Every generation experiences new challenges, of course, but the transition from millennial to Gen Z was unprecedented, according to *The Washington Post*. So, who are Zoomers, and why are they so different from the generations that precede them?

Gen Z is the most racially diverse generation in history. In

addition to racial diversity, this generation has a lot of diversity in terms of gender and sexual identity.

This group also has a unique relationship with mental health. The number of Gen Z college students with mental health issues is increasing every year. Anxiety, in particular, appears to be a major issue for Zoomers.

Although millennials grew up during a significant technology boom, theirs was the last childhood not heavily intertwined with technology. Zoomers, on the other hand, have been constantly and consistently inundated with technology since they were born.

## A TRIP BACK IN TIME

I want you to join me on an imaginary journey back in time. If you're old enough, do you remember what it was like to live in the 1980s? Technology-based entertainment included your local arcade's Pac-Man game or your neighbor's Atari. Peak fashion consisted of neon colors and big hair. Michael Jackson dropped *Thriller*, Cyndi Lauper dropped "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," and MTV dropped America into the 1990s.

Do you remember what it was like in the '90s? America saw a boom in the economy and Beanie Babies. Nirvana gave us grunge, and Britney Spears gave us pop. Do you remember what it felt like waking up for a day of work or school in 1995? Well, you woke up to a world that had not yet seen the Columbine massacre of 1999. The twin towers of the World Trade Center were still standing in New York City. And your worldview had not yet been tainted by the

devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 or the Great Recession.

Now, back in our time machine, let's head to New Year's Eve of 1999. Imagine you're a baby and your parents are petrified the world is going to end at midnight because the dial-up internet said so. With the Columbine shooting in April still fresh in their minds, they're afraid to send you to kindergarten once it's time. (They give you a cellphone at the age of 6, "just in case.")

In grade school, you start active-shooter drills. You see news of hurricanes, shootings, terrorist attacks and wars every night, and your parents complain about money every day. They think you don't understand, but you do.

You grow older, and you graduate from a Motorola Razu phone to an iPhone that constantly pings with notifications. You get an iPad to entertain you when you're bored. More shootings and heat waves and horrific tragedies play out on every screen: the one in your pocket, the one in the living room, the one on your desk.

Fast-forward to 2020. You're in college, but a virus stops the world. You spend the next year at home doing online classes, learning TikTok dances and baking bread. You don't get a junior year. Your younger sister doesn't get a prom or high school graduation. You stop being surprised, however, because the world has been sold to you for years as dangerous and violent.

This is the average experience of Generation Z. I believe this, in combination with technological advancements, is what shaped Zoomers. Over the past decade, technology has shifted toward algorithms, social networking and artificial intelligence. In one study, Gen Zers reported being online for *at least* one hour per day, and 75% of those respondents were online within an hour of waking up.

Gen Z's relationship with technology has had many negative consequences. Members of this generation have an average attention span of only eight seconds. Algorithm-based technology has given many Zoomers a warped perception of reality, and artificial intelligence has rendered others unable to differentiate between credible and noncredible sources.

### WORKING WITH ZOOMERS

At this point, we've identified some hard truths about Zoomers. Here are some of the positive traits of this generational cohort. Gen Z is extremely open-minded, highly social and collaborative. Zoomers are adaptable, and they value non-traditional and nonhierarchical leadership. Their experience with technology makes them well-versed in using these tools for marketing.

So, how can you bridge the gap and work successfully with Zoomers? By learning and adjusting, of course. It helps to understand a few key things about Gen Zers to work with them successfully.

- They are not necessarily motivated by money. They want better schedules and to feel as though they are making a difference. Giving them a raise won't matter a whole lot if they hate their schedule.
- They want to learn, but they expect their mentors to be patient and let them practice.
- They value safety – both mental and physical. Remember, they grew up in a world they were told was extremely unsafe.

Generation Z, like every generation before it, has its faults. Zoomers might be addicted to social media and have the attention spans of goldfish, but they're also caring, intelligent and open-minded. The majority of my students for the past four years have been members of Gen Z. I find their views on a lot of things refreshing, and I generally think they have a good sense of humor.

**We are in the midst of a unique shift in funeral service. Some firms have employees from four or even five generations all in one place.**

Ultimately, we must meet Zoomers in the middle, and they must do the same. Gen Zers have officially joined the workforce. We can either try to make their transition into the funeral service profession easier or stress ourselves out by clashing. It's up to us to shape them into funeral directors with whom we want to work.

At this point, we have reached the end of the Latin alphabet generationally. Where does that leave us? Well, we've started the Greek alphabet, and soon we'll be welcoming Generation Alpha to the workforce. Born in 2013 or later, the oldest members of Gen Alpha will turn 13 this year.

In a survey of 13-year-olds completed by Springtide Research Institute last spring, 60% of respondents said they feel stress about climate change; 40% said they feel loneliness and anxiety "at least sometimes"; and 50% said they feel addicted to their phones.

Are you ready for the generation with an attention span even shorter than that of Gen Z? Me neither, so that is where my advice ends – for now. After all, I'm just a funeral director from the 1900s.

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*Chelsea Cush is a licensed funeral director and current Ed.D. candidate. She teaches at the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science and Point Park University, both located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*



# NFDA Study: How Generations Think, Talk About Funeral Service

By Edward J. Defort

**A familiar expression when it comes to communication is: “Are we on the same page?” The importance of being clear in your messaging cannot be overstated.**

Unfortunately, a common peril in business and social situations is that many people are, in fact, not on the same page. And, in some cases, they’re not even referencing the same book.

That said, the way people approach and discuss funeral service is highly influenced by their generation, which reflects cultural shifts, economic factors and technological fluency. The term “generation gap” was coined for a reason, and the road that bridges generations is very narrow indeed.

**The difference is not just about semantics in terminology; it reflects a genuine shift in what each generation views as the purpose of end-of-life rituals.**

With that in mind, NFDA’s new study, *How Consumers Talk and Think About Funerals*, compares the differences in generations’ perceptions of various end-of-life service options. The study reveals a striking disconnect between how funeral service professionals understand commonly used industry terms and how the families they serve understand them. The research considers how consumers define “funeral,” “memorial service” and “celebration of life”; what types of services consumers want for themselves and why; what elements consumers perceive as part of each type of service; what terms consumers are familiar with (and not familiar with); and what resources consumers would find helpful after a loved one dies.

What is a memorial service? (top responses)	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
Chance to remember, pay respects, pay tribute/honor a loved one	76.3%	71.5%	64.8%	65.3%
Gathering of family/friends	28.4%	32.7%	33.6%	36.3%
Ceremony or service	42.6%	31.1%	25.1%	31.1%
Celebration of life	10.0%	12.3%	14.4%	15.4%
A ceremony without the body present	9.5%	10.0%	11.3%	15.1%

What is a funeral? (top responses)	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
Includes burial or graveside service	35.9%	42.2%	43.8%	43.0%
Ceremony or service	37.0%	32.1%	27.9%	33.4%
Chance to remember, pay respects, pay tribute/honor a loved one	37.0%	34.8%	26.3%	22.0%
Religious	11.5%	16.2%	21.6%	30.0%
Ceremony with the body present	10.9%	9.8%	14.9%	23.8%

What is a celebration of life? (top responses)	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
Chance to remember, pay respects, pay tribute/honor a loved one	42.5%	41.8%	41.5%	39.3%
Gathering of family/friends	34.2%	29.3%	31.2%	26.9%
Same as a memorial service	8.9%	18.4%	23.4%	36.0%
Happy or uplifting	31.5%	19.7%	23.4%	16.6%
Party	8.9%	15.1%	11.0%	10.4%



Mourners view the body	All Respondents	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
Memorial Service	38.1%	39.1%	42.9%	42.6%	28.2%
<b>Funeral Service</b>	<b>86.6%</b>	<b>78.7%</b>	<b>83.2%</b>	<b>88.8%</b>	<b>92.6%</b>
Celebration of Life	12.3%	12.2%	12.5%	14.6%	9.7%

The body is present, but the casket is closed	All Respondents	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
Memorial Service	45.9%	39.9%	47.4%	50.3%	43.7%
<b>Funeral Service</b>	<b>88.2%</b>	<b>78.8%</b>	<b>88.4%</b>	<b>88.8%</b>	<b>93.3%</b>
Celebration of Life	18.6%	16.2%	18.5%	20.8%	18.0%

The body is not present	All Respondents	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
<b>Memorial Service</b>	<b>65.5%</b>	<b>58.3%</b>	<b>57.2%</b>	<b>67.0%</b>	<b>76.1%</b>
Funeral Service	15.6%	16.0%	18.5%	14.9%	13.4%
<b>Celebration of Life</b>	<b>81.8%</b>	<b>69.6%</b>	<b>79.8%</b>	<b>83.8%</b>	<b>89.2%</b>

Cremated remains are present	All Respondents	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
<b>Memorial Service</b>	<b>67.2%</b>	<b>55.9%</b>	<b>65.3%</b>	<b>72.8%</b>	<b>70.4%</b>
Funeral Service	71.7%	61.5%	66.7%	73.7%	80.8%
<b>Celebration of Life</b>	<b>47.8%</b>	<b>32.8%</b>	<b>46.7%</b>	<b>53.6%</b>	<b>52.1%</b>

Although commonly used language might vary across generations, e.g., “celebration of life” versus “funeral,” the more significant difference lies in the generations’ expectations regarding end-of-life rituals. The difference is not just about semantics in terminology; it reflects a genuine shift in what each generation views as the purpose of end-of-life rituals, including both the traditional services that all baby boomers have experienced and the personalized tributes created for necessary community closure.

**Each generation has experienced events that continue to significantly influence the way its members live their lives.**

Recent funeral service history suggests that the biggest cross-generational trend has been the move toward personalization and celebrations of life. Moreover, technology, affordability and environmental concerns have increasingly driven consumer choices across all generations. This has forced the funeral service profession to adapt its services and messaging to meet diverse expectations.

For NFDA’s study, responses from four generations of respondents were considered: baby boomers (born 1946-1964), Gen X (1965-1979), millennials (1980-1994) and Gen Z (1995-2012).

Each generation has experienced events that continue to significantly influence the way they live their lives. Such events might include the Vietnam War, the Cold War, 9/11, the rise of technology, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Gen Z, for example, grew up constantly connected with friends, family and even world news. They came of age practicing active-shooter drills in their classrooms, and they have instant access to information about wars and terrorism around the world. They are acutely aware of

deaths occurring around the world and in their own backyard. It’s no wonder this generation experiences high rates of anxiety. It also makes sense that this generation holds unique views on death.

The financial health of each generation also varies, of course. We know that few people consider themselves on track with retirement savings, so prepaying for a funeral might not be high on their list of priorities.

**IN THEIR OWN WORDS**

The NFDA survey covered terms often used when discussing end-of-life services. Respondents were asked to identify what was foremost in their minds when they heard a particular term. The first question was: “What is a memorial service?”

Less than 12% of respondents across generations described a memorial service as a ceremony without the body present, which is how most funeral directors would define it. Two-thirds of respondents (68.6%) said a memorial service is a chance to remember, pay respects or honor a loved one. This answer was followed by “a gathering of family/friends,” selected by 33.3% of respondents, and “a ceremony or service,” selected by 31.3%.

Looking closer at specific generations’ responses, three-quarters of Gen Z respondents (76.3%) said a memorial service is a chance to remember, pay respects or honor a loved one. Significantly fewer Gen Xers (64.8%) and baby boomers (65.3%) described it this way, however.

Compared to other generations, baby boomers were more likely to describe a memorial service as “a gathering of family/friends” and/or “a ceremony without the body present.”

The takeaway: When presenting various types of services to families, you need to make clear what each type entails.

In fact, you can't even assume the public's understanding of the term "funeral." When asked for the definition, four in 10 respondents (41.8%) associated a funeral with a burial or graveside service. Another 32.1% called it simply a ceremony or service; 29.1% said a funeral is a chance to remember, pay respects or honor a loved one; and 20.9% defined a funeral as a religious ceremony.

Broken down by generation, Gen Z respondents were less likely than other generations to associate a funeral with a burial or graveside service. They also were more likely to describe it as "a ceremony or service" and/or "a chance to remember a loved one."

Not surprisingly, compared to the other groups, baby boomers were more likely to describe a funeral as "a religious ceremony" and/or "a ceremony with the body present."

Next, respondents were asked to consider, "What is a celebration of life?" The top response, identified by 41% of respondents, was that a celebration of life is a chance to remember, pay respects or honor a loved one. This was followed by the definition of a celebration of life as "a gathering of family/friends," selected by 29.8%. And 24% said a celebration of life is the same as a memorial service. Further, 21.5% described a celebration of life as "happy" or "uplifting."

Gen Z was far more likely to describe a celebration of life as happy or uplifting. Nearly one-third said this, compared with 23.4% of Gen Xers, 19.7% of millennials and 16.6% of baby boomers. Gen Z was the generation least likely to think a celebration of life is the same as a memorial service.

Compared to other groups, baby boomers were more likely to think a celebration of life is the same as a memorial service, and they were less likely to describe it as happy or uplifting.

Respondents also were asked to consider what elements are part of each type of service. In the study, 92.6% of baby boomer respondents associated a funeral with viewing the body, whereas Gen Zers were considerably less likely to do so. Similarly, baby boomers were

the most likely generation to associate a funeral with the presence of the body and a closed casket (93.3% of boomers selected this response). With a selection rate of 78.8%, Gen Z was the generation least likely to make this association.

**The takeaway: When presenting various types of services to families, you need to make clear what each type entails.**

Compared to other generations, Gen Z was least likely to associate a celebration of life with the absence of the body. Further, Gen Zers and millennials, at 69.6% and 79.8%, respectively, were less likely than Gen Xers and boomers to associate a memorial service with the absence of the body.

Regardless of generation, most respondents thought cremated remains could be present at a funeral service. At 80.8%, baby boomers were most likely to think this.

Respondents were least likely to associate a celebration of life with the presence of cremated remains. Gen Z was least likely to make this association; only 32.8% agreed, whereas 53.6% of Gen X did.

Gen Z and millennials, at 55.9% and 65.3%, respectively, were least likely to think cremated remains could be present at a memorial service. Meanwhile, 72.8% of Gen X and 70.4% of baby boomers thought this.

Held in a place of worship	All Respondents	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
<b>Memorial Service</b>	62.3%	53.0%	63.4%	63.3%	66.1%
<b>Funeral Service</b>	80.1%	67.2%	74.6%	87.0%	86.4%
<b>Celebration of Life</b>	38.7%	34.3%	43.2%	38.9%	37.0%

Held at the funeral home	All Respondents	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
<b>Memorial Service</b>	57.6%	48.0%	55.7%	62.7%	60.4%
<b>Funeral Service</b>	83.8%	80.1%	82.4%	83.0%	88.2%
<b>Celebration of Life</b>	24.7%	17.4%	23.5%	28.7%	26.5%

Held in a cemetery	All Respondents	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
<b>Memorial Service</b>	32.5%	34.5%	32.4%	35.1%	28.5%
<b>Funeral Service</b>	87.1%	81.5%	88.0%	87.2%	90.0%
<b>Celebration of Life</b>	10.6%	9.0%	13.0%	11.9%	7.8%

Held in some other location	All Respondents	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
<b>Memorial Service</b>	65.9%	51.3%	65.4%	67.3%	74.3%
<b>Funeral Service</b>	31.1%	35.5%	35.2%	29.8%	25.4%
<b>Celebration of Life</b>	83.4%	71.6%	77.9%	86.4%	93.4%



Someone with little to no experience arranging a funeral might ask, “What is an officiant?” Officiants can preside over all types of services. However, respondents were least likely to think an officiant presides over a celebration of life, followed by a memorial service. Because “officiant” is such a general term, it’s likely the public is unable to pinpoint the range of services over which an officiant can preside. Does “officiant” have a religious connotation? It depends who you ask.

Almost all baby boomer and Gen X respondents (95.6% and 92.9%, respectively) thought that an officiant presides over a funeral, specifically. Gen Zers and millennials were less likely to think so – but not by much, at 75.1% and 83.9%, respectively.

In NFDA’s *Consumer Awareness & Preferences Study*, respondents noted that more education is needed to bring the different types of officiants, such as celebrants, to the forefront. If that is the case, then Gen Z makes a ripe target audience. Compared to other generations, Gen Z was less likely to think an officiant presides over all types of services.

When it comes to places of worship, most respondents (80.1%) thought a funeral service is held in a place of worship. Meanwhile, 62.3% of respondents thought a memorial service is held in a place of worship. Baby boomers were more likely to think this way, whereas Gen Z was less likely to think either of these service types is held in a place of worship.

All service types can be held in a funeral home. However, most respondents across all generations did not associate a celebration of life with a funeral home. Gen Z was least likely to think a celebration of life could be held in a funeral home.

According to the study, as consumers age, they are slightly more likely to think a memorial service and a funeral can be held in a funeral home. This correlation adheres to traditional reasoning, but a client’s understanding of terminology must not be taken for granted.

Historically, the terms “funeral” and “cemetery” have been linked. As such, most respondents (87.1%) associated a funeral service with a cemetery. What’s more, only about one-third of respondents thought a memorial service could be held at a cemetery.

All types of services can contain religious elements. However, just over half of all respondents thought that a celebration of life excludes religious elements. Gen Z was least likely to think a memorial service takes place at an alternate lo-

cation, whereas baby boomers were most likely to think so. Compared to other generations, Gen Z was least likely to associate all service types with religious elements.

Moreover, all types of services can be secular. A funeral was least likely to be perceived as secular, whereas a celebration of life was most likely to be perceived as secular. Older respondents were more likely to think that both a memorial service and a celebration of life could be secular.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

Compared to other generations’ respondents, Gen Z respondents were more racially diverse. More women than men, especially among Gen X, responded to NFDA’s survey. Gen Z respondents tended to have lower incomes than respondents of older generations did.

This study was conducted January 9 through February 6, 2025. Survey invitations were emailed to an online consumer panel consisting of adult Americans of all ages. The sampling method was designed to generate a good representation of the different generational groups. A total of 1,104 completed surveys were returned. Results for all respondents were projectable within a range of +2.8% (with 95% confidence). Please note that consumers who participate in online panels are typically higher-than-average internet users with higher incomes and higher education levels.

Most questions were unaided. That is, questions were asked in an open-ended format to capture top-of-mind responses from consumers. Then, the responses were coded to quantify the results so trends could be measured across different generation groups.

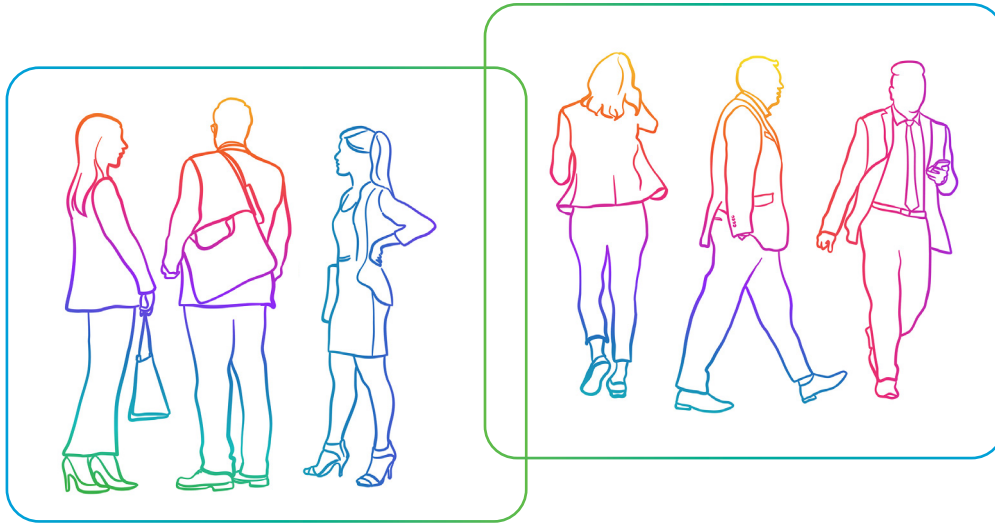
**A funeral was least likely to be perceived as secular, whereas a celebration of life was most likely to be perceived as secular.**

In many cases, the results add up to more than 100% because respondents could mention or select more than one answer to a single question.

*“When Words Matter: A Funeral Director’s Guide to Clear & Compassionate Communication,” an original NFDA consumer research guide, is available at [NFDA.org/Research](https://www.nfda.org/research). The guide is designed to bridge the communication gap between funeral service professionals and the families they serve.*

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*Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.*



# The Rise of the Career Pivot in Funeral Service

**Why funeral directors are leaving the profession – and where they are going once they do.**

By Allyse R. Worland

“Whatever happened to them?”

This is a common opening line at social hours where funeral directors get together and start talking. We talk about how busy we are (or aren’t), industry trends and, most of all, each other.

Because the profession is such a small, tight-knit community, it is easy to recognize when one of us goes silent or is missing from our usual post.

Over the past several years, we have talked about retention rates, yet the profession is now facing layoffs. Also, some funeral directors have made a career pivot, meaning they won’t be returning. So, where are these directors going once they leave the day-to-day of funeral service?

- **Consulting firms:** They’re using their experience and expertise in the field to help other firms and licensees. This is a great way to share your knowledge with others and monetize your experience.
- **Suppliers/vendors:** They’re working for suppliers with whom they enjoyed working during their time as a funeral director. This category includes fluid manufacturers, preneed companies and the like.

- **Organ-procurement organizations:** Many funeral directors are familiar enough with these agencies to step into a role there. These organizations welcome the opportunity to work with professionals like us, those with many transferable skills.

- **Education:** Once again, they’re using their knowledge base to teach others about the funeral service profession. Mortuary schools need quality educators who can lead the next generation of graduates.

Now, will former licensees ever return to the day-to-day work of funeral directing? It’s highly doubtful. I’ve talked to several funeral directors who made a career pivot, and they cited three major reasons why they won’t be returning.

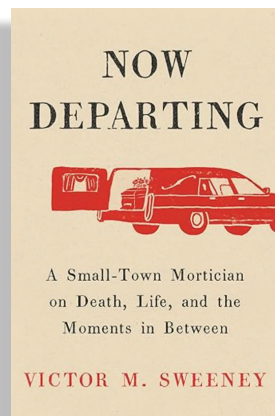
- **Better schedule:** No more nights on call. No more working holidays. Their time off is respected.
- **Better pay:** They increased their salary significantly and gained better benefits.
- **Less stress:** Working in the field takes its toll. Sometimes it entails meeting families, making a transfer, embalming and coordinating everything in between – all in one shift. Life satisfaction generally increases for those who opted for a career pivot due to burnout.

Understand that a career pivot doesn’t make an individual any less respectable within the funeral service profession. They still are helping firms and other funeral directors deliver outstanding service to families in some capacity.

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*Allyse R. Worland is a first-generation funeral director and embalmer in New Orleans, Louisiana. She is also licensed in Indiana and Kentucky. She holds a bachelor’s degree in funeral service management and a certificate in thanatology for end-of-life professionals. Worland is an InSight-certified celebrant, as well.*

# “The Internet’s Favorite Mortician” Launches Debut Book



**Viral funeral director Victor M. Sweeney sat down with NFDA to discuss his funeral service journey and latest project.**

**By Edward J. Defort**

A good funeral is all about storytelling. It gives friends and family the chance to recount the life and uniqueness of their deceased loved one. Victor M. Sweeney, based in rural Minnesota, is a licensed funeral director who has amassed a following through viral videos where he shares stories of his own. Some outlets have dubbed him “The Internet’s Favorite Mortician.”

Sweeney works at DuBore Funeral Home in Warren, Minnesota – a small, quiet, predominantly agricultural town with a population of about 1,600. Warren is located in the fertile Red River Valley and serves as the county seat of Marshall County in the northwestern part of the state.

Warren often is described as a town with a strong sense of community where “everybody knows everybody.” Sweeney has been involved in the funeral business since he was 18 and is known for his commitment to this community and the families he serves.

He has achieved significant public recognition from videos produced by *WIRED* and other media outlets, which have racked up millions of views on social media. He answers internet questions and offers insights into funeral service.

His debut book, *Now Departing: A Small-Town Mortician on Death, Life, and the Moments in Between*, is a collection

**“The constant balancing act of work/home is the greatest challenge I’ve faced, am facing and will face. It doesn’t seem to ever lessen.”**



of thoughtful reflections and true stories from his work. The book explores various aspects of death and contains wisdom on how to live and how to be remembered with intention and meaning. It delves into the rituals of saying goodbye to loved ones and the interplay between the business of deathcare and the deep grief of humanity.

We caught up with Sweeney recently to ask him about his background and new book.

**NFDA: Talk about your road to becoming a funeral director. What piqued your interest, and what did you discover about the profession along the way?**

**Sweeney:** From the time I was a little boy, I always wanted to be a Catholic priest ... I was discerning this deeply in high school. By senior year, I had “discerned out,” realizing I was meant for something else. That’s when my godfather, also a priest, handed me a book by a schoolmate of his, *The Undertaking* by Thomas Lynch. He thought it was a good read (and it is), but I finished and thought, “I could do this!” So, I got a job volunteering at the local funeral home, and that was that.

**NFDA: What were some of the challenges you faced as a new funeral director?**

**Sweeney:** It is a strange thing, being 21 and working with seniors who have grandchildren, great-grandchildren, your age. Getting over that hump of becoming a professional, despite maybe not looking quite like one, is a challenge.

And, also, the time commitment. I was newly married and a new father not too long after I was licensed. Balancing the demands of your own family with the families we work for is a huge learning curve.

## An Excerpt From Victor M. Sweeney's First Book, *Now Departing*

DEBRA WORKS AT THE DAIRY QUEEN. In Warren, our Dairy Queen is only open seasonally, during spring and summer. That's part of the cost of living in the far north: nobody wants ice cream when it is minus-twenty degrees out. In any case, when the weather is nice, we take the kids to DQ an awful lot, blowing through our summer treat budget pretty quickly. Debra's smiling face is always at the window or the counter, ready to ask us in her lovely, raspy voice what it is we'd like to order. I, too, have a somewhat distinctive voice up here, lacking the usual long "Minnesota O" that has stubbornly clung on through however many generations since the first Norwegians landed on the prairie. When we talk on the drive-thru intercom we recognize each other's voices right away.

Debra's husband, Sonny, as he was called – a large guy with slicked-back hair and a story always at the ready – had a big personality. Debra met him in unusual circumstances, literally running off with a guy from the circus. He didn't make it easy on her and they lived in a sort of friendly estrangement. When Sonny died a few years ago, Debra and I became close, partly because of her openness in sharing this underlying struggle during our time planning the funeral and subsequent meetings.

There was also a financial struggle. These two sorts of hardships often bring people together.

Some families just don't have much. Or what they do have doesn't translate well to paying funeral bills. DuBore's is lucky to have a very good relationship with the county up here when we work to provide a county burial. We always lose money on the deal, but it is well worth doing. These families who are being served by a small government subsidy and our charity are often the most grateful. There is still a financial transaction taking place, but it's behind the scenes, not requested from the family, but from social services, and is minimal. This is part of the reason why I don't like taking payment for funerals up front if I can help it. I want my work to have

its basis in charity. That I get paid to do it is a nice bonus and keeps me able to do it for others, but I never want it to become the goal of my work.

The stark reality is that an exchange still must take place. You give me several thousands of dollars and your dead. In return I'll handle the ins and outs of their death. For my daily bread, I'll pick up your dead loved one in my arms at the nursing home and lay them on my cot. To make ends meet, I'll file death certificates, disposition permits, help navigate life insurance benefits, or submit veteran's paperwork for your newly deceased. My time, whether in my office, the embalming room, or in my bed soon to be awoken, becomes yours.

Debra and I worked with the county to provide burial for Sonny, and while the funeral home worked for free and part of the bill was paid by the social services office at the courthouse, there were still some expenses left over, namely a headstone. Despite some reservations, Debra plans to be buried next to Sonny. Her philosophy is "Well, I lived with him this long, what else is new?"

She wanted something nice, even if it would be hard to finance, as money was tight. The subtext is that she didn't want a less-expensive flat marker, something to get lost in the almost ever-present snow up here. In that cemetery, too, most of the stones are upright. She has "neighbors" and didn't want them to think she went with the cheaper option. I told her I'd figure it out – the stone, the money, the neighbor issue. In a stroke of luck, my granite shop bought a competitor that same year and it came with a scrap pile, odds and ends of stone that sat in a back lot collecting dust. After getting permission, I went on a hunt to find Debra and Sonny something nice.

In the hodgepodge of chipped granite, stained marble bevels, and misprinted veterans' markers sat Debra's stone. It is three feet long, two feet tall, polished on the sides and top, and is an odd color. My granite guys weren't even sure from what quarry it originated and, upon doing

some follow-up, told me that the previous owner wasn't sure, either. It came with the business when he bought it decades before. What looked like a misfit to them was to me an opportunity.

I got it for a song. A piece of granite nobody would use was free: Debra would only pay for labor. The design I already had in my mind, but it came with another little hurdle: the stone was just the top of a headstone – there was no base associated with it. Taking a cue from the monoliths of the last century, I had the illusion of "feet" engraved into the edges. It appears to flare at the bottom and, looking as if it has a base, draws the eye upward to create something of the illusion of the height of its neighbors.

Debra tacitly approved the design, trusting me to carry out her plan: create something nice and don't break the bank. When it came time to pay, even what seems nominal for a headstone was more than she could cover, what with disposing of what was left of Sonny's things, moving from her apartment into his house, and trying to find help to replace the things in the home he'd long neglected.

For a year, each time we would visit DQ, Debra would slip me some cash to put toward the stone. Then last year the cash-to-headstone pipeline slowed down as the repairs on the home grew more onerous. Leaking windows and pipes put an end to our unspoken agreement and cash exchanges. So, I paid off the balance myself. Debra is a friend, not just a customer, and a few hundred dollars is well worth the service we get from her all summer long – especially when I bring four rambunctious kids to drip ice cream all over the restaurant. Truth be told, I probably give away what I paid on the headstone in Dairy Queen tips every year.

This is the kind of reckless charity I strive for. Say what you will about good business practices and responsible annual budgeting, I believe that my return on (human) investment will yield far more than anything you could find on a profit-and-loss statement.

**NFDA: For better or for worse, what have been the major changes in funeral service since you became a funeral director?**

**Sweeney:** COVID-19 was monumental, but I feel like those years are a haze of no sleep, overwork and traumatic experiences – not from a grisly standpoint but from a human, emotional one. To watch families not get to say goodbye or to shuttle bodies out with limited to no services, only to have new ones immediately take their places, was hard for families and hard for us.

Pandemic aside, I think the constant balancing act of work/home is the greatest challenge I've faced, am facing and will face. It doesn't seem to ever lessen, despite spending nearly half my life in funeral service at this point.

**NFDA: What are some of the things about funeral service that the public might or might not know but should know?**

**Sweeney:** Honestly, I think it'd be great if folks knew how flexible undertakers are. There's a stereotype that we're these rigid, funereal humbugs who will only do things as they've always been done when, in reality, I think most of us like the challenge of serving a family with creativity and doing something new and finding a way to do it really well.

Sometimes people come into the funeral home with their elbows out, ready for a fight, and who can blame them on the worst day of their lives? It takes some time to disarm them and make them realize that while, yes, we get paid for what we do, at our cores, we just want to help. I've met dispassionate and unimaginative funeral directors, but they are, at least in my estimation, rare and getting rarer.

**NFDA: More consumers are getting their information about funeral service from social media. What type of messaging do you use, and how has it been received?**

**Sweeney:** Having stumbled into a sort of media-facing position, I like to think that I do what comes naturally. I don't have an "agenda" or a stump, so to speak. Mostly, I just want to be myself and tell people what I do (and why!), and hope that it is enough to set people at ease about this great big looming thing we call death.

I've been all over YouTube as a guest on other platforms (with 50 million views on YouTube alone), and while that has been fantastic, I've lately branched into producing some

**"While, yes, we get paid for what we do, at our cores, we just want to help. I've met dispassionate and unimaginative funeral directors, but they are, at least in my estimation, rare and getting rarer."**

of my own work. There's a podcast, *Death And*, which came out last October, along with my book, *Now Departing*. Both are just extensions of myself more than an extension of an ideology. As humans, we're meant for relationships. And you cannot relate with an ideology or an agenda, so I just try to be myself wherever I happen to be.

**NFDA: Funeral service is all about sharing stories. When did you start considering writing a book?**

**Sweeney:** You know, it is funny. When you become the center of a viral video, suddenly reality TV people come crawling out of the woodwork wanting a piece of you. And after talking with producers on shows you've surely heard about, I realized that what they call "unscripted television" isn't for me.

Rather than have my worldview cast out to others through the lens of an editor and producer looking for clicks, views and ratings, it became clear to me that the best way to control my narrative was to write a book – which I'd never come close to before. Like most of us, I've written a thousand obituaries, so at least I had a little practice storytelling and writing about lives. Although, writing about your own life and philosophy, and sharing stories and drawing out what they mean to you, is a substantially different thing.

I like to think *Now Departing* is a memoir and soft-philosophy book that "storytells" about death. I couldn't sum it up any more succinctly than that.

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*Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.*

## From the Editor's Desk

# For Every "Six-Seven" There's a "23 Skidoo"



The most recent NFDA International Convention & Expo certainly had its share of innovation and discoveries that funeral professionals hopefully will put into practice over the next year and beyond. But you know what? Not one person came up to me and said "six-seven" while pretending to balance a scale with their hands.

The "six-seven" phenomenon is all the rage among Gen Alpha and the youngest of Gen Z. My 10-year-old niece did the "six-seven" dance to me recently, and my only response was, "What?" I asked her what she was trying to tell me, and she said, "Nothing."

And that is true; the gesture and expression have no specific meaning outside of internet memes. The fact that they have no meaning is supposedly what makes them so funny, as it causes confusion for older people, parents and teachers.

The point is that every generation has its "thing" so members know where the other person is coming from. As the NFDA research discussed during the opening general session of the convention revealed, different generations speak differently about funeral services and end-of-life arrangements. This happens primarily because each generation's views are shaped by distinct cultural values, life experiences, technological fluency and economic realities. And it's not as though funeral directors are using professional jargon – common words can have different meanings to different generations, too.

The shift in language and focus reflects a move from highly traditional, ritualistic services to more personalized, flexible and value-driven commemorations.

Most of these barriers can be overcome by taking the time to carefully explain each part of a service. For example, if you ask a family whether they are interested in using a celebrant, the family might think that a celebrant is a religious speaker and therefore not what they had in mind. You can counter such misinterpretation by mentioning that a celebrant does not have to be a religious speaker and is there simply to drive conversation and offer remarks about the deceased.

A common thread in NFDA's research is that older respondents seem to adhere to what can be referred to as traditional observations of the funeral, whereas younger generations do not have as much experience with funerals in general. What this means is that the older generations might need to do some "unlearning," while the younger generations might need to learn some more.

The next time my niece hits me with a "six-seven," I will respond with the classic "23 skidoo." This expression originated about 120 years ago. Back in the day, the term "twenty-three" was slang for "go away," and "skidoo" was a version of "skedaddle," which means "get going." At least this expression has some kind of meaning!

So, when my niece looks at me with the same quizzical expression I had after hearing her "six-seven" line, I simply will say, "I think I've made my point."

*Ed* Edward J. Defort  
-Editor

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