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ESSAY

In my 35-year career, I have never experienced anything like 2020 and 2021, professionally or personally. The political climate, race relations, and the COVID-19 pandemic made for an unprecedented difficult year, especially for those of us in funeral service.

In January 2021, our company served more families than any other month in our 108-year history. Our staff was working 50-70 hours a week, suppliers could not keep up with demand for their products, families were being torn apart by the ravages of this never before heard of Corona Virus, and everyone was trying to keep themselves healthy.

As exhausting as those days were, it was ever clear why we as funeral professionals “do what we do.” My colleague, Wendy Thames, wrote a poignant essay about a very meaningful experience she had with a family during the pandemic. I share this essay in hopes that it will serve as an encouraging word to fellow funeral service professionals. It is a bit longer than the standard POE essay, but I ask that you take the time to read about this touching experience.

Sincerely,

Tim Gossett

Cole's Butterfly

During the late evening hours on Friday, February 19, 2021, a young family gathered at the bedside of their two-and-a-half-year-old son, Cole, as he ended his courageous battle with neuroblastoma cancer and victoriously journeyed back to his eternal home in Heaven. He took his last breath at 1:14 a.m. on Saturday morning cradled in the arms of his mother and father.

Later that afternoon, I was driving in Pendleton, South Carolina headed to pick up my son's birthday cake from our local bakery. As his special-order cake was not quite ready, I wandered into a local antique shop on the town square and started browsing to pass the time. On a table in the back corner of the shop was a basket filled with inexpensive pins, earrings, bracelets, and other



random costume accessories. After several minutes spent digging through the items, I picked up a card with a handsome pair of identical butterfly pins attached. These butterflies struck me as unusual as their wings were colored black and their bodies were a vivid green. Holding them in my hand I felt an instant connection to them and wanted to take them home and share them with someone dear. Everyone has different tastes when it comes to jewelry and accessories, but I decided the sincere gesture of sharing a gift would be appreciated regardless of the style of the item. I purchased them for \$8.00 and raced home with my son's cake.



Because I have been a Funeral Director for almost 20 years, I seldom purchase decorative jewelry to wear at work because it is attention drawing. I was trained to dress and accessorize myself in a way that is minimalist and classic. A seasoned Funeral Director in Texas 'schooled me' while mentoring his young apprentice, "As Funeral Directors we should strive to be in the background quietly attending the needs of the family and never distracting the public by drawing negative OR positive attention to ourselves. This applies to our conduct as well as our attire. The funeral is about the family and not the Director!" I embodied this advice 100% and began collecting a simple and understated wardrobe of mostly black and navy that over two decades would become like my second skin, a uniform of comfort and security.



Saturday night I was sitting on my bed blowing up balloons with my husband thinking about the coming week, and I logged into our funeral home schedule to see what was happening. This is when I first learned of Cole's passing and felt immediate sadness for the family and relief for myself when I saw my colleague's name assigned to meet with his family on Monday morning. It felt like I had been spared for two reasons: 1. Children are not supposed to die. Period. It is the scariest call a funeral director

can receive from a family. 2. I am a mother of three wonderful boys, ages 7, 6, and 2. My two-and-a-half-year-old son is a golden-haired cherub with an inquisitive mind and a joyful heart. I do not know how my husband and I would process losing a child and the more I thought about Cole, my mind filled with fear.

Sunday came and went, balloons, cake, songs, presents, picnic by the lake, and sushi for dinner...it was a magical sunny day with a cool breeze, and I enjoyed every moment spent with my family.

As I laid down that night, I said a prayer for Cole's family and for my colleague who would serve them... *Lord, I ask you to help these parents find the strength to face this and allow those around them to help them. Please watch over us as we try to guide them and help them take these first important steps on their journey. Please watch over their family and keep us all safe. Amen.*

Monday morning while driving to the funeral home I received a text that I was scheduled to meet with a family at 10:00 a.m. and learned shortly after it was Cole's family. My heart began to race. I had calmed my fears and relaxed knowing I would be in the background and not intimately involved with this child's arrangements. His masked mother and father arrived promptly, calmly carrying travel mugs filled with strong coffee. They came together without other family members and considered the other's feelings and opinions when asked a question. They had forged an unbreakable bond while watching their son experience multiple medical procedures and treatments even prior to his cancer diagnosis. They took one day at a time, crying through the hard times and celebrating even the smallest of victories. Dealing with terminal illness during a pandemic also presented unforeseen challenges for two parents who so desperately wanted to spend every waking moment with their son. Through it all they received tremendous support from the medical community, countless relatives, and lifelong friends, as well as their Pastor, church family, and professional colleagues. Their abundant gratitude and expressions of love for the people in their lives was inspiring.

Cole's Mommy and Daddy were open to share with me about their amazing little boy (who was quite a big boy for his age) and what he had experienced in his 1,070 days on earth. When talking about him, they teared up, smiled, and even laughed. We shared parenting moments and exchanged personal stories about what it means to be a Mommy and Daddy to a little boy who is ready to take on the world.

I consider the time spent with a family talking about their loved one the most precious gift a funeral director can ever receive. It is the time in which the decedent becomes more than a stranger with an associated case number but a flesh and blood person you wish you could have had the privilege to know in life. This time also allows us to become comfortable with one another and establish trust. It is all about trust. I am passionately committed to serving families and want them to have full confidence in, first and foremost, my sincerity, and secondly, my professional excellence. "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." – President Theodore Roosevelt

It should be mentioned that Cole had a social media presence and an enormous community of friends and family following his journey on



Caring Bridge. He even has a hashtag, #strongasabear. His parents often referred to him as Cole Bear. Closer to the end of our conversation, I asked about Cole's favorite things. His mother immediately looked up, smiled, and mimicked her son saying, "Geen my favit." I felt a flutter in my heart in hearing these words and instantly saw the butterfly pins in my mind.

The endless details of planning a funeral for a child can be overwhelming to the family and funeral director but in this case his mother was a planner with a capital P! Due to COVID-19 restrictions and Cole's compromised health, his mother was unable to execute the big party she had organized for his 2nd birthday. It became clear in our discussions that the theme and display she wanted was already in her mind (and in boxes in her living room) and the location was going to be the challenge. They were expecting many people and needed a venue that could safely accommodate their guests. This is where the funeral director becomes vital! After negotiations and many conversations, I secured the desired venue on the desired date (miracles all around us) and planned to meet the family at the church on Thursday morning.

At this point I had only seen one photo of Cole, and it tore a hole in my heart. He was so beautiful with his sparkling eyes and big smile. After I looked at the photo on his mother's phone, I could not shake the image of his perfect bald head and the long-sleeved, button-up shirt he wore. It reminded me of

my middle son at his 3rd birthday party. Cole's family then decided to share more special family photos in order for our staff to create a video to play before his memorial service. After the video was available to view on our website, I could not bring myself to watch it.

Wednesday night while lying in bed, trying to rest from a very busy day, I decided to watch the memorial video on my phone. I was able to keep my emotions inside and for the benefit of my husband, muted the gentle background track that can so often destroy the composure of the viewer. He knew what I was watching and asked why I was watching it and turned away to avoid seeing any of the images. It was too hard for him.

I should tell you what I saw in the video that affected me the most. It wasn't the photos of Cole in the hospital receiving chemo treatments or the touching holiday moments like the previous Halloween when Cole and his brother dressed up as a chef (Daniel) with a lobster in a pot (Cole). It is always an image that reaches you on a personal level and connects with your personal experience. For me it was an image of Cole wearing a cranial band painted to look like a Clemson University football helmet. Cole's parents are passionate Clemson fans and alumni!

I am familiar with cranial band therapy because our youngest child (future LSU quarterback) ⇒ wore one for almost a year. This was a difficult time in my life, struggling with postpartum depression, traveling 90 miles round trip twice a month to the band clinic for adjustments, and pretending not to see strangers staring at my baby in the grocery store.



I instantly felt so connected with Cole's mother and the hurt deep inside began to grow and push against my chest. How I wished things could be different for her. Why did this happen to her? This unanswerable question which so many families have asked me in my career always creates the same thought...It hurts to look in your eyes knowing there is no explanation or rationalization that anyone could give that will lessen the pain you feel right now.

Thursday morning came quickly, and I placed one butterfly pin in my raincoat pocket and knew what I needed to do. As we gathered with his family and close friends to walk through the logistical challenges of executing a socially distanced memorial service for 200 people, I learned even more about Cole from his grandparents, aunts, and uncles. They explained how Cole became a hopeful blessing to other families battling childhood illness and inspired his community to never give up. As

we prepared to part ways, I felt brave as the butterfly tried to fly out of my pocket. I approached Cole's Mom and shared my story. I was honest and told her how and when the pins found me and the ways I felt connected to her. I shared with her my sincere feeling that this pin was meant for her and asked her to please accept it in memory of her son. She cried and held it in a shaking hand and hugged me tightly. She said she believes God sends special people to us when we need them.

The young family planned to gather later that afternoon at our cremation center for private viewing and to witness Cole's cremation. I cannot describe the moments we shared at the cremation center because I do not believe my emotions would allow me to type the words. I will have that memory burned on my heart forever and will never forget the red Mickey Mouse sheets lining the seagrass casket or the two green apple flavored Dum Dum lollipops his Mother placed in his hand.



Saturday morning was gray and cool with a continuous mist that glazed the roads leading to the church. After dressing for this child's memorial service, I felt dark and hidden under my black face mask and decided it was vital to visibly show my support and encouragement of this young family. I defied my instincts, dress code, and past training and wore my butterfly pin up on my shoulder and green Converse Chuck Taylor sneakers on my feet! It felt like the right thing to do and his family was elated by my gesture. The entire family and audience were clad in varying shades of green and mingled

around the Disney themed floral sprays on either side of his Mickey Mouse cookie jar urn. This service was indescribably personal and uplifting, and his father's eulogy brought me to tears. We cried, we sang, we smiled, and said goodbye to a brave little boy.



In the month following his service I emailed his parents a reminder of how special I felt to have met their entire family and to have been personally trusted to care for their son's arrangements. They were very thankful to the McAfee Family for their generosity and support through this difficult time in their lives and for the dedication and creativity of our staff.

His mother emailed me a special photo of her son's urn with the butterfly pin resting gently beside it. She said she could never forget me and the special ways I helped them.

Cole's birthday came in April, just 10 days before my son turned three. It was an emotion filled time preparing for this rite of passage and beginning to see my baby disappear and an independent child emerge. While planning this celebration for my son, I experienced heartache thinking about this boy who will never turn three. Grieving and feeling the need to purge these feelings in a positive way, I began privately verbalizing the entire experience and composed the first poem of my adult life. I remember thinking, so what if no one ever reads it...it was for me.

Funeral directors may understand this next admission...I dread holidays. It is not for the obvious reasons one might assume, like missing out on special events due to the unplanned death or service. It is almost entirely because of the guilt I feel when meeting people who will never again celebrate that special day with their loved one. It is such a sensitive and painful time for most people, and I find it difficult to become fully engaged in merriment while carrying the sadness of others in my heart and mind.

It was on Mother's Day Sunday, May 9, 2021, after a week of serving two families who experienced the unexpected deaths of young adult sons, that I felt moved to share my words with Cole's mother. She was visiting her favorite beach struggling to find solace and comfort watching the waves, knowing her special place would never feel the same because someone was missing. Cole's mother admitted that spending Mother's Day with her family at the beach was harder than she had imagined it would be and that my poem came to her at the right moment and 'turned her attitude around'. I felt an immediate relief in finding courage to share this personal work and knowing it helped ease her sadness.

Before COVID-19 changed our lives, I was mindful to control my emotional and physical reactions when confronted with the pain and sadness radiating from grieving families.

I was trained our self-protection is accepted as professionally respectful and appropriate and allows the funeral director to function as an unbiased yet sympathetic observer.



The pandemic created yet another measurable buffer between the Director and the bereaved...six feet to be exact. To cope with the changes and feel that I was continuing to make a difference, I opened myself up to learn more about the emotional needs of grieving families and share more of my personal emotions with them. In offering my ears and heart, I gave them something that posed no exposure risk...my attention! Creating these connections that were so desperately needed throughout the

pandemic improved my communication style and ability to help families. The hundreds of lengthy conversations and heart-to-hearts I shared with people taught me so much about why our lives are significant and reminded me of the need to share my life experience with others.



Serving Cole's family challenged me to overcome feelings of isolation and fear and show love with meaningful words and noticeable actions. I am grateful for Cole and his family as well as the thousands of other families I have been privileged to know throughout my career.

Because of them, I will remain #strongasabear.

Written by,

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