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Always the Apprentice

By Todd W. Van Beck

Ah, the sensitive subject of mortuary science education.

Since time began, I believe mortuary science students have universally chanted the same phrase: "Why do we have to know this stuff?"

I know I asked the same question when I was a student back in the Middle Ages. Full disclosure, however: The truth is I most often posed this immature question when I was having trouble in a course (chemistry anyone?). In those classes in which I was doing great, I never chanted that refrain – never, not once! Ah, the life of a student!

For me, asking that pesky "why" question and receiving reinforcement from my college friends made me feel artificially in

control of an academic situation that was in truth spinning out of control. This approach to academics was a pretty pale type of student psychology. Yes, I passed chemistry but just by the hair on my chinny chin chin.

As long as there are students, the "why" question will be asked, and as long as there are examinations, there will be prayer in the classroom.

In writing this article, I felt there might just be some worth in focusing readers on the concept of creating a philosophy of education and associating it with the humility and great value of looking at a career in our beloved profession as being an experience of "always the apprentice."

There's a quote from Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), an English author who made lasting contributions to literature as a poet, essayist, moralist, biographer, editor and literary critic, that points to a persistently important subject in all professional educational endeavors and one I feel is particularly important for funeral service: "Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless; knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful!"

In contemporary funeral service education, I often hear students speak of education as if it were an end in and of it-

self. I read about and hear people debating the question of whether funeral service is a profession, a trade, a ministry or a business. Some people even question the relevancy of mortuary science education in the first place. I mean, there is no required licensing in most of the world, except for Canada and the United States. Why is this education stuff important anyway?

Here's a possible answer. A philosophy of education is, in the end, not concerned with proving or disproving anything concerning the sand traps of evidence in which people get caught up and addicted concerning academic elitism, intellectual snobbery or a general attitude of affectation of the self or even the obsession of whether this course or that course is actually relevant to the realities of any kind of career path.

Instead, a philosophy of education is a process of living life and searchingly asking one specific question: "What is the aim of education?"

I believe very much that if those important people who are charged with and who have earned authentic funeral service influence would center their vision solely on the high-level moral and non-political ideal of education simply for the sake of education, we would see some impressive and much needed changes and improvements. This sounds easier than it is, however. Education to what end and for what purpose are always compelling questions and very difficult to answer.

I also believe very much that if those important people who are charged with and who have earned authentic funeral service influence would center their vision on imparting the ancient and honored wisdom of humility, our profession would be enjoying enhancements and educational creativity that too often have been sacrificed on the altars of ego, territories and conformity.

History has proved time and again that the greatest of the greats in every profession have embraced the idea of the humble position of being the apprentice for life.

I mentioned before that I didn't like chemistry in mortuary college. I didn't like anything about it and I also really didn't like the chemistry professor – in a big way! He was obnoxious, ego-driven, rude, unreasonable, and he made me work like hell. The first day of class, as a matter of fact, he looked at our entire class and announced in a loud, aggressive voice that when he finished with this class, "We will hold commencement in a telephone booth." Do you know many people you can get in a telephone booth?


I hated him.

Adding to this was that all of the students at New England

Institute of Anatomy, Sanitary Science, Embalming and Funeral Directing (NEI) sat back and complained that nobody used chemistry to embalm a body anyway – nobody! The students in my class were devoted to the idea that the embalming chemical companies mixed the fluids and all we had to do was add water. Chemistry had no relevance to the real world of funeral service, or so we thought.

This, my friends, was *not* a philosophy of education.

This was just a bunch of young funeral director wannabes who were terribly young, probably immature, most definitely insecure and who certainly had horrible attitudes toward the very purpose of their even being in the mortuary college program in the first place! Humility toward the purpose of the career and the purpose of the mortuary college had vanished – temporarily anyway.



I didn't like the chemistry professor – in a big way! He was obnoxious, ego-driven, rude, unreasonable, and he made me work like hell. The first day of class, as a matter of fact, he looked at our entire class and announced in a loud, aggressive voice that when he finished with this class, "We will hold commencement in a telephone booth."

And yet against all these wacky student protests, against all of the negative gossip, against all of the unkind graffiti that ended up on bathroom walls, our dedicated but still annoying chemistry professor kept pounding away at us week after week, and the more he pounded, the more I hated him. He was relentless!

Of course, the glaring problem was that I was too young and possibly too stupid to even remotely understand what a philosophy of education even was when it was standing right in front of me day after day. I totally missed what the chemistry professor was trying to do.

And then the clouds lifted and I ended up earning my highest mark on the National Board Examination in chemistry!

Then a strange thing happened. I had a sudden and fickle change of heart. The haunting feeling struck me that just possibly, the chemistry professor might have known what he was doing all along.

Once I had that epiphany, I was in love with the chemistry

professor. This was totally psycho on my part, but it happened just that way.

After doing really well on the National Board, I felt a tremendous appreciation for my chemistry professor. I even had a fleeting moment of actual maturity in which I went up to him and thanked him.

Looking back, my old chemistry professor at NEI possessed a very effective philosophy of education. He had it. I didn't! He lived by the example of the power and truth of education simply for the sake of education – period! No argument, no debate, just educational action. Having him as my professor was indeed a humbling experience. He was not my friend, he was my professor, and he knew what was better for me than I did.

Here is how a philosophy of education works, and it's really simple, which is probably why I totally missed it 50 years ago.

Okay, I admit it – I don't use chemistry theory to embalm per se. I don't actually use anatomical theory to raise vessels. The truth is I forgot all of the linear and anatomical guides in embalming theory decades ago. However, forgetting the written theory is not synonymous with my being embalming or chemistry illiterate. Far from it!

In the end, my annoying and hard-driving chemistry professor was right and I was wrong. His dedication to his philosophical ideal of education for the sake of education helped create in little old immature and dysfunctional me a career that is now well on its way to the half-century mark.

Here is an example of the consequences of recognizing the priceless worth of a philosophy of education.

When I used to watch a program with my father on, say, Discovery Channel and the program would be about finding a cure for some dread disease, because I was educated in chemistry theory at mortuary college, I was able to follow the contents of the program much better than my father could. My late father would not have known the periodic table from a pipe organ.

That's not to say that my father wasn't an extremely bright man, but he was never college educated in chemistry.

Sure, I don't use chemistry to actually embalm per se, but

I still calculate the CH_2O demand, and in general, I do use chemistry every day of my life.

Education is a powerful tool that can be used for good and for bad. I've worked with students whose life experiences and education taught them to deceive and take the easiest way out. I've also seen students with great talent and intelligence whose life education taught them lessons of deviousness and destructiveness even unto themselves.

Education is surely not a substitute for morality, but in teaching and attempting to communicate with students, I have found that moral, ethical and – yes – even spiritual elements must be added to give philosophical character and balance to their lives. These are elements that go immediately to the bottom line in their ability to function in the “real” world as caring, concerned and compassionate funeral professionals. This is not easy, particularly in the cynical and complicated period in which we live, but it is a worthy ideal worth discussing and holding onto as a vision of the future.

The National Board Examination and funeral director's license are vital, but those certificates are really simply learner's permits. What I learned from my obnoxious chemistry professor in Boston some 50 years ago has been a part of my life ever since.



In the end, my annoying and hard-driving chemistry professor was right and I was wrong. His philosophy of education and his dedication to his philosophical ideal of education for the sake of education helped create in little old immature and dysfunctional me a career that

is now well on its way to the half-century mark. I was smart enough to thank him. He's now dead, but I am still beholden to him and always will be. Being beholden to someone is a humbling feeling that helps people grow up.

ALWAYS THE APPRENTICE

When I graduated from mortuary college, I made a categorical mistake – I thought I knew it all. And when I received my license, I made an even larger mistake – I thought I knew what I was doing.

Looking back, I'm embarrassed at my behavior and offer thanks and appreciation to those veteran funeral professionals who had the kindness and graciousness to tolerate my arrogance and ridiculous behavior.

I was supremely confident for no appreciable reason and so immature that if someone else got to drive the funeral coach, I was upset.

Then I landed a job with a gentleman in Cedar Rapids, Iowa,

named John B. Turner. Turner was a human being who today I call a Great American Funeral Director. He was mature, confident, knowledgeable and extremely humble and kind.

One day, John approached me and said, “Todd you are going to meet this family and be the funeral director in charge of this service from start to finish.” I was so happy but still so full of myself that it was obnoxious.

I had my conference with the family, and while the actual funeral service was being held, John came up to me and very gently said, “Now Todd, you know that on our services, the funeral director in charge takes the flowers to the cemetery?” I was stunned and confused and could feel my anger growing.

The places at which I had worked in the past gave the job of taking the flowers to the cemetery to the grunts on the staff. The funeral director in charge usually drove the lead car or at least the funeral coach, but here at Turner’s, they got to take the flowers out to the cemetery. I didn’t like this notion one bit and thought to myself, “Didn’t John realize I was a graduate, licensed funeral professional?”

Then John explained to me his reasons. First, the funeral director in charge, in order to ensure funeral service excellence, needs to be the first person to arrive at the grave. Second, his method ensured that if anything was wrong at the grave, it could be corrected and notification made, if necessary, to slow down the procession. And third, and in John’s opinion the

greatest benefit would be that the funeral director in charge would be already in position to personally greet and tend to the bereaved family when they arrived at the cemetery. After the committal service was completed, the funeral director in charge could honestly say that he or she, not somebody else, would stay to ensure that the vault and grave were properly closed.

John B. Turner made a production out of his graveside committal services, and looking back, there were good, solid reasons why he was conducting more than 800 funerals annually. John was right and, as usual, I was wrong.

When I got back to the funeral home, I was still fuming and John sensed my frustration and approached me. I tried to act cool and collected, but it was no use – I was upset.

John pulled me aside and said these words: “Todd, you are licensed and that is great. However, that is behind you now. We are all licensed, it is special, but it is not that special now. What is special for the rest of your career is humble service. Todd, remember, here at John B. Turner & Son, we are all life-long apprentices.”

Now that is a true philosophy of education.

Todd Van Beck is director of continuing education at John A. Gupton College in Nashville.

Funeral Service Workforce Expectations

By Daniel M. Isard

Dear Newly Graduated Persons,

Regardless of the age group with which you associate a job title, living up to an employer’s trust is all about their expectations, which should be contained in a job description and employee manual.

The challenge should not be your age, personal beliefs or fashion. The challenge is communication! You want to have the family members sitting across from you at the arrangement table hear you. They want to know you understand them. Keep this in mind and you’ll be able to communicate well.

We communicate with words, but we also communicate with our bodies, and part of our body language is how we dress



and hold ourselves when talking to someone. Yes, dressing properly is a critical part of communication.

Imagine that your driving passion is to make the world a better place by making hamburgers and that a company with yellow arches has hired you. Think about what your first day or week working for the company might be like. On your first day, you show up in your tie-dyed shirt and clogs and are immediately informed that you are not dressed appropriately. The company requires uniforms.

We use uniforms in funeral service as well. Perhaps these uniforms are designed by a conventional haberdashery, but they are still uniforms! What is the purpose of a uniform? There are three:

1. *Consistent Appearance* All people working in a business present themselves in a fashion the owner requires.
2. *Functionality* Clogs in an environment of grease and oil? Really? A uniform sometimes has a dress code that provides for safety over fashion.
3. *Non-offensive to Patrons* A consumer cannot hear you if they are distracted, and a dress code is one way to eliminate negative distractions.

Just as you wouldn't wear your silver tie and black shirt to work, keep the tone and choice of your words on a more formal level when assisting a family. Part of your job, after all, is to put them at ease.

The concept of a modern-day uniform in funeral service is evolving. It used to be blue suit, white shirt and black shoes for men and comparable attire for women. The 20th century rules of fashion are gone. So what do you do? I recommend you still dress for work as if it's the 20th century. Remember, you are dressing for the people with whom you meet, and those making the decisions generally are not millennials.

When in doubt, dress up as opposed to dressing more casually. Note: Dressing up does not mean dressing fashionably. Wearing a black suit with a black shirt and a silver tie is fashionable for going out but not appropriate for meeting with a family in

mourning. Of course you are allowed to have a personal wardrobe – just don't blend those pieces with work attire.

Another key point of good communication is language. Assuming that we are speaking English, there is youth English, street English and business English. Just as you wouldn't wear your silver tie and black shirt to work, keep the tone and choice of your words on a more formal level when assisting a family. After all, it's your job to put them at ease as much as possible.

If you're lucky enough to be considering a choice of several employers, remember that they have to hire you, but you also get to hire them. Go through the business location. Interview existing staff. Look at the job description for the job the firm wants you to perform. If you have two choices and one has a written job description and the other doesn't, I would vote in favor of the company with the job description.

Think about your motivation for being in this business. If you are joining for the money, you may as well leave now. Rarely have I seen an overpaid funeral director. Those who are highly compensated are paid more due to their responsibilities and/or ability to direct patronage. Ultimately, being able to drive patronage to a business by your personal good will is the highest compliment and will lead to the highest compensation.

Don't up and leave a job because of a negative employer experience. Over your career, you will meet many people; some will teach you what to do and more will teach you what not to do. Keep your focus on your drive and do not get discouraged.

Daniel M. Isard, MSFS, is president of The Foresight Companies, a Phoenix-based business and management consulting firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, valuations, accounting, financing and consumer surveys. He can be reached at danisard@theforesightcompanies.com or by calling 800-426-0165.

Being Consumer Conscious in Your Community

By Sarah Rickerd

Online shopping trends may not seem of great significance to funeral homes, which are far more likely to deal in real-world, in-person transactions. But it is the underlying mental shift that should interest all who engage directly with consumers. Understanding what is driving these trends and why will reveal the best way to connect with prospective families in the modern age – a critical consideration for funeral homes facing tough competition, higher cremation rates and slim



profit margins. Is your funeral home consumer conscious? Let's find out.

The Case for Consumer Consciousness

Most funeral home owners and managers are, by now, familiar with the suggestion that the profession may be oversaturated. To test this hypothesis, Funeral Consumers Alliance (FCA) calculated the number of funeral homes that would be needed in each state

to handle one funeral per day, five days per week (assuming two weeks off per year). According to its analysis, “Certainly in rural areas with sparse population, a funeral home does not expect the dying business to be a full-time one, and more establishments will be needed to cover the geographic area than the number generated by a simple death rate formula. In most other states, however, the number of funeral homes far exceeds that which can be reasonably supported by the death rate. In Kansas, Nebraska, Pennsylvania and Vermont, there are almost four times the needed mortuaries; in Iowa, there are five times too many.”

Certainly there are weaknesses in FCA’s interpretation of these numbers, primarily in the assumption that a single funeral can be managed in a single day and the absence of accounting for the geographic variability of sparsely versus densely populated areas. Other contributing data, however, should still give forward-thinking directors pause. With funeral home profit margins averaging less than 6% in light of increasing cremation rates, according to the video *Death: It’s a Living* and Gallup data suggesting that only two out of five people believe funeral directors are highly ethical professionals, any level of competition – to the extent predicted by FCA’s analysis or even less – represents a threat to a firm’s current and future financial stability.

The key, then, for funeral home success lies in a firm’s ability to connect with customers as they are now – not as they behaved 50 years ago, not as we would prefer they behave and not as we predicted in the past that they would behave in the present. Meeting this new standard of consumer consciousness comes down to one factor – trust. Building trust with a population that’s increasingly distrustful of the work of commercial deathcare providers takes a number of different forms, but there are two that are particularly worthy of your attention. The first is the way in which consumer shopping trends influence the best practices funeral homes should be using when engaging with families in their community. The second is the impact greater transparency in both price and service disclosures can have on the esteem in which families hold your firm.

Multichannel Shopping a Priority for Today’s Consumers

To understand how funeral homes can build trust with today’s consumers, it’s important to first see how these shoppers prefer to behave on their own. Nearly 85% of adults access the internet, while Forrester Research reveals that, within this group, more than 75% of nearly 57,500 U.S. consumers surveyed had ordered products or services via the internet. Even more interesting is research done by Pricewater-

houseCoopers (PwC) detailing the multichannel nature of their internet shopping activities. Defining multichannel shopping as shopping across a number of different channels, buying goods from the same retailer but doing it across more than one channel and using a number of different channels to make a single purchase, PwC asserts that 86% of consumers surveyed use at least two channels to shop, while 21% rely on four to five channels.



As a representation of how multichannel shopping occurs in the real world, consider the following scenario. John, a 35-year-old consumer, browses Amazon’s website for a new TV, relying largely on the site’s user-generated reviews to narrow down his manufacturer and model selections. Upon making his decision, he checks prices elsewhere on the Web, only to find that a local electronics chain is offering his preferred TV at a deep discount. He completes the purchase at his local store and returns home with his new TV, utilizing multiple sales channels in the process. This scenario may not sound noteworthy to you, but the seamless interplay between various sales channels is truly a modern phenomenon and one that puts the consumer in control of both the information accessed and the final outcome of the buying activity.

Contrast this common shopping approach with the typical process for making funeral arrangements and PwC’s ultimate conclusion – that “consumers are leading the way in multichannel shopping, with many retailers lagging when it comes to meeting consumer needs” – is clearly supported. Despite consumers’ proven desire to review prices and compare alternatives independently, accessing multiple channels as needed until a final buying decision is reached, funeral homes traditionally rely on a single channel – their showrooms. In doing so, trust is diminished. When only one source of information is provided, it is obvious to today’s scam-sensitive consumers that such information could be manipulated to suit the needs of the party sharing it.

Joe Joachim, founder and CEO of technology provider funeralOne, writing for his company’s blog, suggests that baby boomers, an essential demographic for many funeral homes, are especially sensitive to this effect. “Boomers are focused on getting the service that suits them best,” said Joachim. “The trouble is that many funeral directors are boomers, too, focused on selling the services that suit them best. No matter how you feel personally, the objective has to be to make client families happy above all else. That means identifying their needs and providing them with what they want from a funeral service.”

What is important to understand are the reasons driving trends toward consumers’ preferences for multichannel expe-

riences, as well as how this underlying psychology should impact the way you connect with families.

Transparency: A Driving Force in Consumer Behavior

PricewaterhouseCoopers' research goes on to reflect on the fact that one of the defining elements of a multichannel shopping experience is its transparency. "Whatever a retailer's product range, there's a need for greater transparency and more accurate real-time data, which has major IT and systems implications. There's no question that the costs and complexities of delivering a state-of-the-art multichannel operation are significant, but the stakes are high. Achieving such a state not only means survival but the taking of market share from weaker competitors. Failing in this effort means losing market share to more savvy competitors." Single-channel shopping experiences, naturally, enjoy less of this valued transparency. And if transparency is, ultimately, a priority for consumers, many funeral homes are falling behind.

An October 2015 report by FCA and Consumer Federation of America (CFA) detailing the prices and price disclosures of 150 U.S. funeral homes found that "only 38 of the 150 homes (25%) fully disclosed prices on their websites, while 24 (16%) failed to fully disclose prices both on their website and in response to an email and phone call." Expanding on the report's conclusions, particularly the discovery of significant price differences (from \$2,580 to \$13,800 for a full-service funeral among surveyed locations), CFA Executive Director Stephen Brobeck notes, "The huge price ranges for identical funeral services within individual areas indicate that these markets lack effective competition. The lack of price competition is unfortunate given the relatively high cost of funeral services and the reluctance of many bereaved consumers to comparison shop for these services."

Buddy Phaneuf, licensed funeral director and owner of Phaneuf Funeral Homes & Crematorium, echoes these sentiments. "There's no better way to find out how transparent the funeral home is than by looking at its website," says Phaneuf. "It amazes me that you still have the vast majority of funeral homes that aren't putting prices on their websites. Consumers are looking to find out how much stuff costs; [funeral homes] spending thousands of dollars on great websites but not providing the most basic thing is shocking. Say you have a family that's comparing two funeral homes. If you've got one that's fully transparent with its pricing and value proposition, I think it gives that funeral home a huge advantage."

Caitlin Doughty, owner of nonprofit funeral service Undertaking LA and host of the popular "Ask a Mortician" YouTube video series, suggests that transparency in service offerings is as beneficial as transparency regarding prices, based on her experiences educating families on end-of-life options, witness cremations in particular. "People are really interested in know-

ing that witness cremations are available," she said. "I think the biggest gift you can give someone is telling him or her that it's okay to be with the body after the death." Furthermore, she argues, "Transparency creates trust. If you're willing to be open with consumers – to let them into your world and get them involved – that's going to increase their trust and their perception of your level of service."

A Consumer-Centric Game Plan

If you take away just one thing from this article to put into action, let it be the knowledge that today's consumers, accustomed to searching online on their own and accessing multiple sources of information in advance of every purchase decision, expect – even demand – transparency. In a funeral home, that transparency can manifest itself in a number of ways – from how you describe service options and your willingness to share pricing with the families you serve to the information access you give families at multiple points throughout the arrangement process.

Consumers are looking to find out how much stuff costs; funeral homes spending thousands of dollars on great websites but not providing the most basic thing – pricing – is shocking.

Joachim supports the notion that being transparent increases consumer trust, writing, "Your value to client families is not about what you can sell to them but about supporting them at an emotionally trying time. If you're all about the money and the merchandise, client families won't trust you and they won't think of you the next time they're in need of your services." Furthermore, he suggests, "Some funeral directors show prospective client families their most expensive caskets first, and it's easy to see why they do it. While there's no denying that selling an expensive casket boosts the bottom line for your funeral home, in these tough economic times, do we really need to prey on those who can't afford top-of-the-line items? Would you trust a salesman who only offered you expensive items way beyond your budget? Probably not."

Increasing the number of touchpoints your funeral home has with the community is one way directors can build trust and avoid the "used-car salesman" stereotype that has long plagued the profession. Phaneuf, a pioneer in this regard, maintains an active company blog, multiple social media profiles, paid search and social ad campaigns, an e-commerce store, a talk radio show and a podcast. Being so engaged, he argues, has enabled his firm to differentiate itself from lower-cost providers in his area.

“Half of our cremation society customers are value-seeking, but when all is said and done, it’s really about the experience. Even if you charge a higher price, you need to explain what makes your process different. I think some funeral homes think it’s all about price, and while that may be why a family calls you, that’s not why they’ll use you.”

Furthermore, Phaneuf argues that his firm’s open engagement with the community has led to a surprisingly valuable resource – data that enable the firm to better serve its customers. “Every month, we look at a number of metrics. We look at how many people visited our website, where they come from and how many leads they generated. We’re tracking that on a monthly basis and also by device. We’ve seen an association between our website traffic numbers and the number of at-need families we serve. We also look at how many internet leads we’re getting per visitor, as we want 2% of all of our visitors in a given month to convert to a lead. We’re constantly trying to drive our cost-per-lead down and our paid-ad click-through rates up. We’re constantly looking at how our ads convert. It’s not static. You should always be looking at the data and fine-tuning.”

Doughty makes another strong case for open engagement via media channels such as YouTube. “Having a YouTube channel, or any kind of web show, lets people feel like they’re making a connection with you. It goes back to people valuing transparent companies and transparent people more. They don’t feel like I’m trying to hide anything or sell them anything. I think it helps people get over the idea that funeral directors are trying to sell them. If you can get across that this is something you believe in, that helps break down barriers. You can also make money off of YouTube. It won’t make you rich, but every little bit counts when you own and operate a small funeral home.”

If your funeral home currently offers only one channel for disseminating information, there has never been a better time to make a change. Publishing the firm’s GPL on your website is one way to become more transparent, though progressive funeral homes will want to go further by offering additional channels through which consumers can learn about your business, the services provided and the factors that differentiate you from competitors.

Taking these next-level steps isn’t easy. Phaneuf is the first to admit that the commitments his firm has made to transparency require the support of specialized service providers, stating, “It’s a lot of work, which is why it’s challenging to do yourself. You really need to engage a company or companies that specialize in this kind of thing.”

Phaneuf’s drive comes from seeing the impact that responsiveness to shifting consumer preferences has had on his firm’s bottom line. “We’ve had an e-commerce site for our cremation society since 2000, and what we’ve found from younger consumers is that not only are they willing to go online, even if you give them the option to come in, they just want to go on the website. They’re thinking, why would I want to drive in and sit down? There’s definitely a process shift, a different way of engaging a consumer than in the past.”

The bottom line is that families’ preferences are changing. They’re demanding trust, transparency and a funeral home that works *with* their multichannel expectations, not against them. Investing in doing this work yourself (or hiring it out, as needed) may seem excessive, but the real question should be whether your firm can afford not to do so.

Sarah Rickerd is a marketing consultant and freelance writer focusing on business, technology and social issues.



Student Perspective Embrace the Adaptive Funeral

By Rosemarie Delgado

Funeral services are no longer as they once were. In the past, they were more “traditional,” which, by definition according to the American Board of Funeral Service Education, is a funeral rite that follows a prescribed ritual or ceremony that may be directed either by religious belief or social custom.

In today’s changing society, we’ve witnessed a deviation from both religion and tradition and thus a deviation from religion-dominant, traditional services.

But who is to say that’s a bad thing? Although services may not be the same as they once were, who’s to say that those involved in creating these new services can’t be more “open minded,” making them more directed to who the deceased was and the personal legacy he or she has left behind.

Why keep funeral services, or memorial services in general, the cookie-cutter type? When services aren’t allowed to have a creative aspect, their value goes down and fu-

When services aren't allowed to have a creative aspect, their value goes down and funerals all tend to feel the same. No creativity, little to no value, nothing memorable remains.

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Even funeral directors themselves, whose task has historically been to provide for, care for and dispose of the dead, along with offering their personal services and running the funeral business enterprise, have undergone a change over time. In early American funeral history, these individuals were craftsmen knowledgeable in the practice of coffin making and other funeral-related furnishings, but they were not much else as far as meaningful services go.

As time went on, funeral service changed, beginning with the development of funeral associations such as NFDA.

According to NFDA's Code of Professional Conduct, a funeral director's first obligation and responsibility is not to the deceased but to the family of the deceased: "Members have an ethical obligation to serve each family in a professional and caring manner, being respectful of their wishes and confidences, being honest and fair in all dealings with them and being considerate of those of lesser means."

If funeral directors or funeral arrangers today were to keep this in mind, funeral services could be less cookie-cutter in nature and more valuable to all involved.

From firsthand experience, I've seen how funeral directors and arrangers can have an effect on funeral services and ultimately prevent them from reaching their highest potential of value. They refrain from saying yes to the family, even making the smallest of ideas or tasks seem impossible.

Traditionally, as I'm sure many readers are aware, services are accompanied with either full casket or cremated remains present, some sort of visitation followed by the funeral services (typically in the funeral home) and concluding with the disposition of the decedent. But services should be allowed to have a more "adaptive funeral" feel, meaning that the funeral rite is adjusted to serve the needs and wants of those directly involved.

Those who serve families should be more open to the endless ideas that can lead to creative and meaningful services for each individual family. In the end, and possibly in the long run, if funeral arrangers and directors are open to the possibilities and their services continue to have that increased sense of value, as well as the rapport and trusting relationship that is developed while creating the services, families will come back and the sometimes negative reputation of funeral service and funeral homes will one day be just another memory of the past.

Rosemarie Delgado is a mortuary science student at Cypress College in Cypress, California.

Bringing It All Together: The Alternative Container Project

By Lee Gohmann

Throughout mortuary school, students are exposed to a wide range of topics – from funeral history to embalming techniques to the chemical formula for formaldehyde. They're taught how to meet with families, write obituaries, plan services.

At Mid-America College of Funeral Service, where I teach, students' training culminates in their final quarter with funeral service sociology, which includes an assignment called The Alternative Container Project.

I believe strongly in the power of project-based learning, and in this class, the seniors' final project is to pull together everything they've learned to plan, create and conduct a mock funeral. But rather than create a traditional funeral, the project asks them to address a challenge being faced through-

out the industry. As the cremation rate continues to rise, so do requests for direct cremation, foregoing a funeral. But we also know that many families may not know all of the options available and that it is incumbent on funeral professionals to educate them about what they can do in the way of services and memorialization, regardless of final disposition.

I pose this question to my students: What if you were to offer a family the opportunity to personalize the lowly alternative container and hold a short service for their loved one?





Students are divided into groups chosen via random drawing. It can be interesting to watch those who may not have gotten along in the past work together. Each group is given a short scenario, basic information about the deceased and a plain alternative container. They begin planning on a Monday and the funerals are held on Thursday. The entire student body and faculty are invited to attend.



It's not unusual to hear students protest that they'll need more than a few days, but my response is that's funeral service. You'll meet a family on Monday morning and they will expect you to execute a perfect funeral by Thursday.

The scenarios mirror situations students may experience in their careers. We've had services for drug addicts, children, victims of suicide, even for a beloved police dog killed in the line of duty. Local funeral homes generously donate the alternative containers and memorial packages. In addition to decorating the containers, students create memorial videos and incorporate music, eulogies and an occasional distraught mourner. The presentations are sometimes humorous and often touching. It's not unusual to see students and even faculty wiping away tears as they watch. "I know it's an imaginary person," one instructor said, "but it was so real!"

On "funeral day," excitement and last-minute nervousness run high as students prepare to begin, dressed in their "funeral director best." Technical difficulties occasionally occur, and when they get that panicked look, I tell them these things can and do happen and you just have to keep rolling. I'm amazed at how every class ultimately succeeds in making diverse and well-executed presentations.

The scenarios this semester incorporated famous movie characters, with services planned for Indiana Jones, killed by an errant boulder; Dorothy Gale, who met her end by tornado; Chief Brody, partially eaten by a shark; and Thelma and Louise, best friends who drove their car off a cliff. Part of the fun is that one scenario also includes a faculty member as a decedent. This time, the "victim" was embalming and restorative art teacher Chuck Lewis, who was pecked to death by birds, à la Alfred Hitchcock. Students can get very creative when planning the funeral of one of their teachers!

The project has been an enormous success, and I always ask students for feedback after their presentations. One summed it up perfectly: "Being less than two months from graduation, I know this is where I belong. The passion and excitement I feel toward my new journey and career is overwhelming. Sometimes all I can do is smile because I simply don't have the words to describe the pride and honor I feel when I care for the deceased or comfort the family. I feel I am now 'home.'"

The first time I did this project, a student dragged his heels, claiming it was a dumb idea and he could never imagine doing something like this at his funeral home. Several months after he graduated, I received an email: "Dear Mrs. G., you'll never guess what..." He went on to relate the story of a family that had limited funds and planned a direct cremation with no service. He asked them if they'd be interested in decorating the cremation container. The family not only loved the idea but said afterward that it gave them a feeling of closure they wouldn't have had otherwise. There are no sweeter words for a teacher to hear than "Thank you, I learned a lot from this."

If we could get every funeral professional to simply ask the question of cremation families, "Have you thought about any type of memorial service?" we would elevate the value of cremation, including the lasting value families receive.

Louise "Lee" Gohmann teaches at Mid-America College of Funeral Service and is a funeral director/embalmer licensed in Indiana and Florida. She has been a funeral service professional for more than 16 years.

Funeral Service Foundation Offers 18 Academic Scholarships Ranging From \$1,000-\$5,000

By Kelly Manion

Twice a year, the Funeral Service Foundation offers up to 18 total scholarships ranging from \$1,000 to \$5,000 to full- or part-time students enrolled in or accepted into an ABFSE-accredited mortuary science program. While the spring deadline has passed, applications will again be accepted September 1-November 30.

"We continually hear from students who say they could benefit from financial assistance," said Danelle O'Neill, Foundation executive director. "Our goal is to make education more accessible



and affordable for the profession's next generation of leaders, thinkers and doers."

New this year, select scholarships are also available to full- and part-time students who are enrolled in or accepted into any Canadian funeral service education program recognized by the Funeral Service Association of Canada.

"This scholarship is an affirmation that being dedicated to your passion will provide opportunities to pay it forward. I'm thrilled to continue my education with the confidence of knowing that my future colleagues see potential in me."

– Jennifer Eggers, Memorial Classic Scholarship Awardee

"Offering select academic scholarships to Canadian students is a natural step for the Foundation since making education accessible has been our cornerstone for three generations," said O'Neill. "We're thrilled to be able to help even more students offset the costs associated with pursuing a degree in mortuary science."

The Foundation offers the Dennis Schoepp, Joseph E. Hagan and Shipley Rose Buckner memorial scholarships; the Steve Lang, Memorial Classic and Foundation '45 scholarships; and promotes the Brenda Renee Horn and Steve Mack memorial scholarships in partnership with the SCI National Scholarship Program.

The scholarship program launched in 2002 with a single \$1,000 Joseph E. Hagan Memorial Scholarship. Nearly 75 students have earned awards since then, and the program has grown to 18 annual scholarships.

"My scholarship was essential in ensuring that I achieved my academic and career goals in funeral service, and it awarded me a deeper confidence that this indeed is a profession worthy of pursuing," said Ryan Joseph Essington, a recent graduate of Worsham College of Mortuary Science in Wheeling, Illinois, and a 2017 Joseph E. Hagan Memorial Scholarship recipient.

Jennifer Eggers received a Memorial Classic Scholarship last year and is slated to graduate from Wayne State University in Detroit in August. "This scholarship is an affirmation that being dedicated to your passion will provide opportunities to pay it forward," said Eggers. "I'm thrilled to continue my education with the confidence of knowing that my future colleagues see potential in me."

The Application Process

The online application requires individuals to submit a brief essay and video; candidates choose from a slate of questions that address the profession's future, its challenges and its draw.

The Foundation's Scholarship Committee, comprising educators and funeral service professionals, awards scholarships to those candidates whose essays and videos best highlight passion, drive and promise. "We extend creative control and allow candidates to answer questions that resonate with their experiences because that's when we truly see their drive and passion and witness the meaningful impact they're already making in their communities and with families," said Stephanie Kann, Scholarship Committee chair and Foundation chair-elect.

Comprehensive submission instructions, award amounts, eligibility requirements and scholarship terms and guidelines are available at FuneralServiceFoundation.org.

Kelly Manion is director of communications for the Funeral Service Foundation.

NEW MEMBER BENEFIT

NFDA Work/Life Resource Program

The Work/Life Resource Program (EAP) is a free hotline staffed by experts who can suggest resources and offer support to help make life a little easier for NFDA members, including student members, and their immediate families. Whether you want to be proactive and plan for the future, prevent minor

issues from becoming big problems or are having a family emergency, confidential assistance is available. The experts from the Work/Life Resource Program have recorded a short, 20-minute webinar describing the wide range of services offered. Watch it at nfda.org/worklife.

From the Editor's Desk...

A Road to Awareness

In my community, this month marks a very sad anniversary. It was one morning two years ago that I learned a jogger and his dog were struck and killed along the route I jog every morning. The accident took place 15 minutes before I would normally run through that area. The driver, a 17-year-old student of the high school, was on her way to school early for a class trip. Ironically, the man she killed was the superintendent of the local school district, and the incident happened just a quarter-mile from the school.

Police investigated the crash and charged the 17-year-old with reckless driving, improper use of a cellphone while driving and leaving the scene of an accident (she did not stop and instead drove to the school, called 911 and then her father). She was later charged with second-degree death by auto.

Personally, I make it a practice to jog against traffic, whereas the victim and his dog were going with traffic. Running against traffic allows me to see what's coming; it also affords me a glimpse into the cars passing by, even if for a fleeting second. And every morning, I see drivers talking on the phone or texting, and I alternate between feeling bewildered and angry.

About seven years ago, in conjunction with Federated Insurance (an NFDA Endorsed Provider), NFDA rolled out a program to promote awareness of and illustrate the consequences of distracted driving. The program is turnkey for funeral directors, as they can take a positive message into their communities as a public service. Federated expanded that program two years ago with the introduction of its "Please Make It Home Safe" message.

funeral directors to employ to deliver an impactful presentation to colleges and high schools, community centers, senior living communities, churches, fire and police departments, VFW posts/service clubs and other community organizations. The kit is an effective tool to use to reinforce a positive message in your community and perhaps help prevent some voices from going silent too soon.

One of the points repeatedly brought up in the NFDA Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey is that funeral directors need to be visible in the community. As you embark on your career in funeral service, don't underestimate the impact that advocating such a message will have in your service community and with the families you serve.

According to U.S. Department of Transportation statistics, in 2012, 3,328 people were killed and 421,000 injured in accidents in which distracted driving was suspected. In 2014, the number of fatalities dropped slightly to 3,179, while the number of injured jumped to 431,000.

I was an advocate for the program then and am even more so now. It includes many tools for

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13625 Bishop's Dr.
Brookfield, WI 53005-6607
800-228-6332
or 609-815-8145
www.nfda.org

Editor

Edward J. Defort
(edefort@nfda.org)

Managing Editor

Dawn M. Behr
(dbehr@nfda.org)

Graphics

Brooke Krishok
(bkrishok@nfda.org)

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