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## Surveys Weigh Funeral Director and Student Expectations

By Deana Gillespie and Edward J. Defort

**BROOKFIELD, WISCONSIN** – In October and November of 2016, NFDA, in collaboration with the American Board of Funeral Service Education, conducted a study of mortuary science students to measure their expectations of starting salaries, job benefits and job responsibilities. A follow-up study surveyed funeral home owners and managers to measure their workplace expectations of new graduates.

Comparison of the results of the two studies paints a clear picture to better understand whether job seeker and employer expectations are indeed congruent, realistic and achievable – and when they may not be – and how gaps in expectations can be bridged. Where applicable, results were also linked to previous studies conducted in 2013 and 2010.

In examining the state of the funeral service job market, the data suggest:

- In the past 24 months, funeral service has followed the national trend for small businesses, reporting minimal increases in hiring over the past two years overall. Nineteen percent of funeral homes reported increasing the number of licensed staff, while 15.9% reported decreasing licensed staff.
- Twenty-five percent of funeral homes plan to increase the number of licensed staff in the next 12 months, while 4% plan to decrease the number of licensed staff. This is better than

the national outlook, where 16% of all small businesses plan to add jobs in the next 12 months.

- Twelve percent of respondents reported postponing their retirement plans at this time, which is on par with the national outlook. According to the 2016 Retirement Confidence Survey, 13% of American workers are postponing retirement plans.
- Owners stated that the greatest challenges facing funeral service today are:
  - « Decreasing profit margins: 68.3%
  - « Availability of qualified personnel: 58.2%
  - « Increasing cremation: 52.9%
  - « Changing consumer preferences: 51.9%.
- Approximately half of employers reported having trouble finding skilled employees.
- Employers are almost evenly split as to whether they prefer to hire experienced individuals or new graduates.
- Half of respondents have hired at least one new graduate in the past five years.
- Turning to salary/hours, students expect to make 12.5% more than employers intend to pay (more than a \$5,000 difference). However, students expect to work longer work

weeks than employers expect them to work (45+ vs. 40+ hours). Students also expect to do more funeral-related tasks than employers intend to assign them. This is a possible reason for the difference in expectations.

- When considering job responsibilities, almost all employers expect new hires to perform removals, embalming and visitations.
- The main gaps in expected job duties are that students expect to do more funeral-related tasks, such as bereavement care and crematory operations. Employers expect new hires to perform more non-funeral-related tasks, such as information technology, custodial tasks (building maintenance, grounds upkeep, cleaning, etc.) and fleet maintenance.
- The largest gaps in expected job benefits are that students

are more likely to expect dental insurance and life insurance compared to benefits employers offer, while employers are more likely to offer benefits such as license renewal, paid vacation, time for professional seminars and continuing education reimbursement.

### What Employers Look For

The study found that the most important qualities/job skills employers look for when hiring new graduates are being ethical, honest and trustworthy; having a strong work ethic; a professional appearance/demeanor and the ability to work collaboratively as a team member.

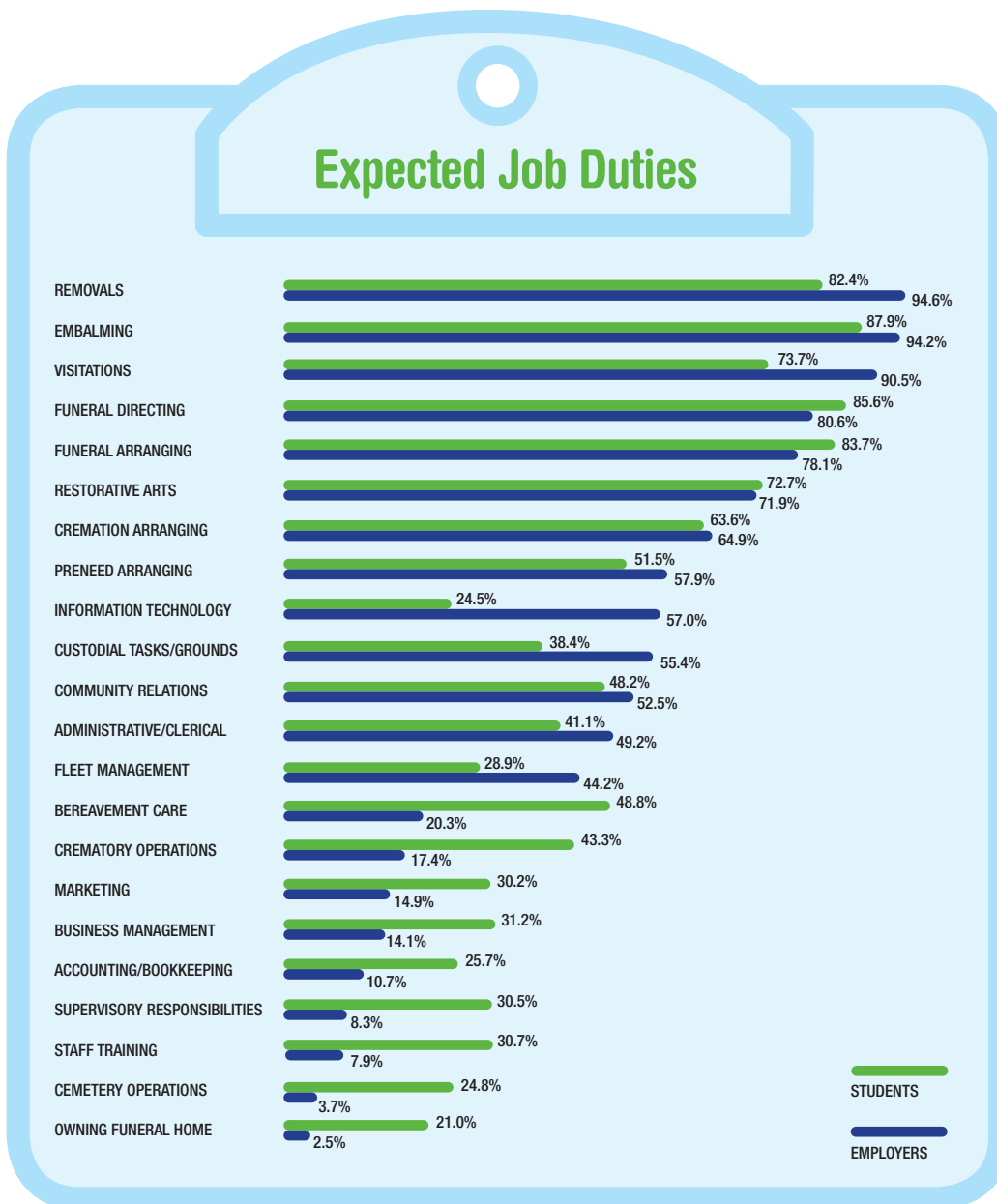
The least important qualities and job skills when hiring new graduates are sales and marketing skills, experience, a high grade point average and having “grown up” in the funeral service business.

### Assessment of Mortuary School Preparation

Just under 40% of employers do not agree that students are well prepared by their mortuary school education for their first funeral home position.

The top suggested changes to mortuary school requirements include teaching on topics such as commonsense/work ethic, customer service/people skills, importance of appearance/demeanor, communication skills and arrangement/directing skills.

Most employers (74.1%) felt it would be either very valuable or valuable for students to have additional arranger training. Similarly, 40%-50% of employers felt it would be either very valuable or valuable for a new hire to be a certified pre-planning consultant and participate in celebrant and crematory operator training.



**Key Findings**

Similar to previous years, approximately half of responding employers (50.2%) have hired at least one new graduate in the past five years. This compares with 53.7% and 48.6% in 2013 and 2010, respectively.

Most of these new positions were for the dual role of funeral director/embalmer (86.8%). This is slightly less than the

90.1% of hires in 2013 and above that of the 78.5% of hires in 2010.

The top job duties employers expect new hires to perform are removals, embalming, visitations, funeral directing and funeral arranging.

The top duties students expect to perform as new hires include embalming, funeral directing, funeral arranging and removals.

In general, employers offer more benefits than students expect to receive. The benefits employers are most likely to offer new hires are license renewal, paid vacation, time for professional seminars, CE reimbursement, an annual salary increase and medical insurance. The benefits students are most likely to expect are medical insurance, annual salary increase, sick time, license renewal and dental insurance.

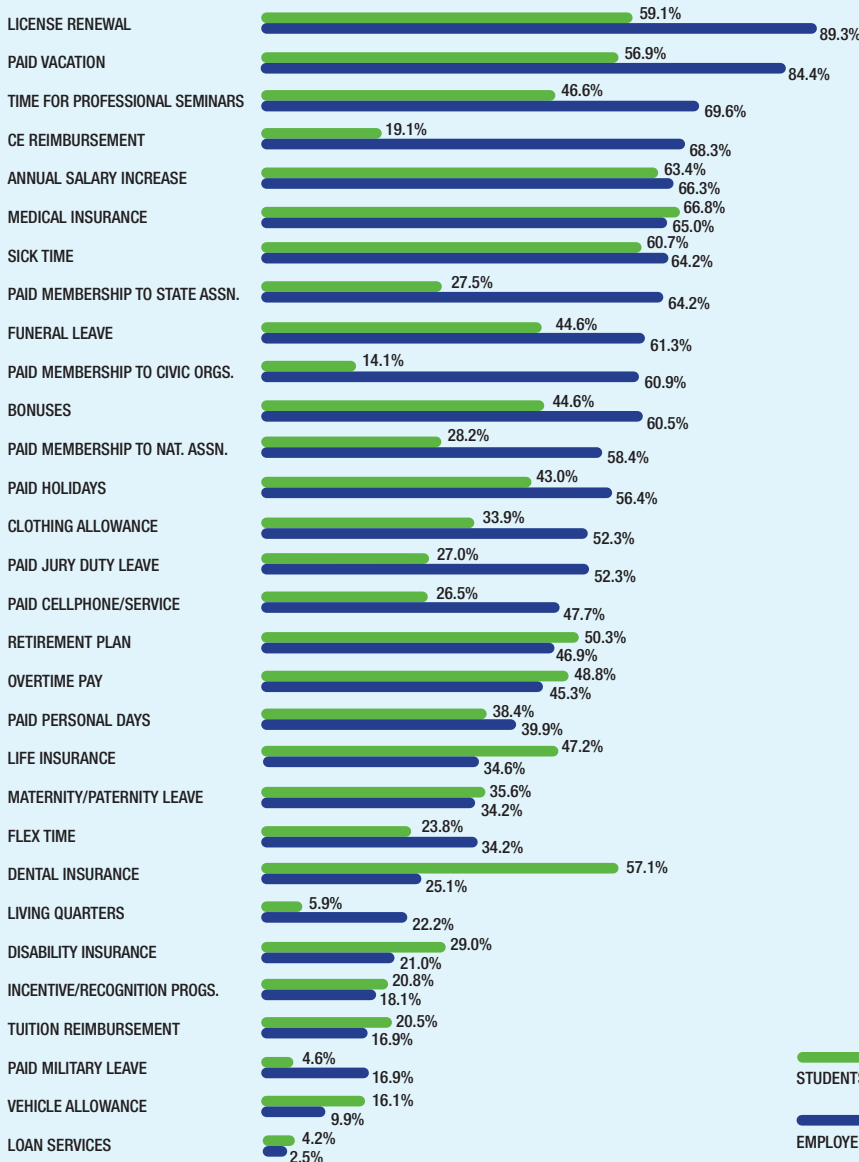
Students expect to make 12.5% more than employers intend to pay (a \$5,000 difference).

Students expect to work slightly longer work weeks than employers expect them to work. Employers expect students to work an average of 40 hours per week, but students expect to work an average of 45 hours per week.

Almost all students and employers expect newly licensed employees to be on call.

As stated earlier, the top job skills or qualities that employers

**Expected Benefits**



look for when hiring new graduates are being ethical, honest and trustworthy, having a strong work ethic, a professional appearance/demeanor and working collaboratively as a team member.

The top qualities or skills employers felt new graduates lack are attention to detail, willingness to work irregular hours, having commitment/dedication/strong work ethic and a willingness to do non-funeral work.

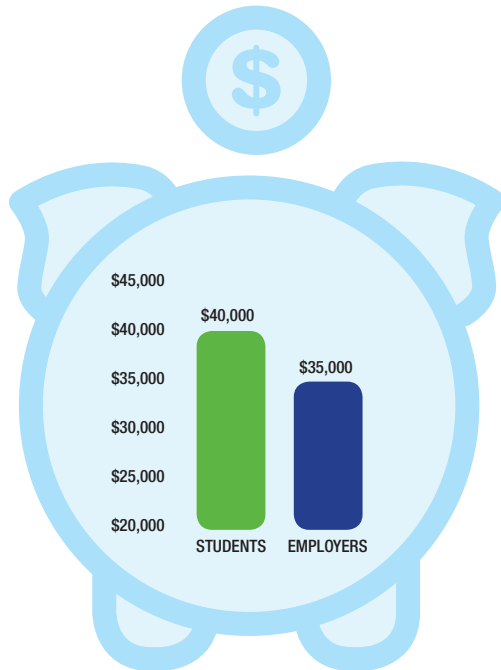
Almost three-quarters (74.1%) of employers felt it would be either valuable or very valuable for new graduates to have had arranger training, 50.5% felt it would be valuable to be a certified preplanning consultant, and approximately 40% felt it would be valuable to have celebrant training and/or be a certified crematory operator.

Almost 40% of employers either somewhat disagree (26.3%) or strongly disagree (11.6%) that students are well prepared for their first funeral home position.

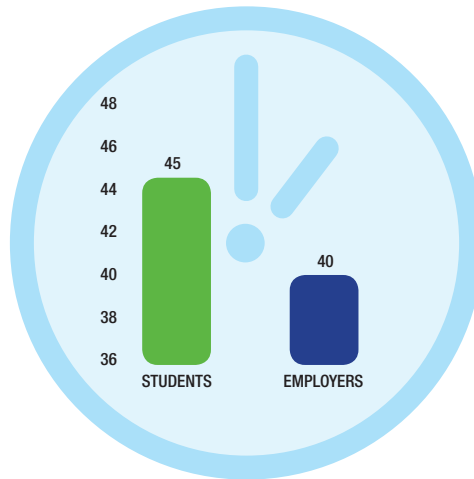
The top changes respondents suggested be made to mortuary school requirements include teaching on topics such as commonsense/work ethic, customer service/people skills, appearance/demeanor, communications skills and/or arrangement/directing skills.

Just under 30% of employers have hired a new graduate who is no longer with their firm.

Of the 27.6% of new graduates no longer with the firms, 32.1% quit to work at another firm, 28.6% were terminated and 25% quit to pursue another career outside funeral service.

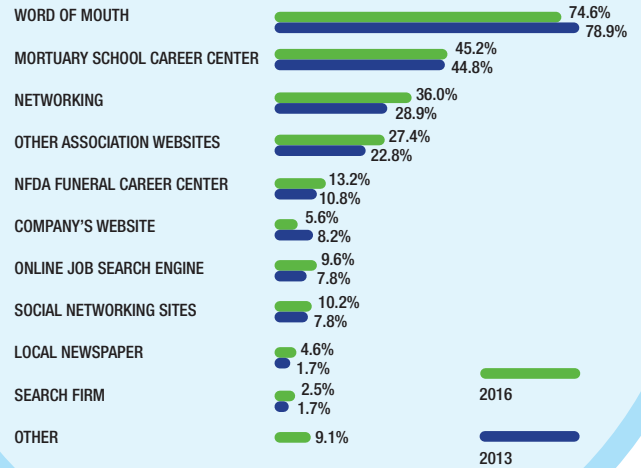


Average Annual Salary Expected



Average Number of Work Hours Per Week Expected

### How Do You Advertise for New Positions?



quit to pursue another career outside funeral service.

Of the employees who quit, 25.8% quit due to the hours and 16.1% did not find the work enjoyable.

When advertising for a new position, most employers find new employees via word of mouth or through a mortuary school career center, networking and/or other association websites.

Employers were most likely to state decreasing profit margins, availability of qualified personnel, increasing cremation and changing consumer preferences as the top challenges facing funeral service.

When determining the greatest challenges facing funeral service as seen by employers and students, both groups perceive changing consumer preferences, the decrease in memorialization and increasing cremation rates as three

of the greatest challenges facing funeral service.

Just over half of employers reported difficulty finding skilled employees.

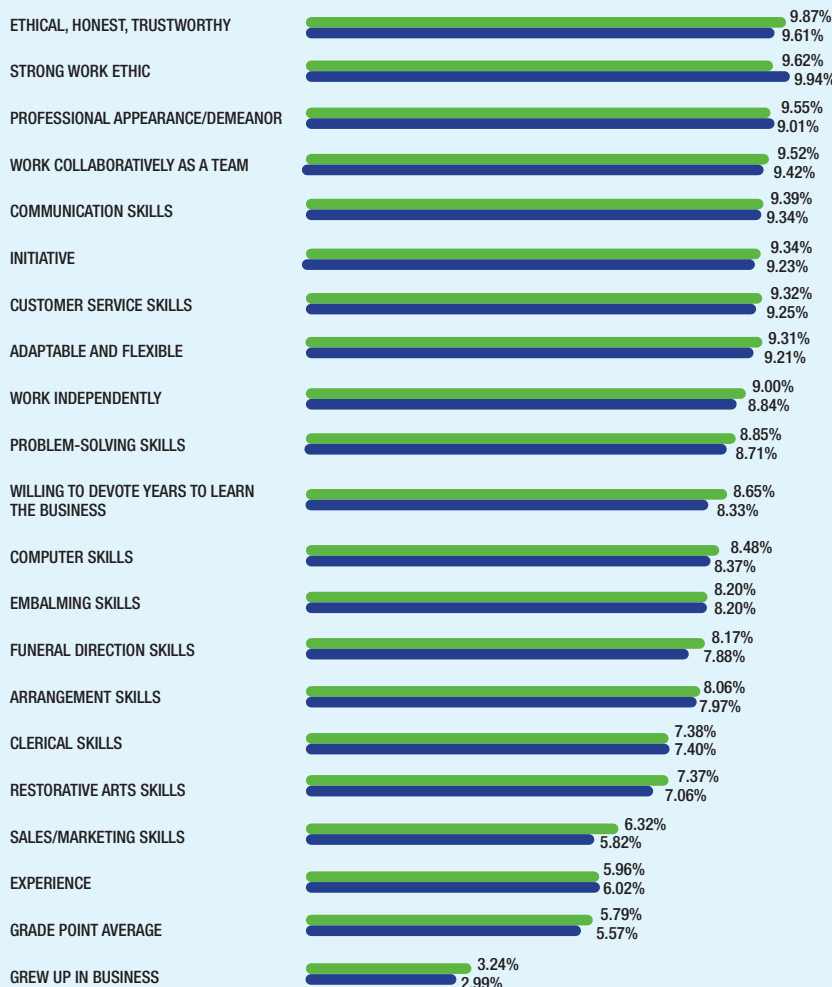
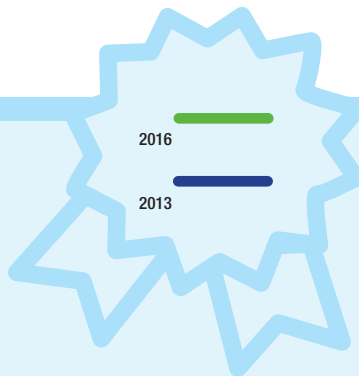
Employers state that the top characteristics that make a candidate stand out in an interview are professional appearance/demeanor and good communication skills, followed by being honest and trustworthy, having a good personality/friendly, being polite and having strong ethics and morals.

Employers are almost evenly split as to which type of employee they prefer to hire – experienced individuals or new graduates.

Employers were asked the reasons they prefer to hire each type of employee. The main reasons 43.7% of employers prefer to hire experienced individuals are because they are already trained and understand the industry/job. The main reasons why 56.4% of employers prefer to hire new graduates are because they can teach or mold them and they haven't developed any bad habits yet.

### Most Important Job Skills / Qualities

(Average Score Using 10-Point Scale)



### Firm Demographics

In the past 24 months, most firms have experienced an increase in total overhead costs (74.4%) and employee salaries (57.4%). It is interesting to note that 19.3% of firms have increased the number of licensed staff members, while 15.9% have decreased the number of licensed staff members.

In the next 12 months, 61.8% of employers expect their total overhead costs to increase, and 50% anticipate being able to increase employee salaries. Also, 25.4% plan to increase the number of licensed staff members at their firms, while 4.4% plan to decrease the number of licensed staff members.

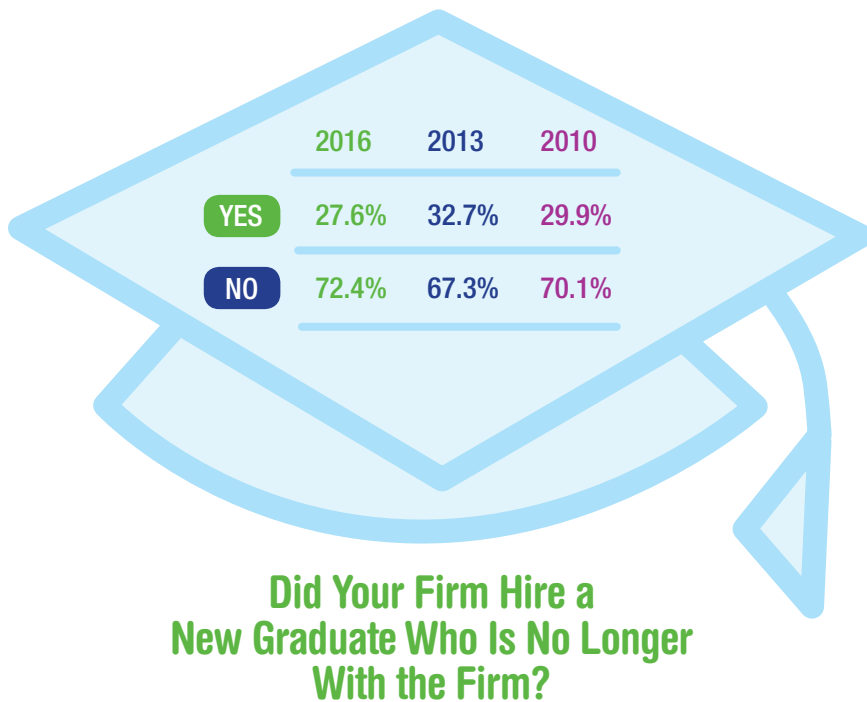
More than half (57%) of responding firms have offered an apprenticeship in the past five years. Of those firms, 80.5% hired the apprentice.

Just over one-third (35.3%) of responding firms reported a caseload of 151-350 per year, 29% reported a caseload of 76-150 and 15.5% reported a caseload of less than 76.

Just under half (42.6%) of firms in this study employ full-time employees only.

### Individual Demographics

Most respondents were the firm's owner, principal or partner.



Twelve percent of respondents stated they are postponing their retirement plans at this time, while 36.9% have no plans to retire at this time.

Most responding employers were between ages 40 and 54 (34.0%) or between ages 55 and 64 (37.4%).

Most responding employers were male (84.4%), while most responding students were female (61%).

Most respondents in both studies were white; however, a significantly larger portion of student respondents were black/African-American (17.1%) or Hispanic (6.5%).

**Methodology**

*Funeral Directors:* A random sample of NFDA members listed as main contacts with a valid email address received an email invitation to complete the online survey. It should be noted that all NFDA members are licensed funeral directors. A reminder email was sent to potential respondents one week after the initial invitation was sent. As an incentive, respondents had the opportunity to enter a random drawing to win one of 10 gift cards upon completion of the survey.

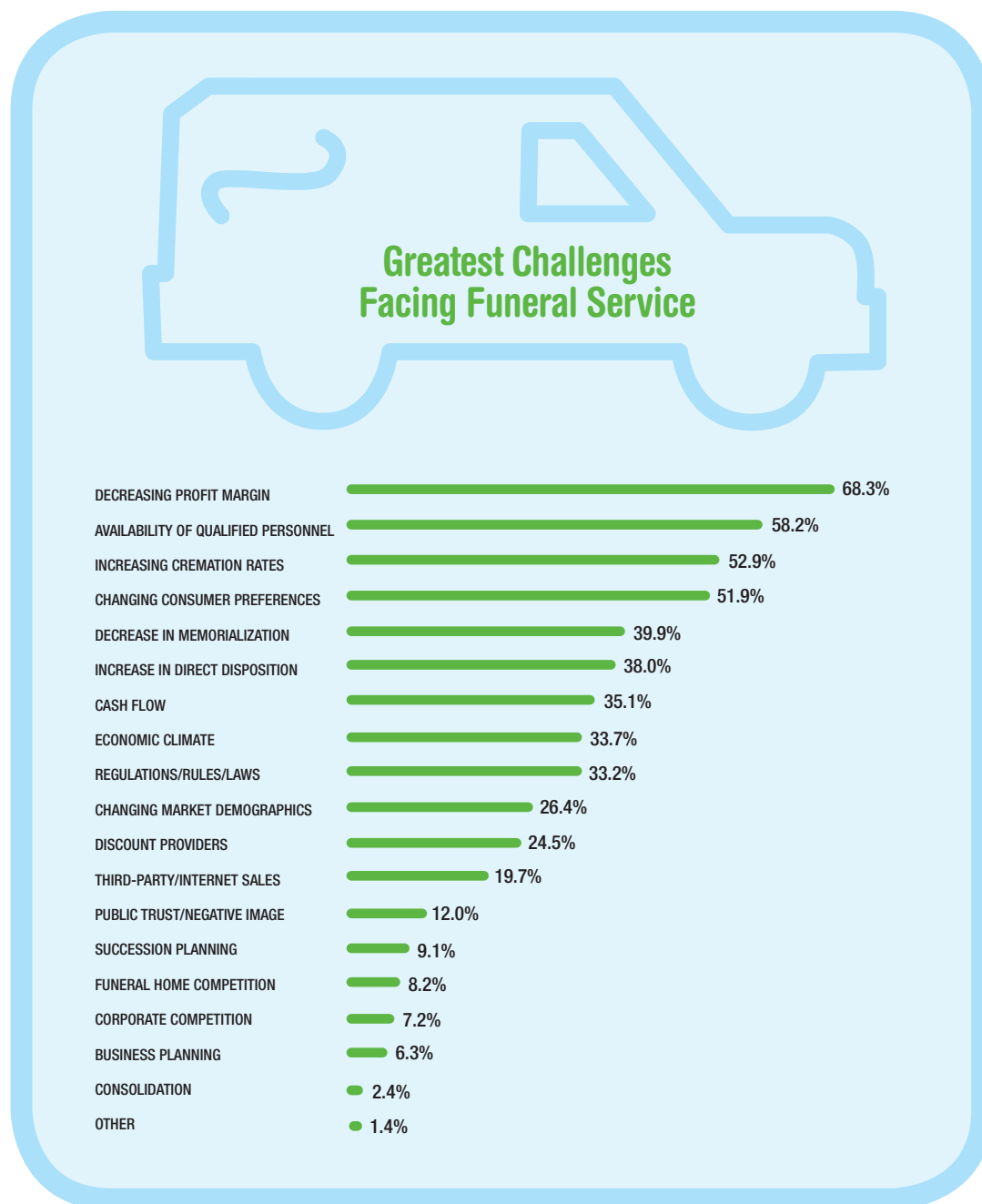
Of the 2,552 potential respondents with a valid email address, a total of 228 members completed the survey (a 9% response rate). Results for all respondents are projectable within a range of ±6.4% (with 95% confidence).



*Students:* The American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) provided NFDA with a complete list of mortuary science schools in the United States, and all schools were invited to participate. School administrators sent a survey link to schools to be posted on the school's website or to be emailed directly to students by the school administrator. Several reminder emails were sent to these administrators, encouraging them to send out reminders to students to encourage student participation.

The surveys were administered from April 8, 2016, through May 6, 2016. To encourage a high response rate, participating

schools were offered a customized report showing the results of their school compared to national-level results. Also, an incentive was offered to students completing the survey to be entered into a drawing for a chance to win one of 10 \$50 American Express gift cards. Out of 58 institutions accredited by ABFSE, 31 mortuary science schools participated in this online survey. A total of 596 students completed the survey, yielding a total response rate of approximately 20.2% and a margin of error of approximately  $\pm 4.1\%$ . Given this margin of error, the actual overall scores obtained in this research could fall either 4.1 percentage points higher or lower than what is predicted by the survey.



## Being Productive Isn't Just Staying Busy It's Getting Results

By Lacy Robinson

There's a certain level of confidence you feel when you wake up knowing that what you want to get accomplished will get done. It's more than checking off a to-do list or keeping copious notes and daily reminders on your mobile device. As you can probably imagine, that to-do list can go out the window in a split second when working at a funeral home. It's the positive impact of staying organized and fully engaged with short-term and long-term goals that prepares you mentally for shifting gears and then returning confidently to those items with a clear mind.

Is there an app that will keep you focused and on task until the end of time? Nah. Is daily meditation the answer to keeping it all together? It's not for everyone. Will a subscription to *Real Simple* magazine help? Perhaps.

The answer to waking up with clear thoughts, reduced anxiety and the ability to amp up productivity lies in having the right state of mind. Some funeral homes go five days or more between services. What a gift that is in order to catch up on paperwork and refocus on business goals. Other funeral homes are incredibly busy, serving families in a variety of ways day in and day out. Regardless of where you find yourself after graduation, taking control of your organizational skills now and achieving a state of mind that benefits you, your family and your co-workers will be your greatest asset as you move forward in your career.

Don't rely on the infamous whiteboard to keep you focused. Try one or two or all five of these tips designed to keep you on top of it all.

### 1 Keep Up Your Energy Level

You can drink all the water you want and load up on Cliff Bars and prunes, but none of it will help if you don't get quality sleep every night. A good night's rest requires a schedule, tools and rituals. Commit to a regular sleep schedule the very best you can. Invest in quality bedding, black-out curtains and essential oils. Have rituals in place, such as decluttering your sleeping area and light reading. The more focus you place on getting a good night's rest, the more likely you are to achieve it. Even if you're on call multiple nights during the week, having the right tools in place and sticking to your rituals will help.

### 2 Use the Organizational Method That Works for You

Every day, people are being convinced to download one app or another with the promise of a freebie, added convenience or

a simplified life. But you must realize that what works for one person may not work for you. *And that's okay!*

Here's a quick example and one of the only times I will talk about myself in an article. A digital calendar does not work for me. I have kept a paper pocket calendar since I was in high school. Several times, I've tried ditching my handy calendar and attempted to use a digital calendar that syncs with every device I own. But I always go back to using my 'old-fashioned' calendar. There have been plenty of times in years past that I have been embarrassed to bust out my calendar in a meeting while everyone else is whipping out their smartphones. Then I heard Lee Cockerell, former executive vice president of operations for Walt Disney World Resort, speak. During his speech, he pulled out a paper pocket calendar and emphatically insisted to the audience that a paper-based planner was the only way to go. I wanted to jump up and yell, "Thank you!" The point is that you should do what works for you. Only you know what tools will work best for your method of staying organized. For me, it was reducing the number of clicks and writing things down as a way to declutter my mind.

### 3 Always Improve the Appearance of a Room Before Exiting

Whether you're walking out of the arrangement room or the selection room, commit to improving its appearance beforehand. It could simply be straightening chairs or signage or adjusting the light. By maintaining the organization of a room on a daily basis, you are contributing to overall productivity for the day as well as the general ambiance. Regardless of whether it's a space used by employees only or a room used for serving families, you will prevent clutter from occurring and feel a sense pride with each room's appearance.

### 4 Prioritize Your To-Do List

The key to maximizing productivity is to prioritize. David Allen, an expert in personal productivity and creator of GTD – Getting Things Done Work-Life Management System – says the most important step to staying focused and productive is knowing your priorities as you start your day. If you research different ways to create a to-do list, you'll find numerous techniques, ranging from how President Dwight D. Eisenhower stayed focused to billionaires who schedule their day minute by minute. The consistent method among the most successful people is their ability to prioritize their to-do list and schedule. Since day-to-day activities can change rather quickly at a funeral home, the minute-by-minute schedule that Olympians use will not work. Consider using customized categories

that reflect your role at the funeral home to prioritize your responsibilities. Take a look at the following example:

#### Reading

- *The Director.edu*
- *Memorial Business Journal*
- *Smithville Times*

#### Top 5 Must-Do's Today

- Schedule meeting with hospice.
- Pick up dry-cleaning.
- Pick up death certificates at Dr. Smith's office.
- Schedule meeting with event coordinator at Greenlawn Country Club.

#### Correspondence

- Handwritten note to Mrs. Smith
- Call state board.
- Post to social media about grief help meeting.

#### Community Outreach Planning

- Explore ideas for implementing Conversation Cards.
- Outline discussion points for high school career day.
- Research death cafe for our area.

#### Professional Development

- Schedule certification/training classes.
- Pick two webinars for second quarter.

## 5 Do One Thing at a Time

For millennials, breaking their habit of multitasking would be as effective as a screen door on a submarine. But the benefits and sanity that come with completing one task at a time without interruption is a glorious feeling. Multitasking can sometimes result in less-than-perfect results, while giving your exclusive attention to one task at a time, also known as single tasking, can result in a more productive day. Try turning off those pings and dings from your phone that are constantly interrupting your thought process. Think of your attention span like a muscle and commit to strengthening it by single tasking. It works!

There's no one size that fits all when it comes to amping up productivity. You will find that after graduation and when you begin working what could be more than 40 hours a week at the funeral home, your ability to stay organized and focused on short-term goals and long-term goals will help you in living a life that is balanced. Be aggressive in maximizing productivity. You – and only you – have control of how your day ends up.

*Lacy Robinson is NFDA director of member development.*

## The Art of Telling Your Employer Goodbye: 10 Tips When Quitting Your Job

By Jzyk S. Ennis, Ph.D.

Though it may seem premature to be giving advice to apprentices/interns and new licensees on how to quit their jobs, the reality is that there is a proper way and a wrong way to part ways with an employer. Some of you would love nothing more than to channel country music star Johnny Paycheck and tell your boss to “take this job and shove it!”

But Paycheck never worked in the funeral profession, and he surely didn't understand the culture and dynamics of our close-knit community. If he had, he'd have understood that leaving a job on bad terms is the same as burning a bridge. And we've all heard the adage that you should never burn your bridges because you never know when you may have to double back and cross them again.

This is very true in the funeral profession, which is based on trust and building relationships between the community and



the funeral professional. In the same way, employment in the profession is based on trust and building relationships.

Let me readily admit that there are some employers in the profession that need to take a course on how to mentor and build

Take it from me – other jobs are not always what they appear. I've taken new opportunities thinking they were greener pastures, but when I got to the job, it was not a greener pasture but a burnt field!

those same relationships previously mentioned. However, let's get back to you, the apprentice/intern or new licensee.

Most of you are just beginning your career. You will have many opportunities to either stay in your current position or move to another job. Please take it from me and personal experience – other jobs are not always what they appear. I have taken new opportunities thinking that they were greener pastures, but when I got to the job, it was not a greener pasture but a burnt field!

When you do find that great employment opportunity, you must let your current employer know that you plan on moving to the other position. Here is where many fail to understand the nature of the funeral profession.

We are a *very* close-knit community. In some states, there are only several hundred licensees. We talk at our district, state and national association meetings. We converse at local civic clubs, watering holes and places of worship. When you leave a job – especially when you pull a Johnny Paycheck on your employer – we hear about it and we talk about it.

Salespeople are notorious for spreading the “news” about such events. To some, it's funny that the owner/manager was told to “shove it”; others, however, make a mental note that they would never want you as a part of their team.

Over my 26-plus years in funeral service, here are some tips for you on how to say goodbye to your current employer:

- There are no “secrets.” We all know each other, and word travels fast. Don't think you can hide a job search.
- Tell the owner/manager first and then your colleagues.
- Don't search for a job just to try to get a raise. You may be shown the door! If you offer a resignation, you'd better have a job waiting.
- Be prepared for your current employer to accept your resignation and immediately release you from your duties. This is just good business and proper security in some cases.
- Be prepared for a counteroffer if you are a good and valued employee. If you take the counteroffer, be prepared to stay and not repeat the process next month, next year, etc.

- *Always* offer a two-week notice. Offer four weeks if you are in a management position or the only licensed person in the business.

- Do *not* quit by text, email or social media. Present your resignation in a simple, appreciative and concisely written letter. Don't write a manifesto listing all of the wrongs of your employment.

- No matter how mad you may be, do not walk out on your current job without notice.

- Even after leaving, speak of your previous employer as a colleague and keep any negativity to yourself. There are no “off the record” conversations in the employee lounges at funeral homes, especially when salespeople are present.

- Don't be a job-hopper who constantly moves for a few hundred bucks every few years.

I hope these tips will help when it's time for you to decide about your future employment. Remember, your reputation is more important than silver or gold. Protect it!



*Jzyk Ennis, Ph.D., is a full-time funeral service education instructor at Jefferson State Community College in Birmingham, Alabama. He is also a part-time funeral director/embalmer for Deerfoot Memorial Funeral Home in Trussville, Alabama, and a licensed funeral director and embalmer in Alabama and Georgia. Ennis currently serves as vice president of the American Board of Funeral Service Education and on NFDA's National Spokesperson Team. He is a past president of the Alabama Funeral Directors Association and a former NFDA Executive Board and Policy Board member. Ennis has written many articles related to embalming and funeral service and is a nationally recognized speaker on topics related to embalming and funeral service. He can be reached at jennis@jeffersonstate.edu or 205-856-7852.*



## Leaning Into Funeral Service

By Sarah Rickerd

Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, captured plenty of attention in the business world for its assertion that a combination of factors keep women from leadership roles, including deeply held gender biases in the working world and the internalized message that being ambitious isn't "ladylike" or "appropriate."

The case she makes is compelling. Even though women represent 57% of college graduates and 63% of master's degree holders, only 21% of all Fortune 500 CEOs are women. In these same companies, women hold just 14% of executive officer positions and 16% of all board seats. Congress is just 18% female. In 1970, women were paid 59 cents for every dollar men made; as of 2010, that number has only increased to 77 cents per dollar.

Certainly there are any number of explanations for these disparities, many of which Sandberg addresses in her book. However, what intrigued me about the author's work wasn't just her overall thesis but the fact that her arguments seemed to dovetail with an interesting statistic I read during my first week in the funeral industry: Women, on average, last only three years in the profession.

So is it the funeral industry or the business world as a whole that fails, in many cases, to provide a supportive environment for women balancing career, family and/or other demands? And regardless of which environment is to blame, why should we care? What advantages do women bring to the field that make it worthwhile to accommodate the unique challenges they face?

It's easy to say that women matter to the funeral industry because their more nurturing natures and team-building attitudes make them better able to serve families and build consensus within funeral home staffs. But this is lazy thinking. Women are not a monolith that can be universally classified as being more sensitive or more compassionate than their male counterparts. Even if more women than men do share these tendencies, every employee brings his or her own strengths and personality traits to this field, and it's this balance that enables funeral homes to serve diverse customer populations.

A much better answer is that firms with women in leadership positions tend to perform better financially. In its 2011 research, U.S. nonprofit Catalyst found a 26% difference in return on invested capital between companies with 19% to 44% female board representation and those that had no women directors. Other studies support this conclusion, demonstrating that both businesses and economies with higher rates of female involvement perform better from a financial perspective. Based on this alone, adding women to leadership positions within funeral homes seems like a no-brainer.

But financial benefits aside, it's worth noting that one aspect in which the funeral profession differs from other industries is in its overall availability of leadership positions. The 2013 NFDA Compensation Study found that nearly two-thirds (64.1%) of respondents operate a single funeral home location, 22.5% operate two locations and just 13.4% operate three or more branches. While multi-location businesses may offer non-owner management positions, the only leadership

positions likely to exist at a single-location funeral home are either owner or branch manager.

Essentially, it isn't just difficult for women to achieve leadership roles in funeral businesses – it's difficult for everybody, short of those who elect to open their own firms.

However, a lack of leadership positions doesn't explain women's short tenure in the field (though it's worth noting that no comparable statistics on the average number of years men remain in the field were available for comparison). To dig deeper into why women might be leaving the field and what funeral homes can do to encourage them to stick around longer, I interviewed a half-dozen female funeral directors, including women new to the field and those with decades of experience. Their responses, condensed into the suggestions below, proved incredibly enlightening regarding the gender-specific challenges women face in the field.

### Division of Labor

Many of the top concerns women have about balancing a funeral service career with impending or current parenthood are physical in nature. A female embalmer may feel uncomfortable with the potential impact of consistent chemical exposure during pregnancy. At the same time, many female directors find themselves at a distinct physical disadvantage when carrying out the heavy lifting required by many funeral home tasks, compared to their male counterparts.

The solutions to these concerns are simple. Installing a lift system in the embalming room and implementing other support systems to minimize the physical demands of funeral work will enable pregnant funeral directors to handle their duties longer into their pregnancies. In addition, adopting a "jack of all trades" approach to assigning responsibilities (in which all directors embalm, plan and handle other responsibilities, instead of specializing) reduces the lost work hours incurred from a female embalming specialist who becomes pregnant. If your firm specializes its roles, allowing women to move temporarily into arrangements-only positions reduces concerns about balancing funeral service with the challenges of pregnancy.

Another thing funeral homes can do to support women is develop a system of backups that provide coverage in the event a mother must leave to attend to a sick child or other domestic emergency. While men may experience the same demands, it's undeniable that women are still the main facilitators of domestic responsibilities.

A recent study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development demonstrates that regardless of the number of hours men and women put in at work, it is women who still handle the bulk of the domestic responsibilities that keep households running. On average, the American man surveyed put in about five hours a day on the job, while

women averaged only four. But when it comes to the unpaid labor of housework and childcare, women put in an average of more than four hours a day, compared to just over two and a half hours by men.

**The funeral profession differs from other industries in its overall availability of leadership positions. It isn't just difficult for women to achieve leadership roles – it's difficult for everybody, short of those who elect to open their own firms.**

A good backup plan should include a number of different elements, including cross-training employees, establishing call procedures that determine who should be called in the event of an emergency and being proactive about scheduling to ensure that busy periods always have backup coverage on call. Preparing for emergencies before they occur and creating an environment that doesn't penalize women for attending to these issues will go a long way toward supporting women on your staff.

That said, women must also be proactive about finding and selecting career opportunities that meet their anticipated needs. Megan Clancey, a former funeral home owner and director and current director of sales and marketing at Funeral Home Gifts, suggests that in order to find the right fit, women must first identify their own strengths and goals, as well as ask the right questions when interviewing to ensure that the job descriptions and positions they accept are in line with their expectations.

Women who choose to work in small firms, for example, must recognize that they'll be expected to wear many different hats and potentially give up their days off when more calls than expected come in. If this is unacceptable, women themselves need to seek employment by larger funeral homes that can support better staffed on-call schedules or provide desired role specialization.

The key is communication. When women bring their goals and expectations to the hiring process and are met by companies that have adopted clear policies in support of women in the field, both employee and employer stand to benefit from mutually beneficial, fulfilling, long-term relationships.

### Support and Education

In most cases, women enter the funeral profession with an understanding of the demands this career will place on their personal and professional lives. However, two places in which

All the accommodations and preparations in the world won't make funeral service a viable choice for all women at all points in their lives. But instead of leaving the field, there's a whole other avenue to consider.

Weak links exist in terms of support and education are in providing women with the resources needed to educate their partners on how their career choices will affect the family and how to find the external support needed to release stress and tension.

The funeral home can play an active role in providing these resources by facilitating mentorship opportunities between young women and funeral directors with years of industry experience. When asked what advice she'd pass on to women entering the field, Pam Janssen of Marnocha Funeral Home in Pulaski, Wisconsin, offered the following suggestion:

"I would suggest that women interested in entering the funeral profession speak with other women directors, young and old. Ask questions: How did you find balance, how did you handle the physical demands of the job, what have been the joys and the heartaches and what has brought a sense of 'Yes, this is what I was meant to do' to those who have been doing this work for a while."

At the same time, women must be encouraged to find outlets for the stress of constantly caring for the emotional burdens of others. If we accept the premise that some women are more compassionate and communicative by nature, this creates a double-edged sword in terms of funeral industry longevity. While this sensitivity may help women connect with families more effectively during the arrangement process, it may also make them more likely to internalize the burden of providing emotional support to grieving survivors.

Rachel Schad of Harvey Engelhardt Funeral and Cremation Service in Fort Myers, Florida, suggests that women look for creative or physical outlets – painting or yoga, for example – to minimize stress while also making it a priority to spend time with friends and loved ones outside of work. Honoring these needs for external support and engagement enables women to keep the importance of their funeral work in perspective while making the career choice more sustainable over the long run.

## Related Occupations

Of course, all of the accommodations and preparations in the world won't make funeral service a viable choice for all women at all points in their lives. The impact of compassion fatigue is very real, and the on-call demands of the profession may simply be incompatible with a partner's career aspira-

tions. But instead of leaving the field, there's a whole other avenue women in these positions should consider – opportunities with preneed companies and other funeral industry suppliers.

Clancey, for example, elected to sell the funeral home she had purchased when she found she was giving so much to her business and community that it was hard to find time for her family. The position she found with Funeral Home Gifts allows her to work in an industry she's passionate about but without the day-to-day demands of owning and running a funeral home. A tremendous number of these opportunities exist for women who are thinking about exiting the funeral directing profession but want to continue serving funeral homes and families in some capacity.

With this in mind, it's clear that a little bit of effort on the part of both women and the funeral homes that employ them could go a long way toward increasing the average number of years female funeral professionals spend in the field.

But at the end of the day, do funeral homes really stand to reap significant enough benefits to justify these efforts if the limited number of leadership positions available in the industry means that these businesses won't likely reap the financial benefits of increased female representation?

Hopefully, savvy readers have noticed one thing about the recommendations shared above. While they're geared toward making the funeral profession accessible and appealing to women, implementing them has the potential to benefit both male and female employees alike.

Having a system of backups in place ensures that your operations aren't disrupted by employee emergencies, whether these emergencies pertain to men or women. Installing lift systems to make it less physically challenging to move around the embalming room protects the health of employees of both genders. Encouraging workers to seek support before they're feeling stressed or burned out from the demands of the profession is as likely to benefit male employees as much as it will female workers.

Since accommodating the needs that many women experience while working in the funeral profession leads to better employment conditions for both male and female workers, smart owners and managers will implement these recommendations to enable employees of both genders to "lean in" to their work. Sandburg's advice may be criticized as being elitist or inapplicable to some situations, but her overarching assertion that supporting women leads to better outcomes for all is certainly one that deserves critical attention from the funeral service industry.

*Sarah Rickerd is owner of Carry Your Heart, a memorial jewelry and gifts company supporting bereaved parents.*

*From the Editor's Desk...*

## All the Stories Never Told

A topic of conversation often brought up when talking about funeral service today is the importance of teaching those new in the workplace how to engage families that are looking for cremation services and educate them about the options available. Since a majority of services in the foreseeable future will involve cremation, it's an important conversation to have. Of course, for such an equation to work, a family will want to hear the things you are saying and then relate back to you their experience or perspective. These up-front conversations can guard against having to look at an event through the lens of 20/20 hindsight and discussing what should have or could have been different.

A friend recently shared with me the story of the death of her friend's mother. The death was not unexpected, as the woman was well into her 90s and had been in deteriorating health. I don't speak with this friend often since she's the kind of person you won't see or hear from for a year, but when she does surface, she recalls all of the events that have happened in her life in great detail – in a virtual tidal wave of words. Anyway, her friend is the only child who lived locally, and the hospice nurse advised her to call her siblings to come to town since her mother's prognosis was not good.

Knowing what I do for a living, my friend elaborated on the details surrounding the death and the funeral. She told me that two funeral homes had been called and that the family chose the lower cost option. I pretty much knew then what the rest of the story would be, and I was right. One point of fact that stood out was how her friend's family was deeply impressed when they called the funeral home at 1:00 in the morning, and the next thing they knew, two men from the funeral home arrived in full dress suits. That detail really seemed to resonate with the family.

I asked whether it had been a burial or a cremation. She said it was a cremation and that the mother would have an urn identical to her husband's; he had died many years ago. I then asked about the kind of service they had. I'd already predicted that there would be no service because of the way the price aspect was mentioned. Sure enough, she confirmed there was no service. It seems that there was some kind of visitation when the woman's husband died, but the woman had been adamant that she didn't want "anything like that."

"Oh, that's too bad," I remarked, which caused my friend to ramp up the questions. "What do you mean?" she asked. I shared with her my beliefs on the value of a visitation, of saying goodbye and allowing other people, both close and distant, to share memories with the family. She said that at age 90-something, the woman had outlived almost all of her friends and that there wouldn't be many who would have come.

Other things could have been done, I continued, such as a private visitation for just the family. After all, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren hadn't seen the woman for some time, and it would have been good to hear all of the stories that were never told. After a long discussion, my friend said, "I wish I knew that we could have done those things for the family."

The only thing I could say was, "Me, too."



Edward J. Defort  
Editor

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