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Five Tips for Positioning Yourself in 2020

By Lacy Robinson

Were you able to achieve your academic and professional goals for 2019? Does the current landscape and the challenges within funeral service concern you?

Fortunately, 2020 is a new year and the perfect time to establish a new set of goals (after what might have been your most demanding semester yet) to further increase your commitment to becoming a licensed funeral director and/or licensed embalmer.

As you reflect on the knowledge you gained last year and your recent experiences as you forge your path in funeral service, follow these simple truths to better position yourself professionally in the coming year.

1 Acknowledge the Challenges You Face

Whether you struggle to absorb the information necessary to pass upcoming exams or feel concerned about finding future employment at a progressive firm, it's important to honestly acknowledge the situations and challenges you face in order to establish an action plan with solid solutions.

Start with the fundamentals, such as being open to discussing what's keeping you awake at night. Build a trusting relationship with fellow classmates, instructors and/or current co-workers and the funeral home owner/manager, if relevant, to provide open channels for communicating about those challenges. Talking about your concerns or uncertainties will help you feel more engaged in your success as a funeral service professional, resulting in greater motivation and empowerment to contribute to innovative service and exceed the expectations of today's families.

2 Remember: You Are Not Alone

Never forget that funeral service students across the country experience similar challenges to those you face. They, too, feel the demands of family and



work responsibilities in addition to school requirements.

Also realize that funeral home owners – while not being overwhelmed by school responsibilities – are adjusting to changes in cultural and market trends beyond the control of any single funeral home. For them, it can feel overwhelming to take on the magnitude of these industry shifts.

Forecasting what you need to accomplish in 2020 and defining the strategies you can use will improve your state of mind and better prepare you to respond to the unexpected. To accomplish this, take full advantage of the resources available to you, such as vendor support and professional groups, to tackle obstacles and make them more manageable.

For example, seek scholarship opportunities from organizations such as the Funeral Service Foundation to not only gain new knowledge and experiences but to further enhance your résumé. Take time to share in brainstorming and collaborative conversations with other classmates and licensed individuals who understand your challenges and can help pave the way to smarter, faster strategies in overcoming the big issues.

3 Stop Making Excuses

Have you heard any of these before?

- “I got two calls last night and couldn’t study.”
- “I overslept and missed class because I haven’t had any time off in eight days.”
- “The Wi-Fi went out at my apartment and I couldn’t log in.”

It’s easy to play the blame game, but remember that your instructors and employers have heard it all when it comes to excuses. Instead of wasting time with explanations, stay focused on your short-term/weekly goals and your long-term goals by writing them down or creating a vision board. In other words, visualize your goals.

It’s also easy to make excuses for our shortcomings, but the most successful funeral service graduates in the next year will be those who embrace challenges and take responsibility for overcoming them. Therefore, turn the setbacks you encountered in 2019 into opportunities to move forward and

achieve your dream of becoming a licensed funeral director and/or embalmer.

4 Establish a Support System

Your circle of trust should include people within and outside of funeral service who believe in you. Lean on those close to you when you feel overwhelmed and need help staying focused on your goals. It’s especially important to seek a funeral service mentor for possible guidance, a second opinion or just to act as your personal cheerleader.

Attend funeral service events to meet experienced professionals and determine who might be a good fit as your mentor. Read funeral service publications like this one, *The Director* and *Memorial Business Journal* to learn about successful funeral directors and reach out through social media or email in an effort to build your professional network.

5 Focus on the Future

Learn from your past successes and failures, but don’t dwell on them, and remember that many people share your vision of the future and can help you achieve your goals, including classmates, educators, licensed funeral directors, vendors and suppliers. Each has an interest in both preserving the legacy of funeral service and enhancing its future success by providing excellent service to grieving families. Help create the future by sharing your vision and finding opportunities to participate in the achievements of 2020 and beyond.

Although it may feel as if many things at this point in your career are uncertain, one thing you can count on is that there is no going back. The path you have chosen will be difficult, and 2020 will continue moving forward as you navigate the changes occurring in funeral service.

As a funeral service student and future licensee, however, you have just two options – go kicking, screaming and complaining into the night and ultimately get left behind or embrace the new decade with all its changes and plan on greater success by this time next year!

Lacy Robinson is NFDA director of member development.



Notice What You Notice

By Jenna M. Krenz

When you land your first job at a funeral home, you’re probably going to start low on the chain of command. But that’s okay! Believe it or not, even the most respected people in this industry started in an entry-level position.

Once you’re hired and figure out your new role, don’t only do what is asked and expected of you but also “notice what you notice.” By watching what’s going on around you, you will regularly learn far more than the basics required to satisfy

the minimal requirements of your job description. Paying attention will also help you be more present in your work.

Once you understand the particular situation you're in, continue to notice the things you are picking up on and ask yourself "Why?" or "How come?" questions. This is also something you can and should do now as a student entering your apprenticeship.

But whether you're an apprentice or newly hired licensee, it's important to figure out and understand the reason behind why you need to do things a certain way.

Noticing what you notice matters because when you do so, you stay engaged and have a firm grasp of what is actually going on.

After you ask "why?" you might discover a very common excuse: because that's how it's always been done here. Don't let this thinking stop you from discovering the reason underlying why it's done the way it's done. In real life, not every situation will be as simple as a textbook might make it

seem. Funeral service can be repetitive, but much of funeral service is also situational.

In addition, notice how a particular chemical works with a difficult case, such as a jaundiced or edematous body, or one showing signs of cancer. Notice how to properly make a transfer during a house call, especially when the deceased is obese and not in a hospital bed but instead lying on the floor or sitting in a recliner. Notice how to communicate with family members when they are under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol or simply very emotional.

In addition, notice what your co-workers are doing correctly, as well what doesn't work. You need not (and should not) announce what you notice to a co-worker's face or rub it in; just be aware that you are acknowledging the circumstances

as you learn the good and/or bad from a particular situation and then continue forward.

Noticing what you notice matters because when you do so, you stay engaged and have a firm grasp of what is actually going on. You are not just completing work that needs to be done to get through the day.

Unfortunately, and regardless of how many years someone has worked as a funeral director, he or she can still prove under-experienced by failing to notice what should have been noticed. They create cookie-cutter funeral services by going through the motions (even some longtime funeral directors face this) just to "get through the day." This can be a key sign of burnout.

Don't let this happen to you. Instead, never stop engaging in and understanding what you are doing and why. This will help make you a better funeral director and will also make you – today's "entry-level director" – far more valuable to every firm that hires you and to your chosen profession.

As you continue along your chosen path and learn more about each angle of the profession, I encourage you to keep reflecting and never forget that not everything can be implemented right away. As you encounter various highs and lows, make notes on your phone or keep a journal for later reflection. You can also discuss what you notice with a co-worker or talk with a classmate or instructor. If or when the circumstance comes up again, you'll be better prepared to draw from past experience in order to properly move forward.

Ultimately, noticing what you notice will help you maximize your true experiences in funeral service – proving you know what you are doing and know what is going on. This is far more important than just getting through the workday and bragging to others about how many years you've been in the business.

Jenna M. Krenz, CFSP, is a licensed funeral director and embalmer at Pflanz Mantey Mendrala Funeral Homes in Portage, Wisconsin. She is currently president-elect of the Wisconsin Funeral Directors Association. She graduated from Milwaukee Area Technical College in 2009 and has been licensed in Wisconsin for 10 years.

Embracing Learning Moments

By Allyse R. Leitsch

"Experience is a tough teacher; she gives you the test first and then the lesson afterward."

It took me a while to truly appreciate and understand the magnitude of those words. Many of us take things too personally, especially when we are students. Becoming discouraged when mistakes happen is a common side effect when learn-

ing. Training yourself to react more positively to failure will give you a better grasp on your personal growth.

I recently heard this quote: "If failure is not an option, then neither is success." It's become an inspirational mantra for



me – one I wish I would have heard and taken to heart much sooner.

Let's be honest – life isn't easy. It's important to realize that anything worth having is going to take time and effort, especially your career. Being patient with yourself instead of being self-defeating is a vital step to personal and professional development. When mistakes happen, it can be difficult to recognize them as learning moments, but understanding the learning experiences that come from errors will put you that much further ahead in your journey.

I find that a simple shift of perspective can bring about the most positive changes in life. When errors occur, instead of becoming distressed, try looking at it another way. Think of how you will improve in the future and how you can take preventive measures to avoid similar issues.

Remember, always be kind to yourself when issues arise. No one is perfect, and I know of no funeral director who can honestly say that he or she has never made a mistake during their career.

Errors can range widely – from printing the wrong date on a memorial folder to placing the deceased in the wrong casket. We must accept that mistakes happen and that many are preventable. Acknowledge your error, fix it to the best of your ability and then embrace the learning moment that comes

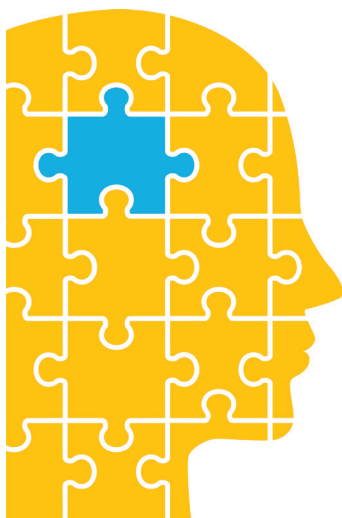
with it. No matter the severity of the mistake, learning moments will happen if you allow them to. Most of us are our own worst critics. Instead, we must become our own biggest fans.

During your time as a student, developing healthy and positive habits is of the utmost importance. Training yourself to react more positively to stressful situations will allow you to become a better funeral director.

Unfortunately, I was not encouraged to do this when I was in mortuary school and later had to unlearn a few negative, self-defeating habits I had developed. Because it's far easier to learn positive habits than it is to unlearn negative ones, I implore you to think of mistakes differently so that you can continue to make a difference.

Self-improvement is a lifelong journey, but starting out at the beginning of your career will ultimately set you up for a more successful mindset in the profession. Learning what not to do is just as important as learning the correct way to do things. Let your passion for funeral service guide you, and keep in mind that dreams don't work unless you do.

Allyse R. Leitsch is a first-generation funeral director and embalmer licensed in Kentucky and her home state of Indiana. She recently achieved her CFSP designation, is a certified celebrant and holds a certificate in thanatology for end-of-life professionals.



Don't Fear the Retort

By Mike Nicodemus

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

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

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

It's now 2020 and I want to fill students in on a little secret I discovered many years ago – learn all you can about cremation. Why? Well, in case you haven't heard, 2015 was the first year that cremation surpassed burial as the preferred method of disposition in the United States. In fact, NFDA projects that the national cremation rate will hit 57% this year. This means that for every 10 death calls

The term "direct cremation" came from funeral directors, not family members!

received, roughly six of them will involve cremation.

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

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

Let's examine that last question, which is one of my favorites. Years ago (and even today, unfortunately), when a family asked if embalming was needed, a funeral director typically replied, "Are you looking for a direct cremation?"

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

How do we do that? Read, read and read some more. Because of NFDA's publications – *The Director* magazine (monthly), *Memorial Business Journal* (online weekly) and this quarterly publication for mortuary science students, there is plenty of information out there to keep you up to date on cremation issues. In addition, sign up for webinars, attend conventions and do whatever else it takes to learn all you can.

And don't think for a second that families choosing cremation somehow require less service.

saying that you should not treat cremation as if it doesn't exist or as if it's a fad. It does exist, and it's not a fad! What if you end up working in a state that has a 70% cremation rate or even higher? There are more than 10 of those states right now, so the chances that you will serve cremation families during your first week on your new job are pretty good.

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

Cremation has also become very litigious, and in the Unit-

ed States, settlements in cremation-gone-wrong cases average \$350,000-\$400,000. Last year, I conducted cremation training programs in two countries and in half the states in this country, and I can tell you unequivocally that we still have a number of funeral directors who don't place enough importance on cremation and documentation – in other words, dotting your I's and crossing your T's.

Just last October, I received phone calls from three different attorneys around the country, each looking to see if I could help them by serving as an expert witness in the cremation-gone-wrong lawsuits they were handling. That's three cases in one month!

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

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

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

It's your call. Will you be a funeral director who says, "Well, that's the way we've always done things"? Or will you ask, "What do we need to change?"

Mike Nicodemus is NFDA vice president of cremation services.

Get to know the families you serve. Don't just make it a Q&A session – make it personal.

Critical thinking and
problem-solving

Effective
communication

Collaboration and
team-building

Creativity and
innovation



Critical Skills for the Workplace

By William E. Ford

Thinking critically, solving problems, innovating and collaborating are highly valued at every level of an organization. More than half of executives polled in a recent survey by the American Management Association, however, said there is significant room for improvement in these competencies among their employees.

According to survey results, a majority of respondents said that the “Four Cs” (detailed below) have been articulated within their organizations as priorities for employee development, talent management and succession planning.

Furthermore, a majority agreed that their employees are measured in these skills during annual performance appraisals and that job applicants are assessed in these areas during the hiring process.

The “Four Cs” Defined

1. Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving

Ability to make decisions, solve problems and take action, as appropriate.

2. Effective Communication

Ability to synthesize and convey ideas in both written and oral format.

3. Collaboration and Team-Building

Ability to work effectively with others, including those from diverse groups and with opposing points of view.

4. Creativity and Innovation

Ability to see what is not there and make something happen.

Three out of four survey respondents said they believe these skills and competencies will become more important to their organizations in the next three to five years, and they offered the following reasons:

- The pace of change in business
- The nature of how work is accomplished today
- The way work is structured.

The survey also reveals that the managers and executives who were surveyed believe it is easier to develop these skills in students and recent graduates (59.1%) than it is to develop them in experienced workers (27.1%), suggesting that students and recent graduates might be more open to new ideas than experienced workers with established work patterns and habits.

Respondents identified mentoring and in-house job training as the most effective methods to improve employees’ skill levels in these areas, followed by one-on-one coaching, job rotation and professional development.

William E. Ford is president and CEO of SESCO Management Consultants. SESCO is an NFDA Endorsed Provider for human resources.



Far left: Dominick Astorino, faculty member at Wayne State University School of Mortuary Science, displays a check from Worsham College of Mortuary Science's fundraising efforts for his Kenyan Embalming Education Initiative. Left: Astorino (at right) is pictured with Ben Schmidt, a Worsham instructor.

Worsham Students Support Kenyan Embalming Education Initiative

A bake sale, pizza and pumpkin-carving parties, T-shirt sales and even an instructor dyeing his hair green were part of Worsham College of Mortuary Science's fall service project. The students came together to support Dominick Astorino, a funeral director who serves on the faculty at Wayne State University School of Mortuary Science in Detroit, Michigan, and his Kenyan Embalming Education Initiative.

"After learning more about the situation in Kenya and the goals of Astorino's initiative, and hearing his passion for this project, I knew Worsham College needed to support him and this very important work," said Leili McMurrrough, program director.

The reality of the funeral service professional in Kenya is something many of us can't begin to imagine. There are just 300 mortuaries serving a population of nearly 50 million. Mortuary workers receive a salary of only \$70 a month, and there are no formal education requirements. There is no access to training or personal protective equipment, and yet, mortuary workers are exposed to some of the world's deadliest diseases.

When Astorino was contacted by the president of the Funeral Service Association of Kenya, he felt compelled to organize and fund the initiative to help educate Kenyan funeral professionals. Securing funding, potentially unreliable electricity, uncertainty about access to water and an alarming scarcity of overall resources were just a few of the challenges Astorino faced as he planned this project in earnest.

He set an initial goal of raising \$15,000, which was quickly met by many generous donors, but the project was more expensive than originally anticipated and all other expenditures were paid out of Astorino's own pocket.

McMurrrough was struck not only by the overwhelming need

of Kenyan funeral service professionals but also their desire and enthusiasm to learn. "Education is key to development and sustainability, and that is true for our students, as well as those abroad. As an organization, Worsham is committed to supporting education and furthering standards of care internationally," she said.

"When I told the students about this project and how we could support a funeral director and help educate funeral professionals in Kenya, they were immediately excited and motivated to raise money," continued McMurrrough.

But considering this was a group of college students with little extra money, it was unclear how the enthusiasm would translate into donations. The students, however, immediately got to work planning different events. The first was a pumpkin-carving party where, for a \$1 donation, you could carve a pumpkin and enjoy doughnuts and cider. The college provided the pumpkins and snacks so that all donations went directly to the Kenyan Embalming Education Initiative.

"The students were so happy. I immediately saw how much being part of something mattered to them," McMurrrough said.

Each event that followed was more successful than the last, and the money quickly added up. "When the amount raised reached \$500, Ben Schmidt, one of our instructors and a friend of Astorino, told the students that if they met the goal of \$1,000, he would dye his hair green. They were not going to miss that opportunity!" she said.

Worsham, located in Wheeling, Illinois, launched its first-ever online program last September, and the challenge of providing both on-campus and online programs is building camaraderie between classes, which is an important goal for the college. Online students engaged and participated in the ser-



Clockwise from top: Worsham students held a pizza party, pumpkin carving and a bake sale to raise money for the Kenyan Embalming Education Initiative.

ters, that education matters and that we have a duty to give back,” she said.

By project end, students had raised \$1,250, which was matched in whole by the college. The students were particularly excited to send Astorino a giant check for \$2,500.

“We showed the students the check, and they cheered,” McMurrough shared. “They were proud of what they had accomplished and that their small acts of generosity actually can make a difference.”

Noted McMurrough: “Education is, to a degree, about investing in the potential of students, and philanthropic initiatives get students to think about their responsibilities to invest not only in the communities in which they live but also those communities in need.

vice project and exceeded expectations. They donated money, posted pictures of their carved pumpkins and were inspired by the T-shirt design contest, for which one of the online students submitted a winning design.

All Worsham’s students participated in the service project in a meaningful way, proving that caring about community extends beyond the walls of the classroom.

Astorino, who also was impressed with the Worsham students’ genuine interest and excitement about the project, offered to surprise them as a guest lecturer on the same day Schmidt would reveal his green hair.

“It was truly a great day,” said McMurrough. “The students loved [Astorino’s] presentations; they were still talking about him months later. But even more importantly, when Mr. Astorino came to Worsham, he validated the work the students were doing. He told them that being a funeral director mat-

It helps them see the power they have to make a difference. I feel confident that the lessons learned will carry with them throughout their careers.”

While the Worsham College service project has ended, there is still time to donate to the Kenyan Embalming Initiative before Astorino leaves for Kenya in February. He can be reached at astorino@wayne.edu.

Dominick Astorino is on the faculty at Wayne State University School of Mortuary Science in Detroit, Michigan, where he oversees the restorative art courses’ lectures and laboratories. He has been a licensed funeral director and embalmer since 2003 and is managing director at Wujek-Calcaterra & Sons, a fourth-generation, family-owned firm handling 1,500 funerals a year in the suburbs of Detroit.

Leili McMurrough, a licensed funeral director/embalmer and attorney, is program director at Worsham College and on staff at McMurrough Funeral Chapel in Libertyville, Illinois.

IF I KNEW THEN...

Don't Let Change Happen Without You

By Dr. Joseph Marsaglia

As if time does not pass fast enough, change also occurs with time, and keeping up with change requires looking ahead to anticipate the future, especially that of our profession.

As you embark on your career, you will undoubtedly experience many situations where, in hindsight, you’ll wish you had either thought of an idea or acted on an idea you had.



Too often, unfortunately, we expect others to be creative or entrepreneurial.

As we get older, it’s common to say: “If I only knew then what I know now.” Most of us can look back and question why we did not look ahead and anticipate the changes in our industry. For example, in my early years of practice, I remember re-

ceiving frequent calls from families that had experienced the death of a pet. I questioned why they were calling the funeral home and always directed them to their veterinarian. Little did I know that this was opportunity knocking.

Years ago, the very idea of handling pet and human calls would have been a conflict of interest for most funeral homes. Today, there are individual pet funeral homes and funeral homes that handle pets, including many with separate pet facilities and crematoriums.

Looking back, I wish I knew then what I know now about pet services. Oh, the opportunity I might have had. Unfortunately, I did not recognize how important pets were to families, and it's too late for me to act on it now.

Similarly, cremation was practically taboo years ago. As the cremation rate has steadily increased, however, I wish I knew then what I know now about cremation.

It's easy to look back and wish we had done something, but most of us never take the risk. Although cremation is merely a form of disposition, perhaps if it had been addressed years ago, the families we serve would recognize the value of embalming, visitation and other elements of a traditional funeral service.

What changes do you anticipate in the funeral service profession? Instead of waiting to see what happens, take the bold step and make it happen now. You are the future of funeral service. With the knowledge you have acquired thus far and with continuing education, you are capable of becoming a leader in the profession.

You can never know enough. Don't let life pass you by. Don't let change happen without you!

Dr. Joseph Marsaglia, CFSP, is dean and chief operating officer of Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science.



When You Need a Win

By Kelly Manion

Have you ever forgotten to set the alarm after a long night of studying? Wakened to the neighbor's snowblower, realizing that the local forecaster had gotten it wrong (again)? Discovered that your car was piled with snow that you'd have to deal with after you got the kids some

breakfast (of course, you then noticed that someone put the empty milk jug back in the fridge and the dog just knocked over the open cereal box)?

Taking a cleansing breath of self-care proportions, you know it'll all be fine if you can just get that first cup of coffee, except that you forgot to place the carafe underneath and coffee is dripping everywhere, including on your notes for today's test. You finally make your way out the door (but not before you mix up your hairspray and dry shampoo), shovel off the car and leave your lunch on the roof as you drive off.

Zoning out at the end of a long checkout line at the grocery store because there's no time for lunch today and you need to study through it, a kind woman in front of you quietly pays for your underwhelming chicken salad wrap and double-shot cold brew just because "it looks like you need a win."

The Funeral Service Foundation understands you're doing your best to do it all, trying to keep all the plates in life spinning, and we want you to know we're here to help.

Last year, the Foundation awarded a record 24 academic schol-

arships ranging from \$2,500 to \$5,000 to students across the United States and Canada to help offset costs associated with books and tuition. We were honored to award scholarships to first-, second- and third-career funeral directors, fourth-generation directors and full- and part-time students in good standing at ABFSE-accredited mortuary science programs or accredited Canadian institutions.

We've seen it all and understand why you do it – to make a difference in your community, to support your family, because you're meant to help people when they need it most. You do it because you were inspired by a funeral director who helped you when a loved one died. You do it because you were called.

The Foundation has two application cycles in 2020: February 15-March 31 and September 15-October 31. The application process is easy. You'll be asked to answer four questions in no more than 250 words each, write your own epitaph in 10 or fewer words and upload a short video talking about the path that brought you to the profession.

Submit an application, and your commitment, passion and drive could be rewarded with a scholarship to help ease the costs associated with your education while helping you get back to what matters – helping families and cleaning up that coffee spill.

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

From the Editor's Desk...

2020 and 20/20 Hindsight

One topic of conversation I often hear when talking about funeral service is the importance of teaching those new to the workplace how to engage families looking for cremation services and educate them on the options available. As the majority of services now involve cremation, it's certainly an important conversation to have.

Of course, with the varied families you serve, some will want to hear the options you present and then relate to you their perspective on them. These discussions can be the difference between planning the perfect event and looking back in hindsight about what should have/could have been different.

A friend once shared 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. And while I don't speak often with this friend, she is the kind of person you won't see or hear from for a year and, when she does surface, she recalls all the events that happened in her life in great detail – a virtual tidal wave of words.

Anyway, her friend is an only child who lived locally, and hospice advised her to call her siblings to come since her mother's prognosis was bleak.

I learned that two funeral homes were called, and the family did go with the lower-cost option. I pretty much knew then what the rest of the story would be. And I was right.

One point in the story that stood out was how deeply impressed the friend's family was when they called the funeral home at 1 a.m. and soon after, two men from the firm arrived in full dress suits. That detail seemed to really resonate with the family.

I asked if it was a burial or a cremation. She said it was a cremation and that her friend's mother would have an urn identical to her husband's, who died many years ago.

Given that it was a cremation, I asked about the kind of service they'd had. I'd already predicted that there would be no service given the way the price aspect was mentioned. Sure enough, she told me there had been no service. It seems that when the woman's husband died, there was some kind of visitation, but the woman was adamant that she didn't want "anything like that."

I must have made a remark like, "Oh, that's too bad," 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 the deceased, to share memories with the family.

She responded that at age 90, the woman had outlived almost all her friends and there wouldn't have been many people who would come.

Other things could have been done, I offered, such as a private visitation just for 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 the stories that had never been shared.

After a long discussion, my friend turned to me and said, "I wish I knew we could have done those things for the family."

And the only thing I could say was, "Me, too."

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