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## Preparing for the National Board Exam

By David R. Penepent

In 2010, State University of New York at Canton lost its accreditation with the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE). Multiple years of poor performance on the National Board Exam (NBE) was the main reason, but several other factors contributed, including administrative issues, ABFSE policies, student selection for the program, student exam readiness and others.

In analysis of SUNY Canton's program, it was determined that students were doing well in individual classes, but when it came to comprehending material eclectically, they failed to understand how the information was interconnected and their learning process became departmentalized.

In 2011, SUNY Canton developed a bachelor's of technology degree in funeral services administration to replace the failed associate degree. Nonetheless, the new program has not gone

without struggles and challenges, one of which was, again, poor performance on the NBE for first-time test takers.

After two years of program changes, students in the Funeral Services Administration Program at SUNY Canton had overwhelming success on the NBE for the first time in a decade. This article will outline how significant program changes were implemented that impacted outcomes for first-time NBE test-takers.

A student who attended the Canton associate program in 2006 and failed the NBE Arts section six times after graduation decided to enroll in an online mortuary compliance course at the college as part of the NBE remediation process. He successfully completed the course and attended the week-long review session on campus, but still he felt ill-prepared for the exam. So, on four occasions, he also met with the program director for one-on-one tutoring sessions. During these sessions, the student used quizzes on which he had scored poorly as his remediation guide. Each topic was reviewed and several more practice tests given to ensure that he understood the material.

Prior to taking the NBE, he took the online practice exam offered by the International Conference of Funeral Service Ex-

aming Boards (The Conference) and scored a 91. When he took the Arts section of the NBE two weeks later, he passed.

This student case was a turning point in the way Canton prepared students for the NBE. Repetitive testing is important, but it is not the reason for success in any assessment. Memorizing questions and answers is not learning; in fact, the volume of questions that must be memorized is a nearly impossible task.

The student finally succeeded because he had a foundational knowledge that had been brought forward for testing purposes. “Blood returns to the heart from the upper extremities through the superior vena cava” is an example of foundational knowledge. No matter how poorly a question may be worded, if students possess minimal critical thinking skills, they will be able to answer a question relating to blood flow back to the heart. However, if the foundational knowledge is not present, test-taking becomes nothing more than a guessing game.

Assessment is key in determining how to improve a program’s curriculum. In analysis of Canton’s program, it was determined that students were doing well in individual classes, but when it came to comprehending material eclectically, they failed to understand how the information was interconnected and their learning process became departmentalized.

A new initiative was adapted within the program to connect materials learned in a previous class to information currently presented. For example, when teaching restorative art, 50% of the material pertained to restorative art material and 50% required the students to use their foundational knowledge from anatomy and embalming to understand the material being presented. Devising the interconnectedness between the various disciplines is key for revising pedagogy within a program.

For the past decade, The Conference has been under scrutiny by some educators for the type of questions asked on the Arts section. Over the years, students from several mortuary science programs have seen significant drops in scores on this section of the NBE.

SUNY Canton educators knew that pointing fingers wasn’t the answer for improving the program; bad questions are inevitable. The key to mastering the NBE is to teach students to be “test smart.” The following pointers can be used by every student who takes the test.

- Study, study, study! The way to pass the exam is to study. Students should go over past questions and use a review manual to clarify any unanswered questions they have regarding the material. People study in different ways and there is no proven way to prepare for the NBE. Some students might take three months and others three weeks. However, the test should not be taken for granted since most people who fail the NBE at Canton do not fail it by many points. Most only

failed one section by a point or two, yet that point or two is the difference between passing and failing.

- Stress is everything, and if a student enters the NBE with high test anxiety, the probability that he or she will not succeed is greatly enhanced. Students need to develop a “keep calm and test on” mentality.

- Students should employ team study. Studying with classmates is always easier as you can quiz each other.

- At SUNY Canton, the on-campus review was first expanded from three days to one week. After further assessment of the week-long review, it was determined that weekly in-class reviews would be a better way to cover the material. Although the week-long review will not be eliminated, it will become more topic orientated. This change means that after a series of assessments during the week, the topics that appear to be problems for the students will be remediated. Topic-specific review will better improve the deficiencies of that particular group of students.

SUNY Canton educators knew that pointing fingers wasn’t the answer for improving the program. The key to mastering the NBE is to teach students to be “test smart.”

- Students can use the 50/50 rule to their advantage. Following is an example.

Deoxygenated blood returns to the heart from the upper extremities via:

- Inferior vena cava
- Brachiocephalic
- Superior vena cava
- Pulmonary vein

What can be known for sure? Well, the pulmonary vein carries oxygenated blood to the heart, so that cannot be the answer. The brachiocephalic is an artery going away from the heart, so that’s not it either. There’s now a 50/50 chance of getting the right answer. If inferior means below and superior means above, the right answer would have to be (c) superior vena cava.

- Some questions might not have answers. Sometimes the NBE will ask for the best answer, but the best answer might not be the right answer. Poorly worded questions should be flagged with the reasons they are difficult to answer. Over a period, perhaps the questions will be removed if there are enough complaints about the wording.

- Students should make and use note cards, as a majority of the NBE is based on glossary terms. Having a concrete knowl-

edge base for these terms will help students when posed with a situational question. For example:

Bill dies without a will and his estate is probated. Mary, his daughter, is given permission by the courts to settle her father's final affairs.

Mary's title is:

- a. Executor
- b. Executrix
- c. Administrator
- d. Administratrix

This is an example of where foundational knowledge of vocabulary terms is essential. While all of the terms are correct titles for a person who takes care of the final affairs of the deceased, only executrix and administratrix could be possible answers because the suffix -trix at the end of a title means "woman." The key to answering this question is to read the question again thoroughly: "Bill died without a will..." When a court appoints a woman to carry out the final affairs of the estate, she is provided "Letters of Administration," which would make her an administratrix.

- Reviewing answers is one thing; changing them is another. A general rule in test-taking is that your first answer is probably the right answer. From a psychological point of view, people know the right answer but then lose confidence and second-guess themselves. Some test-takers talk themselves out of the right answer. Unless a student knows the answer is wrong, he or she should stick to the first answer written.

- The SUNY Canton program designed a group of 10 qualifying tests to determine student readiness for the exam. When students successfully complete five qualifying tests with a grade of 85% or better, they pass the mortuary compliance course. While 75% is an average grade for passing the NBE, that is not the bar to set in a mortuary program. As previously stated, most students who failed the NBE did so only by a point or two. Still, by raising the testing bar to a solid B, a margin of error will be present for poorly worded questions.

- The Conference practice exam is also a good instrument to use to determine students' readiness for the NBE. If they can score an 85% or better on this exam, there is a strong probability they will succeed on the actual test. In a statistical analysis of students at SUNY Canton who passed the NBE on the first attempt in 2017, all who passed The Conference pretest with greater than an 85% passed the NBE on the first attempt. Students will also be exposed to question wording on the NBE.

- Finally, an opportunity must be created for students to be tested in the way they are going to be tested. In fall 2016, an assessment tool was created on Blackboard at SUNY Canton that allowed students to take a variety of different tests on various subject matters. The Testing Simulator is a test bank of more than 2,500 questions relating to every topic testable

on the NBE. A federal work study student was hired to log in previous program final exams and test questions from other instructors in different mortuary science programs in the United States.

In our analysis of testing problems, it was determined that students became immune to the way instructors asked questions. By taking questions from other instructors' test banks, the same questions might be asked in different ways. Here is an example of the question about the blood returning to the heart:

The opening in the heart where deoxygenated blood will return from the hand is

- a. Inferior vena cava
- b. Brachiocephalic
- c. Superior vena cava
- d. Pulmonary vein

This question is the same as previously asked, but it's worded differently. The beauty of the Testing Simulator is that in one test, students might be asked the same questions in three different ways. Such circumstances are an essential part of critical thinking skill development because students learn how to break apart questions so they can arrive at the same answer. By seeing the same question in different ways, students will be able to pick out key components that make the answer self-evident.

The key to overcoming the low NBE scores of first-time test-takers was to use assessments as a tool for understanding the problem, then create a plan for addressing the problem, followed by implementation and revisions to the plan based on student feedback. Most mortuary science programs are creating excellent foundational knowledge for their students. However, there comes a point at which test-taking skills must be mastered, and nothing can substitute for intense studying prior to the exam.

Students must also take ownership of the material and not take the NBE for granted. Mortuary science programs need to set the bar high because the margin of error on the NBE needs to be compensated for by test-takers. Getting a C (75%) on preparatory assessment tools will almost guarantee that students will fail the NBE on the first attempt.

Success on the NBE comes when all parties involved take ownership and commit to a preparation process that uses assessment as a tool for determining the projected outcome of the exam.

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## Choosing Your Career Path

By Daniel M. Isard

If you want to hire a doctor, you want someone educated as a physician. In funeral service, there are three ways to create a career. Your education must prepare you for the various opportunities that will be presented.

**1**

### Embalmer

Embalming is a noble but often thankless job. You are taking human bodies that have died from many different causes and helping to restore the appearance of each so families can see their deceased loved one in the best possible way one last time. Each case will be somewhat different. The 25 or so embalming cases you need to complete for mortuary school graduation is inadequate to prepare you for the responsibilities to come. Wow, talk about stress!

**2**

### Funeral Director

A funeral director works with the living to help them plan the funeral event. The people with whom you meet are sleep deprived, stressed, angry, fearful and a hundred other human emotions. Your job is to help them get to the conclusion of the service for their loved one. You are further challenged to do everything right, make sure that nothing goes wrong and ensure that no one, whether under your control or not, screws up. Wow, talk about stress!

**3**

### Management

A manager is a person who supervises funeral directors and/or embalmers, as well as administrators and vendors. Based on level of education and experience, his or her role is to keep everyone operating properly

and make sure compliance and financial tasks are performed correctly. Imagine a circus ring master with no cages, nets or extinguishers. You have a whip, but you best not use it and anger the trainers, jugglers, lions or clowns. Wow, talk about stress!

So which route do you take? In some states, you are required to be a funeral director/embalmer, as those states have only one license. All other states have two licenses, except for Colorado, which is license free.

Your licensure and career could find themselves at opposition as well. Imagine that you want to be a funeral director and use your mind to help the living without being an embalmer. However, you find yourself employed by a small firm that needs someone to embalm, and you have that license. Is the fact that you didn't want to pursue embalming and now are required to do it going to make you unhappy? Will it push you to find an exit strategy out of that job or out of funeral service altogether?

Since more than half of all funeral home jobs are in rural settings, moving from one funeral home to another may require uprooting a family. If you are in a two-worker household, that puts more pressure on the relationship.

Funeral service is a calling for most. Whether you're working as an embalmer or a funeral director (or both), most people come into the profession with a lay ministerial motivation. However, funeral service, like the ministry, is also a job. Your desire to repair the world or those who are hurting must be tempered with the desire to be gainfully employed.

Gainful employment is a quid pro quo between employee and employer. The employer is obligated to provide an accurate job description, proper training and safe working conditions. The employee is obligated to act according to the employer's rules and in a professional manner.

So what makes an embalmer worth more? Experience and competency are the two components that drive a person's compensation amount. An experienced embalmer with an unsteady hand is not going to be well compensated. This is a technical and surgical profession. You need to make decisions about chemicals and other decisions affecting tissue, gases and the flow of fluids. Having embalmed difficult cases is the only way to gain the experience needed.

There are some advance classes from master embalmers available, but you may not see cases such as the ones presented for many years. The embalmer's art is fading as fewer bodies are embalmed each year.

What makes a funeral director worth more? That is a most complex question. I think it's about revenue. Funeral directors meet with families. Those families that are satisfied not only pay their bills but pay them quicker, which positively

affects revenue. Funeral directors who get out into the community attract patronage, which drives revenue.

I don't endorse directors who upsell or try to influence families to buy more merchandise than they can afford. I've very rarely seen this, in fact, but I know some do it. On the other hand, I don't want a family to learn a week after the funeral that there were additional ways they could have memorialized or celebrated the life of their loved one that they were not told about. "Every option, every family, every time" is a credo to live by.

In many states, funeral directors also sell preneed. In those states, the director with a better arrangement style and a willingness to handle the rejection of sales is more valuable. While this doesn't promote revenue today, it does drive tomorrow's patronage.

One modern-day expression is that the employer "wants to get everyone on the bus." His or her goal is to let the best people sort out their own seats. Sometimes, the driver (employer) has to pull the bus over and train people how the bus works. Sometimes, they pull the bus over to let someone off.

I like employers that give employees written reviews at least annually. A job description upon hiring is the start, but let's now tell the employee how well they are doing at meeting the requirements of the job description. It could be that the employee is going to need added training; this is the time to plan that out.

What education should you get if you want to be a manager? You need job experience. You need to know how to guide peo-

ple through routine and not-so-routine matters. The top skills a manager needs are confidence and good communication. Good communicators can transmit their confidence in getting things done to both staff and families. A good communicator will train co-workers properly and in advance of need.

Confidence is critical because "when you know that you know, you fear no one or nothing!" You can only get confidence by doing. Place yourself in many different jobs. As for communication, I love Toastmasters for teaching public speaking. I think it's critical to be well-read as we are often communicating in writing to families and staff.

So what path should you pursue post-graduation?

Start backward. Look at yourself at age 67, when you're retiring and collecting Social Security. Describe the trappings around you. How happy are you? Did you bring joy to the world and to those with whom you worked? Did you help families? What are the things you did that made you happy?

A client's son recently told me he is leaving funeral service because he never really wanted to go into it in the first place. He did it as a favor to his father. Now his father has died and he wants to be a dairy farmer. I sure am glad he figured that out now, rather than at age 67!

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## How to Pitch Your Ideas to Management

By Lacy Robinson

As a mortuary science student, you may feel both completely overwhelmed with learning such an incredible amount of information and enthusiastic about and energized by the memorial ideas you come across in trade magazines, on funeral blogs or as human interest stories in news and popular media. Despite the business challenges faced by funeral homes across the country, there is much to look forward to after graduation. One day, you may come across a product that blows you away



When it comes to pitching ideas, one of the best shows on television to learn from is *Shark Tank*.

and feel confident it would appeal to families. You could wake up with an idea for personalization you know will set the funeral home apart from its competition. Or perhaps you feel there's a missed opportunity in providing a unique service to the community.

Sitting on these ideas and pondering the perfect time to bring them up to a manager can be nerve-wracking. It's really all about presentation and timing in order to get the full attention and buy-in of the owner or manager. When it comes to pitching ideas, one of the best shows on television to learn from is *Shark Tank* on ABC. On *Shark Tank*, you will see the good, the bad and the embarrassing.

Here are six tips – inspired by the show – to help you pitch your ideas to management.

**1.** Establish the problem or missed opportunity of which the employer or manager needs to be aware. Perhaps it's been mentioned in the past without elaboration. Refer to what was mentioned as a way to show that you listened and care about the issue.

**tip:** Review NFDA's Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey results for additional guidance and validation on areas of opportunity.

**2.** Explain how addressing these issues head-on with a real plan or specific solution will help gain market share and increase the long-term satisfaction of client families.

**3.** Identify the solution, new idea or recommendation in detail. Providing specific details will show that you have done your research.

**4.** Share the experiences of funeral homes that have successfully implemented your proposed solution. Include with those experiences the results achieved, client family testimonials and projected growth.

**tip:** If you come up empty-handed on finding other funeral homes that have implemented the idea or product, put the emphasis on being the first in your area or in all of funeral service to offer it. Being "first" carries weight in marketing.

**5.** Provide the "what's next?" Present a plan for moving forward that includes time and cost investments. Explain what your role could be and how other team members might be engaged.

**6.** Provide ample opportunity to examine pros and cons. To prepare for this discussion, jot down anticipated questions and develop your responses. Look at all angles of an issue and demonstrate that you have given careful consideration to potential results.

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*Lacy Robinson is NFDA director of member development.*



## Social Conversations and Self-Expression in the Digital Universe

By Edward J. Defort

It was late-night talk show host Conan O'Brien who first quipped that there was big consolidation afoot in the field of social media. He joked that Twitter, YouTube and Facebook were going to merge, with the resulting firm known as "You Twit Face."

One of the challenges social media brings to the table is

not so much learning how to use it but in which option to invest your time. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube remain as probably the three most top-of-mind options. Fallen by the wayside is MySpace, which is still active but has been retooled to be a shell of its former self. Apple's venture into social media on iTunes, Ping, which was designed to allow fans to connect with artists, failed to generate any buzz. There were other attempts as well, including ConnectU, VitalSkate, The Hub, Yahoo! Buzz and Friendster.

It's true that as the average age of a typical Facebook user increases, a new communication frontier emerges. If I am to go by the teenagers I know, they have embraced the mini-reality



series of Snapchat. Also, has anyone been contacted by their “text-door neighbor”? This is when you receive a text from someone whose cell number is close to yours; for instance, if your number is 123-4567, you might get a text from 123-4566 or other nearby numbers.

Every generation has its own nuances to consider. Have you noticed that some people just seem to have their own language? And I’m not just talking about millennials (although I still remember the crooked look I gave my niece the first time she used the phrase “on fleek”).

But while the format and tone changes, the purpose is still to effectively communicate information, thoughts and ideas to a listening audience.

### The Digital Universe

Have you ever seen, heard or read something that brings to mind something you thought you’d long forgotten? That happened to me while reading an article by Bill Ford, president and CEO of SESCO Management Consultants.

It was nearly five years ago now that a 30-year-old woman was fired for allowing her picture to be taken in front of a sign at Arlington National Cemetery that read, “Silence and Respect,” while she posed as if she were yelling at someone and made an obscene gesture. Surprise! The photo found its way to Facebook and other social media ports, which means, of course, that it will never go away.

At one time or another, we’ve all said or done something we thought was going to be a laugh riot, only to have it fall flat. I understand that humor is subjective, and I suppose the actor here may have been going for a modern-day interpretation of the image of the guy leaning against a pole under a sign that says “No Loitering.” But this woman lost her job because of the complete disconnect between funny and shocking dis-

respect. Of course, we can’t be sure of her motives. Did she have illusions of the photo “going viral” and maybe securing a mention on one of those cable TV shows that spotlight foolish behavior found on the internet? Who knows?

The woman did issue an apology, saying it was a “spur-of-the-moment total lapse of judgment” and that she “wasn’t reacting to the place, she was reacting to the sign.” Reacting to the sign? Again, for the record, the sign said, “Silence and Respect” and “Arlington National Cemetery.” While I will accept the “total lapse of judgment” comment, I can’t see how she missed the cemetery’s name on the very sign she was mocking. Did she forget where she was?

One thing is certain – she was not the first, nor will she be the last to be terminated for such behavior. The internet is unforgiving, and if you do have second thoughts about something you said or did online, well, you’re rolling the dice that no one’s taken a screen shot.

**But this woman lost her job because of the complete disconnect between funny and shocking disrespect. She was not the first, nor will she be the last. The internet is unforgiving, and if you do have second thoughts about something you said or did online, you’re rolling the dice that no one’s taken a screen shot.**

While the general issue of a company’s influence over an employee’s behavior in the employee’s off hours has been debated in many circles, this woman made this decision pretty easy for her employer since she was on a company-sponsored trip to the cemetery. The woman’s photographer co-worker was also dismissed.

In the funeral home just a few years ago, funeral directors could bank on the majority of end-of-life services being traditional funerals. Much has been said and written about baby boomers’ tendencies to be more individualistic than previous generations. Looking well down the road, Gen-Xers and millennials may be even more individualistic than the boomers. And one of the keys to arranging these conferences is to consider who is in the room and what their needs are as far as communication and input.

Too often, people try to communicate with people without considering what type of language and presentation they are comfortable with. Too often, people are spoken at rather than spoken to.

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

# The Face of the Funeral Director in Pop Culture

## A Look Back at Some Diverse Portrayals

By Sarah Rickerd



News that an upcoming media project – particularly one as high-profile as the forthcoming feature film *Getting Grace* – will portray a fictionalized funeral home is, understandably, greeted with a mix of optimism, anticipation, apprehension and skepticism by those in the industry. There’s optimism that such an outlet could expose the public at large to the care and compassion that goes into deathcare work. But at the same time, funeral directors have reason to be skeptical, given the often unflattering representations they’ve been subjected to in the past.

As we await the movie’s release, let’s look back on past portrayals of funeral directors in mass media projects to identify any emerging trends that could influence how *Getting Grace*’s fictional funeral director Bill (acted by Daniel Roebuck, with support from Madelyn Dundon, Duane Whitaker and Richard Pryor Jr.) will be explored.

### Funeral Directors in Cinema’s Golden Era

ICCFA Executive Director Robert Fells is the industry’s go-to guy for cinematic history. Not only can he speak knowledgeably about the evolution of different media – from radio shows to silent films and eventually sound films – he’s well-versed on

the portrayals of funeral directors within these forms. In fact, he argues, the way funeral directors have been depicted has been largely positive – with one glaring exception.

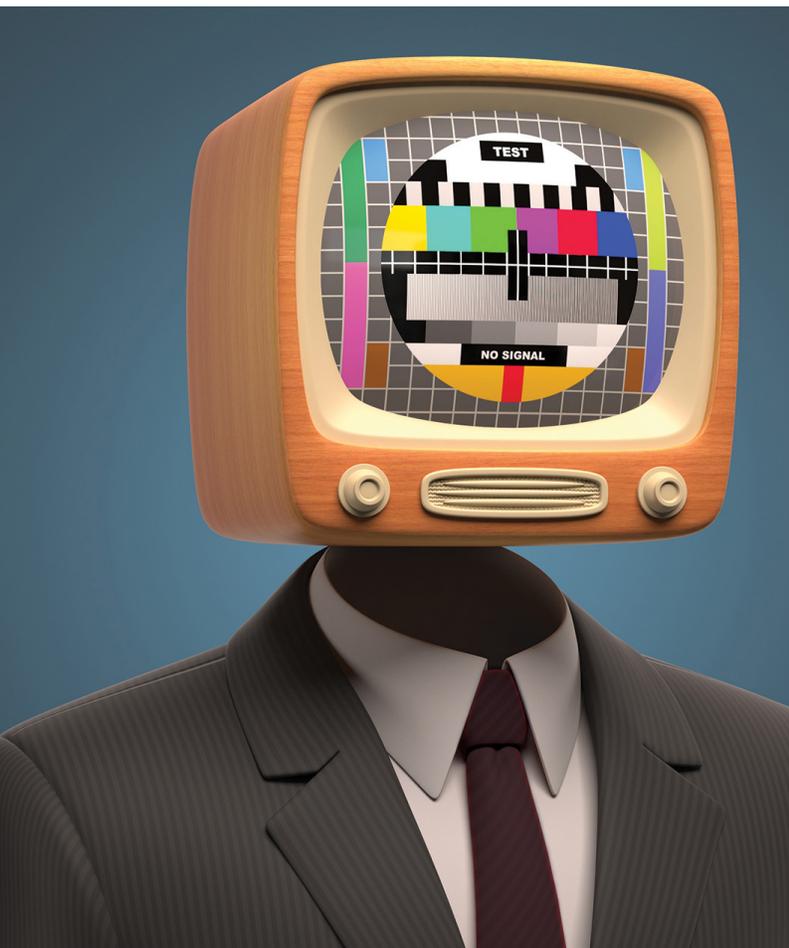
“Readers who are baby boomers will remember the movie *The Loved One*,” he states. “It’s probably the one movie out there that was a wicked satire on funerals, funeral homes and funeral directors. It was based on a popular book by a British novelist. It wasn’t nasty, but if you’re a funeral director, you’re going to be upset.”

Fells notes, as an aside, that the timing of the movie’s release in the mid-1950s coincided with the release of Jessica Mitford’s book, *The American Way of Death*, a scorching indictment of the funeral profession that some believe directly influenced the first edition of the FTC’s Funeral Rule in 1975. Beyond this, however, Fells is happy to share a few more positive examples of the treatment of funeral industry characters in mainstream movies.

“My favorite,” he shares, “isn’t a funeral movie. It’s meant to be more generic. It’s a 1965 movie called *Send Me No Flowers* that starred Rock Hudson as a hypochondriac who, by mistake, thinks he has an incurable disease and is dying (the audience, though, knows he’s fine). He doesn’t want to upset his wife, played by Doris Day, and wants to spare her any burden, so he goes to the cemetery to buy a double plot. There, he encounters the cemetery salesman, and it’s not that he’s trying to be funny, but he’s trying to be upbeat about everything. He insists on being so chipper about it that he winds up being pretty funny.”

At the end of the movie, as Fells describes, Day’s character suspects that Hudson’s strange behavior means he’s been unfaithful to her. With no way for Hudson’s character to prove he truly believed he was dying, separation seems imminent; that is, until Paul Lind’s cemetery salesman shows up on the doorstep holding the deeds to the plots. Shares Fells: “What I think industry folks will like is that, at one point, Lind’s character is going over his books and realizes that he has overcharged Hudson and he gives him a cash refund. Paul Lind really was incredible, and it’s a nice statement. One of the things the movie says is that he’s an honest man. It really shed a nice light on the funeral professional.”

Another humorous portrayal of funeral directors, Fells points out, comes from the 1951 British version of *A Christmas Carol*. “There’s the scene of Christmas Past that shows Scrooge going to Marley’s house, where he’s dying. The housekeeper lets Scrooge in, and he sees that it’s very dark and depressing. At the top of the staircase, near the door to Marley’s room,



Scrooge sees a man waiting and asks the housekeeper, 'Is that the doctor?' She answers, 'No, that's the undertaker.' In response, the undertaker drawls, 'Ours is a very competitive industry, sir.'

Fells shares further depictions of funeral directors as minor characters in the movies *Fast Workers* and *Johnny Apollo* but is quick to point out that radio shows offered their own take on the profession as well. "There was a show called *The Life of Riley* that was a family comedy show, not unlike *All in the Family*, except that it wasn't a social commentary. There was a recurring character named Digger O'Dell, who called himself 'The Happy Undertaker.' He was always very chipper and it seemed that no matter what the conversation was about, Digger O'Dell could turn it to funerals. They wrote a scene for him in every episode; he was quite popular and probably got the biggest laughs of the show."

While many funeral directors, understandably, bristled at media portrayals that seemed to confirm the public's worst suspicions of deathcare professionals, others argued that these dramas showed a compelling, human side to funeral work.

### Modern Portrayals of Funeral Fiction

Where past depictions of funeral directors in the Golden Age of film and radio were largely positive, modern media portrayals represent more of a mixed bag. For every *Six Feet Under*, there's a *Family Plots* – the reality TV portrayal of Poway Bernando Mortuary in Poway, California, that was largely panned by deathcare professionals for its focus on salacious family drama – and *Best Funeral Ever*, another reality TV effort that covered the extensive end-of-life celebrations thrown by Dallas' Golden Gate Funeral Home.

While many directors, understandably, bristled at media portrayals that seemed to confirm the public's worst suspicions of deathcare professionals as greedy or duplicitous, others argued that these dramas showed a compelling, human side to funeral work.

Following its 2013 release, I argued in favor of *Best Funeral Ever*, suggesting that its bombastic approach could change public discourse on death. "To see a life celebrated rather than a death mourned sends a powerful message that death isn't something to be feared, that even though loved ones we leave behind might mourn us and be sad, they might find some comfort in funeral services that commemorate the things that made us special. And that – God forbid – celebrating a person's life could be a joyous occasion rather than one mired in tears and grief alone."

Though it doesn't seem as if this wish has borne out, it remains clear to me that there are both pros and cons to depicting funeral professionals as real people with all of their foibles and failings. Nowhere is this dichotomy more evident than in the funeral industry's most recognizable pop culture outing, *Six Feet Under*, which is described as "a drama series that takes a darkly comical look at members of a dysfunctional California family who run an independent funeral home."

Created and produced by Alan Ball, the series was groundbreaking in its approach of opening every episode with a funeral (though, admittedly, the specifics of each arrangement grew more and more bizarre as the series progressed).

Upon its release in 2001, then NFDA spokeswoman Laura Glawe stated in an interview with the *Las Vegas Sun* that "*Six Feet Under* has done more for funeral service, in terms of people better understanding death and dying and how we are involved, than any other public education tool has ever been able to do. It portrays funeral directors as real people. These are sensitive issues the show brings up. This is a business, but funeral directors have to be compassionate people to work in this business."

Funeral directors themselves found a lot to love in the show. In a 2002 interview with *Newsweek* magazine, Todd Van Beck, past president of the New England Institute of Funeral Service Education, shared, "I have been in this business for 35 years and have seen such offensive and rude and exaggerated portrayals of funeral directors in the past – things that almost should be libelous they are so inaccurate and out of context. *Six Feet Under* really portrays the lives of a family that runs a funeral home, which is really what the story is about."

### How Media Can Set the Record Straight

In his *Newsweek* interview, Van Beck expanded on his point about negative portrayals in the past, laying blame not just at the feet of fictional TV and movies but on the investigative media as well. "They have these 'investigative reports' into the funeral industry. First of all, it's not an industry, it's a profession. We're not making cars. We're serving families, and we're serving them at a time when most people don't even want to talk to funeral directors. There was one investigative reporter, this glamorous reporter, who said she was going to rip the lid off the corruption in the funeral profession. They went out and interviewed 50 or 60 directors but picked out the most awkward one they could find, and that's the one who gets on TV."

If the media holds some responsibility for manipulating the way the funeral profession is viewed by the public, could it also right these wrongs with more objective journalism? The case of the PBS *FRONTLINE* program *The Undertaking* suggests this may be so.

*The Undertaking* came about following the publication of the book by the same title by funeral director Thomas Lynch. For

nearly 10 years, Lynch and his brother, Pat, owner of Lynch & Sons Funeral Home in Clawson, Michigan, declined PBS' requests to film a live version. That is, until *Family Plots* hit the air in 2014. "When that came out and it was so poorly done and reflected so poorly on funeral service, [Thomas] thought, 'Wow, if this is all they can offer, maybe we do have an obligation to our profession and to the public to show how funeral service can be done properly,'" shares Pat Lynch. "He called me and said, 'If you're willing to let them in and we can vet them properly, let's do this.'"

Pat Lynch describes the process of filming the documentary as taking about 10 months, with PBS crews alerting him intermittently as to when they'd be in the area and what they were hoping to shoot. For Lynch, the primary concern was making sure any families who chose to be involved in the production were treated with the utmost respect and sensitivity.

"They wanted to film an actual embalming, and of course, my concern was that it not be graphic or interfere with the integrity of the relationship we have with families," he explains of the embalming PBS went on to film. "I asked the son who came in to make arrangements: 'I have a film crew here and they're doing a film for *FRONTLINE*, and part of their assignment is to film an embalming. I wondered if you'd consider granting permission to film your father. It would be handled discretely, his face would not be shown and there would be no way to tell it's your father.' He asked, 'Will it be educational? Do you think it'll be helpful for people?' I said yes, and he responded, 'My dad would be all for that.' I was surprised and pleased with that and with the way it turned out."

Reflecting on the finished product, Pat Lynch is still pleased with the results. "I think it was honest and fair and extremely well done," he states. "It was real families, in real time, unscripted, and it covered basically every element of what funeral service is currently doing, including burials, cremation services, transfers of individuals from places of death into the care of the funeral home, advance planning and preparing for someone prior to death. It covered all of those, and it was real. It was actual people and actual circumstances; there was no script. There was no input by the funeral home on how it had to be done. We simply went about our business, and they filmed."

To date, *The Undertaking* remains an important resource used in community colleges, seminaries and mortuary schools to demonstrate how funeral service actually happens.

Where *Getting Grace's* portrayal of funeral directors and the industry at large will fall on this spectrum – from the friendly caricatures of *The Life of Riley* and *Send Me No Flowers* to the sensationalized, satirized *The Loved One*, *Best Funeral Ever* and *Family Plots* – remains unclear. It is my fervent hope, however, that it becomes – like *The Undertaking* and *Six Feet Under* – a heartfelt, honest depiction of funeral service that can offer viewers a glimpse into the world of deathcare done well.

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*Sarah Rickerd is owner of Carry Your Heart, a memorial jewelry and gifts company supporting bereaved parents. Readers can email sarah@carryyourheart.net to request free Comfort Kits full of educational and grief support resources their funeral homes can provide to the families they serve.*

## Student Perspective

# Someone Has to Do It? Why NOT a Woman?

By Gina Hooper

I remember working my first committal service at Good Shepherd Cemetery in Huntington Beach, California. When closing, the funeral director said, "On behalf of the family and [funeral home name], I would like to thank you all for coming and giving the most precious gift you can – your time. [Insert decedent name here] held a special place in your hearts and by showing up here today, you have displayed your admiration and love for [him/her]. May [decedent name] live forever through your memories and may you never forget the time you spent together. Thank you for your precious gift to the family in such a difficult time. This will conclude our services. Please drive home safely."



At first, the statement sounded sweet and simple, but as I worked more committal services with him, I found that it was a script used for every family he served. In his years of service, he had chosen not to take opportunities to learn about the decedent; he would just sit idly by at viewings, ignore the beautiful eulogies spoken about the family's loved one and wait to say his closing line at the committal service.

I lost my first loved one when I was 8. I still remember being that little girl in the back of the group, peeking through legs, watching my grandfather's slab of marble be affixed to his niche. To this day, I still regret not placing a gift to stay alongside him in the columbarium.

My grandfather was the first of many to die in my life, and his service was the first to show me how permanent the memory of a funeral can be. I left that committal service with a knot in my stomach; hearing the name "Harry Sham" placed into a script gave no comfort to my heart. Funerals started to become more frequent as family members died, and the death toll began to triple when I entered high school. Some of the experiences were helpful and others were, well, others weren't helpful at all.

My goal when I entered the funeral service industry is still the same goal I have today. I wish to limit the number of names being input on a script. I wish to help families personalize their services so they are meaningful and unique. I wish to treat the deceased and family as if they were my own. All of my positive funeral experiences had a common factor – a compassionate and inquisitive woman. These women would ask open-ended questions to family members and guests to better understand who the decedent truly was. In doing so, these women were able to create a beautiful rendering of the individual we came to honor.

Although women do not dominate funeral service now, in time they will. Our numbers have jumped from just 7% of the workforce in 1970 to 28% in 2015. It may not sound like an astounding number, but in a few years, women's representation will become much larger.

The American Board of Funeral Service Education reported that 56% of graduates from accredited mortuary science programs were females. What a beautiful reality! Women are taking back the calling that was theirs prior to the institutionalization of the death industry.

Women taking care of the dead are documented to the eighth century B.C. in Greece. In the infant years of America, women of the household were typically the ones washing and dressing

the body. It was not until the Civil War that at-home death-care became uncommon. Once embalming became popular, everything changed; death started to become institutionalized. Women who had catered to their dead for years were now told they could not practice their calling, akin to midwives who are not doctors being told they cannot deliver babies.

Decades have passed with males dominating the funeral service workforce, but women have slowly been on the rise and are gaining momentum quickly.

Decades have passed with males dominating the funeral service workforce, but women have slowly been on the rise and are gaining momentum quickly. ABFSE recently reported that 56% of graduates from accredited programs were female. What a beautiful reality!

Women have had a positive influence on funeral service. Maybe it's because society ascribes caring characteristics to females, and due to that notion, families find it easier to open up about their loved one with a woman. Maybe it's because females tend to work harder to obtain the same recognition as their male counterparts and families are put at ease when they experience sincere dedication. Maybe it's because they did not get hired to look good in a suit, but it was their compassion that spoke volumes to the interviewer and is evident to the families they serve.

Whichever the reasoning might be, funeral service benefits from having strong, caring, empathetic women on the front lines. But women aren't just on the front lines. Women embalmers are some of the most detailed practitioners I have met. Because of their meticulous behaviors, families can see their loved ones with the most natural appearance possible.

Funerals and memorials are becoming less scripted and becoming more personalized to the decedent because of women's involvement. Women are painting a new picture for the industry, and it's a positive one. I thank the women who have served my families in the past and am appreciative of the opportunity to pass the compassion forward. If someone has to do it, like the public says, why *not* a woman?

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*Gina Hooper is a mortuary science student at Cypress College in Cypress, California.*

From the Editor's Desk...

## ROTFLSUTIHMHOTCT

Maybe no one should speak publicly anymore. Maybe we should all just send texts, instant messages and emails or constantly update our status on Facebook. I think it would be a much happier world. Think about it. How many times have you seen LOL either typed in a text message, email or instant message or on Facebook? People sure are cracking up at the printed word. I don't see nearly as many people laughing out loud outside a Jim Gaffigan performance as they seem to do in these other communication outlets. In fact, I have even seen the letters ROFL disproportionately more than I have actually seen someone rolling on the floor laughing.



In fact, it now seems that the LOL and ROFL acronyms have been replaced by emojis of characters laughing so hard they're crying. In the past decade, we've gone from your basic "ha, ha" to LOL and ROFL to a laughing cartoon with tears flowing from its eyes.

Such is the evolution of social media. In 2010, a top box office attraction was *The Social Network*, an Aaron Sorkin-penned screenplay about Mark Zuckerberg and the creation of Facebook. I've always been a fan of Sorkin's work. Currently, he is enjoying some good reviews not only for writing the screenplay for *Molly's Game* but also for his directorial debut.

Over the years, we've seen how social media has played an increasingly larger role in our personal lives but also in our professional careers in funeral service. By now, most funeral homes have a social media presence. Social networking has become central to the grieving and memorial process. And at the same time, social media has given all of us a platform to sound off on topics of consequence, in addition to the posts about the quality of that last cupcake we ate.

And while this new avenue of communication offers many bonuses, such as an inexpensive way to reach a targeted audience, there are some pitfalls. For one, when you interview for a job, many companies ask about your social media usage, and part of your background check could very well include some cyber-stalking of your social media past. Also, once you get the job, you have to be very careful about how you use social media moving forward, as a woman at Arlington National Cemetery found out several years ago (see story on page 6).

And now I will adjourn to inform my Facebook friends that I have completed the editorial for the Winter 2018 edition of *Director.edu*. While I'm online, maybe I'll see a post that will cause me to ROTFLSUTIHMHOTCT (as if I had to explain, that means "roll on the floor laughing so uncontrollably that I hit my head on the coffee table").

Ed.

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