



IN THIS ISSUE

1 YOUR ONLINE BRAND

2 Mentoring Emerging Leaders

4 Mentorship Matters

6 One Light Through the Glass

8 A Matter of Passion and Trust

9 Connecting With a Mentor

11 Coming to America

14 *From the Editor's Desk:*
A 41,900-Seat Funeral Home

Your Online Brand

A mortuary student's guide to avoid accidentally undermining your credibility.

By Savannah Evanoff

My condolences to anyone trying to find a job right now, but not for the reason you might think. Yes, the job market is tough, but the uphill battle I'm referring to is your online reputation.

The internet has the memory of an elephant, only better. Its memories are backed up, searchable and screenshot-able, making this arguably the most challenging era to run for political office, be a celebrity or simply exist on the internet. We live in an era where nothing ever truly disappears. One offhand comment, ill-advised photo or outdated post can linger in the digital ether long after you've moved on.

In the Winter 2025 issue of *TheDirector.edu*, Ring Ring Marketing founder Welton Hong touted the importance of funeral professionals building a personal brand online and offline. He is my boss and I stand by his suggestion, but this article addresses a different but equally crucial topic: protecting your personal brand.

When you start looking for the right position for yourself in the funeral service industry, promoting yourself professionally is vital. But equally important is making sure you don't unintentionally step on your own shoelaces in the process. Here are some ways you can protect your personal



brand and maintain an online reputation that aligns with your professional goals.

YOUR DIGITAL DEMEANOR MATTERS

I regularly advise funeral homes to assess and improve their online reputation by asking for reviews, responding to positive and negative feedback, and updating their websites and social profiles. The same advice applies to you. While you might not have a five-star rating floating around online, people still form opinions and they'll start with a search engine you know and love.

Before a funeral home interviews you, or a family entrusts you with a loved one, they're probably going to Google you. It's just good business sense. And what they find could tip the scales between hiring you or moving on.

So, Google yourself. If the search results include spring-break photos from 2012, political rants, or an oddly enthusiastic post about your fantasy basketball team, it might be time for a little online spring cleaning.

My advice: control the controllable. You might not be able to remove content from every corner of the internet, but you can take action on what you manage by deleting

unprofessional photos, inappropriate forum comments, or questionable posts from current and former social media profiles (such as your Myspace page, if it still exists).

Start with your social platforms. Don't leave public posts or photos out there that don't reflect who you are today. That tweet from 2011 that was "funny at the time" might fall flat or, worse, raise red flags when viewed out of context.

Second, be mindful of getting tagged in unprofessional content. We all have that one friend who thinks it's hilarious to share throwback bar-crawl photos and the like. While an unflattering angle probably won't set back your career goals, a photo depicting what felt like harmless fun back then can actually prove a liability. Therefore, update your tag-review settings and, if needed, kindly talk to your more enthusiastic friends.

Third, resist the urge to overshare personal drama online. It might feel good to vent about your HOA or the guy who cut you off in traffic, but those rants don't paint the picture of the calm, compassionate person families seek in a funeral service professional. Save the rants for your journal or a private group chat.

Lastly, double-check your privacy settings. Just because you think you're posting something privately doesn't mean it'll stay that way. Social media platforms frequently change their privacy policies and default settings, so make a habit of confirming who can actually see your content.

PROFESSIONALISM IN THE AGE OF SCREENSHOTS

This might be the first time you've evaluated your online reputation; if so, that's totally normal. But I suggest you make it part of your regularly scheduled programming. Start auditing your profiles regularly. Once a quarter, scroll through your accounts and view them from the eyes of a potential employer or client. You might be surprised by what's still visible.

Then, use your platforms to reflect your values. If you attend community events, volunteer or read insightful

Just don't forget to do a little digital housekeeping now and then. No one notices when everything is spotless, but everyone notices when it's not.

articles about grief or end-of-life care, then share them. These posts showcase empathy, engagement and professionalism – qualities that resonate deeply in deathcare.

Don't shy away from highlighting your expertise either. Social media is a great space to share insights into funeral service, answer common questions about end-of-life planning, or even post respectful behind-the-scenes content that educates the public. Done tastefully, this can help demystify your work and foster trust.

And yes, you can still be yourself, but polished. You don't have to be robotic or overly formal. It's okay to share parts of your personality, but just be mindful of tone and timing. Aim to present the version of yourself you'd want a grieving family to meet during one of life's most vulnerable moments.

Remember: it only takes one screenshot to undo years of hard-earned credibility. Whether you're applying to work at a new funeral home, trying to gain the trust of a family, or looking to establish a reputation within your community, your online reputation matters.

So, yes, build your personal brand. Just don't forget to do a little digital housekeeping now and then. No one notices when everything is spotless, but everyone notices when it's not.

Savannah Evanoff serves as director of social media at Ring Ring Marketing. In this position, she leads the strategy and execution of compelling social media content, helping funeral homes connect meaningfully with their communities and grow their online presence.

Mentoring Emerging Leaders

By Lauren Budrow



Mentoring is a concept that is easy to support, and one that many people feel they need professionally. Who doesn't want someone who can help them develop their career and show them the ropes? I don't hear anyone saying that mentoring is a bad idea.

Mentoring is a vague concept, however, and everyone has a slightly different idea of what it means. Who should be a mentor? What does the process of mentoring look like?

Moreover, if someone says they have a mentor, there's a thin

layer of mystique about it. This can leave people wondering where they can get one, whether they should already have one, and if their career will be stunted if they don't have a mentor at some point.

In addition, mentoring and leadership tend to get lumped in the same bucket. While they can go together, they are not the same and they require different skills to be effective. It is necessary to distinguish between the two.

So what is effective leadership? Leadership is an instinctive, internal process of motivating members of a group for a common purpose. Effective leadership is more collaborative

than a solitary venture.

Personnel at all levels of a business can exhibit leadership. This might involve a location manager asking for input from employees and setting attainable goals that move the firm in a productive direction. It could be a high-performing employee who is an excellent communicator and able to inspire his or her coworkers to give a chance to a new product or service offering, such as livestreaming funerals, and then help educate them on how to do it. Good leadership creates a space where employees can grow professionally and be their best selves while still meeting the goals of the organization.

Leadership also has a cost. If a leader asks her team to trust in her idea and move in a particular direction and it doesn't work out, the leader owns it rather than penalizes her employees. If her plan is a success, she praises her staff rather than claims personal victory. If a sacrifice must be made, the leader needs to be willing to go last, like the captain on a ship.

According to a study conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership, more than 40% of young adults think of leadership roles as a solitary pursuit that will burden them psychologically and socially without support from the organization. For young adults, the cost of leadership is too high even as they aspire to become leaders. This is where mentorship can make a difference.

Mentorship is traditionally a one-on-one relationship where a more experienced professional guides a mentee on his or her career journey. Like leadership, it requires trust between the mentor and mentee, but the exchange is focused on developing the individual. The mentorship can help an emerging leader understand their role in the big picture – particularly how their contributions make a difference in the organization.

In addition, the mentee might be motivated by the company's leader, but he or she might also lack the finesse and the communication skills needed to be considered as a potential leader. A mentor can have the honest conversations a mentee needs to hear and can provide suggestions and resources about how to improve in those areas.

An effective mentor will challenge a mentee while offering support and will provide a stepwise approach to building skills and confidence before throwing the mentee into the deep end of the pool. Historically, apprentices were often baptized by fire when they joined a funeral home. This included hand-washing the vehicles every day, being on-call every weekend, embalming all the difficult cases, etc.

But this approach breeds only discontent and attrition today. Now, a strong mentor will be by the mentee's side during some of the tough cases and those big funerals, not sitting in the back office letting the mentee sink or swim. A mentor will ask a mentee to reflect on what he or she thinks went well that week and will then help the mentee identify areas for improvement rather than criticize them about what could've been done better.

The best mentor might not be who you think it would be, but it helps if the mentor and the mentee have similar training and goals. For example, a firm's top preneed



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salesperson, who might also be a funeral director, is likely focused on the process that works for him or her within their network. This person would likely not be an effective mentor for a new funeral director. After all, if he or she is compensated by commission and not mentoring, then he or she probably wouldn't be interested in doing it – at least not in any meaningful way to the mentee.

Before I was allowed to conduct an arrangement on my own, I had to observe each funeral director once with a family. Then I was given the opportunity to lead an arrangement conference with one of them observing me. After that, I was kicked out of the nest and told to fly. Sure, my coworkers were always there if a challenging situation arose or there was a question I couldn't answer, but that was not mentoring – that was precepting.

There are wonderful preceptors who unknowingly become mentors over time but, generally, preceptors acclimate students and apprentices to their new surroundings and offer suggestions. They instruct them how to answer the telephone or greet guests, where to find the first-call forms or carwash tickets, protocols for labeling files, and other such details. These basics are essential to the orientation process, but this is the minimum expectation in that relationship.

From my experience, the best mentorships are those that form organically between colleagues rather than through a structured program. The latter works well if the mentor and mentee do not work together in the same building or even the same state. Those programs help the mentee create benchmarks that the mentor can then hold them accountable to toward their progress. If they stay on course in the mentorship program, it can be a productive partnership.

An organic mentorship, on the other hand, is fluid and allows mentees and mentors to go in whatever direction

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is needed in the moment, such as having a conversation about inappropriate attire for work that day, and how those impressions matter if you want to be taken seriously by a family and respected by your colleagues.

Someone who accepts the role of mentoring a new licensee is likely doing it without being asked because they see potential in the person, or they remember what it felt like to be fresh out of school and insecure. They might not even realize they are mentoring.

Structured or organic, the only way a mentorship is effective is if the mentee is willing to accept constructive comments and adopt recommendations, and the mentor doesn't impose only his or her views and preferences onto the mentee. A mentorship is not about creating mirror images of mentors, but about fostering positive qualities in the mentee, such as resilience, self-awareness, compassion, and empathy of future leaders in their practice.

In the funeral homes in which I've worked, there were natural leaders and excellent managers, but only a handful of mentors (whether they knew it or not). Often, the latter neither held a supervisory position nor were they always the oldest or longest-serving licensee at the firm.

A mentor often has more years of experience to pass on to a younger employee, but those new employees aren't always

going to be young, and they will bring their own knowledge and experiences to the mentorship. That is why mentorship should be treated as a mutually respectful two-way street and not with a top-down approach. We all have something we can teach each other.

I am a passionate advocate for incorporating mentoring into funeral service education and practice. My process for doing that continues to evolve based on what the profession is asking of graduates, and what I discover individuals need to avoid the rookie mistakes I made as a new licensee. This advocacy stems from when I was a student wishing I had a connection with an instructor or funeral director who could open a few doors and present opportunities I felt were not available because of my gender, age or lack of confidence as an intern.

Moreover, I made no secret about my fortunate employment with amazing colleagues who guided me, let me try and sometimes fail, and who were always standing by waiting with words of wisdom for how I might do it differently next time. They gave me the confidence to forge my own path in funeral service and the memory of that continues to inspire me to do that for others. I benefited from being mentored.

Wordsworth wrote it best in *The Prelude*, "What we have loved, Others will love, and we will teach them how." Those of us who chose funeral service have loved it and we want those who are entering funeral service to care for and love it as much as we have – but we must also teach them how. That is the power of good mentoring; to pass between generations the knowledge, excellence and high standards of care that families and their loved ones deserve.

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Mentorship Matters

By Allyse R. Worland



The death of one of my mentors was described accurately during his funeral as a "bolt of lightning on a clear day." Each of us who were once his students, in one way or another, were left grief stricken and speechless, as if we were now orphans.

Such was the impact of the life of Todd Van Beck, who died a legend of our beloved profession in 2023. His loss marked a great sadness throughout funeral service, but also posed the question: What made this man so great?



There is no single answer that could satisfy such an inquiry. He was an advocate of our profession and believed in its noble cause. But what I believe to be the greatest asset he possessed was the gift he gave of great mentorship. He believed in us during the times when we didn't believe in ourselves. He was dedicated to helping all "baby undertakers" to crawl, walk,

Great mentorship is the key to the continuity of our profession – treating every student as if they are our own and preparing them for the world.

run and then fly with him.

Great mentorship is the key to the continuity of our profession – treating every student as if they are our own and preparing them for the world. Through the years, I have had several wonderful guides help me navigate through my funeral service journey. It must be distinctly understood that mentors are not just for those who are starting out on their journey, but rather for all of us at every stage of our voyage through funeral service.

My first mentor was a female funeral director in my hometown in rural Indiana. After having several other funeral homes slam the door in my face when I came knocking at 15 years old, she welcomed me in and instantly took me under her wing. She taught me about the importance of taking your time with each loved one, how to think of each service as the most important day of someone's life, and how to dress professionally – which I would further appreciate during mortuary school and beyond.

Another vital role she taught me concerned the struggles of being a first-generation female funeral director. I saw how she was held to a different standard given that the owner had been hesitant to even hire a woman. I also saw how difficult it was to juggle being a parent and a professional. But she did it with an effortless grace that I still admire today.

I worked for her through high school, and she taught me how to crawl as a baby undertaker. It was at that point she let me crawl right to mortuary school and toward my next mentors.

My time spent in mortuary school was stressful. Back then, we went to class, sat at desks and didn't have laptops or recordings during lectures. We took actual notes with paper and pencil. There were many different personalities, which created both camaraderie and competition.

I was fortunate to find a position at a local funeral home near school, across the river in Louisville. The staff at the funeral home were very helpful, and so were the owners, in teaching me how to stand up on my own, walk and eventually run as a full-fledged funeral director. I would not have been able to do that without the help of those who were willing to share their knowledge with me.

During this time, I became well rounded in the "six arms" of funeral service: arrangements, services, preneed, removals, embalming, and restorative art. I say "arms" because I imagine myself juggling all these things and having the knowledge to do so with grace.

After being able to run even faster with my mentors, I was ready to fly. My feet were slowly leaving the ground and, with much sadness after several years, I returned home to Indiana

with a warm welcome.

I was still gaining momentum as I flew, and I flew right to my next mentor. He was not only my mentor, but also my business partner and my dearest friend. He believed in me in a way I had never experienced. He bet on me – a young, ambitious funeral director he met at a seminar in 2019. He could have chosen anyone else to help run his continuing-education business, but he chose me.

Following his death in 2021, I went into the grieving process unlike anything I had ever known. His final gift to me was to help me fully understand what it was like to be on the other side of the arrangements table.

After not having a mentor for a few years, my wings brought me to my next mentor, Brian Vaughan. The greatest gift he has given me so far is teaching me patience, which I never imagined I could learn, and that everything will fall into place in due time. His knowledge and sense of steadiness have been an invaluable gift not only to my career, but to my life in general. Vaughan also taught me not to be so critical of myself when things go wrong. His "It's okay!" response to mishaps still echoes in my head when there are inevitable stumbling blocks.

In my current role as vice president of a family-owned firm, I'm gaining knowledge from the owner, who has also been a mentor to me. I also serve on several boards within the profession and present continuing-education programs. None of these things would be possible without my mentors lifting me up through the past 16 years.

Some people believe mentorship is only necessary at the beginning of one's career. That is simply false. Mentorship is a necessity throughout every stage – even at its height.

While I am still learning the tools I will need to step into the next stage of my career as a funeral home owner, I know my story will not end there. Some people believe mentorship is only necessary at the beginning of one's career. That is simply false. Mentorship is a necessity throughout every stage – even at its height.

The most surprising thing I discovered from my mentors was that I could become one myself. My mentors instilled in me the passion to give and to open the gates of knowledge for others, just as they did for me. Although I never saw myself as the best example due to my rebellious nature, I slowly learned that so many were without guidance. Thus, I set out to become the type of mentor I needed most during my formative years in funeral service.

Though I still receive guidance, and I am still on my own professional journey, within the last few years I have been able

to help others on theirs. One of the most recent opportunities I had to become a mentor was through Continuing Vision's mentorship program, which provides guidance to those without a guide on their funeral service journey.

Over the years, there have been numerous conversations surrounding the retention rate of the funeral service profession. The average burnout time for a funeral director is now five years, which is extremely concerning. So, what is the answer to this? Some have pondered that it involves offering more benefits and more compensation, but the answer is right in front of us – great mentorship.

We must strive to create a true, unconditional love for funeral service in all the “baby undertakers” we come into

contact with. Simply brushing them off and making them feel unwelcome is not going to serve us in the long run. Having a deep love and understanding of what it truly means to be a funeral director is what will sustain us for the future. It is up to us to foster lifelong dedication – at all stages of our careers – in our beloved profession.

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ORIGIN STORY: One Light Through the Glass

By Nick McKinley

Editor's note: One of the first questions we tend to hear once someone finds out they are speaking with someone in funeral service is “How did you get into that?” Sometimes it is asked with genuine interest in mind, while some might have a morbid curiosity. Be that as it may, almost everyone enjoys a good origin story. In this issue, Nick McKinley, a mortuary student finally pursuing his passion, offers his origin story.



Time and human existence in history have always been precious to me. To me, life unfolds like a symphony full of crescendos and decrescendos that we experience at various points in our time on Earth. Certain ones make us turn our heads and stop because of how they resonate within us, eliciting something we never knew we could experience. For me, that has been the essence of what funeral service represents and what called me to become a part of the profession.

I grew up and still reside in Speedway, Indiana. A small town with a big personality, to me, Speedway is always like a miniature version of New York City, with a constant rush of people, especially during the Indianapolis 500.

Amongst all the hustle and bustle, there was one establishment that stood out to me – our local funeral home, located just around the corner from my childhood home. It was there before I was born and, growing up, I would



The building was solemn and quiet, but it was the light in the window coming from the chapel that truly fascinated me.

constantly see the parking lot full of cars and a procession coming out that stopped traffic.

The building was solemn and quiet, but it was the light in the window coming from the chapel that truly fascinated me. There were nights when I would go for a walk past the funeral home and the parking lot was totally empty, yet somehow I always knew as I passed that a loved one was in the chapel and they kept one light on for them. I have never forgotten that image, and I still think about it each time I walk past that funeral home.

I first was drawn to funeral service when I was eight years old because of my interest in ancient Egyptian culture, which I studied with a ferocious appetite.

This actually led to my discovery of how we, as human beings, care for our dead. I first was drawn to funeral service when I was eight years old because of my interest in ancient Egyptian culture, which I studied with a ferocious appetite. Intrigued by the regality of the conduct when preparing their dead through mummification, I read numerous books, studied the rituals, and even made little pyramid and sarcophagus models.

I later realized that this is still conducted in modern times. When I would go to funeral homes for the visitation of friends and relations, I would see the work of the funeral directors and embalmers proudly laid out in the chapel. I was amazed at the beauty the dead could instill in me as a small child, and how they were presented with dignity and in a place of sacred silence. I knew that this was something I would enjoy becoming a part of, but I didn't know how to get into the industry.

Because of how the deceased looked and were presented, this also sparked my artistic interest in painting portraits and how our visage unfolds like an epic poem over a lifetime to truly tell us about who we are as people.

As I continued to grow, I still had the idea of becoming a funeral director tucked in the back of my mind but remained unsure how to pursue this dream. One thing that did help as I grew up was watching my mother, a social worker, work with a variety of people. She taught me what it means to make a human connection and to support someone in difficult situations.

She also taught me to expect the unexpected and to always be ready to help someone who is in need. She instilled in me the sense of adaptability; how we, as human beings, can always find ways to give support to each other; and that we must be in tune with our deeper consciousness and emotions.

After I graduated high school, I attended Marian University and graduated with a bachelor's degree in philosophy. For about six years post-graduation, I worked within the disabled community helping various individuals with community exploration, job seeking and other life skills.

The thought of becoming a funeral director still popped up in my head sometimes but particularly when my grandmother died in January 2023. I had to lead the arrangements, alongside my mother, and help organize what my grandmother had wanted based on the conversations I had had with her in previous years.

The funeral director was intrigued by how attentive I was to the arrangements and liked the energy I brought to the table. He even asked me at one point, "Have you ever thought of working in funeral service?"

I then told him that it had been in and out of my head over the years but that I was never sure how to get the experience. He then handed me an application and, shortly after that, I began working part time at one of our local funeral homes. I finally was involved, as I once dreamed of doing.

As time passed, I was getting my feet wet in the profession by setting up chapels for visitation, greeting people, and gaining a better understanding of what the funeral industry was all about. On a pivotal day in late July, I met an exceptional funeral director who was my age, and we immediately struck up a conversation with each other while working on a visitation. We spoke about our passion for funeral service and the impact it makes on those we serve.

At one point, she asked me, "Why don't you just go back to school? You would do so well in funeral service as a director. I can tell this is where you belong."

At that moment, I decided I would go to mortuary school and finally achieve my lifelong goal. I applied and was accepted to attend Worsham College of Mortuary Science. I'm currently in my third semester.

Before attending school, I decided it was time to take the plunge and shift from working within the disability community in order to work full time in a funeral home to really see it, day in and day out. One of the funeral homes on the south side of Indianapolis was looking for a student, and helped by a recommendation by the same funeral director who encouraged me to go back to school, I was hired as a student and funeral home assistant.

At one point, she asked me, "Why don't you just go back to school? You would do so well in funeral service as a director. I can tell this is where you belong."

I have been working at this funeral home since January 2024 and every day brings me renewed joy when I walk through the door. The owner and funeral director, along with his associate funeral director, have really embraced me and shown me the true meaning of serving people. My passion and drive are at full steam every day, and that same light I once saw on the other side of the chapel glass in the funeral home as a child is the one I now turn on for the loved ones we bring into our care.

A motto that has stood out for me since my journey began is the Latin phrase "Vincit qui se vincit." Attributed to writer Publilius Syrus, this phrase means "He conquers when he conquers himself." I feel this phrase captures the core of funeral service, i.e., serving the living and the dead is how one gains a better understanding of oneself. One must respect what they will become to really appreciate the purpose and humility attached to this noble profession.

ORIGIN STORY:

A Matter of Passion and Trust

By Allison Voorhess

Editor's note: One of the first questions we tend to hear once someone finds out they are speaking with someone in funeral service is "How did you get into that?" Sometimes it is asked with genuine interest in mind, while some might have a morbid curiosity. Be that as it may, almost everyone enjoys a good origin story. In this issue, funeral director Allison Voorhess, a Worsham College graduate, offers her origin story.



When making funeral arrangements with a family, there is often a moment – usually in the middle or near the end of the conference – when a family member feels comfortable enough to ask me, “How did you get into this?” I’m sure that when they walked into the funeral home’s lobby, they weren’t expecting a woman in her 20s to be responsible for their loved one’s services.

I never feel bothered by the question or tired of answering it because I see it as an opportunity to show families that funeral directors come from a variety of backgrounds but choose – and continue to choose – this profession because of their passion for it.

After the conference, the funeral and the final disposition, I hope the families I’ve served leave with a better impression of funeral directors than when they first arrived. Not just because of our origin stories, but because of how we, as funeral directors, made them feel while supporting them in their grief as we cared for their loved ones.

As you peruse my origin story, I encourage you to consider how you will soon share your own story with families, many times over, and how you can convey the passion that led you to this profession.

It feels a little odd to admit, but I have no definitive memory of when I chose funeral service as a career. It is a profession I grew up alongside of, and have always felt connected to, however. My introduction to funeral service can be attributed my father, Glenn, and his brother, John. Uncle John entered funeral service in 1970 as a graduate of Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. His career included employment with several funeral homes in the Metro Detroit area. Ultimately, he achieved a partnership in a funeral home and also handled trade embalming for other firms in the area (including the firm I’m at now, several decades later).

Despite having a career in the banking industry, my father enjoyed assisting his brother with transfers and services, and, to my benefit, remained involved with funeral service throughout his working years. Unfortunately, Uncle John’s career was cut short: he passed away in 1983 at just 39 years

Although I never met my uncle, he was my father’s introduction to funeral service and, indirectly, mine.

old due to health complications. Although I never met my uncle, he was my father’s introduction to funeral service and, indirectly, mine.

During my childhood, my father spent his “semi-retirement” as a funeral assistant for Hauss Funeral Home in Macomb and Armada, Michigan. He co-owned a 2005 S&S Lincoln hearse with the company’s owner, Thomas Hauss.

My dad had no qualms about making that vehicle a family business venture. One of my earliest funeral service memories involves him bringing the hearse home in the summer and parking it in our driveway. I would wash and wax that vehicle until it shone, earning a little cash to spend at the mall. The neighbors actually called us the first time Dad brought the hearse home, just to make sure everyone was okay, but they soon learned to turn a blind eye.

On days I was home from grade school, my father sometimes brought me along to the city clerk’s office to file death certificates. He would take me to the funeral home first to pick up the certificates and, on the drive, I remember poring over the various occupations and ancestries listed on those documents. Little did I know that I would be collecting the same information someday.

When I graduated high school, I felt ready to experience funeral service as an assistant, too. During this time, I shadowed funeral directors and became more familiar with the profession from both the front and back of the house. I watched and assisted as those directors cared for decedents while also supporting the family and friends they left behind.

I continued working as an assistant while home on winter and summer breaks from Albion College, a private liberal arts school in Albion, Michigan. Early on in college, I felt



confident that I would become a funeral director, though I recall withholding that sentiment during the many icebreaker sessions at the start of my classes. (I was less confident about how my peers would react to my career choice.)

As I pursued my bachelor's degree, I tailored my studies to subjects I thought would be beneficial in funeral service. Ultimately, I majored in economics and management, and minored in cellular and molecular biology.

One advantage of attending a small college was the flexibility in programming, which I certainly tested. Among a group of pre-med and pre-vet students, I was the sole pre-mortuary science student enrolled in Albion's Institute for Healthcare Professions. But, as fate would have it (or perhaps divine intervention by my late Uncle John), the daughter of my healthcare institute advisor had recently graduated from Worsham College of Mortuary Science in Wheeling, Illinois. With my Albion advisor's understanding and guidance, I joined Worsham's graduating class of September 2018.

As a mortuary school student, I was pleased to discover how interconnected and beneficial my work experience was to my education. The summer before attending Worsham, I completed four months of an apprenticeship in Michigan. During that time, I gained confidence in all aspects of funeral directing, especially in restorative art.

When classes began at Worsham, I recall a "full-circle" moment when the professor highlighted various embalming room instruments, including a restorative instrument for swollen tissues. I recognized it immediately – an electric spatula. It's an admittedly intimidating instrument that my preceptor had taught me to use.

Moments like this occurred throughout my education, reinforcing my Michigan experiences with the curriculum I was learning in Illinois. Gaining work experience before or even during mortuary school is an advantage I recommend to anyone considering funeral service.

I am grateful to have worked alongside funeral directors and support staff at multiple firms. I began my career as an assistant at the former Hauss Funeral Home in Macomb and Armada, Michigan, and A.H. Peters Funeral Home in Warren and Grosse Pointe Woods, Michigan. While

attending Worsham, I enjoyed working as an assistant at Donnellan Family Funeral Services in Skokie, Illinois.

After returning to Michigan, I completed my apprenticeship and worked as a licensed director with A.H. Peters before joining a dedicated team at William Sullivan & Son Funeral Directors in Utica and Royal Oak, Michigan. My passion for funeral service has been nurtured by the directors and staff I have worked with, the educators who guided me and, of course, my family.

As a mortuary school student, I was pleased to discover how interconnected and beneficial my work experience was to my education.

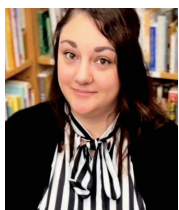
Although I have short- and long-term career plans, I have learned to leave room for unexpected opportunities for growth. Some of those arose when I felt "too new" or "too young," but I am thankful that I said yes and trusted the colleagues, educators and friends I have made in this profession. I didn't think I was capable of leading, for example, but I served as a district president of the Michigan Funeral Directors Association. I didn't think I had enough career experience, but I now serve on the advisory board of Worsham College.

Each opportunity has led to another and – even with the opportunity to write for *TheDirector.edu* here – I feel a strong desire to pay it forward to others entering this profession. I am deeply appreciative of the people in funeral service who believed in me, and it is my sincere hope that you, as a mortuary student, find those who support your passion and, most importantly, that you trust them.

Allison Voorhess, CFSP, CMFP, graduated from Worsham College of Mortuary Science and now serves as a funeral director with William Sullivan & Son Funeral Directors in Utica and Royal Oak, Michigan.

Connecting With a Mentor

By Sioux Westby



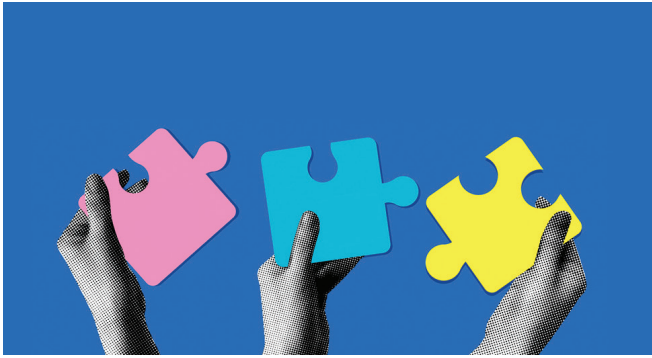
company.

I found my way into the funeral service industry by chance through a mutual friend of someone I had known for many years. A local funeral home was in need of an administrative assistant, and I was desperate to get out of my job as a data-entry specialist at a pharmaceutical

When I accepted the position, I had not intended on it

being anything more than a job – just a new and exciting experience. At the time, I was a 27-year-old wife and the mother of a four-year-old. I was a college dropout who never had a career goal in mind. I honestly didn't think I would ever have a "career." Returning to college, especially as a "non-traditional student," had not been on my radar. My goal was simply to enjoy where I worked and bring home a paycheck to help support my small family.

Once I started, I quickly began to learn the intricacies of



the funeral service industry, which were very foreign to me since I had only been to one funeral in my entire life. I had never experienced a significant loss before and I immediately felt like I had found the place where I belonged, however, and exactly where I was supposed to be.

Over time, I was able to witness firsthand the impact that a truly great funeral director can have on a bereaved family. I was also able to see the negative impact that careless, self-centered funeral directors can have on the families they served, as well as on their colleagues.

One exceptional funeral director I met early in my career was Miranda French. She was the most selfless funeral director I have had the pleasure of working with. Serving families was her passion and despite her own hardships and turmoil, she never wavered in her dedication to the profession or to the families she served.

French took me under her wing to show me what it meant to be a “pillar in the community.” She was a nontraditional student when she graduated from Ivy Tech Community College in 2017 with a degree in mortuary science. She was also a wife and mother to three beautiful children when she graduated.

I went back and forth on whether I should try to obtain a degree in mortuary science or if it was just too late for me to even bother. French encouraged me to look into going back to school to become a funeral director. She told me, “If I could do it, you can do it.” Along with my husband and son, she was one of my biggest advocates and always supported any venture I pursued.

On October 5, 2022, French passed away in her home with her family and me by her side. She had battled Hodgkin’s lymphoma off and on for more than a decade. Her mentality was that she didn’t lose her battle with cancer because it was never a fair fight anyway. Being a funeral director was in her blood, and she even planned her own funeral service. It was beautiful. She was and will always be one of my best friends.

After her death, I settled for simply being “just an admin” at the funeral home. I felt I had no one in the funeral service industry to encourage or guide me in the right direction to pursue my goals.

Of course, it didn’t help that I never fully believed in myself to even try. I was never an outstanding student or even a strong one. In the third grade, I was diagnosed with dyslexia and I sometimes struggled in school. I received average grades, and I worked extremely hard for those

average grades, but it just never came easily to me.

In 2010, I was accepted to Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis, where I struggled immensely to find my footing. In 2011, I began studying at Herron School of Art and Design, never really knowing what I wanted as my career focus. My anxiety and self-doubt got the better of me and after starting and stopping my secondary education several times, I dropped out completely at the end of 2013. I had failed myself and I never intended on continuing my education because I didn’t want to feel that disappointment again.

Because the funeral service industry has been a predominately male-dominated field, I believe it is extremely important for women entering the profession to see other strong women in the field. About a year after French passed away, I met one of those strong female role models – Allyse Worland. From the moment I met her, she embraced me. We were immediately “sisters,” no questions asked.

Worland rekindled the passion and drive in me to go back to school. I thought I was gaining a friend when I met her, but I was also meeting my mentor. She barely knew me, but that didn’t matter. She instantly believed in me and supported me. Few people have had as profound an impact on my life as she has. It is because of her that I gained the confidence to believe in myself. There is a certain inner power that comes from knowing that others believe in you.

In November 2023, I applied for Worsham College of Mortuary Science’s online program. Not only did I have Worland by my side, but I also had another strong female in my corner encouraging me – Jan Smith. She is the vice president of funeral operations at the funeral home I began working at in 2019. I approached her before beginning the application process for Worsham to gain more insight into the funeral service industry and for a letter of recommendation for my application. Her honesty and support to pursue this degree meant a lot to me.

On December 26, 2023, I received my acceptance to Worsham College of Mortuary Science! I officially began taking online classes in May 2024.

I went back and forth on whether I should try to obtain a degree in mortuary science or if it was just too late for me to even bother.

I believe my husband, Michael, and our son, Alex, would attest to the fact that I was a nervous wreck when classes began. I have always had an enormous fear of failure and there was no exception when courses started that May. I had zero confidence in my schoolwork or the material I was submitting.

Fortunately, the lack of confidence I had in myself was offset by one individual who never lacked belief in me – Worland.

A truly great mentor doesn't need to come to you and say, "I'm a mentor." Instead, it is just something that happens organically.

She wasn't just my friend, she was a mentor, and I never even realized when that distinction occurred. A truly great mentor doesn't need to come to you and say, "I'm a mentor." Instead, it is just something that happens organically.

Our relationship was built on friendship, as well as mutual trust and respect, and from there it grew into a mentorship. There have been many times when I reached out to her for guidance, or for encouragement when I felt less than confident. There has never been an instance when she said to me, "I'm too busy" or tried to withhold information. Worland's drive to better this industry and to help students, colleagues and the families she serves is honestly extremely inspiring. Although she is a few years younger than me, I often joke that I want to be like her when I grow up.

My third semester at Worsham began in January 2025. I am currently halfway through the program, and I am very proud to say that I have been thriving! I currently have a 3.94 GPA, which is vastly different from the 2.84 GPA I had when I dropped out of college in 2013. Because of my grades, I was invited to join Pi Sigma Eta. I also applied for multiple scholarship opportunities and was awarded the Tradition of Caring Mortuary Science Scholarship from the Newcomer Funeral Service Group, as well as a scholarship from the Funeral Service Foundation.

Being a full-time administrative assistant, a full-time mortuary science student, and a full-time wife and mother are not easy tasks individually; combined, it sounds like a nearly impossible amount of responsibility to accomplish. But in the words of Miranda French, "If I could do it, you

can do it."

My passion and drive to accomplish my goals has only grown more concentrated the further I advance in my education. I continuously work diligently to complete my schoolwork, study and learn. I am beyond grateful to be where I am academically and professionally.

I encourage anyone considering joining the funeral service profession, and even those already in it, to consider their personal, academic and professional goals. Find individuals you can relate to and can trust. The foundation to a successful mentorship is common ground. If your beliefs and goals align, you are able to build each other up and everyone can then thrive.

I don't believe that mentorship is a one-way street. Mentees learn from their mentors, and mentors can learn from their mentees. One piece of knowledge I have acquired in my 32 years is that it is important to cheer each other on, and it is imperative to not tear each other down. We should all feel excited to see people in our community and our industry succeeding.

It really is invaluable to lift each other up when someone is struggling and needs encouragement. That is the essence of what mentorship is about. Mentorship nurtures the groundwork for building a community of positivity, learning and growth. Mentorship isn't jealous and it doesn't gatekeep. I have been extremely lucky to have found a mentor and feel excited to network, learn and grow my community throughout my career as a funeral service provider.

Sioux Westby is a full-time administrative assistant at Flanner Buchanan-Floral Park, a full-time, third-semester funeral service student at Worsham College of Mortuary Science and member of Pi Sigma Eta. She has been awarded the Tradition of Caring Mortuary Science Scholarship from Newcomer Funeral Service Group and a Funeral Service Foundation academic scholarship.



Coming to America

How one German funeral director's interest in U.S. funeral culture evolved to help students and professionals in both countries.

By Fabian Lenzen

It has been more than a decade since I took the embalming class at the mortuary school in Germany. To pass the final exam, it was mandatory to take part in at least 80 embalming cases.

Now, embalming generally isn't very common in Germany. We almost exclusively embalm for international repatriations but, other than that, cooling [refrigeration] is

the common way of preserving the body until the funeral. Most students do a little practical training in another country, where embalming is done more frequently.

In high school back in the 1990s, a couple of my friends took an exchange year in the United States. Afraid to leave home for a year at that time, I was kind of jealous to hear their stories when they came back. Later, I was thinking of doing

an international semester in the U.S. during my university studies, but then I met the girl who is now my wife, and new love kept me from leaving for that half a year.

Thus, when I started the embalming class more than a decade later, I decided to take the training abroad as a chance to finally travel to the United States for the overseas experience I had not taken so far. I had been to America a couple of times before that, but only for touristic purposes.

It took a while before I found a funeral home that would give me the chance to make my plans come true. Finally, a recommendation by the Rotary Club in Boston, Massachusetts, got me in contact with Mount Ida College, and they introduced me to Faggas Funeral Home in Watertown, Massachusetts.

To stay in contact not only with the new friends I made during that time, but also with the funeral service industry, I became an NFDA member shortly after my return.

I applied for a visa, booked the flights and spent an amazing month there. I still think back to those days and how lucky I was to get this great opportunity. To stay in contact not only with the new friends I made during that time, but also with the funeral service industry, I became an NFDA member shortly after my return.

A year after I had completed my embalming class, and I started teaching at the Theo-Remmerts-Akademie, the biggest and most important mortuary school in Germany. After teaching for a while and telling my students about the great experiences I had in the U.S., I decided I wanted to give others the chance to create their own impressions of American funeral culture.

It took another couple of years but, in 2017, a small group of us – me and three students – came to the U.S. We attended the NFDA International Convention & Expo in Boston, visited two funeral homes, and toured Mount Auburn Cemetery and Mount Ida College. My three traveling companions enjoyed every minute of it, which quickly led me to the conclusion that I wanted to come back with other students.

Since then, we have offered study trips to Chicago in 2019, a road trip from Baltimore to Washington D.C., and New York to the Boston area in 2022, and to Houston and New Orleans in 2024. During these trips, we have visited the NFDA convention; saw funeral homes, cemeteries and suppliers; and, of course, enjoyed the museums and other general sights at the places we visited.

One of the things students enjoyed the most on every trip were the visits to the mortuary schools and the opportunity to



Some Major Funeral-Related Differences Between Germany and America

During our travels, we figured out a number of major differences between the funeral cultures of the USA and Germany. One difference, for example, is that in Germany (with a few exceptions), you may not take cremated remains home or scatter them somewhere – you need to bury them in a cemetery.

Another difference is that in Germany, families don't buy grave spaces. Instead, they only rent them for a certain period – usually 20 to 30 years, the so called "resting time." After that time, the family can prolong the rental by paying again but, if not, the grave space goes back to the cemetery for rental to another family.

Since embalming is uncommon in Germany (as mentioned before), and coffins, caskets and urns need to be biodegradable, after the cemetery "resting time," there usually isn't much left but the bones of the deceased.

exchange their experiences and knowledge. Discussing what is similar and what is different in both countries gave them a great impression of the funeral culture of their exchange partners. To draw an even wider overview of German and European funeral directing, I gave a little lecture about this topic at all of the schools we visited.

The groups became bigger each time we visited the U.S., so much so that last year, we traveled with 12 students and two faculty members of the Theo-Remmerts-Akademie, of which I had become the first board member by then.

After Mount Ida College closed in 2018, I got in contact with Fine Mortuary College, which is also located in the Boston area (Norwood), through a former faculty member of Mount Ida. After they hosted us during our 2022 trip, we were happy that Fine accepted our invitation to visit Germany with a group of students the year after. There, we took them on a one-week road trip through our country,

My three traveling companions enjoyed every minute of it, which quickly led me to the conclusion that I wanted to come back with other students.

showing them cemeteries, funeral homes, a crematorium, museums and, of course, our school.

We ended our travels with a perfect weekend in Berlin, during which the European Federation of Funeral Services also held its annual meeting. Simultaneously, the German “young funeral directors gathering,” which takes place at a different location in the country every year, was held in Berlin, as well. This clash of funeral professionals from all over the world and of very heterogenic age groups was an amazing experience to everyone involved. Colleagues and friends I meet still talk about it often.

Next, the Bundesverband Deutscher Bestatter (BDB), the German funeral directors association, asked if there was a chance to take part in the study trips, not only for our students, but also for them as funeral directors. Thus, I started planning a journey for everyone interested, in cooperation with the Kuratorium Deutsche Bestattungskultur, an organization attached to the BDB that focuses on the cultural aspects of our profession. They restarted organizing study trips last year involving a four-day stay in Oslo, Norway.

In cooperation with NFDA and others, we are currently setting up a trip for this fall to visit the NFDA International Convention & Expo in Chicago, Illinois, and then heading on to the Boston area from there. For 2026 or ‘27, we are planning to travel with a group of students to the U.S. again. In the meantime, we will be happy to host interested groups of American students in Germany, especially (but not only) from those schools we personally had the chance to visit before.

As a result of all the activities described above, a lot of great friendships have been developed throughout the years. Knowing and understanding each other has always been a perfect opportunity for making the world a little smaller and for creating long-lasting partnerships on a professional level, as well as on a personal one.

I would like to thank everyone who has helped me in the process of making all of that happen. Next to many other terrific partners, for whom I am supremely grateful, I would like to mention a few by name: the NFDA staff; everyone at the former Mount Ida College, at Worsham, at Fine, and at Commonwealth Institute of Funeral Services; at the funeral homes and all the other places we have visited, including George and Adrienne Faggas, Kevin Koch, Glenn Burlamachi, and Kathrin Niehaus; and last, but not least, my family and the staff at my own funeral home for giving me space and backup while planning and traveling.

Dr.-Ing. Fabian Lenzen is a licensed funeral director and embalmer, and owner of Kluth-Bestattungen Funeral Home in Berlin, Germany. He is also the first board member and a teacher at Theo-Remmert-Akademie, the federal education center for funeral directing, and also teaches at Regensburg University in academical studies on funeral and cemetery culture. Lenzen is also the Obermeister (first board member) of the Funeral Directors Association of Berlin and Brandenburg



Funeral Service Education in Germany

As with all handicraft professions in Germany, the basic education to become a funeral director is a three-year apprenticeship in the so called “dual system.” First, apprentices need to find a funeral home at which they can learn. At the same time, they need to go to a public vocational school to learn all major theoretical subjects, such as mathematics, German, and accounting, as well as subjects related to the funeral profession.

In addition to that, the students come to our school, the Theo-Remmert-Akademie, where they are trained in the practical subject-related things, such as hygiene, soldering and finishing coffins, decoration, psychology and arrangements.

At the end of the apprenticeship, students need to pass a written and practical exam, the so called “Gesellenprüfung.” When they pass it, they are funeral directors.

After that, they can add various ongoing-education options, such as becoming an embalmer, which is not included in the basic education, or a master program. The latter is not an academic master but a handicraft master, the so called “Handwerksmeister.”

Unfortunately, all of these education options are now voluntary since, legally, you don’t need to have any education to work at a funeral home, or even to run one. As a school and as a professional association, however, we have been campaigning for a long time for training to become a mandatory requirement.

From the Editor's Desk

A 41,900-Seat Funeral Home

No other sport can claim the phrase “Opening Day” like baseball. As 30 teams welcome back their fans, all of them optimistic that this will be the year, the spectacle that is opening day is one to behold.

I have been fortunate enough to attend a few opening days, and I once witnessed a skydiver parachuting to a perfect landing on the pitcher’s mound at Citizen’s Bank Park, home of the Philadelphia Phillies. Through the years, there have been countless returning old timers to throw out the first pitch and celebrities to sing the national anthem.

And when there is a somber note to play, Major League Baseball teams usually hit the right note. Last year, the Boston Red Sox honored former all-star pitcher Tim Wakefield, who passed away suddenly on the final day of the 2023 season.

This year, it was the Milwaukee Brewers who paid tribute to their Hall of Fame broadcaster, Bob Uecker, who passed away January 16 at the age of 90. After all his legendary Miller Lite beer commercials, a TV series and role in two “Major League” movies, Uecker was a much sought-after guest on talk shows. Despite his national celebrity, he was still all about Milwaukee and the Brewers. For parts of six decades, he called games as the voice of Brewers radio, where he supplied “the soundtrack to the Wisconsin summer.”

For his tribute, the outfield grass depicted Uecker’s autograph, and banners were everywhere. The narration during the video montage talked about the “dash” – “the simple line between the years” – such as: “The 90 years that dash represents, my goodness, that’s a life lived unlike any other; a remarkable, unmistakable, hilarious, glorious life.”

While the memorial video played as both teams stood on the sidelines, camera shots caught the players focused on the video, hats covering hearts and even wiping away a few tears.

“While we mourn his death as we celebrate his life, very few did more with that dash than you, Mr. Baseball.”

As the public-address announcer asked fans to pause for a moment of silence, his voice cracking as he did so, the stadium fell silent. The cameras caught teary-eyed fans throughout the ballpark. Then, one voice broke the silence: “We love you Ueck!” and the crowd erupted in applause.

Once again, it is all about the power of memorialization.

Edward J. Defort
- Editor

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