

Memorial Business Journal

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CEMETERIANS AND CREMATIONISTS IN THE SERVICE OF END-OF-LIFE CARE

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Not Our Story But Still Our Problem

By Jessica A. Koth

BROOKFIELD, WISCONSIN – A new documentary series has revived an old scandal – and it's a stark reminder that, though the public might judge funeral service by its worst headlines, funeral directors have the power to build trust and shape the narrative every day.

I watched the first episodes of HBO's documentary series called *The Mortician*, and truthfully, it was hard to watch and has been bothering me since.

I'm bothered not because the storytelling is graphic or sensational (though it certainly doesn't shy away from the sickening details) but because the man at the center of the series, David Sconce, represents everything the funeral directors I know are not.



Over the past 18 years, I've had the privilege of working alongside some of the most compassionate, ethical and community-minded professionals one could hope to meet. Sconce, by contrast, operated without integrity, exploited grieving families, and violated every standard of decency and care that this profession holds sacred.

It's the same feeling many of us get when a sensational story that paints funeral service in a dark, unethical light breaks. We know these stories are the outliers, not the norm.

For those who haven't seen it, *The Mortician* revisits the story of Sconce, a California crematory operator who, in the 1980s, was convicted of grotesque-

ly mishandling human remains. Among his many crimes: cremating multiple bodies at once, extracting gold fillings from decedents, stealing personal effects of the deceased and delivering mixed cremated remains to grieving families. He turned his family's crematory into a high-volume, low-ethics operation, driven by profit and run with a shocking disregard for the dignity of the dead and their loved ones. He also made threats against other funeral service professionals and paid people to beat up those who sought to expose his horrifying practices.

We cannot ignore stories like this, but we can respond by reaffirming who we are and what we represent. This is why reputation management is more than just a business concern – it's a professional responsibility.

For some viewers, *The Mortician* is their first exposure to funeral service. For others, the series reaffirms long-standing doubts or uneasiness about what occurs behind the closed doors of a funeral home.

As I brace myself for the final installment, I think about the fact that this story – one that took place nearly four decades ago – is being thrust back into the news cycle in 2025. I worry about how it might shape the perceptions of people who have never had the chance to meet a good funeral director or who already carry doubts about our profession.

It's easy to dismiss the three-part documentary as sensationalism, but the uncomfortable reality is this: When one funeral director's actions make headlines, the public doesn't see them as a rogue deathcare provider but as part of a larger system.

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resent. This is why reputation management is more than just a business concern – it's a professional responsibility.

BEFORE THE FIRST CALL

Incidents such as those portrayed in *The Mortician* can shake public confidence, but they also serve to remind us how important it is to shape the narrative before someone else does it for us.

Most people don't form their opinion about a funeral home during a service. Reputation mounts quietly and gradually – when someone drives past your building, glances at your website, reads an on-line review or hears a neighbor's story over coffee.

For that reason, your reputation is always subject to change. It's bolstered – or damaged – by every interaction, every impression, every moment of visibility. Although you can't prevent a TV series like *The Mortician* from airing, you can ensure that the story people believe about your funeral home is one of transparency, trust and care.

That kind of trust isn't built in a single day or with a one-off campaign. It's built by everyday actions that reflect your values and reassure families that they're in good hands.

STRENGTHENING AND SAFEGUARDING YOUR REPUTATION

You don't need a marketing team or PR budget to manage your reputation – you just need to present your firm to the public and serve your community with intentionality. Here are a few steps every funeral home can take:

1. Be transparent, even when no one's asking. Most consumers have no idea what happens to their loved one while they're in your care – and what consumers don't know, they often fear. Transparency is the antidote.

Create opportunities to educate families, even before they ask. Gently walk them through what happens behind the scenes. Explain your processes for identifying remains, tracking chain of custody, and maintaining dignity and respect. A little information can go a long way in calming anxiety and

building confidence. Families might then share this information with others in your community.

2. Communicate your credentials and affiliations. Many families assume that funeral homes are regulated, licensed and held to strict standards – and they're right! But assumptions aren't enough. Be explicit.

Ensure your licenses are displayed prominently in public spaces. If you are part of NFDA or your state association, or have earned certifications or a Pursuit of Excellence Award, say so loudly and proudly. These affiliations matter. They signal to the public that you don't just meet the minimum standard but that you are striving for more.

3. Introduce the people behind the business. One of the most effective ways to build trust is by humanizing your staff. On your website and social media, share who you are: your values, your experience and your role in the community.

Use staff spotlights, behind-the-scenes videos or photos of your team at local events. These personal touches remind the public that funeral service isn't transactional – it's relational. It's built on compassion and service.

4. Monitor and respond to online reviews. Even if you don't engage online, your community does. People are reading reviews. They are posting on local Facebook groups. They are turning to Google, Yelp and even Reddit.

Take control of the conversation by claiming your online listings, encouraging satisfied families to leave honest comments, and responding to positive and negative reviews with grace and professionalism. Don't let silence speak for you.

5. Turn community engagement into your reputation strategy. Every interaction is a chance to show – not just tell – your community who you are and what you represent.

Participate in community events. Host grief-support workshops. Offer tours of your facilities for civic groups, church members and local students. The more your name is associated with service, compassion and education, the less your community will be swayed by negative media portrayals.

ONE BAD ACTOR

When David Sconce committed his crimes, he tarnished the public's perception of those who work in funeral service. Unfortunately, that perception still lingers. We saw it in the documentary series. We observe it in online comment sections. We hear it in the uncomfortable jokes and skeptical questions that people make and ask when they learn what we do for a living.

Yet, every day, you and your colleagues prove that our profession is defined not by scandal but by service. By integrity. By compassion. By families that say, "I don't know how we would have gotten through that without you."

That's the definition the public needs to hear more often, and it's up to all of us to share it.

EARNED NOT OWNED

Reputation is not a logo, a slogan or a plaque on the wall. It's not something you own. It's something you earn – one conversation, one family, one moment at a time.

Although *The Mortician* might cast a shadow, it also offers a reminder: We can't control which stories make the headlines, but we can control the story we live every day – and that story matters.

Let's make sure it's one worth telling.

MBJ

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Funeral Service Foundation Surpasses \$1 Million in Academic Scholarships Awarded

BROOKFIELD, WISCONSIN – This spring, thanks to the generosity of its donors, the Funeral Service Foundation awarded 32 academic scholarships totaling \$92,500 to students across the United States and Canada. This scholarship cycle marks a momentous milestone: The Foundation has awarded more than \$1 million in academic scholarships since the program's inception in 2002.

“Donating more than \$1 million to such an important cause – the future of the profession – is at the heart of the Foundation's mission,” said John Heald, chair of the Funeral Service Foundation. “Investing in funeral service students who will strengthen and shape the profession has been incredibly meaningful to the Foundation and its supporters.”

Since awarding its first academic scholarship, the Joseph E. Hagan Memorial Scholarship, in 2002, the Foundation has established additional scholarships in memory of Shipley Rose Buckner, Mark Hornibrook and Harry Pontone, Steve Mack, Louis and Josephine Pontone, Dennis Schoepp, Todd Van Beck, Jack Springer (with CANA), and Edward J. Fitzgerald (with APFSP). The Foundation also has created scholarships in honor of John Carmon, Bob Horn, Steve Lang and Funeral Directors Life.

The Memorial Classic Scholarships are supported by proceeds from the annual Tom Johnson Memorial Classic golf tournament. Moreover, Foundation '45 Scholarships honor the Foundation's inaugural year, 1945. The Foundation also promotes the Brenda Renee Horn and Steve Mack Memorial Scholarships in partnership with the SCI National Scholarship Program.

The Foundation's academic scholarship program runs in two annual cycles – spring and fall. The next application window is September 15, 2025 to April 1, 2026.

ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP SPRING CLASS OF 2025:

Foundation '45 Scholarship | \$5,000

- Anna Bruess, Roseville, Minnesota, University of Minnesota – Program of Mortuary Science
- Cecilia Fajardo, Downey, California, Cypress College – Mortuary Science Department
- Christine Jesoraldo, Beverly, Massachusetts, North Shore Community College – Funeral Service Program
- Brashad Young, Edna, Texas, Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service

APFSP/Fitzgerald Memorial Scholarship | \$2,500

- Ethan Yoder, Sioux City, Iowa, Des Moines Area Community College – Mortuary Science Program

Bob Horn Scholarship | \$2,500

- Dave Dockweiler, Yorktown Heights, New York, American Academy McAllister Institute of Funeral Service Education

CANA/Jack Springer Memorial Scholarship | \$2,500

- Christopher Bobo, Le Roy, New York, Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science

Foundation '45 Scholarship | \$2,500

- Alexandra Allen-Byam, Peterborough, New Hampshire, FINE Mortuary College
- Stephany Garber Black, Delta, British Columbia, Canada, Canadian College of Funeral Service
- Taryn Dallas, Corona, California, Cypress College – Mortuary Science Department
- Jelene Eliassen, Lynnwood, Washington, Lake Washington Institute of Technology – Funeral Service Education
- Aylissa Koskey, McKeesport, Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science

- Marina Shafer, Bella Vista, Arkansas, Commonwealth Institute of Funeral Service
- Erika Stark, Catonsville, Maryland, Community College of Baltimore County-Catonsville – Mortuary Science Program
- Cora Tinker, Wethersfield, Connecticut, Goodwin University – Funeral Service Program

Funeral Directors Life Memorial Scholarship | \$2,500

- Nora Derthick, Galloway, Ohio, Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science

John Carmon Scholarship | \$2,500

- Linda Barajas, Kissimmee, Florida, Florida State College at Jacksonville – Funeral Service Program

Joseph E. Hagan Memorial Scholarship | \$2,500

- Simone Fournier, North Providence, Rhode Island, Cape Cod Community College – Funeral Service Program

Louis & Josephine Pontone Memorial Scholarship | \$2,500

- Francis Murphy, Salem, Massachusetts, North Shore Community College – Funeral Service Program

Memorial Classic Scholarship | \$2,500

- Marvin Laurel, Decatur, Georgia, Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service
- Johanna Trenter, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, Canadian College of Funeral Service
- Christie White, River Ridge, Louisiana, Delgado Community College – Funeral Service Education

Harry Pontone Memorial Scholarship (NGL) | \$2,500

- Jane Baden, Washington, D.C., University of District of Columbia Community College – Mortuary Science Program
- Ly'Geria Mathis, Lithonia, Georgia, Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service

Mark Hornibrook Memorial Scholarship (NGL) | \$2,500

- Dustin Mangum, West Jordan, Utah, Arapahoe Community College – Mortuary Science Program
- Graham Myrfield, Nanoose Bay, British Columbia, Canada, British Columbia Funeral Association and Funeral Service Association of BC

Shipley Rose Buckner Memorial Scholarship | \$2,500

- Bryn Cleary, Savage, Minnesota, University of Minnesota – Program of Mortuary Science

Steve Lang Scholarship (Homesteaders) | \$2,500

- Stanley Murray, Alexander, North Carolina, Fayetteville Technical Community College – Funeral Service Education

Steve Mack Memorial Scholarship | \$2,500

- Brelan Holston, Conyers, Georgia, Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service

Todd Van Beck Memorial Scholarship | \$2,500

- Veronica Rapier, Chandler, Arizona, Chandler-Gilbert Community College – Mortuary Science Program

ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIPS FOR VETERANS

The Funeral Service Foundation, in partnership with the ICCFA Educational Foundation, offers academic scholarships to U.S. and Canadian military veterans as part of the Journey to Serve initiative. Offered twice a year, scholarships range from \$2,500 to \$5,000. They are available to military veterans who are currently enrolled at or accepted into an ABFSE-accredited funeral service program and 18 years of age or older at the time of application. Learn more at JourneyToServe.com.

Journey to Serve Scholarship | \$5,000

- Roderick Ward, Jacksonville, North Carolina, Fayetteville Technical Community College – Funeral Service Education

Hunter M. Harbeson Memorial Scholarship | \$2,500

- Derek Shilling, Silver Lake, Indiana, Mid-America College of Funeral Service

The Foundation is currently accepting applications for scholarships to the 2025 NFDA International

Convention & Exposition. Applications are due July 24, 2025, at 11:59 p.m. CDT. Learn more information at funeralservicefoundation.org/scholarship-opportunities/nfda-international-convention-expo-scholarships/.

MBJ

The Notebook

ANTHEM PARTNERS received the Leader in All-in-One Technology Award from Tribute Technology at the company's two-day conference, Trend ReCON 2025. This award recognizes organizations that are transforming funeral service through new technologies, including those pertaining to operations, staff empowerment, family experience and community engagement. "We're honored to receive this recognition from Tribute Technology, as it reflects our commitment to redefining how we support families," said Chad Jackson, Anthem Partners executive vice president of operations.

DIRECTORS INVESTMENT GROUP (DIG), the parent company of Funeral Directors Life, Passare, Claim-check and other subsidiaries, has been recertified as a "Great Place To Work" through May 2026. "To be recognized as a great workplace for the fourth consecutive year is an honor and a testament to the culture we've intentionally built over the years," said Kris Seale, DIG president and CEO. "This achievement isn't just about having amazing programs or benefits; it's about our people. We extend our gratitude to Great Place To Work for this recognition!" Great Place To Work is a global authority on workplace culture. Harnessing 30 years of research and data, the organization helps every company become a great place to work for all.

The leadership team and board of directors of **NATIONAL GUARDIAN LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY** (NGL) have approved a proposal to restructure NGL into a mutual holding company. NGL has filed a plan with the Wisconsin Office of the Commissioner of Insurance to form a mutual holding company. Subject to regulatory and policyholder approval, NGL will convert to a stock insurer and become a wholly owned subsidiary of the mutual holding company. Policyholders will maintain ownership and control of the insurance holding company while providing NGL greater financial flexibility. The Wisconsin Office of the Commissioner of Insurance will hold a public hearing to review the proposed reorganization and, if approved, the proposal then will be submitted to a vote of the policyholders later this year. If all approvals are obtained, the proposed reorganization is expected to go into effect January 1, 2026.

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From the Editor's Desk

Pavlovian Conditioning

When I saw that the winning word of the great Scripps National Spelling Bee was *éclaircissement*, all I could think about was my gratitude for spell-check – and that I don't know anyone who uses that word on a regular basis. Of course, I had to look up the definition, and I learned it is a French word that, translated to English, means a "clearing up of something obscure" or enlightenment.

It serves as a reminder that we never stop learning. However, this month calls to mind the end of the school year. When that final bell would ring on a sunny June afternoon, learning did stop – for a while. But there was always an element of angst during those last few days of school. As my feet rested on the starting blocks of summer, there was still one hurdle to overcome. Although I earned mostly As and Bs in elementary school, on the last day, when I received my final report card, I would walk tentatively back to my desk, glance at the back page to see if I had advanced to the next level and slowly exhale a sigh of relief.

I don't know why. Maybe it's some kind of Pavlovian hard-wiring (a fourth grade lesson), but June still gives me that "school's out" feeling. On the first day of summer vacation, you couldn't avoid hearing Alice Cooper's "School's Out" blasted from many a car window. Gary U.S. Bonds also recorded a song called "School Is Out," but it doesn't get near the airplay that Cooper's song gets.

My friends and I would trek to the nearby sporting goods store to stock up on Wiffle balls, bats and official score books (for keeping track of our summer-long series). It was a seasonal ritual – Wiffle ball in the morning, then the pool all afternoon and evening.

Sometimes there is no explanation for these triggers and why they stay with a person for so long.

No matter the month on the calendar, unlike those grade school days, when "learning" was put on the shelf for the summer, there is no day off from learning something new.



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