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The Blessings and the Curses of Being a Funeral Director  
Part 5 By Todd W. Van Beck  
John A. Gupton Alumni Reunion Celebrates Their 75th  
Anniversary in Style!  
2021 NFDA International Convention & Expo: Reunited  
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“What the New Year brings to you will depend a great deal on what you bring to the New Year!”



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## notes from the editor

### Education Does Matter

by John Yopp

No different than the death care profession or any industry, education matters. Education allows each person to gain power and create opportunities. It impacts every aspect of our lives, as it is the means by which we develop as individuals, young and old, and come to understand our community, as well as our world.

Education level is directly linked to income and job security, but also correlates with health, mental well-being, civic management, home ownership, business ownership and more importantly long-term financial stability. Beyond the economic implications, education is an issue of basic human dignity. The ability to gain knowledge, access positive learning opportunities, and apply skills which are the cornerstones of healthy development.

In the current economy, nearly 2/3 of all jobs require a least a two-year college degree of technical training for entry and advancement. Within this reality, adults who were unable to build a strong educational foundation have no way to advance without first moving forward in education. For some, moving forward may be learning English, earning a GED, brushing up on skills, or earning a college degree.

In addition to the personal impact of education, the effects of educational attainment are felt at the family and community level. The strongest indicator of a child's success in school is the education level of the parent.

Fortunately, there is renewed energy around improving early childhood and K-12 education, but in order to make significant change we must also ensure opportunities for advancing parents' educational level. With each adult who re-engages in education we, as a community, grow. On every level education matters.

Even though COVID and ramped up unemployment proceeds has created a bumpy road for motivating some individuals to become employed and seek meaningful careers. The funeral profession can allow spe-

cial and gifted individuals to help a business and family deal with some of the difficulties in life that death and grieving presents.

As we move forward in 2022, funeral home owners should take the time to continue to educate their staff on a consistent basis. How else can the young apprentice, fresh out of mortuary school, learn to be a great funeral director if the owner and some of the senior staff do not take the time to show and explain why certain things are done. Attending conventions and conferences is also a great way for all of us to continue to be educated, especially on what the needs are of our families and how we can continue to better serve them and the community we live in. Have a successful and prosperous 2022!!!

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# Funeral Service Education:

## *What Hasn't Been Said?*

By Todd W. Van Beck

What does a person say concerning the subject of funeral service education that has not been said already? I know in my own career countless articles, meetings, conferences, and efforts have been made in a big way to describe, to analyze, to assess, to argue, to praise, to criticize, and to evaluate this intensely important subject.

In fact, I have concluded that funeral service education has been hashed over, then re-hashed, and then hashed over again about the re-hashing. So, what should we center on in this article?

Possibly a commentary should be made concerning the ever-increasing number of mortuary science programs in the United States. However, I remember very well that way back in the early 1980's David FitzSimmons, who at the time was the President of the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science, published a great article entitled "The Proliferation of Mortuary Programs in the United States." His conclusion way back then was that there were too many mortuary science programs – when he wrote this article there were less than 25 programs, today there are over 55 programs. I personally still agree with David's observation 30 plus years later; there are too many programs.

Everybody appears to know that there are too many schools, but as with many aspects of mortuary education, a solution concerning this particular issue seems out of our grasp. However, on the plus side, all schools must pass a rigorous accreditation process so who am I to question the validity of that process which results in having so many mortuary science programs? I will leave that one alone.

Possibly I ought to address the interesting topic of the mortuary science curriculum. Many people have harsh things to say about the seemingly lopsided subject matter, the relevancy of certain courses to the reality of 2016 funeral service demands, and the myriad of licensing requirements that are in place in every state except Colorado

Ah, the sensitive subject of the mortuary science curriculum! Since time began, I believe that mortuary science students have chanted over and over the same phrase, "Why do we have to know this stuff?" I know I asked this exact question when I was a mortuary science student back in the Middle Ages. Looking back the truth was I most often was asking this immature question about a course that I was having big trouble in, such as chemistry. In the courses I was doing great in, I never asked the "What do we have to know this stuff for?" never, not once!

Looking back at this, after more than four decades in funeral service I have concluded that it was easy and terribly immature on my part to ask the "why" relevance question when failure in a particular course is looming on my horizon. Asking that pesky "why" question and then getting immature reinforcements from

my other college friends just made me feel a little more in control of an academic situation that was in truth spinning out of control. It was a pretty pale type of psychology, and it still happens to this very day. I passed chemistry but just by the hair on my chinny chin chin – more on this in a minute.

Now on second thought reading what I just wrote I think I will leave the mortuary science curriculum alone also. Not because I don't have opinions about it, but really because I like mortuary science professors, no matter what subjects they teach, and I don't want to unduly upset anybody in this article. The juice just doesn't seem worth the squeeze.

OK here is an educational topic possibility to write on. I will write on the benefits of requiring a bachelor's degree in all states as a minimum academic requirement for licensing. I will write on the benefits of creating a uniform licensing system that would eliminate reciprocity, endorsements and the hoops that are too often in place and have to be jumped through simply because a person wants to improve their stock in life and by chance the golden opportunity requires them to relocate to another state. No, I will leave this subject alone also. I am too old and too worn out to expect that anybody could accomplish the uniform licensing task, so I will let sleeping dogs lie.

Possibly the reader would be interested in reading some thoughts on the state of the world in funeral service apprenticeships? Would it be helpful to relay the challenges of young entry level people in funeral service who just might be confronted with a not too friendly work environment where the "boss" expects the new person to know way too much, know it way too fast, and then when the apprentice does not meet that ridiculous watermark, (that the "boss" could not have done either when they were 20 years old) becomes the object of scorn and ridicule. No, best leave that alone also, I have good friends who are sponsoring apprentices and they are trying their level best at doing a great job.

I have as you can see, for variety of good solid political reasons decided not to address the following educational topics in this article. 1. The number of mortuary



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science programs, 2. The mortuary science curriculum, 3. Enhanced academic requirements for licensure, 4. Uniform license, and 5. Apprenticeships/internships. I don't want to offend anyone and the harsh truth is I have written on these topics in the past and have gotten into trouble.

So what's left? I won't talk about having too many schools, I won't talk about the lopsided curriculum, and I won't talk about the state of the apprenticeships, so what's left?

I will leave the criticisms, opinions, and judgements of these avoided subjects to other individuals who are smarter, more insightful, more talented, and more articulate than I am.

I think, however, that I will write about a philosophy of education. Not immediate gratification education, not quick education, not vocational-technical education, not "will I actually use this stuff?" education, and not let's get out of here as fast as we can education, but I take the risk will write about a great honorable and noble subject: The Philosophy of Education.

There is a sentence from **Dr. Samuel Johnson** (1709 – 1784, Dr. Johnson was an English author who made lasting contributions to literatures as a poet, essayist, moralist, biographer, editor and literary critic) that points to a persistently important subject in all professional educational endeavors and one that I feel is particularly important for our beloved profession, funeral service: *"Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful."*



In contemporary funeral service education I often hear students speak of education as if it were an end in and of itself. I read and hear people debating in our contemporary times the question as to whether funeral service is a profession, a trade, a ministry, or a business? A philosophy of education is in the end not concerned with proving or disproving anything concerning the sand traps of evidence that people get caught up in and addicted to concerning academic elitism, intellectual

snobbery, or a general attitude of affectation of the self. A philosophy of education instead is a process of living life and searchingly asking one specific question: "What is the aim of education."

I believe very much that if those important people who are charged with and who have earned authentic funeral service influence would center their vision solely on the high level moral and non-political ideal of education simply for the sake of education, we would see some impressive and much needed changes and improvements. However, this sounds easier than it is. Education to what end, for what purpose, are always compelling questions and are very difficult to answer.

These are difficult questions to answer to be sure, but they are not impossible to answer.

Here is how one arrives at an answer about the philosophy of education as reflecting the worthy ideal of education simply for the sake of education.

I mentioned before that I did not like chemistry in Mortuary College. I didn't like anything about it and I really didn't like the chemistry professor in a big way! He was obnoxious, ego driven, rude, unreasonable, and he made me work like hell. The first day of class he looked at our entire class and announced in a loud aggressive voice that "When I finish with this class we will hold commencement in a telephone booth." Do you know many people can you get in a telephone booth?

I hated him.

Add to this annoying situation was the fact that all the student's sat back and complained and complained that nobody uses chemistry to embalm a body - nobody! The mortuary students in my class were devoted to the idea that the embalming chemical companies mixed the fluids and all we had to do was add water.

**This was NOT a philosophy of education.**

This was just a bunch of young funeral professional wannabes who were immature, insecure, who were just possibly going into the wrong profession, and who certainly had horrible attitudes toward the very purpose of their even being in the Mortuary College program in the first place!

And still against all these wacky student protests and

odds our dedicated but annoying chemistry professor kept pounding away at us week after week, and the more he pounded the more I hated him.

Of course the glaring problem was that TVB was too young and too stupid to even remotely understand what a philosophy of education even was! I missed totally what the chemistry professor was trying to do.

However, when I earned my highest mark on the National Board in chemistry a miraculous thing happened to me, I had a sudden and utterly fickle change of heart, I now was in love with the chemistry professor – it was psycho I know but that is what happened. After doing really well on the National Board I felt great appreciation to my chemistry professor, I even had a fleeting mature moment where I actually went up to him and thanked him, and I began to have the sneaky suspicion that he just might have known what he was doing.

Looking back, my old chemistry professor at the New England Institute of Anatomy, Sanitary Science, Embalming and Funeral Directing truly possessed a very effective philosophy of education. He had it, I didn't! He lived by example the power and truth of education

simply for the sake of education – period! No argument, no debate, just educational action!

The marvelous consequences of any human being implementing future academic decisions based first and foremost on a true, solid, and authentic philosophy of education is that it works!

Here is how it works, it is simple.

OK I admit it, I don't use chemistry theory to embalm with, per se. I don't actually use anatomy theory to raise vessels. The truth is I have forgotten all the linear and anatomical guide's in embalming theory decades ago. However, just because I have forgotten the written theory is not synonymous with being embalming or chemistry illiterate. Far from it!

Here is an example. When I watch a program with my father on the Discovery Channel and the program is about finding a cure for some dreaded disease because I was educated in chemistry theory at Mortuary College I can follow the contents of the program much better than my father can. My father would not know the atomic chart from a pipe organ.



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Now my father is extremely bright, but he was never college educated in chemistry, not a day in his 90 years of life. Sure I don't use chemistry to actually embalm, per se, but I still calculate the HCHO demand, and overall I do use chemistry every day of my life. Because of my education in Mortuary College in chemistry I do know something, I have some level of knowledge, about what is going on in a great big world that is made up of chemicals all over the place.

So my friends in funeral service the ideal end of the philosophy of education for just the unblemished sake of education is, of course, to increase knowledge and skill over a lifetime, to increase competence and understanding over a lifetime, and to increase character and integrity over a life time. These ideals about life are not things we are born with, they are developed, and if a philosophy of education is anything it revolves around human development, and the experience at Mortuary College, mirrors this reality.

Education is a powerful tool for good and for bad. I have worked with students whose life experiences, their life education, taught them to deceive and take the easiest way out. I have seen students in my career who had great talent and intelligence, but their life education taught them the lessons of deviousness and destructiveness even unto themselves.

Education is surely not a substitute for morality, but in teaching and attempting to communicate with students, I have found that moral, ethical and – yes – even spiritual elements must be added to give philosophical character and balance to their lives. These are elements that go immediately to the bottom line in their abilities to function in the “real” world (whatever that is these days) as caring, concerned and compassionate funeral professionals. This is not easy, particularly in the cynical and complicated period in which we live, but it is a worthy ideal which is worth discussion and holding onto as a vision of the future.

“The end of education,” said President Nathan Pusey of Harvard University, “is to see men and women made whole, both in competence and in conscience. For to create the power of competence without creating a corresponding direction to guide the use of that power is bad education. Furthermore, competence will finally disintegrate apart from conscience.” I personally believe that mortuary science education truly accom-

plishes this, even though the frenzied focus, temporarily for most students, is on performance on a major life changing examination.

The examination is vital, but it is a learner's permit. The license is vital, but it is a learner's permit. What I learned from my obnoxious chemistry professor in Boston forty-seven years ago has been a part of my life ever since; I am way beyond the learner's permit stage.

In the end my annoying and weird chemistry professor was right and I was wrong. His philosophy of education and his dedication to his philosophical ideal of education for the sake of education helped create in little old immature and dysfunctional me a career that is now well on its way to the half-century mark. I was smart enough to thank him, he is now dead, but I am still beholding to him – always will be. Beholding is a humble feeling that feels good and helps people grow up.

So my friends in funeral service let's return to our beginning questions I asked a moment ago that at that time I didn't have the guts to confront. I will try now to be a little more courageous.

Based on all this educational idealism, what then could be some answers to the questions I poised in the beginning? Well, being grounded in the philosophy of education for the sake of education the potential answers become simple, evident and relevant for 2016. Let's give it a try to arrive at our answers through the filter of the philosophy of education as was presented in this humble attempt at writing. Ready? Let's go!

- Too many mortuary schools? You bet there are, so select the best, not the closest.
- Too much science in the curriculum? Nay, not true. Any science is good; learn it for the life-long enhancement of your brain.
- The bachelor's degree in funeral service? – It is ideally a good idea, it could be a great idea, a few states already can attest to this truth, so let's do it.
- The apprenticeship/intern experience? Choose your mentors very carefully, and don't pick the one who promises you that you will own the funeral home someday. (That is supposed to be a joke, but possibly there is nothing funny about this statement in the least?)
- Is funeral service a profession? Of course it is. But

then that is my personal opinion of which I believe strongly I can back up.

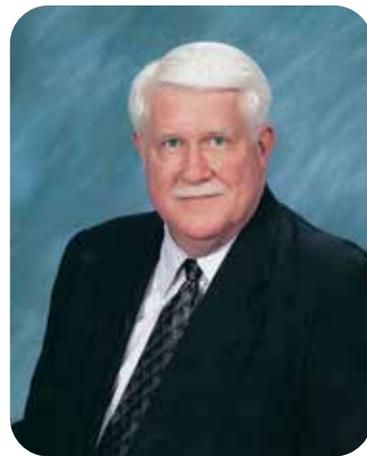
Even with education idealism, not all will be the way it could, should or would be. That is impossible. However, in 2016 the simple fact of life is that when funeral service or any other profession stagnates in the stale pool of education paralysis, then the world, our families, our consumers, and our communities quickly and permanently pass us by. I see this happening right now. Let us, then as a true professional calling ground our educational decisions around the philosophy of education which centers its visionary decision on the philosophy of education simply for the sake of education. Let us abandon territories, egos, and personal agendas and educate simply for the sake of education. Let us continue to include, as difficult and as controversial as it can be, a moral and ethical content way beyond just what is needed to pass a board.

The long and rich history of our beloved profession has been a consistent effort waged by diligent and dedicated people to raise the level of funeral service to humanity in our work of ministry, of teaching and of

learning. This is indeed a worthy ideal.

*About Todd Van Beck*

*Todd lives in Nashville, TN with his wife, Georgia. He received an honorary Doctorate Degree in Humane Letters from Commonwealth Institute of Funeral Service, Houston, TX, Master of Arts Degree in Pastoral Ministry from Mount Saint Mary's Seminary, Cincinnati, OH, Bachelor's of Arts Degree in Psychology and Philosophy from Mount Mercy College, Cedar Rapids, IA and Mortuary Arts and Sciences Diploma from New England Institute of Anatomy, Sanitary Science, Embalming and Funeral Directing, Boston, MA.*



*He is the Dean of the College of Funeral Management at the University of Memphis. He is a Certified Funeral Service Practitioner and a member of the Academy of Professional Funeral Service Practice, a Certified Embalmer, the author of 4 books, 400 professional articles.*

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## Why I Chose Funeral Service as a Career



*Samantha Brown Gibbs is a nurse and is married with three children and two grandchildren. She currently lives in Demopolis Alabama and is enrolled in the Funeral Service Education program at Jefferson State*

*Community College, Presently, she is serving an apprenticeship at Hardaway Funeral Home in York AL under the guidance of Judge Eddie Hardaway, Jr.*

In 2019, I lost both my parents seven months apart each to cancer; (my father to leukemia on May 26th, 2019, and my mother to breast cancer on December 22nd, 2019). Before that year I had no up close and personal experience with death or the planning and decision-making process of a funeral. I was hurt and lost all at once, but somehow drawn to the details of the process in a mysteriously intense way that I couldn't put into words at that time. I just wanted to know more about everything that funeral service involved, what all it took to carry out this task from the other side of the desk. Somehow, I was prompted to pay close attention, even through my pain, to something that I had never taken a part in or didn't really understand for that matter; but all I knew is that I now wanted to understand with a passion that was so intense that it couldn't be ignored. This desire first became apparent to me when my father died in May, but I didn't act on it, instead, I just picked up the pieces of my life without my dad and went on as best I could, but never forgetting my newfound interest. Life happens as it often does, I didn't have much time to think, act or grieve before more bad news was delivered. Two weeks later my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Now my dad opted out of any treatment, chemo/radiation that was offered to him, based on wanting

to just live out the rest of whatever life he had left in the best condition possible; not sick, weak, tired and drained. So, I respected his decision and supported him in the way that he would have me to, but my mom was a different story. She wanted to fight by any means necessary (whatever that meant); so we started her journey to survive. But by her third round of chemo things took a turn for the worst and she lost her battle with breast cancer.

While my family and I were planning her funeral I became sure of what I had to do, it was no longer just a fading curiosity, no longer an option for me to ignore what God was showing me about what I was really put here on earth to do (MY PURPOSE). Soon after my mom's funeral on December 28th, 2019, I was finally able to put into words and state out loud what I had discovered about myself and what I had to do as a result. So I stated to my new husband my new revelation (Not knowing how he would receive or feel about this information), I stated "I think that I have to go to school for funeral service". He asked me why I thought that, I explained my reason and he stated "Okay, I will support you if that's what you feel you have to do".

2020 came in, I was hoping to just be able to breathe, grieve, heal, and once again pick up the pieces but this time it would be without my mom or dad, so I knew that I was going to need the type of strength and energy that only God could give me, to even get started on the task ahead. So I did what normally works best in my life (I prayed) asked God for what I needed. Then I got up, did my research, and started my journey to become enrolled in a funeral service program. I spoke with the owner of Hardaway Funeral Home (whom we had entrusted to provide funeral services for our parents), shared my plans/my reason, and asked if he would allow me to do my apprenticeship at his facility when it was time; and he stated "Yes", So I placed the first phone call of many to Dr. Ennis at Jefferson State Community College; who for the next year pleasantly talked me through step by step what I needed to do to become

enrolled in the Funeral Service Education program. I listened, took notes, and followed instructions; but then the pandemic happened and I told myself that I couldn't go to school and start something new in a pandemic. So I carefully placed all of my progress into a folder in a filing cabinet, closed it up for another time, and tried to be at peace with not pursuing what I now knew to be my purpose. I carried on just trying to adjust to and survive the unknown just like everybody else but as 2020 and the pandemic continued, so did my desire to become who I am supposed to be; somehow, I knew that if I was going to make it to what was awaiting me on the other side of all this uncertainty, that I would have to trust God to allow me to move in his protection within a pandemic. I knew that I couldn't wait any longer, I had to move right then, So I prayed and trusted God and moved right back to that drawer and my journey.

I finished my prerequisites at Shelton State and was then able to enroll in the Funeral Service Education program at Jeff State (Fall Semester 2021). So here I am making lemonade out of lemons. As tragic as it was that I lost both of my parents within one year's time, (although nothing could ever replace them) it was through that tragedy that I found my purpose. Leave it to my parents they didn't leave without looking out for me just one more time, giving me one last gift; the gift of a new direction. So the question was, "Why did I choose Funeral Service as A Career"? The answer is simple, it was my parents in their own way that helped me to choose this path, and to honor them; I will graciously take pride in being able to help other families in their time of need.



*Chad Boyd is currently on staff as the Associate Pastor of Families and Mission with First Baptist Church of Camilla, GA, as well as being a part-time employee of Parker Bramlett Funeral Home of Camilla, GA. Mr. Boyd is also currently working on his Funeral Service Education degree through Jefferson State Community College of Birmingham, AL, and plans to graduate in May of 2022.*

What led me to choose funeral service as a career is a question I never imagined would be directed toward me. If you had known me growing up as a child, youth, and even up until I was in my early 30's, I was the one who could see people in pain or blood and pass out in a moment. I never wanted to have anything to do with doctors, hospitals, or death and dying. I guess for my situation it is not really a question of what led me to choose funeral service as a career but more how funeral service as a career chose me. Well, based on my faith and work in the ministry as an associate pastor and my part-time position in funeral service, I would have to say it is more how God chose me for funeral service as a career.

I graduated college with a Bachelor of Business Administration-Management degree and was working in the banking industry. I had made it to where I wanted to be in that industry as a branch manager to one of our community banks and realized it was not the career God had intended for my life. I entered seminary and shortly thereafter I became the pastor of a small country church in Southwest Georgia.

During this first pastorate, I found myself constantly ministering to my members in hospitals and gathering around the graveside of a loved one. As the years passed, I soon realized that God had helped me to overcome my anxieties and fears of doctors, hospitals, and death. He helped me to grow to a place of ministering to families during these times in a way I had never thought possible.

My service to that first church lasted 8 years and during that time I was called upon by the church and community to assist in approximately 45-50 funerals, a figure I would later learn is not typical for a pastor in a small country church. I had a man in the community to tell me, when I left the church, that he hoped in my next pastorate I would have fewer deaths and funerals to perform. However, in looking back, he nor I was able to see God was accomplishing a different plan. I now see that it was through the church and the numerous funeral services of that eight-year ministry that God was moving and making connections that would eventually lead me to a career in funeral service.

During those years, I met Cullis Taylor and Randy Bentley with Parker Bramlett Funeral Home. I would be working closely with Parker Bramlett Funeral Home in ministering to the families within the church and community during their time of loss. At some point through this journey, Mr. Cullis or Randy asked if I could assist them in working a funeral, or it was me who offered to assist or a little of both, but I gained new friendships and through the years developed a love for the ministry of funeral service.

After years of ministering through the church I serve, working part-time with Parker Bramlett Funeral Home, and having people tell me after preaching a funeral service or assisting with a funeral service they could see how I was called into this ministry, I finally decided it was time to fully embrace funeral service as a career. As I stated in the beginning, I would never have chosen funeral service as a career, but I do believe funeral service chose me.



*Dakota Goodwin is a first-generation funeral director from Eclectic, Alabama. She is an apprentice at Linville Memorial Funeral Home in Eclectic and attends Jefferson State Community College. In her spare time, she paints. She has won many art competitions in her hometown and has had two of her paintings displayed at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts.*

My life can be best illustrated by the slow process of putting together a puzzle – the puzzle of my life’s calling. With every piece, I find myself wondering “How does this fit? How does all this connect?” Throughout my life, I have searched for an answer to two questions. “Why am I still here?” and “What is my purpose?”

My mother was treated for leukemia when she was pregnant with me. She did not know she was pregnant until she was three months along; for those three months, I was also receiving chemotherapy. Every doctor she saw refused to treat her because I only had a ten percent chance of survival without being severely handicapped; it was too risky. Against all odds, I was a healthy baby. But, that was not the end of my health complications. When I was three years old doctors discovered that what they thought was a small hole that actually was a hole that took over the entire back of my heart. I had to immediately have open-heart surgery. I was given a fifty percent chance of surviving the surgery. I survived the surgery and had a speedy recovery. However, my health has not been the only thing I have struggled with. Throughout my life, I have been in and out of a funeral. It felt like the grief my family

experienced was never-ending. The death that impacted my family the most was the death of my Aunt Jessie; my mom’s younger sister was thirty-two when she died. Her death was completely unexpected and didn’t just impact our family, but the entire community. She was a nurse practitioner and dedicated her entire life to taking care of people. Her visitation and funeral were turning points in my life. I remember how helpless I felt the night of her visitation because I was too young to be able to do or say anything that would help or comfort my family. I remember how upset my mother was because my aunt did not look like herself. Not only was I dealing with my grief, but I was also seeing the grief of others who loved my aunt just as much as I did. On the day of her funeral, there was not a single empty seat. Because of her funeral, I saw how many lives she impacted. This was another puzzle piece in my life.

After her death, I immersed myself in my art. At thirteen I was a theatrical makeup designer and artist for a playhouse in Montgomery. I was on the right path to a successful career as a makeup artist, but I felt like God was leading me somewhere else. The summer after my sophomore year I attended a church camp, called Huntingdon Leadership Academy, that was focused on what our calling in life is. I was sixteen years old when I publicly announced at Huntingdon Leadership Academy on Closing Day that my calling was to be a funeral director. That week I reflected on those who I have lost, what I have survived, and why God has given me certain talents. It was not until the night before Closing Day that I discovered my life’s purpose. There was a purpose for my pain. There was a purpose for my grief. The puzzle pieces of major events in my life finally came together. I had to grieve, so I can comfort the grieving. I had to survive, so I can care for the dead. What leads me to funeral service goes beyond an interest; it is my life’s purpose.

# Jefferson State Community College Profile

## Funeral Service Education Program

### Objectives:

The Funeral Service Education Program at Jefferson State Community College and American Board of Funeral Service Education's objectives are to educate students in every phase of funeral service so that this FSE Program graduates are prepared for entry level employment in funeral service. The FSE Program has adopted the following Learning Outcomes and the student will be able to:

- Explain the importance of funeral service professionals in developing relationships with the families and communities they serve.
- Identify standards of ethical conduct in funeral service practice.
- Interpret how federal, state, and local laws apply to funeral service in order to ensure compliance.
- Apply principles of public health and safety in the handling and preparation of human remains.
- Demonstrate technical skills in embalming and restorative art that are necessary for the preparation and handling of human remains.
- Demonstrate skills required for conducting arrangement conferences, visitations, services, and ceremonies.
- Describe the requirements and procedures for burial, cremation, and other accepted forms of final disposition of human remains.
- Describe methods to address the grief-related needs of the bereaved.
- Explain management skills associated with operating a funeral establishment.
- Demonstrate verbal and written communication skills and research skills needed for funeral service practice.



## Funeral Service Education



*"Show me the manner in which a nation or community cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender sympathies of its people, their respect for the law of the land and their loyalty to high ideals."*

— W. Gladstone

## For More Information Contact

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## INDUSTRY NEWS

### PIMS Awards Max Starks, Pittsburgh Steelers Super Bowl XLIII Champion, an Honorary Degree in Funeral Service

On Friday, September 24, 2021, at Calvary Episcopal Church, MAX STARKS, retired Pittsburgh Steeler, will be awarded an honorary degree in Embalming and Funeral Directing from the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science (PIMS) at the school's 163rd Commencement Exercise. Before becoming an NFL Super Bowl Champion with the Pittsburgh Steelers, Max grew up and actively worked in funeral service as his Mom, Elleanor Starks, graduated from mortuary school in 1983. Subsequently, in the early 1990's, Elleanor went on to open the first multinational/multicultural funeral home in Central Florida --The Morales and Starks Multinational Funeral Home located in Kissimmee, Florida.

This visionary enterprise was so successful because Mrs. Starks focused on serving the diverse populations that were endemic to the Kissimmee area. She learned the customs, understood the languages, and tailored her business to create an environment of comfort where this multicultural population could mourn the death of their loved ones. Max helped his Mom at the funeral home in various ways, which included helping to transfer decedents from their place of death, attending to the needs of the bereaved, as well as keeping the funeral home well appointed.

Elleanor's legacy in the profession continued to grow. In 1993, she founded the 100 Black Women of Funeral Service, based out of Kissimmee, Florida. Elleanor established this organization in an effort to assist African Americans and Minority Women who have chosen a career in funeral service. Today the organization celebrates 28 years as an advocate for the funeral profession in general, while highlighting the unique talents and gifts that women bring to funeral service.

Thus, with such a remarkable family history, PIMS is proud to have various members of the Starks family involved with the upcoming commencement. Not only will Max receive the honorary degree, but his Mom will be recognized for her work in funeral service. In fact, she has been selected as the Keynote Speaker for the ceremony in which she has penned a prescient

speech entitled, "Fundamentals of Surviving a Disruption in the Death Care Industry and Finding New Opportunities of Sustainability." Unfortunately, for personal reasons, Elleanor is unable to travel to Pittsburgh and attend the ceremony, however, her sister Ida Murrie will serve as her proxy and deliver Elleanor's inspirational words to the graduates. Interestingly, Ida

is yet another member of this amazing family involved in funeral

service as she partnered with her sister in the genesis of the 100 Black Women of Funeral Service. PIMS is proud to announce that its upcoming commencement will definitively be a "Starks" reminder to the graduates about achieving all of one's potential in their career and in life! #PIMSPride

Note about PIMS: The Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science offers a specialized education exclusively for funeral service providing a "bridge" (in a city known for its bridges) to a career in this essential vocation. With a legacy of 80+ years, PIMS offers, either online or on campus, a transformative learning experience designed to prepare students for the many challenges they will encounter in the profession. Embracing such ideals as diversity, integrity, and kindness, "PIMS Cares" about its students by empowering them in an ethical learning environment with a focus on becoming compassionate caregivers inspired to practice service excellence! With a large and supportive alumni network, most PIMS graduates find employment opportunities throughout the country. Like Max's team, the Steelers, PIMS contributes to Pittsburgh's legacy as the "City of Champions" by being recently selected to the prestigious Forbes Magazine "Top 25 Career Schools in the USA." For anyone considering a career in this benevolent vocation, PIMS invites you to attend the Institute and become a "funeral service champion." Click on <https://pims.edu/> for more information.



Max with his Mom after the Steelers won Super Bowl XLIII in Tampa, FL



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# The Value of an Education

By Matt Rowe



As people start to grow up, some start to question the value of an education. Is it really worth it to stay in high school or go to college? But, then, you grow up, and there seems to be a billion tech people making a billion dollars, and you again wonder about the value of an education. In fact — many will tell you your education is not worth what it takes to get it and whether it's worth it to pursue an education.

## **A Degree Never Expires**

If there's anything that you learn from this article — make sure it's this; a degree never expires. Someone that gets a bachelor's or master's degree in anything business, history, or art (any subject, really) can still use that years later when applying for jobs. Even this one fact that I call “your education calling card” makes it completely worthwhile to pursue an education.

## **Maybe you think you won't use an education**

You may not plan to use your education for various reasons, and that's totally okay. However, education provides a great cushion to fall back on or a plan B in a way. When unexpected events happen, and you need a bit more financial help, having a degree will help you 50 or 60 years down the line.

Getting an education makes you more valuable to companies and employers for a long, long time.

## **The Value of an Education is worth your time and money**

When you go to a quality high school or university, what are you pursuing? Are you pursuing friendships, knowledge, skills, or experiences? The great thing is college comes with each of these perks.

School teaches you how to socialize; you learn important concepts like sticking with something (even when it sucks) for the value of your goals.

Something you get from an education that is sometimes not learned anywhere else is you learn to put up with getting bossed around. The professors tell you what to do — and you do it. Papers are due — and you do them. So many demands are made on your time, and you do what you have to get through your college life.

These situations and the information you gain at the university will be used throughout your whole life. Think “how to analyze and problem solve?” A definite yes.

Think about it; if you were trying to manage finances but only had a 3rd-grade education, you wouldn't be able to understand how compounding works. Even with a full university degree — it's sometimes difficult to budget money, manage things around the house, and a million other things each person has to do daily. Additional education puts all of this “life learning” and places it in reusable “habit” form.

A baseline education is important. It makes your life easier in the long run, even though it may not be the most fun thing to complete in the short run.

## **The Value of an Education is an investment in you**

I like to think of education as an investment in myself. I'm spending time learning and developing skills that I otherwise wouldn't be able to obtain. I'm developing critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills, which I can use when issues come up later in life. I'm investing some money and some time into a degree, which I can then use to make more money than I'm already making.

When pursuing an education, think about how much you want to get out of it.

Some may be totally satisfied with a high school diploma. Others may want to get a bachelor's degree, master's, or even a doctorate. We encourage you to get at least a college degree since you can do so much more with a college degree than a high school diploma. If no one is there to encourage you — encourage yourself. The value of an education is one of life's secrets.

Many high school students may not be super interested in school because high school isn't really super exciting or interesting. The great thing about college is that you can study what you want. I get to take psychology and business classes that fascinate me. I don't have to

worry about calculus or world history that (I tell myself) I'll never use again. College and education, in general, are valued by many. When you get more educated and get a degree, you become more valuable to others — but it might be to yourself that you become more valuable.

### **The Value of an Education reaches beyond a career**

Education also increases your capacity to serve and give back to the community.

### **Problem-solving**

Developing problem-solving skills will help you when problems arise in your career, family, and life in general. People will always struggle, and an education opens your eyes to multiple ways of helping these individuals.

Education has helped me personally in understanding other people's thoughts and the positions they take on issues.

### **Psychology education**

School teaches you to think critically, analyze widely, and learn vast specific and general lessons. The lessons you learn in school — from good examples to poor examples — help you forever. For example, taking psychology courses helps you understand how humans think and allows you to process thoughts better and understand why people behave in a certain way. As a result, you'll be better able to reach out in certain situations.

### **Financial education**

Financial education hones skills for budgeting, which will help the economy and help you understand how to learn about investing money and where to invest it.

### **Education in your career**

More and more professions in our modern-day require a college degree at a minimum. These jobs tend to come with more benefits and pay better than those that don't require a college education. Sure, you could deliver packages and make decent money, but think about how much more you can make with technical and analytical skills or any skill.

Studies show that people with higher levels of education tend to make more money and even tend to be happier. This is because education teaches and refines skills to help you become the best you can be.

When you Value an Education — you can get one  
The best part about education is that you can do it!  
You can pay for college, and you can use the knowledge you gain to help others and make a real change in the world. We all have dreams and goals we want to achieve in life. But, most of the time, education will take you where you want to go.

You may want to live internationally, run a nonprofit to help others, or just make a change in the world. Valuing an education motivates you to get one and learn everywhere, whether that be school or elsewhere.

### **Education gives you the capacity and the ability to do more.**

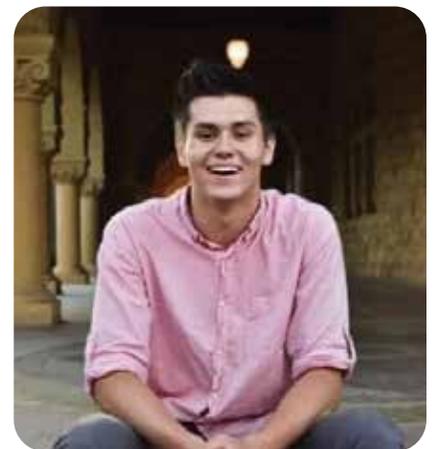
You can live wherever you want, do the things you want in life, and be the best version of yourself with education and hard work. Talk to those you look up to and learn about the people you want to be like in the future. Where did they go to school, and did education influence their lives? Education nearly always makes a positive impact on you, your family, and the world.

### **Conclusion**

An education can take you all the places you want to go in life. Employers and future job opportunities value an education, and getting to the finish line of this goal increases your capacity to serve, learn, and become.

It may seem daunting, but you absolutely can get an education. Save early and work hard; your future self will thank you for it.

Matt Rowe is currently working on his Bachelors Degree in Advertising. He grew up in the heart of Silicon Valley where he was able to network around some of the top technical minds. He lived blocks away from Steve Jobs and was able



to witness the transformation of the Bay Area to one of the strongest technical scenes on the planet.



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## Not Your Father's Funeral Home



*Estreya McCanna lives in Clarksville Tennessee with her husband Sam and their three daughters, Lillian, Rosalie, and Juniper. They are an Air Force family and enjoy traveling to new places. In her very little spare time, Estreya*

*enjoys reading books, listening to podcasts and consuming coffee in abundance! Her passion for dignity in the death care industry is what drew her to the mortuary science field. She is a student of John A. Gupton and looks forward to make them proud as she progresses in her career!*



*This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA-NC*

Its May 2021 and I just started my very first semester of Mortuary school at John A. Gupton College. I logged into my classes to complete some of my first assignments, and it was a discussion board with my classmates in relation to our employment at the funeral home. I thought to myself “wait... what funeral home, I don’t work at one. I’ve never even been inside one, except for some funerals when I was younger and my shadowing experience well over a year ago”. I decided to look at the responses from my classmates first and see what they all had to say. I was floored at how so many of the responses were about working in their parents, grandparents, or Uncle’s/friend of family’s funeral home.

Reading through these discussions, I started to doubt myself and my place here in mortuary school. I had no “right” to be here, attending a school that’s so specialized to a small percentage of the population. There are so many of my peers in this class, who already are in this field and have been since birth. I have no connection; I don’t know a soul who works at a funeral home or who has ever entered this field, perhaps I’ve put myself where I certainly don’t belong. As weeks passed, I started to stress thinking that, sure I can take and pass all my classes but who is to say I will ever

be able to find an apprenticeship, let alone a job. I decided that I wanted to speak with one of my professors about my concerns. I called my professor (Hi Ms. Allen!) and I shared with her my fears and how I felt that I was really coming up short in comparison to my classmates, also sharing with her about how I felt this insurmountable hurdle of falling behind since I am at a disadvantage. I am so inexperienced in all aspects, and how I feel its harmful to my goals. Adding to this that I am also a military spouse, so the longevity of my career in one location was going to get in the way of achieving my dreams. It all sounds very dramatic now, and it certainly was to me that day.

She told me exactly what I needed to hear. She said I will obviously have obstacles in my way that other classmates won’t face, but that so long as I am willing to work hard, these obstacles won’t hold me back. Feeling more empowered, I decided to buckle down on my studies and be sure in my decision to become a mortician and funeral director. I finished the semester strong and was relieved for the (very) short break that comes between semesters. When fall semester started, we jumped right back into the swing of things and half-way through we started discussing apprenticeships. There it was again, that feeling of dread and short coming. I once again called my professor and just said “what do I even do?”. Again, with encouragement and support she said “You dress for the career you want, take your resume, and go into every single funeral

home, introduce yourself and tell them what you are hoping to achieve for an apprenticeship. When you get turned down, don't give up and try again." I did just that. It was slow going at first.

I went into the same funeral homes multiple times to show I was serious and made follow up phone calls. In the meantime, a funeral home had asked if they could give my resume to a gentleman who owns a mortuary transport company. This gentleman called me and did an over the phone interview with me and had me go on a "test run" with him, and just like that, that locked tight door was just nudged open. I worked with Mr. Ronnie for a few months, getting my foot in the door and learning everything there was to learn. As many of you who are experienced death care industry workers know, so much of that learning is something that you can't get from a textbook. I was blessed to find someone again, who was supportive of me and encouraged me to pursue my goals and go after what I wanted. This gave me the confidence boost to go after my apprenticeship even more. I went into the family-owned funeral home that I had shadowed at 18 months prior and met with the two owners to discuss opportunities for me in their small but mighty business. Imagine my relief when I was able to finally get an apprenticeship and not only get hired but to be hired at one of the best funeral homes in the area! I just recently started, and it has been amazing learning from the best and seeing the core values and strengths of the profession I am so passionate about in action every day.

All of this to say that starting a new career can be incredibly scary. Especially when that career choice feels like a super-secret club that's hard to get in to. The depth of the people entering this field can go back generations and coming in a first generation is not easy, but not impossible. The truth is when you are passionate about something and you look for support and ask for help, it will come to you. I have been passionate about the Death Care Industry for many years and never felt the time was right to pursue my career. As a military spouse and as a stay-at-home mom for almost a decade, a lot took precedent over my goals and aspirations.

When the time came, I pursued it full force and with my drive to achieve and pursue a career that I truly feel is my calling, I was able to finally break through a wall that I had labeled impenetrable. I have learned since

working in the industry for this very short amount of time, that so many funeral directors and embalmers are NOT children of funeral homeowners. Many do have connections, but it was not this club that I had assumed it was. There are plenty of first-generation funeral directors, more than I had taken the time to realize. There are a lot of people who like me want to come into this realm of business but are worried because they don't have connections or ties to a funeral home, I hope they find out sooner rather than later that persistence, hard work and a welcoming employer can do wonders to quiet your fear of falling short as an asset to this industry. Going forward, there are only so many relatives and children and acquaintances to hire and this field will have much more "family, who aren't related" owned funeral homes.

It's an industry of wonderful likeminded people who are just like me and all striving for the betterment of our industry and contributing to people's lives through the dignity, respect, and love given to their loved ones in our care.



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# John A. Gupton Student Essays



*Cameron Westbrook is 19 years old and from Kingsport, Tennessee. She is currently attending John A. Gupton College and entering her second semester. She has shadowed Gate City Funeral Home in Virginia during her time*

*in high school while also enjoying her hobbies of doing gymnastics and wrestling. She spent a year at Northeast Community College to complete her general classes before enrolling at Gupton. In her free time, she loves to paint, watch movies with her roommate, and visit family along with her dog, Reese, whenever she gets the opportunity. She looks up to her mother as her mentor and best friend to help and guide her. Her goal is to do the best she can in her work and be apart of a board of funeral directors in the future. Later in life she plans to move to New York for work as well as to watch Broadway musicals whenever possible and eventually vacation to the outer banks to shore fish on Ocracoke Island.*

As an eleven-year-old, growing up with the idea of being a funeral director, embalmer, undertaker, etc., was considered a real shock to all my peers since I never had a family connection or any connection for that matter. The sixth-grade career fair piqued my interest by those who worked at Hamlett-Dobson Funeral Home and from there I thought I had it all figured out. Before the pandemic at the age of sixteen, I job shadowed at Gate City Funeral Home in Virginia. By the time looking for colleges came around, I had already decided to go to John A. Gupton while all my friends wanted to be nurses, teachers, and lawyers at a local four-year school. At times it felt like I was being left behind as they pursued more schooling, but I could not be happier where I am in reaching my professional goals.

Currently I attend John A. Gupton college and will be starting my second semester in the spring of 2022 and

hope to graduate in December. Everyone seemed to tell me that I may have issues with potential employers who may refuse my service as a woman. Since being enrolled at school, I have noticed that even if there is a bigger percentage of women to men, employers will ask the college for potential workers only if they are male. I am ecstatic to hear of more and more women and young girls finding their passion to help those in the worst time of their life, and even though the trend of more men in the profession is still present, it is declining each year.

As a child growing into adulthood, I did not have many opportunities to witness a funeral. During the first, I was five years old at my great-grandmother's viewing. I saw her twice and, in my mind, she was asleep and at peace. The only thing that struck me as weird was that both times I saw her she wore the exact same clothes in the casket. It wasn't until freshman year of high school when one of my friends and classmates passed away that I went to my second viewing. I was nervous to see her because I did not know what to expect when I walked up to say goodbye. I realize now that it was the best idea to see her that last time because she looked soft, and unbothered in her sleep. I wasn't scared of or for the deceased; I was glad my family, friends, and myself can look as serene as my classmate did, and I wanted to be the one to create and care to such an extent.

Cremation is becoming the next big thing in funeral service due to lower prices rather than purchasing a casket, vault, grave plot, head stone, etc. For some the thought of being buried underground or small enclosed spaces is unsettling. Others do not like the idea of spiders and insects crawling on them. Whatever the reason no matter how irrational is perfectly valid regarding the choice for cremation. As cremations become more popular, there are those who may feel it lacks the formality of a burial, but it all depends on the service given by the funeral director. In my opinion, all services, funerals, and cremations should be as important to funeral directors as a \$75,000 funeral, and all families should always be treated with the upmost respect. Cremation cannot be an excuse to brush off a family



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because it is the cheaper choice. It also should never be discouraged or looked down upon because it is not a traditional form of disposition. However, I implore the idea of viewing or seeing the deceased as it can ease the grieving process as well as help those who might have a difficult time accepting the finality of death.

Funeral service in the year 2022 seems to be all about eccentric new ways to perform services that match the individuality of the dearly departed. Although cremation services are less in price compared to burial, there are newer and more extravagant ways to honor lives. Along with personal little keepsakes that can be made in abundance and purchased by all family if they so desire can mean much more than a standard cremation with or without a viewing. Apart from cremation, other changes are being made to those who request for caskets and burial. For example, there is a possibility to

line caskets with lights for people who, me included, are afraid of being in the dark. Also, for those who find Snow White's glass case especially magical, caskets with transparent glass may be available for purchase in the future.

On a final note, as far as trends go in the coming year of 2022, services and dispositions may be changing, but the options of excellent professional service should never be in low supply. I can say in confidence the new funeral directors and embalmers of the generation are being steered and taught in the right direction when it comes to communication, professionalism, and compassion.



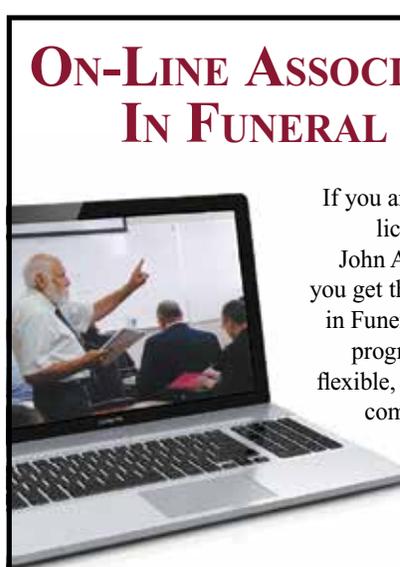
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# How to Use Topic Clusters for Digital Marketing

By Welton Hong

RING RING  
MARKETING

Google loves a good topic cluster, and you should too! Creating a cluster of blog posts and landing pages that cover all aspects of a funeral services topic helps your pages rank higher in search engine results, builds trust with your audience, and helps convert site visitors into clientele.

## *What Are Topic Clusters for Digital Marketing?*

Topic clusters are a series of pages about different aspects of a topic. They're typically heavily interlinked to provide readers with options for learning more about a topic.

Usually, topic clusters are organized with a long pillar page that links out to shorter pages on subtopics. The pillar page covers or mentions all relevant topics, providing an overview and a sort of index to the cluster.

For example, a topic cluster on preplanning cremation might include:

- A 2,000-word pillar page covering, at a high level, what preplanning cremation is, the benefits, the costs, and how to do it.
- Posts ranging from 500 to 1,000 words covering each subtopic in greater depth. Those might include how cremation works, the benefits of cremation over burial, costs of cremation vs. costs of burial, how to talk to your family about your wishes, etc.
- Landing pages that actually "sell" the services related to the content. Examples include pages for direct cremation and cremation with a funeral service.

## *Benefits of Topic Clusters for Funeral Content Marketing*

Quality topic clusters create clout that helps your site perform better in the search engines. Creating a comprehensive cluster means publishing a number of highly relevant pages, and that's automatically good for SEO.

But your clusters also help search engine AI better understand your site and how all the information relates. Google uses complex natural language programming to understand what sites and pages are about and how to rank them in relation to each search query.

A cluster effectively communicates concepts such as, "Here is a page about funeral services. Here's a page about costs of those services, which is highly related. And here's a page about caskets, which is a topic that's important to both funeral services and the costs of funerals."

Search engine AI on its own wouldn't know what a casket is and why it's important to funeral service costs. But cluster hierarchy offers this data.

Topic clusters are also convenient and practical for people who come to your site. They help keep people on your page, build trust while displaying your expertise, and increase the chance someone will turn to your deathcare firm when they're ready for preneed planning or have an at-need situation.

## How to Create Topic Clusters That Work

Implementing topic clusters isn't difficult, but it does require some organization and understanding the needs of your target audience. Follow the steps below to plan a topic cluster for your deathcare website.

- **Brainstorm categories.** Look at keyword research, clientele feedback, and the services you provide to come up with high level content categories that meet your audience's top needs. For example, a funeral home might have categories such as preneed planning, at-need services, luxury funeral services, and budget services.
- **Choose one category for your cluster.** Most small or midsize businesses can support up to around five content clusters because they have up to five major topics or service lines to cover. But it's easier to create these clusters one at a time, so start with one category. For example, a funeral home marketing team might begin with budget funeral services.
- **List all the relevant topics.** Look at keyword research, Google the topic yourself and see what others are covering, and check the People Also Ask box on Google results. Use that data to create a list of topics related to the category. For "budget funeral services," topics might include:

- Cost of funerals
- Cremation vs. burial cost
- Tips for meaningful but inexpensive services
- Cost of burial
- How location impacts cost
- What expenses are optional
- How to prepare financially for a funeral
- The value of preplanning in saving money on deathcare costs

- **Outline a pillar page.** Come up with a pillar page concept that covers all relevant topics at a high level. For example, a pillar page on budget funerals should include a section on the cost of funerals. That content could cover what contributes to funeral costs and the average overall cost of services. But the entire purpose of the pillar page isn't to inform the reader about exact funeral costs; the page should also cover options for savings, how to prepare financially, and all other relevant topics.
- **Plan subtopic pages.** Any relevant topic covered or hinted at in the pillar page can be covered by a subtopic page or blog post. The pillar page on budget funeral services might mention caskets, for example, so you can write a blog post on the cost of caskets. You might also create a post on how to select a casket.
- **Create the content.** Write and publish the content. You can write the content yourself or have it outsourced, but it's a good idea to have at least the pillar page and some of the supporting pages completed before you start publishing your cluster.
- **Create internal links.** The pillar page should link out to all the subtopic pages. But subtopic pages should also link to the pillar page and to each other as relevant.

Yes, creating content clusters takes a bit of work and a lot of content. But here's one piece of good news: Some of the subtopic pages from each cluster will be relevant to future topic clusters. For example, the casket content that's relevant to a budget funeral cluster would also be relevant to other funeral and burial clusters, so you won't have to create everything from scratch.

You might already have content relevant to potential clusters on your deathcare website. Reworking existing content to fit the proven cluster model is a great way to revamp your site for stronger SEO performance and conversions, so give it a try.



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Welton is a leading expert in helping funeral homes convert leads from online directly to the phone line. He's the author of the book *Making Your Phone Ring with Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes*. Learn more at [FuneralHomeProfits.com](http://FuneralHomeProfits.com).

# John A. Gupton Alumni Reunion Celebrates Their 75th Anniversary in Style!!!

John A. Gupton College celebrated the their 75th Anniversary with their Annual Alumni Reunion at the Grand Hyatt in Nashville, Tennessee back in August 2021.

The Friday night reception and 75-Year Celebration was attended by a record crowd of alumni (young and old), staff, students, spouses and guests. It was an enjoyable reception on the Roof Top Terrace overlooking downtown Nashville and special thanks to all of those that contributed great raffle prizes for all attendees, as well as Danny Hurt and Wilbert Vault for sponsoring the beverages and food.

The following morning was a sponsored breakfast provided by Batesville Casket Company and Matthews-Aurora Funeral Solutions. Afterwards all alumni gathered at the John A. Gupton College lecture classroom for the annual business meeting.

The meeting consisted of a memorial service to honor all alumni and spouses that had passed away during the previous year as well as a financial report, report from the board of directors and President Spann addressed the alumni with his State of the College Report.

Steve Spann had the honor to present “50-Year pins” to 3 distinguished young gentlemen who also happened to be roommates during their tenure at the college; Albert Atchley, Bob Foster and Steve West.....Needless to say, many war stories were shared by those 3 individuals! Stanley Powell was also presented his 50-Year pin (class of 1970), since there was no Alumni Meeting in 2020.

Lynn McClain and John Robbins were also presented with their “25-Year” pins.

The business meeting concluded with election of the officers for 2021-22 and included: Bobby Cook, President succeeding Bill Hudson, immediate past president; Chris Jefferson, 1st vice president; Brandon Yarborough, 2nd vice president; Keith Stapleton, Treasurer and Tim Bond, secretary.

Tracy Allen, Alumni Public Relations, wanted to remind everyone to “Save the Date” for August 5-6, 2022 for the 76th Alumni Reunion to be held once again in Nashville, TN.



Enjoying the 75th Year Celebration, (L-R), Steve and Meryl Spann, Sherri and Bill Hudson, Madison Spann and John Yopp



50-Year Recipients and also roommates during their tenure at John A. Gupton College, The 3 Amigo's, (L-R) Bob Foster, Steve West and Albert Atchley



John A. Gupton Alumni Association 2021-22 Officers (L-R) Tim Bond, Secretary; Chris Jefferson, 1st V.P.; Bill Hudson, Immediate Past President; and Steve Spann, President John A. Gupton College. Not pictured, President, Bobby Cook; Treasurer, Keith Stapleton and 2nd V.P., Brandon Yarborough.



Steve Spann enjoying the evening with students and alumni



Special thanks to Tracy Allen for coordinating the special 75th Anniversary and enjoying time with Delbrita Green, JAG Alumni Past President



(L-R) Steve Spann presenting Stanley Powell 50-Year pin from class of 1970





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# The Blessings and the Curses of Being a Funeral Director

Part V of a V Part Series

By Todd W. Van Beck

## The Impossible Curse

I have spent most of my professional career trying to explain the values and benefits of the funeral experience to anyone who would listen. I have tried to contribute by writing, speaking, teaching and helping people embrace the subject of death and funerals.

Throughout the years I have known that the basic subject that funeral directors are asked to cope with, deal with, help with, is in the end an impossible subject to be assigned to tackle, and there are many anti-funeral people who take full advantage by demanding from the side lines that funeral directors tackle the impossible, and then jump all over us when the impossible task cannot be fulfilled, and I am not talking about the task of doing and giving funeral services, no one does that better than funeral directors, I am talking about the impossible subject of human death.

I have concluded that funeral directors, particularly in this rampant out of control death denial and death anxiety age we live in have to face up almost constantly to the obvious fact that our job is different than any job on earth. Funeral directors are in the unique position of offering a type of service that may well be needed, but is rarely wanted. It is a sticky wicket.

The Pollyanna's of the world (which I have little use for) have proclaimed to me in a futile effort to instruct me in a better way of thinking and hence make my observations and experiences more contemporary that, according to them "No one wants to have to call a doctor, or a lawyer, either because Todd that is most times not a good situation." I want to throw up when I am tossed that terribly naïve and nay offensive position. I have been in medical situations where I damned well wanted to call a doctor, and would do anything he or she told me to do – and money was no object. I have found myself in great need of a lawyer when there has been deep private trouble, and was damned glad to get and pay for the lawyer's advice and counsel. But even I don't want to speculate too much what it would mean in my private life to need to call a funeral direc-

tor. This is heavy stuff to be sure, and no matter how people rationalize the subject there is little positive to the subject of death, it basically terrifies people.

Funeral directors are special people no question about it, for few if any professions can deal with a subject like death, and deal with that subject exclusively and in doing so sustain the public's anxieties about the subject, their avoidance of the subject and at times their glaring ignorance of the subject and then when a death occurs here present in our profession are people who can help guide the survivors, help counsel them, walk with them, and direct them to and discover in the end making wise and helpful decisions.

However none of what I just said changes the core fact that no one wants to have to call the funeral director. It is a cardinal strength of funeral service that our members not only understand this situation, but are respectful and yes sensitive to this reality. The death rate is 100%, but no one outside an insane asylum would be foolish enough to tout that fact in today's world to Archie and Edith Bunker, even clergy squirm and Hospice workers giggled and squirm in their seats when I share this unarguable and inevitable statistic.

Here is an example: I know firsthand of zoning commissions that will welcome the zoning application of a gas station in a neighborhood that will be opened twenty-four hours with one thousand neon lights glaring into people's bedrooms throughout the night, but the same zoning commission will flatly turn down the zoning application for a new funeral home to be built in the same neighborhood. Public meetings after public meetings will be held on the funeral home zoning issue and parent after parent will with self-righteous indignation prophesize that if a funeral home is built in their neighborhood the little children living in proximity will end up being another "Sybil" having to deal with sixteen personalities because they saw a funeral coach drive by while they were riding the tricycles.

I have seen all my life businesses trying to create increased demand for their services and products, and

the results have been often times highly successful – remember the phrase GOT MILK? Milk drinking soared. Of course most everybody likes milk. Even the sainted Hospice organizations today are trying in a big way to create increased demand for dying people now there is a change in attitude for you to ponder – marketing for dying people and Hospice marketers are some of the most well trained promo people I have ever encountered.

However no matter what funeral directors cannot create an increased demand for our services, no never. The funeral profession and its members are unique and special. All professions claim this, but I can think of very few who really can prove it like we can.

### **THE SUBJECT OF DEATH – THE KING OF TERROR (Blessing or Curse? You decide)**

Every funeral director I know I believe ought to have a Ph.D. in experiential expertise concerning the blunt, harsh, raw date realities of death. However people I have discovered have learned the lessons of a basic primal fear of death – we are not born with this, it is learned, but for most it is a lesson well learned. The fear of death can be a lifesaver because it often times stops people from doing stupid things like jumping off a mountain or play chicken in an automobile or experimenting with drugs. For most people I would like to suggest the fear of death really surpasses all other human fears. In fact most every religion has at its very core their central belief system is an attempt to answer this ancient eternally haunting question “What happens to me after I am dead?” Some of the most powerful and influential religious movement on the earth have emerged basically because they came up with an answer to that glaring question.

The reason that funeral directors and the subject of death are so important is that in the end every human beings relationship with death is so important, and funeral directors usually emerge as the one primary single living symbol of death in any community. This is where all the undertaker jokes emerge from – not from humor, but from primal fear.

I have concluded that the fear of death is not just a primal fear, it is **THEE** primal fear.

To be sure death can be viewed as a welcomed visitor

in the sick room, but even that attitude is much more of a psychological grief coping mechanism, and certainly a good one, rather than a statement that one actually welcomes death, and particularly their own death.

I have the thought that death is, for many, is the ultimate bad thing, and this ultimately bad thing attitude of people spills over and is associated with funeral service more than with any other career or profession on the face of the earth – the clergy don’t come close, and neither does Hospice or hospitals for people today actually view Hospice as someplace to get physically well, and most have always viewed the hospital that way. Remember most hospitals whisk death people off to the morgue in camouflaged laundry hampers. Telling is it not?

The association between funeral directors, and what we symbolize - death, and people’s ultimate fear of death will never be broken, it never has been and never will, which fact makes the work of the funeral director a difficult calling to be sure.

I have concluded that one of the reasons that funeral directors have always been praised and lauded in the public’s Gallup Polls is because in the association between the primal fear of death, and deaths 100% predictability common ordinary people actually marvel that there are people out there, you and I, funeral directors, who can foster guidance and positive relationship building when many others turn tail and run.

The anti-funeral people are quick to indict us for being weird, strange, and as one famous funeral critic told me directly to my face “funeral service is in unbelievable bad taste” but the common ordinary people find support, understanding, sensitivity, and compassion when they walk across the threshold of the funeral home, which in and of itself is a powerful symbol for crossing the threshold crossing metaphorically from the world of living to the world of the dead. Powerful stuff!

### **POSSIBLY THE MOST HURTFUL CURSE OF BEING A FUNERAL DIRECTOR?**

Make no mistake the epidemic of death anxieties and death denials have taken a monumental toll on the psychological world of contemporary funeral service. Popular culture invariable shows the funeral director (not my personal good friend the local funeral direc-

tor) but some other unidentified funeral director in a poor light. I have written on this subject in the past, but I need to repeat that the image in popular culture of the undertaker with wringing hands, the vulture like appearance, and a person who is creepy, morbid and ghoulish is a curse that we contend with and have contended with forever. Screenwriters in Hollywood almost universally depend on this untrue image, and even the widely popular television program “Six Feet Under” presented the funeral directors as horribly dysfunctional people.

In real life many people literally cringe at the mention of funerals and funeral homes and funeral directors as though by their cringing death would become an unnatural part of the reality of having been born and living life, and that death by their cringing can somehow be avoided and one easy way to do it is to avoid thinking about funerals, funeral homes and funeral directors. We have all experienced this, have we not? Yes we have all seen this and experienced this and our reactions many times is one more of pity for the cringing person than of personal embarrassment or regret. People totally unaware and yes even blissfully unaware that they are well on the road to their own death by the simply ticking of the clock seem just to not understand. That is truly a pity.

To know, however, that such immature people, such naïve people, such thoughtless people and such unsophisticated people are out there does not change the consequences for the funeral director. Even to know that these pitiful people represent a possible small portion of the population does not make me as a funeral director, the undeserving victim of their mindless prejudice feel much better.

As a funeral professional I do not want anyone to think of me as being a bad guy or gal – not in any way, and not by anyone. Funeral directors are not bad people, we know it, everybody who knows us personally knows it, but still it is no fun for funeral directors to know that even a few people in our universe automatically associate us with something unpleasant and therefore conclude that we as human beings are also somehow unpleasant.

I just don’t know many other professions like funeral service, where in some minds the automatic reaction evokes a feeling of creepiness and in my opinion at

root even a feeling of revulsion.

Probably the closest profession akin to funeral service in a community is the Coroner’s Office. Do people look at the County Coroner as creepy? No they do not. Even the coroner is different from us, because in our popular culture the coroner has now been elevated by the media to the position of a super crime fighter, a modern day Sherlock Holmes. It started with “Quincy” and today its legacy is “CSI”, “Autopsy”, “Snapped”, “48 Hours” and the like. Coroners today are invariably portrayed as valued allies with law enforcement officials in crime-fighting, valiant scientists helping to right a criminal wrong, to identify the criminal with tiny microscopic specks of evidence helping to right a grievous wrong and in a heroic manner identify the criminal and hence free the innocent suspect. I have found it very predictable that no television program which revolves around the dramatic, heroic and yes sexy exploits of the County Coroner ever takes the time or the opportunity to reference the fact that hundreds of County Coroner’s across this country are licensed funeral directors and embalmers.

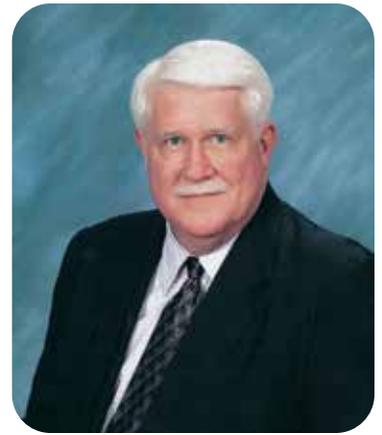
It appears safe to conclude that funeral directors rank alone among the professions in suffering the unjust opprobrium of a certain irreducible portion of the general population because of our embryonic association with people’s ultimate dread, the king of terrors – death, and my friends I personally think it is unlikely that this reality of being a funeral director will ever change. We deal with this tension, this curse daily and do an excellent job in doing so.

However in closing these thoughts let us take faith in the blessings of being a funeral director. No matter what, this is a wonderful career and a great profession. We all have our cross to bear – no one is understood and appreciated by everybody all the time. I don’t think we can do much about changing the world’s attitudes towards their primal fear of death, but we can as funeral directors not walk straight into predictably lost credibility and dignity the way Richard Nixon did in 1973 when he proclaimed, “I am not a crook.” A funeral director would certainly suffer a similar reaction by even bothering to say that he or she is not creepy. We have to play to the winners, and take the high road. Remember people like funeral directors, well not everyone, but in my mind the winners do.

I had a dream some years ago which I thought was somewhat ironic about some people's automatic reaction to funeral directors as somehow being bad people, creepy people, weird people. In my dream I was already in heaven (yes I made it friends) and I saw people who had while on earth laughed at funeral directors and accused them of all sorts of ills and chills and of being in "unbelievably bad taste", and of being composed of really odd and strange people. But now interestingly in my dream, in heaven the slights, and insults, the cruel remarks were being righted. I stood in heaven and saw one funeral directors after another being fitted with their wings and the anti-funeral director group, the people who made all the jokes these souls who on earth did not like us or funerals one by one came up to the newly winged funeral directors to apologize for how terribly they had misjudged us while on earth, and here is the final blessing; every funeral director graciously forgave them, one by one.

**This concludes the 5 Part Series for "The Blessings and Curses of Being a Funeral Director. The previous articles can be viewed in the June, July/August, September and October issues of SFD Magazine**

*About Todd Van Beck  
Todd lives in Nashville, TN with his wife, Georgia. He received an honorary Doctorate Degree in Humane Letters from Commonwealth Institute of Funeral Service, Houston, TX, Master of Arts Degree in Pastoral Ministry from Mount Saint Mary's Seminary, Cincinnati, OH, Bachelor's of Arts Degree in Psychology and Philosophy from Mount Mercy College, Cedar Rapids, IA and Mortuary Arts and Sciences Diploma from New England Institute of Anatomy, Sanitary Science, Embalming and Funeral Directing, Boston, MA.*



*He is the Dean of the College of Funeral Management at the University of Memphis. He is a Certified Funeral Service Practitioner and a member of the Academy of Professional Funeral Service Practice, a Certified Embalmer, the author of 4 books, 400 professional articles.*



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# 2021 NFDA International Convention & Expo: Reunited and It Felt So Good...Music City Nashville

After a hiatus in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Funeral Directors Association International Convention & Expo was back. The convention, which took place, October 17-20 in Nashville, Tennessee, gave funeral service professionals a chance to reunite with colleagues, reexplore what it means to serve families, and renew their professional passion through unrivalled opportunities for learning, networking, and discovering new products and services.

The 2022 NFDA Convention drew 5,052 total attendees (3,316 attendees and 2,021 exhibitor representatives). A total of 76 international attendees, representing 13 countries and territories, participated in the 2021 NFDA Convention. The Expo Hall featured 323 exhibiting companies.

The NFDA convention proved to be an impactful experience for all who were able to attend. To help attendees build upon their foundation of skills, NFDA offered more than 30 engaging education sessions that addressed technical skills; business management; the value of ceremony; marketing and community outreach; grief and bereavement; and more. The sessions offered tangible takeaways to help funeral professionals better understand the evolving needs of families and build thriving businesses.

The Expo Hall was a highlight for many attendees because, in addition to connecting with their valued supplier partners, they also discovered new products and services they can offer to families in their communities.

Attendees also explored a variety of other special areas in the Expo Hall. In the Salute to Service Pavilion, attendees learned about benefits available to veterans. They also learned more about the Journey to Serve initiative, which is designed to connect military veterans with careers throughout the funeral service profession. The Funeral Service Foundation offers this profession-wide initiative in partnership with the ICCFA Educational Foundation.

Funeral professionals discovered the benefits a therapy

dog can bring to their firm – and met puppies-in-training – in the Pause for Paws booth, sponsored by Thumbies and Ultimate Canine. Attendees took a step into the future in the Virtual Reality Technology Lounge, sponsored by Physicians Mutual.

Whether attendees donned a cowboy hat and did a two-step to up-and-coming country band Runaway June during the lively Welcome Party on the streets of Nashville (sponsored by Batesville and Legacy.com), explored exciting Broadway Street at the Funeral Under 40 Party at Nashville Underground, or learned how to line dance during the closing celebration at the legendary Wildhorse Saloon, attendees had many opportunities to network and have fun with colleagues and friends.

## **Giving Hearts**

Seventeen volunteers shared their time and talents with Habitat for Humanity – Williamson-Maury Counties. This year's volunteers worked on a home that was being built for Searria Peoples, a single mother of four, in Columbia, Tennessee, about 50 miles south of Nashville. NFDA volunteers got to meet Peoples and work side-by-side with her on her five-bedroom, two-bath home. Thanks, in part, to the generosity of NFDA volunteers, Peoples will soon realize her American dream of home ownership.

NFDA thanks donors to and sponsors of its Habitat for Humanity volunteer effort in Nashville: Keeney & Basford Funeral Home, NOMIS Publications Inc., Patrick T. Lanigan Funeral Home, Nicodemus & Associates, Cooperative Funeral Fund and Matthews Aurora Funeral Solutions.

## **Honoring the Care and Compassion of Funeral Directors**

A highlight of the 2021 NFDA Convention was the Service of Remembrance. Every day, funeral directors answer the call to be caring, compassionate guides to families that are beginning their grief journeys. During this year's service, NFDA was honored to be joined by singer-songwriter Brad Warren, who experienced the

sudden death of his son, Sage Warren, to an overdose last year.

Warren spoke of the caring funeral service professionals who served his family and helped them honor the life of his son in a beautiful and meaningful way. Brad Warren was later joined on stage by his brother Brett Warren and, together, they performed the song, “If You’re Reading This,” which has been played at many military funerals. Brad and Brett Warren co-wrote the song with the legendary Tim McGraw.

Attendees were also treated to a special video message from Vince Gill, who performed “Go Rest High on that Mountain” during the Service of Remembrance at the 2014 NFDA Convention. Gill was joined in the video by his wife, Amy Grant, and, together, they thanked funeral professionals for their extraordinary care and

kindness they have shown, not just during the pandemic, but always.

As NFDA paid tribute to the essential role of funeral directors in grief and healing it also honored members of the NFDA family who died this past year.

During the Service of Remembrance, a collection was taken up for Alive Hospice in Nashville. Through the generosity of convention attendees, \$1,882 was donated to the organization.

Be Charmed by “Charm City” Save the Date!

The 2022 NFDA International Convention & Expo will take place October 9-12, 2022, in Baltimore, Maryland.

## INDUSTRY NEWS

### Randy Anderson Installed as President of the National Funeral Directors Association 2021-22

Randall P. “Randy” Anderson, CFSP, CCO, of Radney Funeral Home in Alexander City, Alabama, was installed today as 2021-22 president of the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA). The installation took place during the 2021 NFDA International Convention & Expo, October 17-20 in Nashville, Tennessee.

NFDA also installed the association’s officers for 2021-22: President-elect John O. “Jack” Mitchell IV, CFSP, CCO, of Mitchell-Wiedefeld Funeral Home in Baltimore, Maryland; Treasurer Douglas R. “Dutch” Nie II, CFSP, CCO, of Nie Family Funeral Home & Cremation Services in Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Secretary Christopher P. “Chris” Robinson, CFSP, CCO, of Robinson Funeral Home in Easley, South Carolina.

R. Bryant Hightower Jr., CFSP, of Martin-Hightower Funeral Home in Carrollton, Georgia, was installed as immediate past president of NFDA. The officers and immediate past presidents will serve one-year terms of office.

Chris E. Christian, CFSP, CCO, of Christian-Sells Funeral Home in Rogersville, Tennessee, and Beatrice

“Bea” Lewanduski, CFSP, of D’Andrea Brothers Funeral Home on Copiague, New York, were installed as at-large representatives and will serve two-year terms of office.

Also participating in the installation ceremony were at-large representatives Linda L. Allan, CFSP, of Allan & Ciuferi Funeral Home in Collinsville, Illinois, and Daniel Ford, CFSP, CCSP, of Alderson-Ford Funeral Homes in Cheshire, Connecticut, who will serve the second year of their two-year terms of office during the coming year.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, NFDA members consented to a temporary change to the association’s bylaws that delayed the installation of the officers and at-large representatives who were elected in 2020 until 2021. This afforded the association consistency in leadership during the pandemic and enabled NFDA to best serve its members during the crisis.

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**National Alliance for Grieving Children**

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- Talking to Children About Death
- Preparing Children For Funerals
- Supporting a Grieving Child
- Children, Grief & Holidays

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