



photo by Bruce Crippen/Courier
article by James Ritchie Staff Reporter

Karen Giles became president of the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science earlier this year.

Called to action

**Scary? Shocking?
Not for students at
Cincinnati College of
Mortuary Science;
it's a career that just
seems like right fit**

Lindsey Stone hears it all the time when she tells people that she's studying mortuary science: "You want to do what?" Coming to study at the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science just felt right to her.

"It was something I was being called to do," Stone said. "I wanted to work with bereaved families."

Most students say the same thing, said Karen Giles, the school's new president. As she completes her fourth month leading the school at 645 W. North Bend Road, just across from St. Xavier High School, Giles plans to continue bringing in students from all over the country while also growing the school's donation base.

The country's demographics, she said, should mean a strong future for the college and for students who choose the profession.

"For most people, the prospect of death and dying is something they want to avoid," said Giles, who spent five years as director of the Port Mortuary at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. "But for the people we teach here, it is indeed a calling."

The offerings are part art, part science, part business. In a two-year associate's program or a bachelor's program, students study subjects from microbiology to restorative arts to accounting and marketing.

Some have a family background in the funeral business; 10 percent to 20 percent of the students are "legacies," with relatives who have attended the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science. Some students' families have attended for four generations.

Many students come from related industries, such as health care or the florist business. About 25 percent of the college's 130 enrollees are career-changers.

But a good portion are like Stone, whose family has no background in the profession. She left

the University of South Carolina, where she was studying nursing, after two years to come to the Cincinnati school.

THE HARVARD OF MORTUARY SCIENCE

She talked to a funeral home proprietor in her hometown of North Augusta, S.C. Though there are more than 50 U.S. colleges teaching mortuary science, he told her to go to Cincinnati, "the Harvard of mortuary science schools." (Cincinnati's school is also the oldest, having started in 1882.)

Stone was afraid she would be the only out-of-towner. But she found herself surrounded by classmates from as far away as Idaho and New York. There were even a couple of other South Carolinians.

They were all there to take advantage of the college's strong clinical program; students prepare 25 bodies before graduating.

The people close to Stone didn't quite know what to think about her decision.

"There's an initial shock," she said. "But they're intrigued by it. I'm the talk of Thanksgiving dinner. My family and friends want to know how it's going."

Job opportunities should be good as the baby boomers enter their golden years, said Ellen McBrayer, spokeswoman for the National Funeral Directors Association.

The U.S. death rate, roughly stable for the last 20 years, hitting 8.5 deaths per 1,000 people in 2005, will begin climbing in about 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. By 2020 it will reach nearly 10 per 1,000, and by 2030 it will be close to 11 per 1,000.

MORE CREATIVITY INVOLVED

And the field grows more dynamic all the time, McBrayer said.

"Years ago it was a cookie-cutter situation: People had the same songs, the same types of service," she said. "Now the trend is that you celebrate the life of your loved one."

"There are dove releases, DVDs, online broadcasts of the funeral. Some people will bring in a motorcycle or a saddle to represent the person's hobbies. If a family wants it and it's a reasonable request that wouldn't harm or injure anybody, funeral directors are open to it."

There are niches for people who enjoy all aspects of the industry, from the artistic side of reconstructing faces to the social side of helping families, Giles said. Stone said she will go to work for a funeral home wherever in the country she can find a job. But other graduates work for companies in the industry such as Batesville Casket.

And while people get into the field out of a sense of purpose, practical considerations such as job stability weigh in, too.

"Some of our students note that the only sure things in life are death and taxes," Giles said. "The industry is somewhat recession-proof."

ABOUT THE SCHOOL

- The Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science is the oldest such school in the country, founded in 1882.

- There are 130 students enrolled in the school. About 25 percent of those are changing careers.

- In addition, 10 percent to 20 percent of the students are "legacies" whose relatives have attended the college.

- Many come from related industries such as the florist business or health care.

- The industry is likely to be a stable career choice. The U.S. death rate, roughly stable for 20 years, will begin climbing in about 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.