

## The Nation's Oldest Mortuary College Blends 126-Year Heritage with a State-of-the-Industry Learning Environment



Visit the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science (CCMS) any day and the scene may surprise you: a bustle of activity and enthusiasm often not associated with a learning environment and certainly not one where death is the main attraction. In stainless steel clinical laboratories, gowned, masked and gloved students prepare human remains for embalming. Just down the hall, seniors sharpen their skills by role playing a death call and full funeral service. And in a nearby classroom, students display their restorative art models while others gather in the computer lab for online research and study groups.

CCMS may be the oldest mortuary college in the nation – and it may be, literally, your grandfather's mortuary school – but its focus is on offering the firsthand learning experiences which engage students, teach them and shape them into skilled funeral service providers of the future.

Since its founding as an embalming school in 1882, the college boasts an impressive roster of graduates and an extraordinary list of industry accomplishments. While its heritage provides a solid foundation, the school is anything but mired in the past. In its commitment to instructing students in the full range of skills needed to be successful service providers, CCMS has created a hands-on, real-world program that is at the root of the enthusiasm reflected in the students and felt by visitors when walking through the doors.

“Our programs give our students practical exposure, presented by faculty members who have firsthand experience in each discipline,” explains David Tackett, dean of CCMS, himself a Certified Funeral Service Practitioner and Certified Funeral Celebrant. The centerpiece of this hands-on curriculum is the eight-station clinical laboratory where students embalm 300-500 actual cases each year. This opportunity is possible because of relationships with area funeral homes and, most significantly, through a partnership with the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine. Through the Willed Body Program, UC receives tissue samples and donated bodies for use by their medical students in anatomy classes. The bodies are first embalmed at CCMS, under the careful supervision of the college's clinical supervisor, Joseph Main, and then returned to UC.

Our curriculum fulfills the mandates set by the American Board of Funeral Service Education, Inc., (ABFSE) to include coursework in the embalming sciences, business management and social sciences,” notes CCMS president Karen Giles. “Courses in anatomy, microbiology, pathology, grief counseling, business management, restorative art – and many others – form the foundation of a student's education. Our capstone courses during the senior year build from that foundation to bring together all the facets of the funeral profession in a realistic way.”

An onsite selection room simulates merchandise displays as they would appear in funeral homes and allows students not only to become familiar with the many offerings but also to hone the selling skills that are a key to operating a successful business. They develop both an understanding of service merchandise and a comfort level in discussing the benefits and options with families. Categories of merchandise include such products as caskets, urns, floral arrangements and related items, many provided by industry vendors. Field opportunities at area funeral homes and industry representatives of such items as caskets, urns and stationery products enhance the direct, real-world experience which students find so helpful and which instills such practical knowledge.

Staged funeral services emphasize the importance of customizing service to accommodate religious, cultural and ethnic diversity. Students conduct mock visitation and services following the suggested protocols. These role-playing opportunities also help to develop grief counseling skills and establish the importance of embracing and accommodating diversity. Teresa Dutko, Chair of the Department of Funeral Directing Arts and a 22-year faculty member at CCMS, believes passionately in the value of ceremony in facing grief. Through classes such as Social Aspects of Death and Dying, Psychology of Grief and Counseling and Aftercare in Funeral Service, she guides the students in developing interpersonal skills. Dean Tackett observes that the students seem drawn to the somewhat addictive experience of making a difference in the lives of others, particularly during the most difficult times.

Of particular importance at the college is the reality that the

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funeral industry is changing. As the institution entrusted to shape the funeral professionals of the future, CCMS instructs with those changes in mind. Uses of technology, industry trends and cutting-edge ideas being utilized by funeral homes in other parts of the country are all incorporated into the learning experience. A course on cremation fundamentals, for example, helps soon-to-be funeral professionals be better prepared to present cremation as an alternative method of disposition, incorporating the traditional funeral rites with their consoling benefits.

The Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science, a 30,000-square-foot facility on 16 acres, has created one of the strongest academic programs in the country. It is not unusual to find that directors of competing programs are themselves graduates of CCMS. "Ours was the first private college in the United States to offer a Bachelor of Science degree," notes President Giles. "Because of the college's accreditation by North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, which most competing programs have not earned, graduate schools open their doors to our students who become interested in medical school and other career paths stimulated by their experience with us." CCMS is also accredited by the American Board of Funeral Service Education, Inc.

The vision of the college's future falls to the faculty, staff and in particular to Karen Giles, who took the reins as president in April after serving the United States Air Force as Director, Port Mortuary – Department of Defense, since 2003. Just the sixth president – and the first female – in the college's 126-year history, President Giles was attracted by the school's "stellar reputation in the industry." After seeing the campus, meeting the faculty and staff, "I saw great opportunities to lead the school in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by building on its reputation, making the best use of technology and strengthening outreach efforts to our tremendous alumni," she says.

Eric Urbanski, 22, from Bedford, Michigan, did not plan to become a funeral director, even though his father, grandfather and great grandfather all graduated from the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science and went on to run successful funeral businesses in Toledo, Ohio, and Bedford. Instead, Eric studied computer engineering at the University of Toledo for three years. "But it just wasn't very interesting," admits Eric.

During those college years, he helped out his dad, working at the family funeral home. It was that experience which allowed him to see the satisfaction that can come from

making a meaningful difference in people's lives at the very worst times. "I was drawn in by the experience and decided that I wanted to carry on the family tradition, like so many in my family had," he explains.

Although CCMS seemed the likely choice of schools, Eric considered others, too. "A lot of the other programs were a small part of a larger school and seemed sort of insignificant," points out Eric. "I like that preparing us to be funeral professionals – in all aspects of the industry – is the only focus at CCMS. That makes a difference to me."

He particularly appreciates the hands-on educational environment and says that working on actual cases is the best way to learn. He likens much of the coursework to medical school because of the intense focus on the sciences, which are required for embalming. At first he was a reluctant student of restorative art, but that soon changed. "I've seen the difference that it can make for the families when their loved ones look their best."

Eric admits that the coursework is challenging and as demanding as medical school, but the faculty and staff are helpful and accessible, and their personal experience in the funeral industry adds an important dimension to the classes, labs and other educational experiences.

By following in the footsteps of three generations before him – as well as cousins and uncles – Eric has a considerable legacy to fulfill, beginning with his great grandfather who fought in the trenches of France during the First World War. When he returned, he went to CCMS on the G.I. Bill, graduated and built a funeral home in Toledo. His grandfather and father, also graduates of CCMS, expanded the business when they built and began operating a funeral home in Bedford, Michigan. One relative, Tim Wisniewski, also a CCMS alum, is the operator of the largest number of Alaska-owned and operated funeral homes in the state.

With a son of his own on the way, Eric says he can imagine a fifth generation carrying on the important family tradition of applying the skills garnered at the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science to a successful and meaningful career in the funeral service profession.

#### CCMS by the Numbers:

- Ages typically range from 19 to 60; in the current freshman class half are over 30.
- 55% of the current freshman class are female, following a growing national gender trend.
- Typical enrollment comes from 12 to 15 states.
- 10 to 15% of the students are African-American.
- Student/teacher ratio is 1/20; student/staff ratio is 1/10.
- Longest tenured faculty member has been at the college 40 years.
- Average tenure of faculty: 17 years
- Combined years of experience: 102 years
- The current president of the college, in the position since April, is only the sixth since 1882.