

CELEBRANT TRAINING

IN MORTUARY SCHOOL



BY GLENDA STANSBURY AND TERESA DUTHO

As some of you may know, I am an instructor at the University of Central Oklahoma, a four-year university that offers a funeral service degree. This is where I received my first bachelor's degree in special education way back in the 1970s, where I returned to receive my second bachelor's degree in funeral service in 2005 and where I've been honored to teach since 2008.

At first, I began as an adjunct professor, teaching one two-hour class in counseling. Over the years, my classes and opportunities have grown exponentially. I was given more classes, more hours, more time to spend with students. I loved it. However, the dean of our College of Science was not amused. Adjuncts are limited in the number of hours they can teach each semester, and I was blowing through that like a speed racer on an Olympic course.

And so the brilliant chair of our funeral service department, Dr. John Fritch, went to the dean, and they brainstormed a solution. For some reason, Fritch likes having me around, which is nice because I love being with the students, challenging them, scaring them and hopefully inspiring them to become the very best funeral director they can be. Imagine having to listen to me for three hours a week for 15 weeks.

It's hard! Ultimately, they came up with a new title – full-time non-tenure-track temporary artist-in-residence. I asked for that to be put on a business card. I'm still waiting.

The joy of teaching in a mortuary science program comes from the opportunity to provide our future professionals with ideas, concepts, guidance and vision as to where the profession is going and how they can be leaders in the inevitable changes and re-imaginings of this time-honored service. There have been longstanding concerns about curriculum, licensure, national board testing, standards that cross state lines and defining funeral service as a trade or a profession. These are all legitimate issues that are always on the radar for the educators, regulators and leadership in funeral service.

As we all know, one of the biggest complaints about funeral service is its resistance to adapting and changing with consumers and hanging on to traditions and practices simply because they are traditions and practices, not because they work anymore.

Or, as one of my favorite funeral directors and the only celebrant in North Dakota, Jeff Brose, said, "When one door is closed, we so often look long and lovingly on the closed door that we don't see the new door opening for us." I love that line!

What's so refreshing about the students in our funeral service programs

these days is that most of them are not second- or third- or fourth-generation funeral directors. The majority are coming into the funeral program because it is something they truly want to do, not because daddy told them they truly wanted to do it.

Also, as has been well researched in this magazine, part of the changing face of the funeral profession is an influx of women. When I began in 2008, my classes were about 80/20 men to women. Now it has flipped to about 70/30 women to men in our program. What does that mean? Time will tell, but I truly believe it will be a positive evolution, engendering more creativity, flexibility and compassion into what we offer families. It also provides some interesting challenges as our young women enter a centuries-old "men only" club and try to find space for acceptance, growth and leadership.

Of course, we firmly believe that all students should learn and embrace the concept of celebrants. The old adage, "teach them young," is definitely in play here. If students can leave their program already familiar with the process, with the attitude of serving each family in a unique and special way and with the understanding that impersonal, cookie-cutter services are killing us, that will just make them better funeral directors, whether they ever serve a family as an officiating celebrant.

When InSight Institute designed a



If students are already familiar with the concept and understand that run-of-the-mill services may no longer appeal to many, it will make them better funeral directors, whether they ever serve a family as an officiating celebrant.



program for mortuary schools to offer celebrant training as part of the course curriculum, we decided it was time to create a program to “train celebrant trainers.” A logical place to begin was to develop a training and franchise license that could be incorporated into mortuary programs as part of the curriculum, and we invited schools that already had faculty who had received celebrant training to participate.

Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science (CCMS) faculty Wanda Lee and Teresa Dutko, who trained as celebrants in 2005 and 2006, respectively, were the first to answer the call. In August 2014, they attended the first “training of trainers” experience when Doug Manning, author and co-founder of the Insight Institute Certified Celebrant Program, and I were holding a training in Cincinnati. CCMS subsequently purchased the franchise license, allowing Lee and Dutko to incorporate celebrant training into the mortuary science bachelor’s degree curriculum. They were honored to be the first (and still the only) funeral service faculty to implement this partnership opportunity.

In March 2015, eight students became the first class of CCMS bachelor’s degree recipients to complete celebrant training on campus. Kathy Burns, Insight Institute’s mortuary college celebrant program coordinator, was in attendance for the final day, when students presented the celebrant services they



had created. “It was exciting to launch our mortuary college celebrant training program and I was impressed with the caliber of writing and presentations among the students,” Burns shared. She, along with celebrant trainers and CCMS faculty Lee and Dutko, awarded each graduate a certificate and pin.

At CCMS, students meet ABFSE minimum curriculum requirements through the associate of applied science degree, after which they take the NBE. The bachelor of mortuary science degree program exceeds those minimum standards by including additional coursework and specialized training essential for 21st century funeral service practice, and the staff and administration at CCMS consider celebrant training to be the centerpiece of the semester.

Lee and Dutko schedule the training

in a three-day block rather than distributing it over the course of an academic term, feeling strongly that this “immersion” experience is best. Students are focused only on celebrant training and no other course obligations.

The students are often asked at the end, “Did you think when we started on Wednesday afternoon that you would be able to create what was presented on Friday?” Almost everyone says no. They routinely surprise themselves and one another. And the feedback provided during discussion after service presentations is incredibly thoughtful and affirming. They also agree that even if they are never called to do a celebrant service, they will be better funeral directors because of the training.

To date, CCMS has conducted seven

celebrant trainings as part of its curriculum, and 148 celebrants have graduated. These young professionals join the more than 3,000 celebrants who have gone through the InSight Institute training since its inception. Each person who enters a training room is steeped in the idea that funerals are valuable and healing, that everyone deserves a funeral that fits them, that ceremony is going to save our profession and that hearing the story and helping a family share that story is the most important skill we offer.

This is music to our hearts. When we began training celebrants in 1999, it was always our dream that someday the training would be part of the national mortuary school curriculum. We're not there yet, but to have a school that has been so dedicated and deliberate about providing this experience to its students has given me hope for the future.

Of course, we are also very grateful to the state and national associations that

have begun to offer celebrant training on a regular basis. NFDA will hold two trainings this year: July 17-19 at NFDA headquarters in Brookfield, Wisconsin, and October 12-14 preceding its annual convention in Salt Lake City. The support and validation of national organizations that are joining the movement intent on improving services for families has meant a boost in participation and interest, and students are always welcome at any of the trainings held across the country.

In our program at UCO, we have not yet created a time within the scope of the curriculum, or outside as an add-on, to provide the full celebrant training. We are working on it and hope to have a path for this to happen soon. However, I spend an entire period in my Contemporary Issues in Funeral Service class talking about celebrants, modeling for them a sample service and providing as much foundation as possible so they are at least conversant with the concept and the options. I want them walking

into their firms and asking if there is a celebrant on staff or one to whom they can refer families. I want them to be equipped with the knowledge that there are trained professionals who provide valuable options for families.

How is this being received by students? Are they being given the right foundation to enter the work world of funeral practice?

One CCMS student, Emily Doan, was kind enough to share her thoughts about her entire mortuary school experience in words that are beyond anything I could utter. So we'll let her tell her story:

Mortuary school has taught me so much since I started
 How to dress without dog hair
 How to stop biting my nails and keep them tidy
 How to raise, lower and load a cot without breaking a finger
 How to raise and use a blood vessel in any given limb
 When to give a GPL, a CPL and an OBCPL

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How to file a death certificate and notify Social Security

The layout of the law and the twists and turns and spiked pits that may lie ahead

The name and use of every instrument and stitch in my arsenal

At what temperature to maintain the retort and in what order to best do the day's cremations

How to mix a killer embalming cocktail specialized for each new person I meet

The importance of selling what

needs to be sold

The importance of holding my tongue

And much, much more.

I learned that if you follow these excellent directions, you may become a decent funeral director. You may even, in time, and with a natural inclination, become a good funeral director.

To be great, though, you must do more and be more than what you are taught. You need the key to a door some may not know or see or under-

stand the value of; behind the door lies the ability to connect, to be present, to tell the story of the lost with mindfulness, respect and a true hand.

During my InSight celebrant training, the shape of the key became clearer until the key was real. Seeing what was possible, what was already being done, realizing that the things I thought were vague pipe dreams were real and attainable was intensely affirming. Working with my classmates to make a celebrant service was a brilliant experience, and though the training was rigorous, it was incredibly rewarding and tied together many aspects of my schooling that had been keeping separate academic corners in my mind.

I don't want to be a good funeral director doing good funerals. I want to be a great deathcare provider helping people grieve and honor those they love and have lost. I want to tell the story that must be told. I want to move and rouse the crowd because they need to be roused and moved, now more than ever. I want to crack the shell, drop the stone in the still pond because every life leaves echoes behind and every echo is worth the telling. Being a celebrant makes that possible, and this training was the first vital step.

Well said, Emily, well said. We wish you and all of the wonderful mortuary students out there the best of luck as you carve your own niche, aspire to professional leadership and demand that each of your colleagues becomes a great funeral director.

The future of our profession depends on you. ☰

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