

# Ask The Expert

[Industry leader]

## Back at his Alma Mater

Jack E. Lechner Jr. Returns to Lead the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science

### ■ Summary

In January, Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science welcomed a familiar face back to campus as its new president. Jack E. Lechner Jr. not only graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Mortuary Science degree in 1990, but also delivered the school's fall 2015 commencement address. The New Jersey native started his career as a funeral director before enlisting in the U.S. Army in 1983. In June 2010, he was asked to report to Arlington National Cemetery as a member of a new leadership team being put into place. Retired from the Army since 2011, Lechner remained at Arlington, serving as superintendent from 2014-2015. Lechner talks about funeral service, what brought him back to CCMS and what the future holds. *Patti Martin Bartsche reports.*

**Earlier this year you were appointed as president of Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science. How did you hear about the job, and more importantly, what made you throw your hat into the ring?**

I have remained close to the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science since my graduation in 1990. I was at CCMS last August to deliver the commencement address when I heard that the president was going to retire at the end of the year. I was immediately intrigued by the prospect because, after serving the previous five years at Arlington National Cemetery, I realized that I had to remain in the death-care profession.

**Why is the job the perfect fit for you?**

It is a natural follow-up from my time in the U.S. Army. As an Army officer I had the opportunity to work with, coach, teach and mentor some of the nation's best and brightest youth. I am looking forward to enjoying the same opportunities at CCMS – teaching, coaching and mentoring our profession's next generation of death-care professionals, the staff and faculty. I believe I can have a positive impact on the profession and the professionals entering.



Jack E. Lechner Jr.

Over the past several months I have received many offers and opportunities, but nothing that appeared to be as rewarding as coming to CCMS.

**Your connection to CCMS dates back to 1990, when you earned a Bachelor of Mortuary Science degree from the school. How has the school changed since you were a student?**

CCMS was located on the campus of Xavier University when I attended. Now, CCMS has its own campus that was specifically designed to be a college of mortuary science. The clinical lab program is exceptional and

conducted in a state-of-the-art preparation room stocked with enough types and brands of chemicals to give each student an extensive hands-on embalming experience. The restorative art lab, gross anatomy lab and merchandising display room allows a student to experience every facet of profession in a safe environment where they can learn alongside peers and seasoned instructors. Many of the classes are conducted in our auditorium, which is not only great for instruction purposes, but it is equally as great as a venue to host speakers.

Our association, with the largest anatomical gifts donation program in the region, ensures that there are always enough hands-on training opportunities for each student. What hasn't changed is the same high level of dedicated professional staff and faculty who continue to educate our future funeral directors. The thing that is most striking is how deeply every instructor and staff member cares for the students who attend CCMS. The faculty and staff are personally vested in the success of each and every student.

**How has funeral service, in general, changed over the years?**

There have been many changes since I was first licensed in 1976. For example, the average cremation rate has risen from 5 to above 46 percent. One of the most dramatic improvements is the increase in diversity. When I first went to Mercer County Community College (in New Jersey) we only had two women in the first mortuary science class of 19 students. Now, classes routinely average over 60 percent women. Racial, religious and ethnic diversity is now common on many funeral home staffs and the use of traditional religious services has been declining. The thing that hasn't changed is the needs of grieving individuals. In fact, over the past 40 years their needs have been better defined by the work of accomplished thanatologists like J. William Worden and Alan Wolfelt, to name just two. Now that the practicing funeral professional has a better definition of what is needed by grief-stricken individuals, we should be better prepared to fulfill their needs by providing a tailored ceremony that brings grieving individuals together to mourn their loss.

#### **What qualities do you bring to the job?**

I wanted to be a funeral director for as long as I can remember. When I graduated high school I became a registered apprentice immediately and never looked back. My passion for helping grieving families drives me to continue trying to improve the way the American death-care profession serves families. Taking a break from funeral service allowed me to gain some very diverse leadership, management and executive experiences. It also allowed me time to earn two graduate degrees. Being in the military allowed me to continue my informal education, too. I bring all of that back to CCMS to share with the students, faculty and staff.

#### **As a licensed funeral director, do you feel you are uniquely positioned**

#### **to be at the head of a mortuary school?**

I don't believe that is my only qualification for becoming president of CCMS, but I do believe it is one of the most important because it allows me to understand. I understand the intent and the language of the staff and faculty, but more importantly, I can empathize, understand and share what the students are experiencing.

#### **What are the challenges mortuary schools are facing today?**

Mortuary schools come in many forms: public, private and nonprofit. I am hardly qualified to speak on behalf of all 60 mortuary schools in the nation, but I can tell you that CCMS is challenged by many of the same questions being faced by other colleges: How much of an online presence is enough? How much online presence is too much? How do you keep your physical structure current and up to date? How do we update curriculum to keep our graduating students trained and certified in the disciplines most needed within funeral service?

#### **Would you like to see the curriculum at mortuary schools changed to reflect the current state of the industry, with more classes focusing on cremation?**

We have not waited to be told to change. Our students graduating with a Bachelor of Mortuary Science degree are certified crematory operators. We incorporated training from the National Funeral Directors Association because we believe it is vital that today's death-care professional is certified in crematory operations. They need this knowledge so they can provide informed guidance to the families they advise and assist making funeral arrangements that include cremation. We also incorporated certified celebrant training into our Bachelor of Mortuary Science degree program. One of the largest trends in

funeral service today is the increasing number of families that prefer a secular funeral service as opposed to a traditional religious service. We made the adjustments to our curriculum because we felt it incredibly important to have our students trained to provide celebrant services.

#### **What have you learned in your time on the job?**

The intense desire to help others and assist families at their time of greatest need is still the driving force that propels young students, as well as our students who are changing careers, to want to become funeral directors. The passion of the students for funeral service is still as strong among the students, faculty, staff, alumni and board of trustees as when I attended CCMS.

#### **What are your short-term goals? Your long-term goals?**

CCMS is a 501(c)(3), nonprofit college. So, the short-term and long-term goals are always the same – providing the students with the very best, comprehensive, mortuary educational experience possible. The students come first. We don't have shareholders to satisfy, and we don't have to worry about meeting next quarter's profit/loss projections. Long term, I fully expect that CCMS will continue to emerge as the leader in providing a comprehensive mortuary science educational experience. I want CCMS to continue to be the college that funeral directors select for their children to attend and students select to attend because of the advantages CCMS has to offer.

#### **How will you help CCMS attract the best and brightest students?**

We want prospective students to compare. CCMS, like every other mortuary school in the country, is accredited by the American Board of Funeral Service Education. However, we are also accredited by the

NAME (last, first)	RANK	CATEGORY	BRIGADE	UNIT	DATE	STATUS
	SGT	NON-HOSTILE	1/82 BCT	C CO. 2-142FA		
	SSG	HOSTILE	15 SB	B CO. 2-138FA		
	PFC	NON-HOSTILE	15 SB	B CO. 2-138FA		
	SFC	NON-HOSTILE	1/82 BCT	C CO 2-142 FA		
	SSG	HOSTILE	15 SB	1-834 AG		
	SFC	HOSTILE	15 SB	376 FIN DET		
	PFC	NON-HOSTILE	3 SB	104 TC		
	SSGT	NON-HOSTILE	316 ESC	316 CS DET 4		
	SFC	HOSTILE	1 SB	HHD 15 PSB		
	SGT	NON-HOSTILE	1/82 BCT	2-504 PIR		
	PFC	NON-HOSTILE	1 SB	536 MC		
	SGT	NON-HOSTILE	3 SB	226 CM		
	1LT	HOSTILE	1/82 BCT	B CO. 3-73 CAV		
	SGT	NON-HOSTILE	1/82 BCT	B CO. 307 BSB		
	SSG	HOSTILE	1/82 BCT	A CO. 3-73 CAV		
	PFC	HOSTILE	7 SB	HHC 7 SB		
	SFC	HOSTILE	7 SB	350 HRC		
	SGT	HOSTILE	7 SB	HHC 7 SB		
	SSG	HOSTILE		724TH TRANS CO		

Jack E. Lechner Jr. still carries this card listing the people in his unit who died during his deployment with the U.S. Army in Iraq; some information has been blurred to protect the privacy of those individuals. (Photo courtesy of Jack E. Lechner Jr.)

Higher Learning Commission. The HLC accreditation allows us to offer a Bachelor of Mortuary Science degree. Students recognize that graduating with a BMS provides more options to graduates than a certificate or associate's degree. If a graduate wants to pursue a complementing graduate degree such as an MBA or master's in psychology, they are ready to matriculate. If they decide that they may want to explore other facets of the death-care profession, they are well positioned with the BMS to compete for other jobs. Finally, if they decide the funeral profession is not what they expected, they have the flexibility with a BMS to move into another career field that requires a bachelor's degree. CCMS has very loyal alumni. When a prospective student gets the opportunity to speak with a current student or former student – that usually seals the deal.

**There are a number of students who are frustrated after graduation because they have a hard time**

### **finding a job. What can be done to help your students find greater success after graduation?**

We are encouraging alumni to use our website to post job openings and have recently completed some changes to the job portion of our website that will assist graduates in finding positions. Additionally, we have posted links to other job listing sites like NFDA. We also help place students in funeral homes while attending CCMS. This experience allows the students to network and find out where the positions are becoming available in our area. Of course, graduating with a BMS degree means that graduating students are positioned to pursue a graduate study or qualified to compete favorably in other areas of the death-care profession.

### **What is your education philosophy, and how does it align with the mission of CCMS?**

I believe in a hands-on approach to delivering the ABFSE curriculum. I believe students learn best when

they are in an interactive environment with other students and faculty who care and are passionate about their commitment to funeral service. There is more being taught than just the text material. Our clinical laboratory facilities and instructors provide the student with a tremendous hands-on experience that contributes to the student's confidence upon graduation.

### **You were most recently superintendent at Arlington National Cemetery. Can you speak a bit about your time there?**

While in the Army, I deployed to combat several times. My last deployment was from June 2007-June 2008. During that time I was the chief of staff of a unit of 20,000 soldiers engaged in combat operations during the surge in Iraq. When one of our soldiers died – and we lost 18 that year – I was given a 3-by-5 card with the new name and information added. When my deployment ended I laminated the last 3-by-5 card with all the names. I carry that card every

day to remind me of the price of freedom and that I was lucky enough to come home – so I need to make every day count.

I was not able to personally meet the families and attend the funerals of those 18 soldiers we lost that year. Nevertheless, those losses made me feel an intense personal connection to the service members and their families that we served at Arlington National Cemetery. Because I saw the cost of freedom firsthand and understood the sacrifice, I considered it my duty to do everything within my power to assist those mourning families, either personally or by making sure the Arlington staff was properly trained to provide the caring, dignified, world-class support those families earned. It was an honor and privilege I will never forget.

While at Arlington National Cemetery I met presidents, vice presidents, kings, queens, prime ministers, senators, representatives, Supreme Court justices, admirals, generals, celebrities and literally hundreds of other high-ranking civilian and military dignitaries from around the world. But all that pales in comparison to the sacred opportunity of serving our nation's heroes and their families who quietly sacrifice so much for us every day. It may sound corny these days, but I am patriotic. I devoted a great deal of my adult life to serving our nation. My eyes tear up saluting the flag and listening to the "Star Spangled Banner" before the start of a baseball game. So, it would be impossible for me to put into words how special serving that community was to me.

### **What does it mean to be a leader?**

Being a leader is all about accepting responsibility, setting the example, leading from the front and holding myself accountable. For example, I commanded the 1,000 soldiers of the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment's Support Squadron. I was responsible for all those soldiers – not just their health and welfare but also how well they were trained. I couldn't stand the

thought of possibly taking them into harm's way without being 100 percent confident that they had the best training possible. As a leader, I needed to be prepared to look the parents of those soldiers in the eyes and truthfully explain that their young son or daughter received the best training possible, had the best trained leaders, and that their son/daughter was as well trained as I would want my son/daughter to be.

As the leader of the oldest mortuary college in the nation I feel the same sense of obligation to accept responsibility, set the example, lead from the front, and hold myself and others responsible for making certain that our students receive everything we can possibly provide to make them the best generation of death-care professionals when they graduate.

As a leader I am never satisfied. I always seek improvement. I will continue to hold the staff, the faculty, and myself accountable to those fundamental principles.

### **What does it mean to be a funeral service professional?**

My earliest thoughts of wanting to become a funeral director occurred when I was 9 years old in 1964, when my maternal grandmother died. I can very vividly remember all the details of her dying at home, the removal and the funeral. I was impressed with all the specialized vehicles, flowers, and ceremony – it was a Roman Catholic High Mass with the Knights of Columbus present in full regalia. I got to ride on a jump seat in the Cadillac limousine, and the funeral director showed me the funeral coach and let me sit up front. The Cadillac flower car filled with flowers left a lasting impression. About eight years later when I was in high school, I went on a hospital removal with a close friend who was a trainee at a local funeral home – and the rest is history.

Being a funeral director has always been the most important professional achievement of my career to me.

Whether I was actively working as a funeral director or not, it was always important to me, so I stayed connected. I maintained licensure, continued to earn CEUs and worked from time to time within the Mortuary Affairs arena in the military. My brother and his family own and operate a funeral home in the small town where we grew up, and my best friend, godfather to my children, owns and operates three funeral homes. Death care is a substantial portion of the fabric of my life.

I am convinced there is no greater privilege than being trusted and accepted into the inner circle of a grieving family where you are able to help define and provide the type of service they need to mourn the loss of their loved one. I also believe there is no greater honor than to hear a simple "thank you" from the family, or to just know that the family sincerely appreciates the care you have demonstrated by the services you provided during their time of need. Being in a position to help one family at a time, or being able to influence how hundreds of families will be served by our future funeral directors, provides me with the greatest personal level of self-satisfaction and self-actualization.

### **Do you have a favorite quote?**

*Show me the manner in which a nation or a community cares for its dead. I will measure exactly the sympathies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals.*

This well known quote, usually attributed to William Gladstone, puts into perspective what I've observed in the United States every day as a funeral director: people valuing life by acknowledging the death of a loved one or a public figure through ceremony and a dignified funeral service. I found this quote especially meaningful during my time at Arlington National Cemetery. I witnessed thousands of military funerals where visitors, spectators and tourists stopped to honor the passing caisson. It reaffirmed my belief that Americans do value life and sacrifice. •