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FUNERAL  NEWS

AUGUST 2023



ANSWERING *the Call*

BCFA PRESIDENT ATHENA THEODORAKAKIS LISTENS TO HER HEART

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Athena Theodorakakis

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Canadian FUNERAL NEWS

"The value, purpose and benefit of the funeral profession is not a tangible thing, it is what is in a funeral director's heart. I truly believe that nothing good happens in our beloved profession until first something good happens in a funeral director's heart." ~ Todd Van Beck

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www.otcommunications.com

CANADIAN FUNERAL NEWS is a magazine dedicated to the advancement of funeral service in Canada. The magazine of Canadian funeral directors is published 12 times per year by OT Communications Inc.

Changes of address should be sent in 30 days ahead of the next issue for delivery to new address. Subscriptions: \$100 per year.
Listings without subscription: \$95 per year. Subscription & listing: \$195/year. Add \$95 for each branch listing. Please add 5% GST.
Please allow 8 to 12 weeks for subscription delivery. Authorized as second-class mail by the Post Office Department, Ottawa.
Publications Mail Registration No. 09931. ISSN 0382-5876.
Second-class postage prepaid at Calgary, Alberta.
Canadian publications mail sales product agreement No. 40012479
POSTMASTER: Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to:
Circulation Dept. Suite 1025, 101 - 6th Ave. SW, Calgary, AB, T2P 3P4

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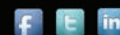
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Pat Ottmann

BARRIERS

by Pat Ottmann

"To point with pride, view with alarm and occasionally recommend."

Through the writings of our editor Lisa Johnston, we have been trying to shed light on – and push for change – with respect to the current education system and the ability to recruit good people into the profession. I hope you can recall the past articles on northwestern Ontario, a region in dire need of licensed people. For one provider, it reached the point where they had to close their doors (approximately 140 services per year) due to not being able to hire a licensed professional. That leaves the remaining providers in the area operating outside the funeral services act and running themselves to exhaustion.

Northwestern Ontario has become the poster child for this crisis but the shortage of staff – leading to fatigue, burnout and exhaustion – has been spoken to across the country. I'm not aware of any area that has been spared.

In my mind, this begs the question. What are we doing in the name of consumer protection (love that term) that actually helps the consumer? When was the last time a family walked into a funeral home and asked if the person helping them was licensed? How many good people are being excluded from the profession because of out-of-date education/licensing requirements?

The funeral service providers in northwestern Ontario are pretty clear they can find people, but not those who are willing to bear the financial and personal burdens of moving to Toronto to attend Humber College for two years. Hmm. Good people with willing on-the-job trainers being kept out of the profession because of licensing requirements.

Simply put, the profession cannot afford these barriers anymore. We are running out of people and as the trends continue, we are running out of the ability to compete in the wage race. There are simply too many options available for people to make more money with less barriers to entry.

The barriers were put in place partly to limit competition in the business. This was never discussed at an AGM, but the owners of a generation ago were certainly aware that the harder it was to obtain a licence, the harder it was to hang a shingle as well. There was a day this worked. It served a purpose. That day is now gone and needs to be reversed. The barriers of today are so high, we cannot get the people needed to operate the business.

I think the days of new operators scrambling to open facilities are, for the most part, behind us. The business model just doesn't have the appeal it once did, so why keep the barriers up?

Many business models place the responsibility of quality and care on the owner or managers within the operation. Why are such individuals in the funeral profession not qualified to assess the quality of care and service their staff provide?

There are lots of questions with only one clear answer. The current system is broken to where families are being asked to drive hours for service. The act put in place to protect them is now causing harm.

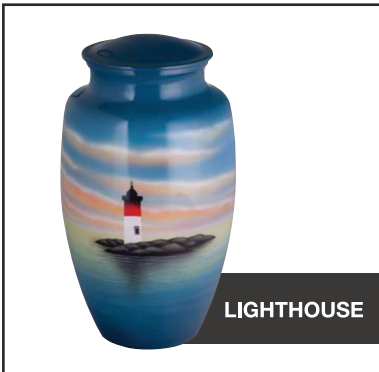
This doesn't need another committee. It needs action. It needs regulators with the leadership abilities to move some barriers and release the pressure on the system. It needs regulators who are not afraid to move in a direction that will serve the public better.

Ralph Klein (past premier of Alberta) said that for some people, moving at all was going way too fast. We can sit on this and watch it deteriorate even further or we can take some bold steps to improve the situation. You do not have to be a demographer to figure out where this is going. It should be very little surprise to anyone where this will take us without change.

Until next month... 

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ANSWERING *the Call*

BCFA PRESIDENT ATHENA THEODORAKAKIS LISTENS TO HER HEART

by Lisa Johnston

From the first moment Athena Theodorakakis experienced the trauma of death, she felt a calling to do something more. Not only for the deceased, but for those left behind, coming to grips with their new reality.

“When I was younger, I’d always had a curiosity with obituaries, but my first real discovery came in March 2000,” says Theodorakakis. “I was living in Whistler when a fellow I’d recently met died in an avalanche. It was the first time I saw a group of people I knew well very upset and it was the first time I ever attended a memorial service. I didn’t even really know the person who died, but I had an overwhelming feeling of wanting to do something more to help.”

The experience led Theodorakakis on a journey of exploration. She began investigating the death-care profession, and the planted seed grew roots when two years later she crossed paths with members of British Columbia’s funeral association.

“They came to the Fairmont in Whistler to tour the facility for an upcoming conference,” says Theodorakakis, who worked in the hotel’s revenue department, and was eager to track them down for a brief discussion. “I ended up meeting Janet Ricciuti and Lorraine Fracy, who were both instrumental in getting me to where I am today.”

Following the passionate discussion, Theodorakakis set her sights on pursuing a new career and did everything in her power to make it a reality. Three years later, she moved back to the Lower Mainland and started her career as an attendant at SCI Canada’s Forest Lawn Funeral Home in Burnaby. It wasn’t an easy concept for some to understand, including her



Athena Theodorakakis

Theodorakakis began investigating the death-care profession, and the planted seed grew roots when two years later she crossed paths with members of British Columbia’s funeral association.

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parents, but it didn't take them long to realize funeral service was the perfect fit.

"My mom was pretty accommodating and encouraged me to follow my dream but my dad was shocked I'd go from a steady job with good perks to starting at the bottom again," recalls Theodorakakis. "He thought I said I wanted to be a film director when I first told him," she laughs. "That was definitely an immigrant parent miscommunication."

Theodorakakis did start at the bottom, washing cars and helping with services, but she loved every minute. By 2006, she had enrolled in the province's funeral education program and graduated in 2008. She spent 11 years with SCI at both Forest Lawn Funeral Home and Ocean View Funeral Home before making the move to Kearney Funeral Services in 2016. In 2022, she took a step back from her day-to-day duties for her own self-care and currently assists various funeral homes on an at-needed basis.

"I made the difficult decision to leave Kearney's without really having a plan, which was very out of character for me," says Theodorakakis. "After a few weeks of being off work, I realized I had to do some personal work. I don't want to sound dramatic, but I think you don't realize you need a break until you are a bit broken. I was struggling and realized my self was forcing me to take a break, which is exactly what I did."

The step back from daily work commitments has come at a key time to serve as BCFA president. A board member since 2015, Theodorakakis served six years as co-chair of the education and apprenticeship committee, before moving into finance prior to taking the president's chair this past April.

It was something she never imagined from her first death experience in Whistler and her decade-old discussion with now fellow board member Lorraine Fracy. "Who would have ever thought this was possible?" says Theodorakakis, who admits the title came with some trepidation. "You really need to rely on the strategic plan and the people who were in the position before you. It's also a difficult time because unfortunately, we don't have an executive director right now. It's been an interesting challenge, but one that must be faced."

Theodorakakis has set her sights on bringing some of BCFA's long-standing action items through to fruition during her two-year term as president. While working with government agencies can be slow moving, she says it is important to continue the momentum and keep the board engaged.


"I want to see more come from the ministry rate increase request," she points out as an example. "This is the first time I feel we have got much closer to a conversation. Through the help of our lobbyist, we are on the right path."



Athena and Richard with their grandchildren, left to right, Stone, Kai, Mabel and Charlie.



Athena Theodorakakis and her partner Richard Barnes.



“We have opened up the dialogue with Consumer Protection BC to see if retired funeral directors might be able to get licensed again so they can help out when times are tough,” says Theodorakakis.

Theodorakakis would also like to see funeral service deemed an essential service. “I would really love to not have to beg for essential service status every time there is a problem, as we most recently saw with the highway closure to Port Alberni because of a fire. It is a struggle to always have to defend why we’re important.”

Her unique experience today – of not working full time – has also opened her eyes to possible solutions for the current labour shortage. With her break from full-time work, Theodorakakis has had the opportunity to assist at other funeral homes on an at-needed basis, in addition to spending some quality weekend time with her partner Richard Barnes and their four grandchildren. The experience of shuffling her services where needed has been extremely rewarding and something Theodorakakis believes other professionals might consider doing – if it was an easier task within the province.


“Your licence is attached to the provider, which means it has to be transferred to wherever you work,” explains Theodorakakis. “It would be easier if the licence belonged to you. That might help with our current staffing shortages. We have opened up the dialogue with Consumer Protection BC to see if retired funeral directors might be able to get licensed again so they can help out when times are tough. After two years, a licence lapses. Instead of having to go through any further exams or schooling, we hope they will allow those who were previously licensed to have an easier route to licensing, should they want to come back to work, even on a part-time basis.

“The staffing shortage is nationwide, and I think our workforce is going to look incredibly different in the next five to seven years. We need to work with SkilledTradesBC (formerly

the Industry Training Authority) to encourage more funding for our funeral program. Their funding only allows a certain number of apprentices per year. With overwhelming demand for the program, we are not able to offer everyone a seat. We need more funding to sustain our staffing shortage.”

In addition, Theodorakakis notes the school program needs to be reviewed, which means having a dialogue with Consumer Protection about licensing requirements and direct supervision. “We need to revisit all this again due to the labour shortages, changing business models, consumer demand and alternative forms of death-care providers and disposition.”

Theodorakakis seems to have the perfect mindset to meet these challenges head-on as BCFA president. “I think any good leader should be authentic and able to communicate effectively. They should also have integrity, be accountable and able to motivate people. I feel I possess these qualities. I know my skill set and I am self-aware of my weaknesses. I don’t shy away from a challenge and I’ll ask for advice when I’m unsure. I’ll try my hardest even if I don’t succeed.”

With funeral service always evolving, Theodorakakis says it’s critical to keep up with market and consumer demands. “To be successful, you have to have an open mind, and be willing to learn and adapt. What keeps me passionate about funeral service is believing that people deserve the best, not just the families, but our peers in the profession. I will do everything possible to ensure that happens, both as a funeral director and as president of BCFA. Even today, after all these years, I still get a little butterfly in my tummy before every funeral. To me, that’s a clear sign of how much this work still means to me.” 



Jeffrey Chancellor, CFSP



FAMILY OR FRIENDS?

by Jeffrey Chancellor, CFSP

I can still remember my first funeral service. It was my first week at the funeral home. My job was to position myself inside the chapel entrance, just past the guestbook, and ask people, “Are you family or friends today?” We had a limited number of seats in our chapel and we had only reserved 25 seats for the immediate family closest to the front, the next 50 were reserved for the extended family and the remainder at the back were left over for friends.

When we ushered the immediate family in and asked everyone to “please stand,” a very close friend was observed standing in the back. The son said, “Please come and sit up front with us; you were dad’s best friend.” He joined them and it was a lovely service.

Well that was in the mid-1980s, a long time ago, and although a lot has changed in our profession, the question “family or friends?” is still relevant. Has that meaning changed? I dare say it has. Is your end-of-life business sensitive to the deceased and family’s closest “friends”? I am not talking about people. I am talking about pets.

Everywhere I go, and I travel a lot, I see pets everywhere! The pandemic lockdowns brought huge growth in the pet industry. Be it companions, emotional support animals or registered service dogs, there was an explosion in the pet industry.

Today, I see dogs and cats in strollers at grocery stores. I see them wearing diapers being walked around at the shopping mall. I see them at hotels and motels. I see them at virtually all airports and it is way easier to find a pet comfort area than it is to find a smoking room. Not only is there more visible signage for pets but the spaces are cooler and friendlier too.

From little plastic fire hydrants to pee on to spray hoses and poop bags, they have made their spaces friendly to man’s best friend. May I ask you, is your funeral home or cemetery pet friendly?

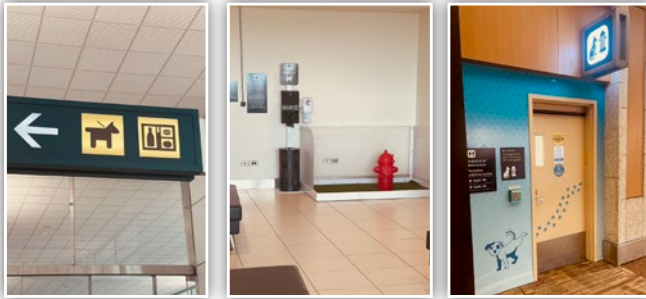


Jeff Chancellor’s dog, KoKo, at last year’s AFSA golf tournament.

The first time I saw an emotional support animal was in 1996 in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. It was a pug named Muffin. When I arrived at the funeral home for a sales call and opened the door, I heard the familiar sound of a “back of the house doorbell.” I expected to see a funeral home staffer come from the back to greet me, but instead I heard a snuffling, heavy breathing sound and was greeted by a little pug. It approached me, sat at my feet and raised its paw to shake hands. I got down on my knee and as I shook the paw, a well-dressed fellow said, “Hi, I see you’ve met our pre-need salesman and grief counsellor Muffin.”

After a brief tour and chat, I learned that Muffin was a superstar employee. People came by to visit Muffin and the pug was taken around to meet shut-ins and folks at the eldercare homes in the area. They told me that Muffin just knows who is hurting and gets close to them. These folks were well ahead of the curve. They really got people and their new brand flourished!

I visit funeral homes and cemeteries almost daily in my work and not just in Canada but worldwide. How many pet-friendly spaces do I see? Precious few. I spoke to many firms recently on becoming pet friendly. How setting up a space similar to what I see at many hotels and airports will build brand loyalty



and make people feel more cared for and welcome. It is so easy to do. A cute space for pets to relieve themselves that is easy to maintain is quite simple to construct. All you need is some signage, some artificial turf, a dispenser with bags and a lidded container to deposit the poop. Stainless steel water bowls and paw print stickers add a nice touch, too. It's a cinch.

Those who get it embrace it. Those who don't mostly utter the same things: "All we need is a bunch of dogs running around the funeral home." Or "what about allergies?" Or "what if they bite someone, we'll get sued?" Or "my staff won't make time to clean the human restrooms let alone this kind of space." You can lead a horse to water but you can't make them drink.

How many emotional support or comfort dogs do I see today? That number is growing, albeit slowly. What I do see a lot of is "No Dogs Allowed" signs at cemeteries. The cemetery operators sometimes tell me it is undignified or the poop is a problem. Funny how a gaggle of Canada geese or ducks in the cemetery's pond get a pass.

Some innovative providers I have visited have cultivated a dog park-like spirit in their memorial parks where family pets are welcome to roam freely. During certain days and times, dogs and their owners are invited to come, feel welcome and play. Some have added pet burial, pet niches or pet scattering gardens so people can be forever close to their faithful companions.

Do you have a special place reserved for friends? Ask yourself this, are people's pets friends or family?

Some of my best customers, you know, the ones with the highest volume of urn, jewelry and keepsake sales, have made space in their business for family friends. Do you have a pet product display in your showroom? What about your arrangements office? What about on your website? Do you really serve the entire family?


Last week, I visited a busy legacy firm. You know the kind. Been around forever, great fleet of luxury cars, portraits of the founders and dead owners festooning the walls. While we were chatting, a first call came in. It was for a pet.

"Our dog died and we'd like your services," I heard the lady say clearly as the director answered. "Madam, we are not a pet funeral home. We only serve people." I tried to hide my smile. Don't get me wrong, these are really super and professional people but they lacked something. Instead of referring them to their well-vetted partner in pet end of life, they simply left them to go shopping, unguided.

I asked them if they get many calls like that. They said a few. At the risk of offending them, I took a chance and went on to ask them if they had ever considered that their established brand, their funeral home and their people are actually a community death and end-of-life resource centre. That they need to be death-care experts, grief experts and not merely a human only funeral home brand. They had not, so at the risk of losing the account, I suggested to them, "I'll bet you just lost a human client family too because of this disconnection with loss, need and care." They seemed nonplussed and I took their standard order.

Another recent experience further inspired me to write this piece. Upon arriving at a client's location, they asked me to join them on a house call. When we arrived at the family home, the guest of honour was in her bed. Her loyal dog was sitting beside the bed, visibly sad. The dog got a little protective as we approached her still warm owner.

We sat down on the floor for a short while as to be non-threatening to the grieving pup and after some time, the dog got used to us and let us do our job. While we were sitting, I observed several heart-shaped keepsakes with paw prints on them. I commented on their mum's love for animals and the daughter said you have no idea! She was a magnet for strays and when each of them died, she had an urn created for them. She asked if we could bury the urns with their mum to which the director answered, "Of course."

As we were leaving, the director then suggested to the daughter to bring the dog to the funeral home for the viewing, to say goodbye and to be there to support the remaining family members. A few days later, I called the client and asked if they mind if I shared my house call experience in an article. They said please do but don't mention the city as all they ever wanted was an unfair advantage and their shared love of faithful friends gave them just that! 

Jeff Chancellor serves as director of education, training and research for Eckels and welcomes your opinions.



Dr. Bill Webster

GRIEF, HEALTH AND WELLNESS IN THE WORKPLACE – PART II

by Dr. Bill Webster

Last issue, we spoke of “A Failure to Communicate” in terms of people grieving in the workplace. The following story will continue building on this topic.

As owner of a small printing business with 15 employees, Sean had always held the view that employees should leave their personal problems at home. For years, his company offered its workers three or four days of paid bereavement leave, believing that gave them enough time to adjust and then return to work.

But when his 29-year-old son took his own life, that devastating experience changed Sean’s perspective. Although he went back to work within a week, Sean struggled to concentrate. He found himself sitting around the office for hours staring at walls before grudgingly going home. It was many months before he could focus again.

Grief can impact job performance, leading to economic stress for both the employer and employee. The annual productivity loss to the Canadian economy is estimated to be at least \$8.8 billion, and is probably much more now. In the United States, 2019 figures were calculated at a whopping \$100 billion. One can only imagine how these stats have increased since COVID.

While three to four days bereavement leave has been standard for years, the emergence of employee assistance programs (EAP) in more recent years has seen businesses investing in the well-being of their workforce. Yet, many organizations still neglect this problem because of a lack of understanding surrounding grief and loss, especially in a multicultural society.

Of course, everyone grieves differently. Some may take weeks and months to heal, and others may need years. Linda, a social worker, told me: “I needed to get back to work as soon as possible. It was a safe haven for me. I could keep busy and not be overcome by my sad thoughts every moment of every day.”

But while some people deal with grief by distracting themselves with work, others often find it hard to just get through the day. Some reactions might include:

- difficulty concentrating at work and memory issues
- reduced confidence
- anxiety
- disorientation
- mood swings
- social withdrawal

But the manifestations of grief and loss have collective and cumulative effects on organizations beyond the impact to individual workers, including:

- absenteeism, illness, high job turnover
- fragile and/or angry workers, emotional outbursts
- poor morale, lethargy, lack of creativity
- unpredictable results on the job
- decrease in productivity
- added employer costs: higher benefit premiums, costs of relief staff, costs of hiring and retraining
- disruption to clients and communities

These, albeit natural, reactions to loss can have serious consequences. Work-related fatalities and injuries remain frighteningly high around the world, and it does not take much imagination to assess how the above symptoms would influence these statistics. Many grieving employees were reported making errors for at least six months after their bereavement, and a high percentage of employees hurt on the job reported it was related to the effects of their grief or loss. This is further complicated for those who do not have access to health and well-being resources, benefits, or for some, even basic health care and essential medications.

A workplace where an employee's well-being is valued is a workplace that retains its staff. You may have expressed your condolences on hearing of the loss, but it is also important to regularly check in with them over the next few weeks and months.

An employee assistance program can give employees access to trained counsellors to provide guidance, reassurance and strategies to help them adjust to life as it is now. A growing number of companies also offer a health and wellness component, which involves employer expenditures on programs, services, activities and equipment aimed at improving their employee behaviours and risk factors such as chronic illness, obesity, addiction, anger management, depression and stress. Sadly, however, very few such programs include a robust strategy of support in dealing with grief and loss. Grief happens after any loss, whether a death, a sickness, job termination, financial security, retirement and a host of other life losses that can occur in the context of the workplace.

Paradoxically, easing an employee's transition back to a normal work routine with flexible hours, work-from-home options or reducing their workload can be cost-effective.

In an upcoming article, I will outline a simple yet effective strategy of assisting employers and employees alike.

A workplace where an employee's well-being is valued is a workplace that retains its staff. You may have expressed your condolences on hearing of the loss, but it is also important to regularly check in with them over the next few weeks and months. Inquire after their well-being and let them know you're there for support. Regular check-ins will also help you spot signs of grief reactions getting out of control, such as depression, aggression or substance abuse. If that is the case, get your employee the help they need.

Now, when one of Sean's employees has a sick family member or experiences a death, he encourages the worker to take as much time as he or she needs. "We don't charge it against their time off," he says. "I'm not going to add to their stress, or penalize them for things they can't control."

By addressing the issue directly, Sean has built in mechanisms for ensuring the work gets done while also providing employees with the time and compassion they need to heal. And that brings with it long-term benefits in the form of greater employee loyalty.

Priceless! 

Dr. Bill Webster is the director of the Centre for the Grief Journey, and can be reached at www.GriefJourney.com, and on Twitter @drbillwebster.

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EXPLORING THE STAFFING SHORTAGE

HUMBER COLLEGE WEIGHS IN ON THE FUTURE OF FUNERAL EDUCATION

by Lisa Johnston

Toronto-based Humber College has a long tradition of educating Canada's funeral profession. The funeral service education (FSE) program is offered via a hybrid approach which requires learners to be on Humber's North Campus for a minimum of three days per week (Monday to Wednesday). Online learning takes place on Thursdays and Fridays, with the exception of scheduled in-person labs. Following successful completion of the first two semesters, students enter into a paid internship.

While the vast majority of the student population hails from Ontario, Humber serves students from across Canada and other parts of the world. Included in this subset are mature students, many of whom are balancing career aspirations with the stress of supporting a family.

"Our program has always had a lot of mature students by comparison with other programs," notes program coordinator Michelle Clarke. "There hasn't really been much of a change in the demographic of our learners overall in terms of age and gender. Our student body still has an average age around 25 years, and comprises mostly people who identify as women. Thankfully, we are starting to see more learners of varied ethnic backgrounds and our hope is that this trend will continue. It would be wonderful to see a student body that is more representative of the population of Ontario."

While obstacles to education vary, Clarke acknowledges mature students often come with a family, mortgages and other life circumstances that make attending school in person difficult. As a result, Humber's FSE team is actively exploring ways to offer



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OUR PROFESSION | *Exploring the Staffing Shortage*



One of Humber College's state-of-the-art funeral service education labs.



Funeral service education lab space at Humber College.



Michelle Clarke

education that mimics what was provided during the pandemic (remote learning consolidated with on-campus labs) – and hopes to offer a more accessible program in the near future.

“Humber has never been opposed to increasing the number of students in a program so long as there is an opportunity for them to successfully graduate and find employment,” says Clarke. “We recognize that there are pockets in the province that are expressing staffing concerns and we are hoping that by having a more accessible option for education, we will capture people from these communities who may not have been able to complete the programs in the past because they

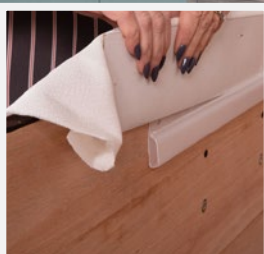
couldn't move to Toronto. Increasing the number of students requires an increase in internships for them as well. Like with many sectors in Ontario, across Canada and around the world, the current level of significant shortages being reported is new since the pandemic. We are exploring options for assisting our colleagues in the field with gaining access to interns as quickly as possible with the hope it will alleviate some pressure.”

Even prior to the pandemic, remote learning options were being considered at Humber. In fact, the FSE faculty team proposed a plan for remote learning with on-campus labs at the fall 2019 advisory committee meeting. Unfortunately, says

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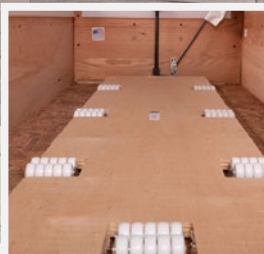
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Rental caskets designed with Funeral Directors in mind.



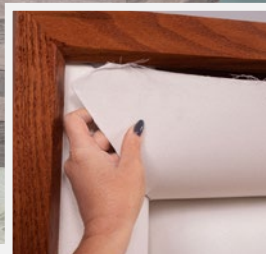
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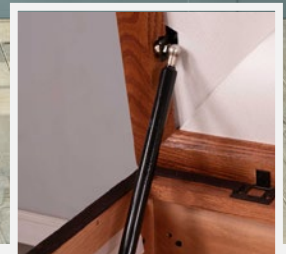
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A GATHERING TO REMEMBER

FSAC REUNITES DELEGATES IN TORONTO - PART II



AP Lazer's Tong Li and Dawn Cunningham.



Daniel Cyr, Grace Rogers and Chak Morcos of Douglas Distributors.



Eckels' Cam Skipper and Jeff Chancellor.



Gurdeep Malhi, Puneet Aujla and Sukha Dhaliwal from Funeral Live.



The GFD contingent included George Janchev, Lisa Palmer, Tanya Witzel, Heather Kiteley, Matt Wren and Cindy Keeting.



At the Dodge booth with Vincent Melanson, Genevieve Gaudette, Steve Beckett and David Bald.



GFD's Cindy Keeting, Legacy Private Trust's Susan Barrett and GFD's Lisa Palmer.



Hourglass Distributors' Glen and Ann Hogle.



FSAC board members Jeff Weafer, Janet Ricciuti and Shawn Williamson.



Brian Clary greeted guests at Messenger's booth.



Select Community Funeral Homes' Robyn MacMackin, William MacMackin and Bill MacMackin.



Victoriaville delegates Brent Quinton, Charles-Olivier Dumont, Michelle Bouffard, Alain Dumont, Rob Dellaire, Mathieu Gauthier and Doug Francis.



OACFP

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AND FUNERAL PROFESSIONALS

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October 3-5
Deerhurst Resort
Huntsville, ON

**Stephen
Shedletzky**

Author
"Speak-Up Culture"



OACFP Conference & Trade Show 2023

LEADING THE WAY

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ANTHEM PARTNERS ANNOUNCE LORNE PALMER EDUCATIONAL BURSARY

Anthem Partners recently announced a \$100,000 commitment over the next 10 years to the Funeral Service Association of Canada (FSAC). The donation will be split between facilitating educational opportunities for the next generation of death-care professionals and the newly established Lorne Palmer Educational Bursary.

According to Anthem Canada president Jeff Christiansen, who made the announcement at FSAC's June AGM alongside Lorne Palmer and Anthem co-founder Todd Lumbard, the company wanted to honour Palmer's upcoming retirement. While several awards exist to recognize leaders for innovative ideas or advocacy, Christiansen says none of them quite fit Palmer's profile. Instead, he believes, Palmer deserves to be recognized for his exemplary service spanning over 53 years, day after day, to countless families.




Lorne Palmer, centre, with Anthem co-founder Todd Lumbard and Anthem Canada president Jeff Christiansen.

“Those of us who have the privilege of working alongside him see the way his quiet, unassuming gentle manner contributes to meeting the needs of families – which is still and has always been his highest priority,” says Christiansen. “We marvel at the deep and abiding passion for his craft which continues unabated even as he approaches his 50th year as a licensed professional and his 80th birthday. Make no mistake, while his longevity is admirable, it alone is not a sufficient reason for the recognition.”

Christiansen adds, “The true foundation of Lorne’s deservedness is his character as an exemplary professional and quite simply one of the most kind, generous and decent human beings I have ever known. A person who daily demonstrates a standard of integrity and commitment which is in itself worthy of recognition; Lorne deserves to be acknowledged because, with no desire for recognition or credit, he simply does his job to the absolute best of his ability and in so doing he demonstrates how profoundly important and meaningful that job and our profession is to individuals, to families and to our communities.”

Over the years, Palmer has also served as a mentor to many funeral directors entering the profession. According to Christiansen, he is usually in the building early and one of the last people to leave at the end of the day.

“I am certain that he often chooses to stay, even when his work is completed, because he fundamentally desires his teammates to feel supported and accompanied,” says Christiansen. “He believes that all the work belongs to all the team and he demonstrates that belief through his actions every day.”

Born in Saskatoon on November 21, 1943, Palmer was raised on a farm near Kenaston. He enjoyed a teaching career in Macklin and Kandahar before joining Helmsing Bremner Funeral Home in Regina in 1970; the same year he married his wife Betty. Palmer became a licensed funeral director/embalmer in 1972, and was managing the firm when it merged with Unser-Rist Funeral Home. Looking for a change in scenery and responsibilities, he joined the team at Speers Funeral Chapel in 1990 where he has remained for the last 33 years. 

CONFERENCE SEASON PREVIEW

MULTIPLE IN-PERSON EVENTS OFFERED THIS FALL

Rebuilding Our Future at the Atlantic Provinces Funeral Directors & Service Convention in Fredericton (September 14-16, 2023)

Rebuilding Our Future is a fitting theme for the first Atlantic Provinces Funeral Directors & Service Convention (APFD&SC) since 2019. Hosted by the New Brunswick Funeral Directors and Embalmers Association at the Delta Fredericton, September 14-16, 2023, the Atlantic Convention will draw attendees from the four Maritime provinces and beyond.

Reconnection starts on the links of Riverbend Golf Club before attendees move into the lecture hall for a Thursday evening keynote address featuring the iconic Larry Stuart Jr. The topic, Funeral Directors in the Age of Cremation, will set the tone for the convention moving forward as the evening continues with the opening reception.

A full day of education encompasses Friday's schedule. Morning sessions feature Todd Reinholt with back-to-back presentations on The Purposeful Funeral Celebrant and Creating Ambience. Following lunch, technical experts will take to the stage with consecutive embalming seminars from Bill Sampson (Dodge Canada), Karl Wenzel (Genelyn Canada) and Jeff Chancellor (Eckels). There is no planned activity for the evening, allowing attendees to explore Fredericton or attend the Harvest & Jazz Blues Festival.

Saturday kicks off with the annual general meeting followed by an afternoon trade show. The condensed trade-show format proved highly successful the last time New Brunswick hosted the convention, allowing delegates to peruse the booths and interact with suppliers during the designated time frame. Connections made will continue through to the evening banquet and entertainment.

And that's not all! For those arriving early, Larry Stuart Jr. will be offering the Crematorium Operators Re-certification Course on Wednesday, prior to the official start of the convention. In addition, delegates can stay three extra days to attend Todd Reinholt's Life Celebrant Training from September 17-19. With so many great reasons to come to Atlantic Canada, Fredericton will be a buzz in September. (Please note: a minimum of 10 participants will be needed for the pre- and post-convention seminars to proceed.)



Atlantic keynote Larry Stuart Jr.



OFSA keynote Jeremiah Brown.

This year's Atlantic Convention has it all: golf, educational seminars, entertainment, a trade show, plus the opportunity to reconnect with friends and colleagues.

For further information, visit APFD&SC's Facebook page or contact Bruce Varner at 902-893-3177.

Connection Key at the Ontario Funeral Service Association Conference in Hockley Valley (September 25 & 26, 2023)

Small but mighty is the focus of the Ontario Funeral Service Association (OFSA) conference, set to take place in scenic Hockley Valley, 80 kilometres northwest of Toronto. Returning to its usual late September date, OFSA has shaved one full day off its conference to allow for owners, managers and staff to come together for education, networking and fun in a more condensed format.

"This year, we've shortened our conference," says OFSA executive director Karen Ayres. "We've even shifted our AGM from the afternoon to the morning because we are recognizing the struggle of the times, which is the labour shortage. Our members are small business people. While it is imperative to come together in person to network, it is also important not to be away from their businesses for an extended period of time."

The official conference agenda will start with a keynote address from Jeremiah Brown, a Canadian Olympic silver medalist. During his presentation, Make the Impossible Possible,

Lessons from an Improbable Olympic Journey, Brown will share his trek to becoming what he calls a four-year Olympian, and in the process, inspire teams to foster deep commitments.

OFSA is also aiming to connect Humber College and Collège Boréal students with owners, managers and funeral home staff during a two-part interactive educational session. It is the first time students will be attending the conference since COVID. Intermingled with the sessions will also be supplier spotlights and a panel discussion on Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD). In the absence of a full trade show, there will be varied sponsorship opportunities, allowing for interaction between supplier members and delegates.

A highlight of OFSA's conference is being together and this year is no different. Opportunities for camaraderie start with a relaxing evening planned at the nearby Adamo Estate Winery. Reconnection is also the theme at the President's Banquet, celebrating 50 years of service from the graduating classes of 1973 and 1974.

"We have a lot of stuff going on in two short days," concludes Ayres. "It's going to be full; it's going to be fun; and people are going to be happy to be there. That is what it is all about: bringing everyone together for conversation, information sharing, and then returning to our businesses revitalized, refreshed and ready to continue the journey."

For more information, visit <https://ofsaeducation.org/2023-ofsa-agm-education-conference/>.

Leading the Way: Shaping the Future of the Bereavement Sector at the Ontario Association of Cemetery & Funeral Professionals Conference & Trade Show (October 3-5, 2023)

The OACFP Conference and Trade Show at Deerhurst Resort from October 3-5, 2023 is set to inspire professionals in the bereavement sector. With the theme of Leading the Way: Shaping the Future of the Bereavement Sector, the conference aims to empower attendees to become leaders driving positive change in the sector. Alongside an immersive trade show, the event offers opportunities to engage with experts, expand knowledge and gain practical strategies for navigating the evolving landscape of bereavement care.

Keynote speeches by sector leaders and knowledge experts will explore the role of effective leadership in shaping the future of death care. A combination of interactive workshops, panel discussions and keynotes will provide practical tools and strategies for thought leadership, fostering diversity and inclusion, and enhancing community engagement. These sessions encourage critical thinking and offer insights into innovative

approaches and best practices, empowering attendees to cultivate a compassionate culture within their organizations.

The trade show will feature exhibitors showcasing cutting-edge solutions tailored to the needs of the bereavement sector, fostering connections and enabling professionals to explore new products, services and technologies. Networking opportunities with industry leaders, peers and exhibitors will further facilitate collaboration, knowledge exchange and partnership development. This dynamic environment creates a space for professionals to enhance their capabilities and improve their care skills.

Success stories and innovative initiatives shared by peers will inspire attendees, offering actionable takeaways that drive tangible change. Learning from real-world examples of impactful projects and collaborations, professionals will be equipped with the knowledge and motivation to make a lasting difference.

In addition to providing professionals in the bereavement sector with knowledge and skills, delegates will also have the opportunity to relax and enjoy the beautiful surroundings of fall in Muskoka at one of Ontario's favourite conference destinations. Whether it is the opening night lakeside beach party, morning yoga on the beach or a relaxing nature walk, OACFP has also incorporated some much-needed self-care time during this year's conference.

Attendees are sure to leave this conference equipped to navigate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, positioning themselves as leaders at the forefront of shaping the future of bereavement care with a renewed invigoration for the profession. For more information, visit <http://www.oacfp-conference.com>.

Choose Your Own Adventure at the 2023 NFDA International Convention & Expo in Las Vegas (September 10-13, 2023)

Embalming and slots? Business skills and the great outdoors? Las Vegas is known for having it all and delegates can choose their own adventure at the 2023 National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) International Convention & Expo.

Taking place September 10-13, 2023 (one month earlier than usual), attendees can customize their NFDA convention experience to help them learn, grow, connect and return home refreshed, ready to serve grieving families and build thriving businesses.

The event's three keynote speakers – Suneel Gupta, Mark Schulman and Dennis Yu – will serve as guideposts,



OACFP guest presenter Stephen Shedletsky.




Suneel Gupta is one of three keynotes at NFDA.

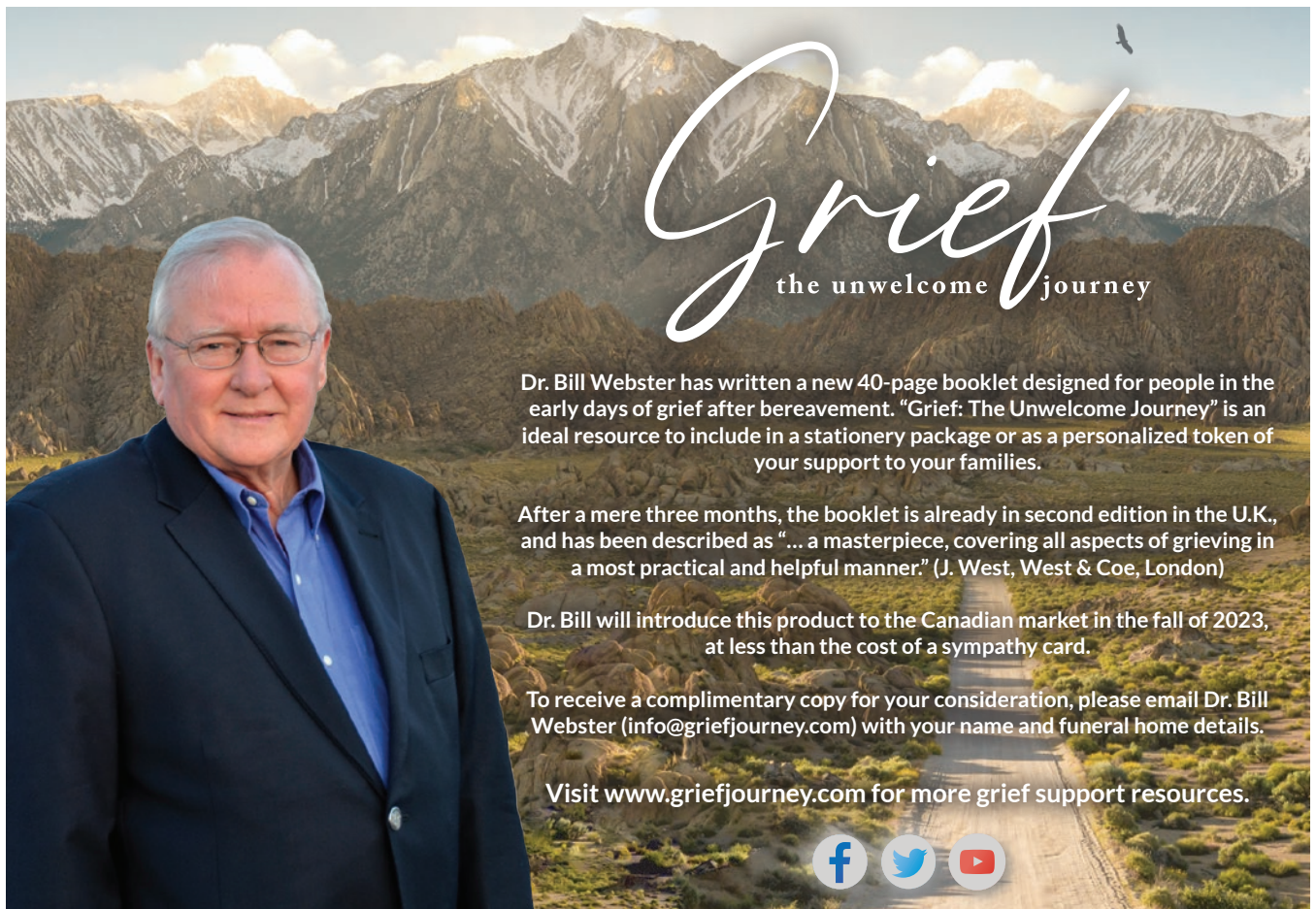
illuminating critical issues impacting the profession. To help funeral service professionals build upon their foundation of skills, NFDA has planned more than 30 engaging education sessions. From a “Back of the House” adventure that includes embalming education sessions to exploring evolving consumer preferences in “Family Matters,” attendees can plot a course for an education adventure that delivers the knowledge they need to foster sustainable businesses. Engaging education sessions will cover technical skills, busi-

ness management, the value of ceremony, cremation, marketing and community outreach.

In addition, the NFDA convention features the world’s largest funeral service trade show, offering the newest products, services and innovations from around the world. Many exhibitors plan to introduce new products and services during the September event.

All the while, NFDA’s distinct events will give attendees an opportunity to connect with colleagues embarking on similar adventures. Special events, planned exclusively for convention attendees, will help delegates to network while showcasing the energy and excitement of Las Vegas.

There are so many adventures to be had during the 2023 NFDA International Convention & Expo. With a variety of options available, attendees should register on or before August 23 to take advantage of early-bird pricing. After August 23, prices will increase by US\$100. The latest information, including how to register and make hotel reservations, is available at www.nfda.org/Convention or by calling 800-228-6332. 



Grief
the unwelcome journey




Dr. Bill Webster has written a new 40-page booklet designed for people in the early days of grief after bereavement. “Grief: The Unwelcome Journey” is an ideal resource to include in a stationery package or as a personalized token of your support to your families.

After a mere three months, the booklet is already in second edition in the U.K., and has been described as “... a masterpiece, covering all aspects of grieving in a most practical and helpful manner.” (J. West, West & Coe, London)

Dr. Bill will introduce this product to the Canadian market in the fall of 2023, at less than the cost of a sympathy card.

To receive a complimentary copy for your consideration, please email Dr. Bill Webster (info@griefjourney.com) with your name and funeral home details.

Visit www.griefjourney.com for more grief support resources.

DEAN ROSS RECEIVES JERRY SMOLYK HONORARY LIFE MEMBERSHIP

Previously known as the Honorary Life Member Award, the newly named Jerry Smolyk Honorary Life Membership was presented for the first time at AFSA's annual conference in April. Held in high regard and awarded only a few select times in the association's 97-year history, the board bestowed the honour this year to past AFSA president Dean Ross.

"It's truly been one of the highlights of my career," says Ross, owner of Stettler Funeral Home and Parkview Funeral Chapels with locations in Castor and Coronation. "Having my name associated with Jerry's in any way, shape or form means the world to me. I cannot express with words how I felt at that time and even still today."

It was Ross' longtime employee Verna Rock who broached the subject of the nomination. She first queried her colleagues at the funeral home and receiving their unified backing, approached past AFSA presidents Stu Murray and Tyler Weber at the annual golf tournament. The response was unanimous: Ross was the perfect candidate for the inaugural award.

"I've worked with Dean for 28 years and he's been one of the kindest, supportive individuals I've ever known," states Rock, who is now retired, but still assists with celebrant duties. "I just felt with all his work with the regulatory board, the association and running three funeral homes he deserved the recognition."

Originally from Maple Creek, Saskatchewan, and a longtime quarter-horse enthusiast, Ross has supported his fellow colleagues throughout the province in a number of key roles. He is a past president of AFSA, served a three-year term on the Alberta Funeral Services Regulatory Board and has sat on several committees. His accomplishments include reworking and rewriting the consumer brochure, Funeral Planning in Alberta, and helping to get the Funeral Education Review Committee (FERC) working on projects again. He served on FERC when the core competency document for the funeral profession in Alberta was created and new logbooks developed for funeral students. To this day, Ross continues to mentor the next generation of leaders and is currently assisting with AFSA's bylaw revisions, while always being a go-to source of information and support.

"As a past president, that is part of our role – to step up when there are issues, to help the association when needed and to help the current board in dealing with government meetings,"



The Jerry Smolyk Honorary Life Membership was presented to Dean Ross during the banquet. Ross accepted the award from Eden Tourangeau and Stu Murray.

says Ross. "If they need advice, support or history, I am always there for them – and they know it." The same rings true for the families he supports every day and the reason he entered funeral service – to work with and help others.

Stu Murray, a former AFSA president and a close friend of Ross', had the honour of presenting the award during the President's Banquet. He began by talking about what the



Craig Kanngiesser, centre, received recognition for 35 years of service at AFSA's President's Banquet and Awards Gala. The Long Service Award was presented to Kanngiesser by AFSA president David Root and past president Eden Tourangeau.



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award stands for before moving on to the reasons Ross was selected.

“Jerry [Smolyk’s] legacy of dedication to the funeral profession will live on through this award,” Murray stated, “and the Smolyk family is so proud to see tonight’s first recipient of the Jerry Smolyk Honorary Life Membership receive this special honour as they too embody the spirit, passion and dedication to the profession that this award encompasses.”

According to Murray, volunteers do not necessarily have the time; they just have the heart. “To me, this describes this man, a funeral professional committed to getting the task done and

who really has a big, big heart ... he is a pillar in the communities he serves.”

Ross says he was overwhelmed, honoured and humbled when his name was called. Despite the roller-coaster of emotions, he did manage to say a few words. “I relayed how Jerry and I had first met. I had sent out an invitation to all the funeral providers in the province when I opened my first funeral home in 1996, and Jerry was kind enough to come down and introduce himself. The rest was history. We became associates and very good friends. To have his entire family there, in addition to my staff, was so nice. This is an award that is not given out very often and I am honoured to be the first recipient.” 

THE NEWS CORNER | *Highlights from the Profession*

MORTUARY LIFT COMPANY EXPANDING INTO COOLERS

NEW LINE OF COOLERS ANNOUNCED

Although the pandemic caught the world off-guard, the funeral profession felt it with extra force. Cooling, in particular, saw an unprecedented increase in volume.

“We knew it was time to act when we saw the situation during the pandemic and the need for future preparedness,” states Mortuary Lift Company (MLC) president Katie Hill. “We were getting requests, but needed to make sure our quality and durability standards were being met before we would introduce coolers into the marketplace.”

After much research and design consideration, MLC recently announced their expansion into coolers. “We recognized the necessity to produce the best coolers to a market that has come to expect excellence in our body-lift products for more than 70 years. The coolers have met our very specific standards and we proudly offer them now.”

Hill is excited to spread the word. “Our team is always searching for ways to make our clients’ lives better. We have landed on a product that has a huge return on investment and we love the incredibly positive feedback our clients are already giving about the integrated cooling systems.”


MLC coolers are designed with the unique ability to incorporate the Ultimate 1000 Lift. “We can install our lift inside your new cooler through our custom designs for the lift installation. We are thrilled to offer this new product integration. We are changing together with you, our trusted clients, as new advancements enter our industry.



“We now offer portable cooler pods on wheels. They fit one body and are movable. The pods plug into a 110V outlet and several can be stacked on each other as your facility grows. The cooler pods are surprisingly inexpensive, with an entry point around \$2,500,” Hill continues. “All of this fits into our company philosophy: ‘work smarter, not harder.’”

The coolers will offer the same quality and customer service that the funeral profession has come to expect from Mortuary Lift Company. Both standard and custom coolers will be available. Three QuickChill Coolers are sized for immediate delivery to keep up with client demand.

Hill adds, “We take pride that our standard and custom coolers are made in the U.S.A. This reaffirms our long-term commitment to supporting not only our industry, but our national economy. It also helps to know we can really stand behind the quality.”

Mortuary Lift Company has been providing high-quality, dependable body lifts to funeral home and mortuaries worldwide for 50 years. 

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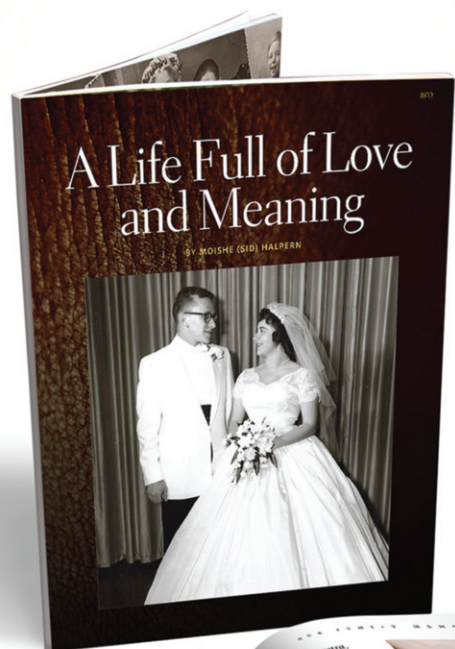
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UPCOMING EVENTS 2023

ATLANTIC PROVINCES FUNERAL DIRECTORS & SERVICE CONVENTION (APFD&SC)

September 14-16, 2023
Delta Fredericton
Fredericton, NB

ALBERTA FUNERAL SERVICE ASSOCIATION (AFSA)

Harald Gunderson Memorial Golf Tournament
September 19, 2023
River Bend Golf & Recreation Area
Red Deer County, AB

BRITISH COLUMBIA FUNERAL ASSOCIATION (BCFA)

Graduation Ceremony
September 16, 2023
Delta Hotels Burnaby
Conference Centre
Burnaby, BC

CREMATION ASSOCIATION OF NORTH AMERICA (CANA)

Cremation Innovation Convention
August 9-11, 2023
Hotel Regency Washington on
Capitol Hill
Washington, DC

INTERNATIONAL CEMETERY, CREMATION & FUNERAL ASSOCIATION (ICCFA)

Leadership Summit
October 24-26, 2023
Loews Ventana Canyon Resort
Tucson, AZ

NATIONAL FUNERAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION (NFDA)

International Convention & Expo
September 10-13, 2023
Las Vegas Convention Center
Las Vegas, NV

ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF CEMETERY AND FUNERAL PROFESSIONALS (OACFP)

Webinar: BAO Registrar's Update
September 11, 2023

Educational Conference & Trade Show

October 3-5, 2023
Deerhurst Resort & Conference Centre
Hunstville, ON

ONTARIO FUNERAL SERVICE ASSOCIATION (OFSA)

AGM & Conference
September 25 & 26, 2023
Hockley Valley Resort
Mono, ON

SELECTED INDEPENDENT FUNERAL HOMES

Women in Funeral Service Retreat
August 22-24, 2023
Saratoga Casino Hotel
Saratoga Springs, NY

Annual Meeting

October 10-13, 2023
JW Marriott
Chicago, IL

WESTERN CANADA CEMETERY ASSOCIATION (WCCA)

Annual Conference & Trade Show
September 6-8, 2023
Royal Hotel Edmonton Airport
Leduc, AB

continued from page 16

Clarke, the advisory committee unanimously voted against a remote learning option for the funeral director programs citing various reasons for concern. The tabled plan, however, did come into play when COVID-19 reared its ugly head a few months later.

“Because this detailed plan was created in advance of the pandemic, the FSE team was able to seamlessly move programming online when the pandemic started,” explains Clarke. “It is important for Ontario’s bereavement sector to know that Humber’s FSE team has wanted a remote learning option that is accessible and flexible for several years and is now in a position to bring it to fruition. Our proposed changes to program delivery are not reactive; rather, they reflect much of the same plan that was proposed in the fall of 2019. In addition to providing a remote learning option, the plan includes consolidation of on-campus lab time so learners continue to have the benefits that come with developing skills in our state-of-the-art labs, yet doing it in a way that minimizes the amount of time they spend on campus in Toronto to just a few days.”

According to Clarke, Humber is actively working with all partners on addressing the current education obstacles. “The BAO has always been, and continues to be, open to us exploring options for change in the program delivery,” says Clarke. “They are actively working with us to find ways of rapidly bringing about some options to alleviate some of the staffing concerns that currently exist.”

All the trends and data indicate educational desires match what workers want in the workplace: the flexibility to complete some tasks from home on their own time.

“These concerns are being addressed with our more flexible and accessible program options that are on the horizon,” says Clarke. “We are hoping for students to have the opportunity to work in an internship capacity earlier in their educational journey, which will be something that prospective employers will embrace. While this option is still in the very early planning stages, the faculty team is hopeful that it will become an option in the near future.”

While the attrition rate has been raised as a concern in some programs throughout the country, Clarke says the majority of Humber FSE students do complete the program. That said, not all finish within the recommended two-year window. “Some, for varying reasons, spread completion of the program over a longer period of time. We lose roughly five per cent of our learners in a year. Some leave because of academic reasons but most leave for personal reasons.”

Finding an internship can also be difficult for some. Rough-


ly 15-20 per cent of students don’t secure an internship immediately following their coursework. The reasons vary, such as not being able to move to where work is located or a lack of childcare at home. However, Clarke says most eligible students will find and complete the internship program within one to two years. Even then, maintaining their employment is not a simple task. Quick exits include everything from lack of flexibility to low wages and less than favourable working conditions.

Clarke says it is important to note that many sectors are experiencing staffing shortages, and some – including health care and childcare – are even more pronounced than the bereavement profession. Openings in other sectors may be luring death-care professionals into new careers.

“As other sectors experience mass retirements and people leaving for other reasons, funeral directors have gained access to jobs they may not have considered in the past,” says Clarke. “Funeral directors have a very broad skill set and are therefore easily marketable to other sectors.”

“Also, while the general public doesn’t know the full scope of practice of a funeral director, they tend to agree that funeral directors are consummate professionals who can easily manage highly stressful workplace conditions – and this alone is immensely beneficial to employers outside the bereavement sector. These sectors may offer better schedules, benefits and working conditions. My guess is that funeral directors may be reflecting on their quality of life and considering a career change. The same has happened in the health-care sector, policing, childcare, and the list goes on.”

As with every workplace sector, the issues surrounding staff retention are complex and solutions need to be explored with all segments of the profession.

“Perhaps what makes the bereavement sector slightly different is there seems to be an appetite among employers to bring about changes in the workplace for improvement which will hopefully reduce the number of people who leave the field,” concludes Clarke. “Perhaps funeral schools could explore continuing education options for owners/managers related to human resources reform as a means to offer assistance. I don’t believe we are in this situation because no one cares about the issues that are driving workers out of our field; this situation came on quickly because of things beyond anyone’s control. Owners and managers seem very keen to hear the concerns of those who are leaving and find remedies so others will stay.” 

If you would like to join the education and labour shortage discussion, email CFN editor Lisa Johnston at lisjoh@telus.net.

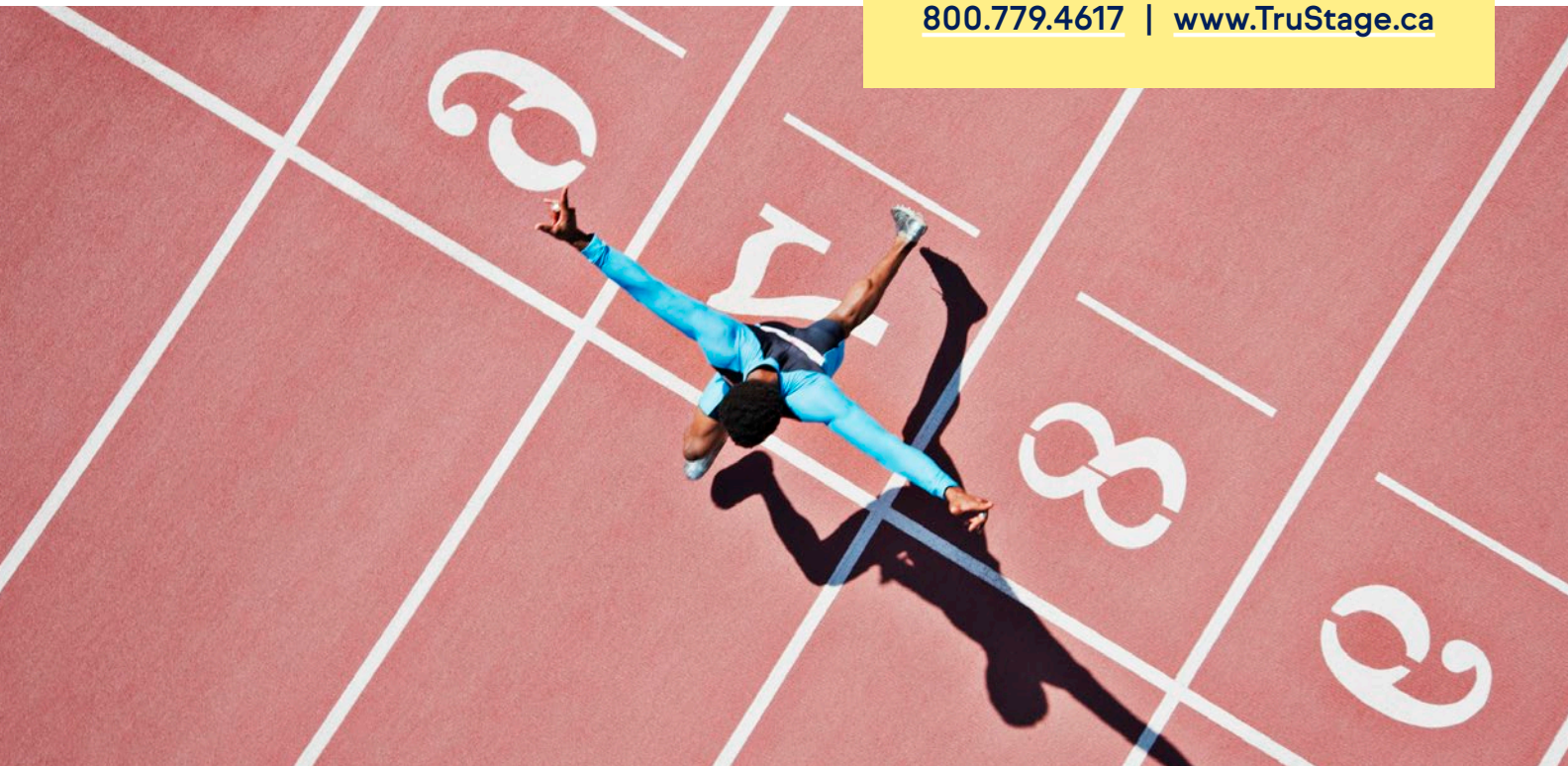


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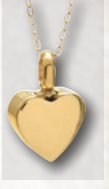
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