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JUNE 2023



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Roger Girouard

ON THE COVER:

- 6 Education Equation
Addressing the staffing shortage
by Lisa Johnston

FEATURES:

- 10 Job Security
by Jeffrey Chancellor, CFSP
- 14 Epitaph for My Friend ... With a Message for My Colleagues
by Dr. Bill Webster
- 16 Mission Accomplished
BCFA hosts stellar Kelowna conference
by Lisa Johnston
- 22 Elevating the Profession
AFSA conference highlights
- 30 Spring Success
OFSA chalks up wins
- 33 BAO Says: Consumer Protection also Means Supporting our Northern Professionals

REGULARS:

- 36 Upcoming Events
- 37 Buyer's Guide
- 64 Classifieds

"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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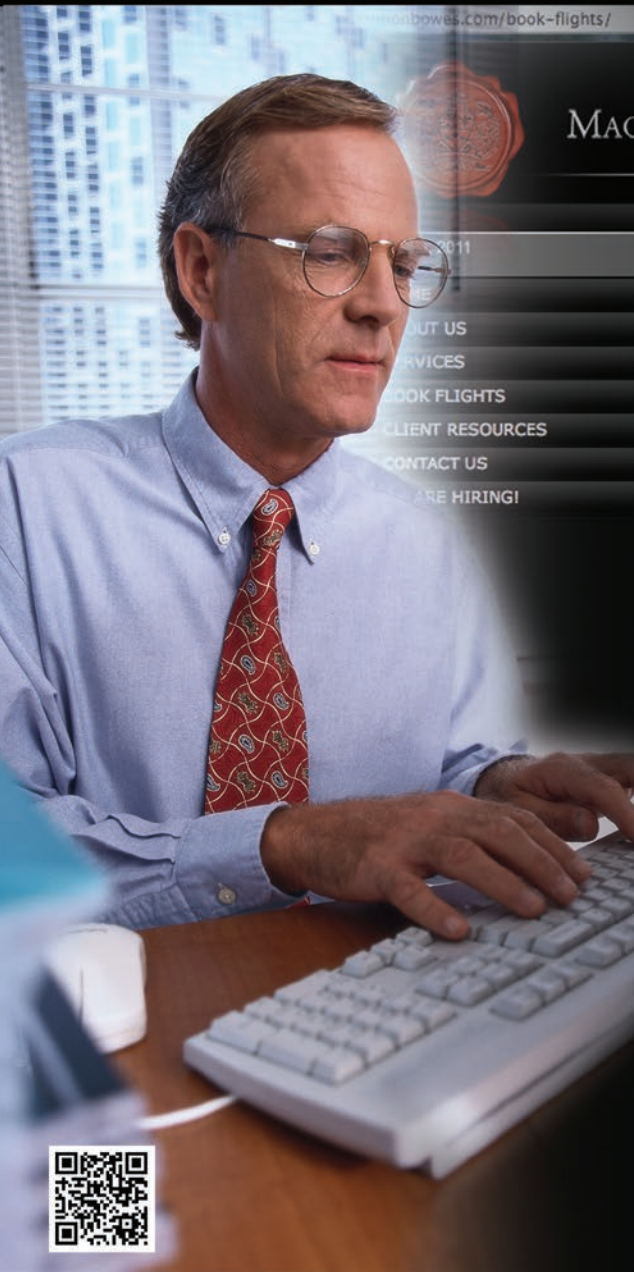
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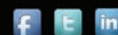
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Pat Ottmann

THE MAN IN THE GLASS

by Pat Ottmann

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

*When you get what you want in your struggle for self
And the world makes you king for a day
Just go to the mirror and look at yourself
And see what that man has to say.*

*For it isn't your father, or mother, or wife
Whose judgment upon you must pass
The fellow whose verdict counts most in your life
Is the one staring back from the glass.*

*He's the fellow to please – never mind all the rest
For he's with you, clear to the end
And you've passed your most difficult, dangerous test
If the man in the glass is your friend.*

*You may fool the whole world down the pathway of years
And get pats on the back as you pass
But your final reward will be heartache and tears
If you've cheated the man in the glass.*

The Man in the Glass - by Peter Dale Wimbrow Sr.

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Education EQUATION

ADDRESSING THE STAFFING SHORTAGE

by Lisa Johnston

For the past several years, experts in the funeral profession have warned about a pending staffing shortage. An aging baby boomer population, a new generation not willing to work 24-7, and a pandemic not seen in over a century have created a perfect storm. With funeral homes and cemeteries across the country struggling to attract and retain employees, *Canadian Funeral News* has committed to running a series of articles to help navigate the future – and in the process create a dialogue where a new way of thinking might emerge. One that will best assist employers, employees and the families being served.

In this first article, *Canadian Funeral News* has gone to the source of education itself – the Canadian College of Funeral Service (CCFS), Canada’s only post-secondary institution strictly dedicated to funeral service education. Serving the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, Saskatchewan, and Yukon, the privately-owned college offers three programs: funeral director, embalmer and the combined funeral director/embalmer – with course material delivered via an online format complemented with a scattering of in-person sessions.

According to CCFS president Roger Girouard, staffing shortages have been an issue for several years and are impacting all areas of the profession. “In speaking with colleagues across Canada, there is a common theme of not having enough staff. Unfortunately, this shortage impacts many sectors and professions. The reality of baby boomers retiring and the lower population following this age group places all professions, including funeral service, in a staffing shortage. Although baby boomers have a longer life expectancy, the death rate will rise over the years, further impacting our profession.”

To help fill the vacancies popping up across the profession, CCFS has increased enrolment – an extra 25 spots in September 2022 – and will continue to do so as needed. In ad-



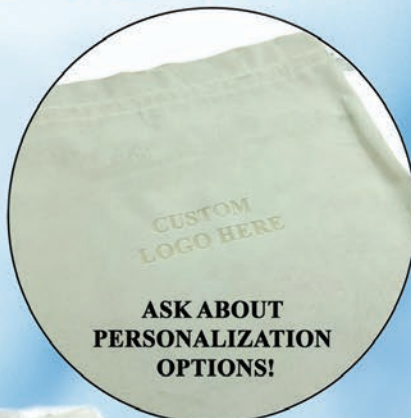
Roger Girouard

dition, Girouard recommends a call for more public awareness – something many associations did well during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Funeral service professionals need to collaborate and work together,” he expresses. “Perhaps connecting with high school students and having a career information session would be something to consider. CCFS is interested in reaching the public and is willing to collaborate with funeral professionals, provincial regulators and associations.”

As educational opportunities can be an obstacle, especially if required to attend in-person classes in a different city from where one resides, CCFS tries to make the process as streamlined and

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CCFS staff members Helena Unwin, Rick Bilcowski, Roger Girouard and Lise Girouard with 2022 graduates.

flexible as possible. Approximately 40 per cent of their students are pursuing a second career while 20 per cent are venturing into their third. This means the majority of students have prior work and/or post-secondary education, bringing a vast amount of experience, knowledge and value to the profession – an enormous benefit for future employers.

“Previous experience in their fields comes in various forms as each will bring their own strengths and energy to their employers,” says Girouard. “It is not uncommon to see students with backgrounds in nursing, paramedicine, management and the service industry. We do commonly see teachers, labourers and clergy come in our program ... with the primary desire to help families through their grief.”

While the profession is appealing to many individuals, Girouard believes the two biggest obstacles are tuition and income. According to a student survey CCFS runs at the completion of every academic year, 44 per cent of students paid for their tuition – and maybe it is time for that to change.

“I do understand most students pay for their education independently in other careers, however, employers may want to consider assisting with these costs within a contract. In fact, approximately 32 per cent of students did have their tuition paid by the employer and the remaining 24 per cent were both student and employer paid.”

Girouard continues, “Secondly, for some, a student’s income is another obstacle. Approximately 22 per cent of students make below \$30,000 annually; 34 per cent make \$30,000 to

\$40,000 annually; and 30 per cent make \$40,000 to \$50,000 annually. For those 60 per cent who are making a second or third career change, I would imagine it would be difficult to manage financially at the lower incomes. I do also understand that for employers, the student is not fully qualified and requires training and mentorship. However, the reality is that the lower income may be an obstacle for some.”

When asked other ways the profession can adapt to encourage higher enrolment, Girouard says some solutions may be found in the nature of the job itself. “As in many other careers, the older generation of workers tended to make their career a priority and worked 24-7. The younger generation value their career but also want a personal life. They do not want to work as their parents or grandparents did. They want work-life balance and do not want to live, eat and breathe funeral service. The work environment and expectations are changing and just like other professions, funeral service will have to modify and adapt.”

The work-life balance equation may also be impacting retention – those leaving the profession to find higher paying jobs with better hours in a different field. Unfortunately, Girouard says, even if funeral service colleges increase enrolment, the profession needs to retain staff. Shortages will continue to increase if the profession continues to lose funeral directors and/or embalmers.

“I believe new graduates and funeral professionals face many factors that would lead them to leave the profession,” says Girouard. “These factors would include job dissatisfaction, workload, overtime/long hours, burnout/compassion fatigue, lack of financial



Instructor Rick Bilcowski conducting an in-person education session.

compensation, and work environment/support. The reality is that funeral service is not a nine-to-five, Monday-to-Friday job. We must serve our families on evenings and weekends. However, we do need to also take care of ourselves and staff. The long-extended hours take a toll. Providing staff with adequate and consistent time off is a challenge. We need to do better but how is this done when you are short staffed? There is no easy answer.”

When it comes to the education component itself, Girouard believes the online program is ideal, especially for second- and third-career candidates who cannot easily pack up their whole family to move to a city like Toronto or Sudbury, the current requirement in the province of Ontario.

“Our program does not require a student to travel to school sessions on a daily basis and students are not obligated to attend online sessions on a daily basis,” explains Girouard. “Most students are working and training at their respective funeral homes and will typically work on their schoolwork during the evenings and weekends. The most significant appeal is the ability for a student to complete their studies at the same time that they can work toward their workplace training. This allows a student to learn the academic portion while being able to apply the knowledge at work.”


CCFS complements the online course delivery with in-class sessions – approximately 12 to 16 days per year – where students have the opportunity to interact and learn from each other. While CCFS was able to pivot to a Zoom delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, the limitations of this format were quickly evident.

“Although the Zoom teaching sessions allowed for instructor and student interaction, it was not the same as in-person. It’s challenging for anyone using Zoom to get excited or stay focused when looking at a screen. The experience with Zoom teaching sessions solidified our decision to re-establish in-class sessions post-pandemic.”

In addition, online education does have certain drawbacks and is not suited to every student – possibly why some schools are hesitant to switch from an in-person format. Not only do some students have difficulties managing the technical side of things, others find online lessons dull, missing out on daily interaction with instructors and classmates.

“During the pandemic, some of our students found online Zoom classes unengaging and long,” comments Girouard. “They commented that they were not getting the benefit of meeting instructors and classmates. As we know, the effects of social isolation through COVID affected many individuals of all ages. Doing this program completely online may take away from meeting other students and developing a support system which will assist them in their career as a funeral professional.”

There are a lot of questions and not many answers as to how Canada’s death-care profession will deal with the current staffing shortage that will only likely get worse as more baby boomers seek retirement. While education format delivery can offer some solutions, Girouard would recommend funeral home management seek to recruit potential employees from within their communities.

“Approach them and get them involved with the profession,” he stresses. “If you know someone who may be a good fit with the profession, invest in them, encourage them and guide them with their work and education. Some funeral homes in Canada see that potential. They may have to review 100 applications, conduct a dozen interviews, and hire three to six students to get the right fit before finding the best three candidates that may become lifelong funeral service professionals.” 

Canadian Funeral News will continue to pursue this topic in future issues. Email editor Lisa Johnston at lisjoh@telus.net to contribute to the discussion.



Jeffrey Chancellor, CFSP



JOB SECURITY

by Jeffrey Chancellor, CFSP

Have you heard about the great employee shortage? The airline, hotel and restaurant industries sure have and they are suffering too. Let me rephrase that. In addition to the people who must use the airlines, hotels and restaurants, their staff are suffering from the shortage of employees too. In fact, many successful service and hospitality businesses have had to scale back their hours of operation because of an insufficient employee pool. That means job security in death care, right? Maybe not.

Now that the staff shortage has arrived in death care, it has resulted in the closing of some funeral homes. Who saw that coming? As the number of potential staff members began dwindling in other sectors like big health care and insurance, they responded by using AI to fill in the labour gaps. Artificial intelligence, AI, has rapidly been replacing people in front-line customer service roles worldwide. Imagine, no more overtime, no more lunch and coffee breaks. The 24-7 availability, without fatigue, would sound pretty good to any accountant or HR professional wouldn't it?

No more uniform and office expenses and a promise of even more savings as the advocates say AI is more accurate than people too. People make a lot more mistakes and mistakes waste time, cost money and reduce ratings. Reducing errors is a big deal in the customer service and branding universe. So are ratings.

I spoke with a fellow in the auto insurance industry recently who told me that AI powers virtually every aspect of their customer service experience in claims. They start by using facial recognition to verify the policyholder and then AI chatbots guide the "caller" through the needed series of questions while gauging the urgency of the situation. The customer-facing side feels like a real person while the back-of-the-house side works quickly to do things like comparing damage photos from vehicles already in their system. This ever-growing database helps to calculate cost, improve response times and has even helped to identify fraudsters.

Will death care follow big insurance by using these same AI tools to their and the family's advantage? Well, I dare say yes and it is actually already happening to a certain small extent in some regions. Is it working? That depends on what "working" means to you.

Let's look at some statistics and facts. They reveal a lot. Statistics tell us that when your left foot is immersed in boiling hot water and your right foot frozen in a block of ice that you are comfortable. I believe it is this place, this space, where hot and cold meet, where we in death care exist.

Let's start with the cold foot. Accountants, shareholders and bankers are far away from the day-to-day grieving action. These people live in a spreadsheet world. Good news and bad news all come in the same way to them. They are statistics, facts or numbers on a screen. If AI can fill a gap, reduce payroll and errors while it ticks the ratings and profit boxes, then yippie it is a definite fit and it is going to get attention and investment.

Jeff, are you saying that AI bots will replace front-line funeral professionals in the near future? In a word, yes. But it is going to take some time to figure out what and where the line is between a licensed director's need and role and physical location and what a self-directed family can do. In the interim, I do foresee tremendous job security for flesh-and-blood death-care professionals. Why am I so optimistic? It comes down to statistics and facts again.

Remember the other foot? The hot one? The grieving family and the front-line death-care worker are the hot foot. When death comes knocking, it brings with it certain predictable emotions, behaviours and a sense of urgency. Loss amplifies feelings. Small things become big deals particularly when a client doesn't feel heard, understood, cared for or in control. Herein lies our greatest competitive advantage and our job security. While the tech companies are developing AI to be better, we need to be developing our employees to be better.

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Is that going to be a person or AI in your firm? Or will it remain a fantasy in an IT developer's meeting notes? I believe that it is job security defined.

Across multiple religions, languages and many international borders, I have observed a pattern. More than any other factor, the person leading the grieving family creates the largest difference in client value. Let's imagine that another way. A client family may spend up to eight times more when an actual known human being with local knowledge, experience, instincts and a desire to help meets with them and guides them all the way through the process.

What is the AI bot's mission? Simple: identify the user, predict their intent, analyze their emotions, process their language (NLP), predict their network and provide personal choices, get payment. What is the funeral arranger's mission? Well, exactly the same as the AI bot's mission but the AI bot has distinct and unfair advantages. Like "the shadow knows" on the old radio show *The Shadow*, the AI bot knows too! It knows who you are and that you are actually you. It starts with face and voice recognition. When the app knows it's you, they can skip the relationship building phase and offer you a soothing or familiar entry point. A sound and a voice and images that can make you feel cared for. It knows what you usually buy or look at because AI has always been following you through your apps.

It pays attention too. It has your biometrics, so in real time, it monitors and analyzes your voice, vocabulary, galvanic skin response, body language and tone to customize your personal journey. It makes sure to put in front of you exactly what your profile says you'll like and then puts a buy it now, check out now or save for later button in front of you quite regularly.

Do your team get tongue-tied discussing cost? "Handling price shoppers" always comes up in the top-three areas that new employees struggle with. Ask yourself this, really and honestly, are you and is everybody on your team great on the telephone? This is where the future lies and this is where AI will soon eat the lunch of the unprepared.

Almost daily I hear comments like "I hate price shoppers!" in my travels and during training. It's not just in death care either. Back last fall, the dentist handed me a tablet and said, "This is our new receptionist." The tablet contained an app that identified me, took my health declaration, outlined permissions and payment terms and recorded my temperature in a friendly and almost fun way. Not to put down my dentist's office previous

staff but the tablet was way cooler than her self-absorbed receptionist and the crusty clipboard of yesteryear.


Hello readers, meet free AI, ChatGPT. I first heard about ChatGPT last fall and I played around with it a lot. I started with the usual questions. You know, like the ones you probably asked Siri when you got your first iPhone or first asked your Alexa speaker. Then I got into some embalming questions. Then some green questions. I was instantly intrigued by the speed, the accuracy and how the information it provided me was organized. I could see why big health and financial were so keen.

Then some more profession-focused questions like, what is a better alternative: burial, cremation or alkaline hydrolysis? The answer: "The choice between burial and alkaline hydrolysis for the disposal of human remains is a personal decision that may depend on a variety of factors, including personal beliefs, cultural traditions, environmental concerns and cost." That was helpful!

What is the purpose of embalming yielded similarly bland responses like, "It's important to note that embalming is not always necessary or appropriate. In some cultures or religions, it may be prohibited or discouraged. Additionally, some people may choose to forgo embalming for environmental or personal reasons. Ultimately, the decision to embalm should be made in consultation with a funeral director or other qualified professional." Wow, sign me up!

Being me, I wanted to compare the answers with a slice of my big city and small-town peers from both sides of the U.S.-Canada border. The results? There wasn't a lot of great information initially provided by these sources either but a reoccurring theme was that these are highly personal decisions that should be made with careful consideration. That sounds hard.

Imagine an experience that gave the client immediate attention; a warm and welcoming greeting as they enter a familiar space where there are no awkward financial discussions, no bad choices and just helpful, palatable suggestions, always within budget and access to many available benefits merely at the mention.

Is that going to be a person or AI in your firm? Or will it remain a fantasy in an IT developer's meeting notes? I believe that it is job security defined. 

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



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Dr. Bill Webster

EPITAPH FOR MY FRIEND ... WITH A MESSAGE FOR MY COLLEAGUES

by Dr. Bill Webster

“One hundred years old? Well, at least he lived a good long life.” Yes ... but no matter how long or short a life is, it never seems long enough for those who care about them.

Howard was born in 1922 and lived with his parents and younger brother. While in school, he developed an interest in ham radio – a hobby that led to an invitation as a teenager to enter a top-secret radar development program following the outbreak of the war in 1939. After his training he was commissioned into the RAF as an officer and found himself stationed in Italy where, for the next few years, he built and repaired flight radar, hitching rides on military flights to Africa, Egypt and other countries, to, in his words, “scrounge parts to make the radar work.” Radar played a crucial role in the conflict, and Howard was a pioneer in the technology.

After the war, he turned his radio engineering experience into a highly successful career with General Electric, and his work took him around the world. He loved going on these business trips and would always take extra days with his wife to explore the various cities and countries he visited. They had no children, so his work and travel were vital aspects of his life, although he had many interests like collecting art, gaining his private pilot’s licence and building a summer home in the countryside. He was one of the most widely read and well-informed people I have ever met.

Howard sought me out 25 years ago after his dear wife of over 50 years died. To say he was devastated by his loss didn’t come close to describing his grief. He attended my support groups and spent many hours in my office in tears of despair. But, eventually, he joined our “Among Friends” group, and participated in dinners, social outings, travel trips and, in the process, made new friends. He became a dear friend to many – and lived the last 25 years of his life to the fullest.

In his despair 25 years ago, Howard found help and strength in a grief support program offered by a different funeral home. He never forgot that. So, when it came to making his own arrangements 15 years later, he wanted to do business there.

Howard died last month at the age of 100 years, and I will miss him. Because he had no family, he had asked me some 10 years before to assist him with his affairs, among which was pre-planning his funeral. As I sat last month making those final arrangements, I noticed something unusual: Howard’s wife had been buried by a different funeral home in the same town.

“So, what?” you may ask. The answer to that lies in another question. “Why did Howard make his arrangements with this funeral home rather than where his wife’s service had been held?” The answer is simple. It was not because he had been unhappy with the experience there. Something else happened to make him change providers.

In his despair 25 years ago, Howard found help and strength in a grief support program offered by a different funeral home. He never forgot that. So, when it came to making his own arrangements 15 years later, he wanted to do business there.

The message Howard sends is based on the following principle: people today invest their loyalty in “what have you done for me lately?”




Customer loyalty describes “an ongoing emotional relationship between the customer and the business, manifesting itself by how willing a customer is to engage with and repeatedly purchase from the business versus a competitor.” In other words, loyalty is a byproduct of a customer’s positive ongoing experience that works to create and build trust. Howard appreciated the service he had received when his wife died, but he never forgot the support and help he received through the aftercare program of the other funeral home and that won his loyalty.

Customer loyalty and customer retention work together. Loyalty is a mindset that predisposes a customer to engage with and do business with a company. Retention is the measure used to track ongoing customer engagement and resulting future sales or service.

Howard sends us all a powerful message about keeping the customers you worked so hard to acquire by providing great experiences and continuing to offer good value. Clients are retained based on the ongoing experience a brand provides, including interactions with customer service, community involvement and continuing contact through social media, a website or in person.

If your client families and community feel that your at-need and aftercare is appropriately prioritizing and addressing their needs before and after the funeral, they are more likely to remain loyal. Similarly, if they have an unsatisfactory experience with your customer service team, before, at and after need, they’ll be less likely to continue to engage with you.

Loyalty marketing is a strategic approach in which you focus on growing and retaining your existing customer base. Forward-thinking businesses recognize that a client’s ongoing experience is a driver of higher customer retention levels.

Howard, at 100 years of age, was a classic example of this modern reality. 

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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BCFA HOSTS STELLAR KELOWNA CONFERENCE

by Lisa Johnston



BCFA board. Front row, left to right, Lorraine Fracy, Bradd Tuck, Athena Theodorakakis and Mark Revie. Middle row, left to right, Bill Clark, Jennifer Hoskins, Ryan McLane, Brigitte MacNamara and Frank Scaglione. Back row, left to right, Jason Meidl and Trevor Tidridge. Missing: Shane Dickson.

The Delta Grand Okanagan Resort served as the perfect location for the British Columbia Funeral Association (BCFA) Annual Conference and AGM. Heralded as the largest gathering since COVID, over 100 delegates and vendors converged on the shores of Okanagan Lake from April 18-20, 2023 to pave the path toward a successful future.

Packed with a full slate of educational seminars, the information sharing started early with the senators' breakfast welcoming back eight past presidents followed by the largest attended cemetery workshop in BCFA history. Led by Valley View Cemetery's Trevor Tidridge and Kerry Haynes, City of Coquitlam, the insightful discussion covered everything from new cemetery innovations to the most common consumer complaints.

The trade-show floor was the place to be for the latest in product and service offerings. Booths showcased everything from memorial keepsakes to caskets and pre-need solutions with plenty of opportunity to peruse the displays while also networking with fellow death-care professionals.

The enjoyment of being together – a large part of every conference – carried over into several social activities including a networking night at BNA Brewery, Kelowna's newest social venue, where bowling and arcade games proved popular activities. Attendees also danced long into the night at the President's Banquet, which featured dinner, the presentation of long service awards and music by The Yellow Brick Road – an eight-piece band with a horn section playing all the hits of Sir Elton John.



Athena Theodorakakis accepts the BCFA president's gavel from Mark Revie.

SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

Keynote Riaz Meghji presented a session on the five habits of human connection that build extraordinary relationships. It was a fitting start to the education sessions for a conference built around connections.

“Communications happens everywhere but real connection is hard to find,” said Meghji, who used examples to show how death-care professionals can change how they communicate to ensure every conversation counts. “We cannot inspire or support anyone effectively unless we connect with them first.”

Leili McMurrugh tackled the ever-important topic of hiring and retaining employees. Discussion specifically focused on characteristics of the millennial funeral director before moving into what this generation values in the workplace.

“You have to give them the tools to be successful,” said McMurrugh, adding that with the right training, anyone can learn and grow. If employers offer what millennials value – social responsibility, diversity, inclusivity, rewards, mentorship and work-life balance – these employees will reward firms with their loyalty. “Ask them what is important; what is it that they want to do; what can you accommodate.... You can't give them everything but they have to feel like they're being recognized and heard.”

Several experts were on hand during the death-care panel to discuss topics ranging from terramation to green burial. Micah Truman from Seattle-based Return Home started the conversation with a warning that current burial practices are not sustainable.

“If 30 years from now, our children are doing what we are doing, we are in big trouble,” said Truman. “We are used to doing it this way. Our parents did it this way. But we are driving in a car with our headlights off at high speeds; and we as an industry have not managed to pivot.”

Truman believes now is the time to make major changes – which might include investigation into terramation. Through this process, the human body is composted into dirt which can be returned to the family or scattered in a woodland area. Unlike cremated remains, the dirt is good for the environment and uses minimal energy production. Truman concluded by saying, “I understand if this is not what you wish for your funeral home but what I don't understand is why it will not be provided to your families who want it and need it. If we as funeral professionals are not offering our families the entire range of options we are shirking our duties.”

Bradd Tuck then discussed green burial from a funeral home aspect, followed by Lorraine Fracy, who explored the same topic from a cemetery perspective.

“It's critical funeral directors understand what this is, and it's imperative the rest of your team know what exists, what is coming and



At the Batesville booth with Christina Thompson and Ray Fournier.



Enjoying the social night are Blair Wallin, Jayson Gordon and Mark Revie.



René de Deigo shows off his Algordanza Swiss-made remembrance diamonds.



Vicki and Karl Wenzel at the President's Banquet.



TruStage Life of Canada's Bernie Perri, Tamara Kroeker and Peter Ramkissoon.

the regulations, so they can speak intelligently," said Tuck. "If we want people to come to us professionally, then we need to be experts, and in order to do that we need to listen; we need to have our ear to the ground."

Frcy admitted opening the first green section at Royal Oak Burial Park was a scary endeavour but it was largely fuelled by consumer demand. "We wanted to listen to our families and service them ... and the feedback that we got from day one on this was so overwhelming. It was way bigger than us." Families from the B.C. mainland and even as far as Alberta made the journey to inter loved ones in Victoria when no such options existed closer to home. "I hope you all will look within your own business model and re-evaluate this great thing that consumers want."

Concurrent sessions also ran on Thursday morning with delegates having the opportunity to choose between Dominick Astorino's *Defending the Truth: Embalming, Social Media and Bias*, or Candace Giesbrecht's *Navigating Mental Health Conversations in the Workplace with Care and Confidence*.

Beverly Beuermann-King closed out the education sessions with *Stop Letting that Difficult Person Ruin Your Day and Team*. According to Beuermann-King, the aim is not to change the person but to neutralize behaviours, which in turn will encourage a better way of responding.

"It's about acting rather than reacting," she insisted. "You need to know what the payoff is and you need to meet those needs. I cannot stress that part enough. How do we act rather than react? We do that by understanding their needs." She also stressed to not let these people – whether clients, colleagues

or family members – ruin your day. "Always remember why you have chosen this profession."

AGM AND TOWN HALL HIGHLIGHTS

BCFA's board of directors highlighted the accomplishments of 2022 while also providing a road map of the future. The association's new executive director, Heather Holmes, was introduced and while there were plenty of opportunities to ask questions, much of the discussion centred on government funding of social service funerals and the future of the apprenticeship program.

Concerning the financial statements and budget, Athena Theodorakakis reported BCFA had a strong financial year. "The



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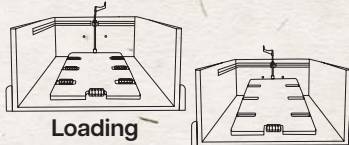
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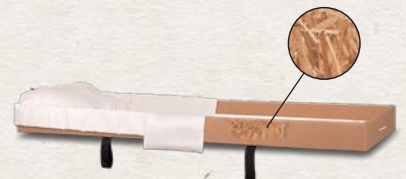


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Long-Term Service Award recipients at the gala.



Kyber Columbarium's Derek Maher was one of the exhibitors at the trade show.



Ken Munday, Susan Johnstone and Matt Wren.



Andrea Love and Andy MacIntyre at the Legacy Private Trust booth.



Luke Straith highlights a revolving memorial statue from Stewart Monumental Works.



Attendees at the cemetery workshop.



Delegates enjoying the social night at BNA Brewing.



Peter Nobes and Sébastien Litalien.



SCI Canada's Jes Beckwith with service dog, Snoopy.



SCI Canada's Janet Ricciuti embraces the bowling challenge.



At the Eternity's Touch booth with Brennan Jackson, Andrew Jaynes, Chantelle Bilodeau-Seton and Chuck Ferris.



Eight past presidents attended the senators' breakfast. Left to right, Dan Devlin, John Chasca, Don Ross, Lorraine Fracy, Jason Everden, Sandra Irvine, Ryan McLane and Justin Schultz.



Brian Currey and Jeff Chancellor at the Messenger booth.



Chris Benesch with Kevin Armstrong at the Dodge booth.

Member system is up to date and dues are coming in for members based on 2021 call volumes. Program revenues remain strong with our exceptional record-breaking 2021 intake." An increase in ITA funding has also been requested for the current year, but had not been confirmed prior to the conference.

Following last year's AGM, Impact Public Affairs was hired to help with the quest to increase ministry rates. Both Kyle Larkin and Dylan Hellwig were on hand to provide a political snapshot of the B.C. government and BCFA's current advocacy plans.


"We've had the honour of working with BCFA for almost a year now and really the main thrust of our campaign is all around the rates provided by the government for low-income families in the province," said Larkin. "Clearly, the government is behind on the \$2,100 mark and the key message we are really delivering is B.C. funeral homes are providing a service to low-income families that the government isn't providing."

With some of the lowest rates in the country, B.C. still has a lot of work to do. "We don't have solidarity, so we've done it to ourselves," said Lorraine Fracy, chair of governance and legal, who discussed a potential government subsidy to increase the rate from \$2,100 to \$3,500 as a short-term solution. "We have no skin in the game at this point; we have no threat.... The reason Saskatchewan got their increase is they are 100 per cent united."

When Fracy asked membership for feedback, one member expressed funeral directors are fighting a losing battle. "As long as we are undercutting each other, we are cutting our own throats, and there is no point going after this." Another said the focus should be on education because without staff, it does not matter what the government rates are.

Fracy agreed, "That's why discussion is so important. We are in crisis for the future. It's so onerous and schooling does need to be revamped. Direct supervision; all the crippling things that have been surrounding our profession for so long to have us where we are today is absolutely on the agenda. We are looking at bringing in consultants and changing things up because it has to happen."

When asked the focus moving forward, Theodorakakis responded, "It's hard to pinpoint the most important concern because they're all teetering at a very even level, but education is definitely high up there with the numbers that we're trying to put through schooling. We understand and we're all feeling it, and we all know what the outcome will be if we don't do something."

Clearly, there is a lot on the plate moving forward, but following another successful conference and AGM in Kelowna, BCFA is ready to act with new president Athena Theodorakakis at the helm to lead the way into the future. 

ELEVATING THE PROFESSION

AFSA CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS



Eden Tourangeau, David Root, Tyler Weber, Dominick Astorino, Chris Jong and Stuart Murray.

The Alberta Funeral Service Association (AFSA) returned to the River Cree Resort & Casino at the end of April for its annual AGM and conference. Welcoming approximately 150 delegates – including students from the Canadian College of Funeral Service and Mount Royal University – each full day featured a comprehensive slate of education and networking, culminating with evening social events.

“I’d say it was a great conference,” said AFSA event chair Tracy McFee. “We provided important updates on our government relations activities, which a lot of our members were interested in hearing about due to the current situation in the province. In addition, the slate of speakers was informative and really commanded the attention of everyone in the room. All in all, it was a well-attended gathering, especially on day two of the conference when a lot of guests came in for our evening gala.”

Day one, April 27, started with an informative presentation by Anita Slomp concerning conflict resolution and how to deal



Andrea Love, Tyler Weber and Ryan Lawson having a laugh at the Legacy Private Trust booth.

with difficult families – an increasingly common occurrence for today’s funeral director, according to McFee. After offering solutions to turn unpleasant scenarios into positive experiences,

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the afternoon session featured Codi Shewan, who helped delegates determine their personality type via a DiSC® assessment.

A personal assessment tool that helps improve teamwork, communication and productivity in the workplace, the DiSC® model provides a common language people can use to better understand themselves and those they interact with on a daily basis – with the goal to also use this knowledge to reduce conflicts and improve relationships.

“Codi really got us thinking about our own personality type and how we interact with those on the opposite end of the personality spectrum,” noted McFee. Prior to attending the conference, delegates were requested to fill out an online personality assessment to learn whether they were D (dominance), I (influence), S (steadiness) or C (conscientiousness). “During the session, we were divided into different groups. We basically had to find a way to work together which was a really interesting practice.”

All personality types came together that evening for the opening of the trade-show floor. Held in the room next to the speaker sessions, there were a lot of familiar faces spotted at the booths along with some new vendors who made the trip to Edmonton this year. Delegates had plenty of opportunity to peruse the booths, while enjoying drinks and finger foods, interacting with experts sharing a wealth of products and service offerings.

Day two, April 28, saw the early arrival of the students to browse the trade-show floor and take part in the first education session with embalming guru Dominick Astorino. A professor at both Worsham College of Mortuary Science in Chicago and Wayne State University in Detroit, Astorino talked about current embalming trends and how to deal with some of today’s common issues – such as drug overdoses – to provide the best experience for funeral families.

Jason Papirny from the University of Alberta’s Anatomical Gifts Program was also on hand for a morning session discussing the process of body and tissue donation. “Jason walked our members through what to expect and what to tell families about everything regarding body donation,” said McFee. “He described who is eligible, as not everyone is, and also provided timelines as to how long body donation takes and what happens afterwards when a family can choose to either cremate or bury their loved one. The session was full of information to help us educate families or at least know where to point them to when they have questions.”

Following lunch, the government relations panel featured Alberta Counsel and AFSA executive members to discuss where things currently stand with both Social Services and



Arshad Zaidi from Fair Trading Canada.



Brad Marshall and Ken Reeson at the Summit booth.



Garfield Refining’s Cameron Axelson.



Eternity’s Touch Chantelle Bilodeau-Seton.



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At the MyBabbo booth with Tracy Rossetti.



Hans Brink and George Kuhse promoting the Last Post Fund.



GFD Canada's Cindy Keeting.



Jennifer Greentree with Sandy Nordstrom at the Mount Royal University booth.



Dodge's Kevin Armstrong, centre, visits with Calvin Blauel, left, and Matthew Kneeland, right.



Platinum Transfer's Jodie Weber.



Mark Makcrow and Shane Austin at the Imperial booth.



Roger Girouard, Canadian College of Funeral Service, and Tyler Weber, Weber Funeral Home.



Life Celebrants International's Todd Reinholt.

Vital Statistics – a large focus of the association’s work over the last year.

“Unfortunately, everything is kind of at a standstill at the moment because of the upcoming election,” said McFee. “Everything’s been put on hold until probably July when the new cabinet will be in place. Over the last while, we have been discussing with them the possibility of bringing ceremony into the fee structure as what they provide right now does not include any form of ceremony. We were getting close to making some progress but now we have once again been put on hold.”


McFee added, “In addition, we are in the process of working with Vital Statistics to move to an online system, but that too has been put on hold until after the election.”

Day two ended with delegates donning their finest attire for the President’s Banquet and Awards Gala. An evening to celebrate the profession and honour all death-care professionals, the gala featured dinner, music by a DJ and the presentation of several long-term service distinction awards ranging from 25 to 50 years. This year, AFSA honoured the contributions of

two former presidents. Tyler Weber of Weber Funeral Home was presented with the distinguished Robert Snodgrass Memorial Award while Stettler Funeral Home’s Dean Ross received the prestigious Jerry Smolyk Award.

Following an evening of celebration, it was back to business with the AGM on Saturday morning. In addition to reports presented by the various committee chairs and outgoing president Eden Tourangeau, Pierson Funeral Service’s David Root was introduced as AFSA’s new president.

In other board news, Park Memorial’s Kirstie Smolyk will serve as treasurer for the upcoming year. Leyden’s Funeral Home’s Dale Wright and Rose Garden Chapel’s Scott Green will serve as new AFSA directors, alongside returning directors Alex Van Geest, Candice Anderson, Joelle Valliere and Bryce Laveck.

It looks like another busy year ahead as AFSA will be returning to the table to continue discussions with Alberta’s new cabinet following the May election – all in the effort to improve funeral service for both members and death-care families throughout the province. 

LONG SERVICE AWARDS

Photos courtesy of ofelia A. photography

25-YEAR SERVICE AWARDS



Janet Litun receives her 25-Year Service Award from David Root and Eden Tourangeau.



Kirstie Smolyk is presented with her 25-Year Service Award from David Root and Eden Tourangeau.



Stephen Wiebe, centre, receives his 25-Year Service Award.

30-YEAR SERVICE AWARDS



Lana Golka, centre, presented with a 30-Year Service Award.



Andrew Jeynes receives his 30-Year Service Award from David Root and Edén Tourangeau.



David Root and Edén Tourangeau present Charlene McFeely with a 30-Year Service Award.



Brian Redpath receives his 30-Year Service Award from David Root and Edén Tourangeau.



Verna Rock, centre, receives her 30-Year Service Award.



David Root and Edén Tourangeau present a 30-Year Service Award to Kristie Tourangeau.

35-YEAR SERVICE AWARDS



Richard Holthuysen, centre, with his 35-Year Service Award.



Dean Ross receives his 35-Year Service Award from David Root and Edén Tourangeau.

40-YEAR SERVICE AWARDS



Omar Abooughoushe, centre, was honoured with a 40-Year Service Award.



David Root and Edén Tourangeau present Peter Haermeyer with his 40-Year Service Award.



Derrick Kruk receives his 40-Year Service Award from David Root and Edén Tourangeau.

45-YEAR SERVICE AWARDS



Rose Mae Kjelland receives her 45-Year Service Award from David Root and Edén Tourangeau.



Maurice Thevenaz, centre, was honoured with a 45-Year Service Award.

50-YEAR SERVICE AWARD



David Root and Edén Tourangeau present Calvin Blauel with a 50-Year Service Award.

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SPRING SUCCESS

OFSA CHALKS UP WINS

From regulatory and coroner updates to educational presentations, the Ontario Funeral Service Association (OFSA) spring meeting proved to be a huge success, welcoming approximately 120 funeral professionals to the Hilton Garden Inn Toronto Airport West for a full day of education and networking on April 12, 2023.

The morning started with a closed-door meeting which allowed OFSA president Brett Denning to update the membership in attendance on the inner workings of the association.

“I took the time to talk about the OFSA Market Place – a place for people to buy and sell anything and everything funeral related – which is now live and attached to our website,” said Denning. “We also touched on the plan we have to explore ideas with scholarships and alternative ways to help with the staffing shortage that persists. We didn’t get too deep into that, but we do have some ideas that we are working on at a board level.”

Then the doors were opened to allow non-members the opportunity to listen to presentations by both Jim Cassimatis, interim CEO/registrar of the Bereavement Authority of Ontario (BAO) and Dr. Dirk Huyer, chief coroner for the province of Ontario. Cassimatis spoke first and discussed two important topics – the increase in death registration fees and the staffing shortage.

“Across the board now, the amount paid at final disposition [to the BAO] is \$30,” explained Denning about the fee increase. “That means the amount has increased from \$13.63 for cemeteries, crematoriums and hydrolysis facilities, while funeral homes and transfer services increased from \$18.18. The BAO has basically equalized the payment, knowing that a large majority of enforcement takes place on the cemetery and crematorium side versus funeral homes, which is something that was well received by funeral professionals.”

Regarding education, Cassimatis addressed the BAO’s recognition of staffing shortages, particularly in northwestern Ontario. “He made it clear he’s considering many different approaches to help and some of that might be through education and some might be in regards to redrawing the line on what unlicensed staff can and cannot do; or possibly a different class of licence.”

More good news followed from Dr. Dirk Huyer, chief coroner, with the closing of negotiations with respect to body transfer rates. In a nutshell, the rates have increased from \$336 (not



Scott Smith and Matt Wren.



David Leplante and Marc Gauthier.



George Darte and Doug Kennedy.



Bob Kebbel, Rebecca Steckly and Christopher Franklin.



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Gallery of attendees.


including a fuel surcharge bump that ended on April 1) to a new base rate of \$550. That rate increases even more after hours, from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. and on holidays by an additional \$120. In addition, the per kilometre charge has gone from \$2.50 to \$4.50.

"I would characterize it as a wonderful outcome with respect to the finance side of things," said Denning. "We got what we asked for and there are also built-in raises for three years at a rate of 3.5 per cent. If you do the math, we are getting over 50 per cent of the hours of the year at \$670 up from \$336, so it's hard not to feel pleased with that result. I think that directly resulted from our membership pushing back at the right time about these coroner rates and doing the work. The OCC was good to work with and they certainly saw the need to make some changes."

The other topic Huyer addressed was the procurement of coroner cremation certificates. "OCC is going to turn it into a rotation in the future, so you cannot use the same coroner for every cremation certificate," noted Denning. "OCC feels this will more fairly distribute cremation certificate fees in an effort to make the system more equitable. OFSA is sitting on a committee to make sure our membership has representation and that we are not paying 30 different coroners every month. We also need to ensure the turnaround time remains as efficient as what exists today."

"It was really great education and another excellent OFSA event for socializing, professional connection and an overall commitment to the profession as we move forward," concluded Denning.

Following a break, the first educational session featured Michael Bach with a discussion on inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility. A representative from Virtopsy was also on hand to demonstrate how CT scan technology can be used in place of a scalpel to look inside a body. Trillium Gift of Life representatives shared information on their body donation program with a focus on tissue and eye donation. The event wrapped up shortly after 3:30 p.m. following a presentation by actor, writer and producer Andrew Musselman who spoke about the value of communication.

"It was really great education and another excellent OFSA event for socializing, professional connection and an overall commitment to the profession as we move forward," concluded Denning. Next up for the association will be their annual conference, scheduled for September in Hockley Valley. 

BAO SAYS:

CONSUMER PROTECTION ALSO MEANS SUPPORTING OUR NORTHERN PROFESSIONALS

by Jim Cassimatis, Interim CEO/Registrar, Bereavement Authority of Ontario (BAO)

In May, *Canadian Funeral News* ran a column and two letters outlining staffing challenges at funeral homes, especially in northern Ontario.

What each said on the subject reflects what I've been hearing from operators and associations since assuming the interim CEO/registrar role in December.

More remotely located funeral homes – across the province – are having difficulty drawing in funeral directors (FDs) to meet the needs of families in their areas. Some FDs are working off their feet seven days a week – and have for years.

The Bereavement Authority of Ontario (BAO) has started investigating possible solutions with licensees, professional associations and community colleges.

This challenge in northern communities is being experienced in several business sectors, including death care. The issue didn't develop overnight, as many funeral professionals know, and it will take a collaborative approach to address it.

LISTENING TO FDS

I've had one-to-one conversations with several funeral directors with decades of experience. For some, it's their most pressing issue in their communities, for others less so. It depends mostly on where they live.

John-Bryan Gardiner, president and managing funeral director with Everest Funeral Chapel in Thunder Bay, has told me that there is an urgent need to attract FDs to northwestern Ontario. "This is definitely an issue with us here in the northwest, more so than other parts of Ontario," he told CBC News in March. He added that in "other parts of Ontario, there's a larger staffing pool to draw from." He also told the media that the work of FDs is vital to families. "We're the ones that get called out of bed in the middle of the night to go to the suicide scene, the overdose, the homicide, the truck accident, car wreck on the highway."

Mr. Gardiner describes the need for and value of FDs very well.

Scott Miller, president of Funeral Strategies, a bereavement sector consulting firm in Ottawa, is a licensed funeral director and member of the BAO board of directors. He has noted in another publication that staffing shortages existed in the 1990s. During that decade, he saw almost half of his college FD classmates leave the profession. "To be honest, it wasn't a great career to raise a family in, as the hours were long, there were significant pressures in the workplace and salaries were not as high as other careers," he wrote. "Not only do we have to address the issue of education, but we have to address the issue of employment. Are we doing enough to keep the individuals in our profession satisfied?" he wrote in reference to work-life balance and how FD salaries have generally not kept up with other sectors of the economy.

Both Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Miller precisely sum up the ongoing situation.

THE NUMBERS

The BAO's latest fiscal year-end numbers also tell the story of the last six years.

Provincial totals	March 31, 2017	March 31, 2023	Change
Funeral Establishments	583	567	-16 or -2.7%
Funeral Directors (FD1&2)	2,776	2,504	-272 or -9.8%

FUNERAL HOME NUMBERS ARE FAIRLY SIMILAR

I have no doubt that several communities are feeling the pinch and having to spend most of their time working very long days serving grieving families, with no end in sight.

The BAO's statistics on funeral homes and FDs paint that provincial picture. The number of funeral homes across Ontario, however, has remained relatively consistent in recent years. At fiscal year-end on March 31, 2023, there were 567 funeral homes, down by 16 (2.7 per cent) from six years ago.

9.8 PER CENT FEWER FDS PROVINCIALY

But the number of funeral directors is a different matter.

Across the province there were 2,504 funeral directors in FD Classes 1 & 2 as of the fiscal year ended March 31, 2023.

Between 2017 and 2023, our number of FD Classes 1 & 2 licensees decreased by 9.8 per cent, or 272 fewer funeral directors. The situation continues to worsen.

ADDRESSING EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The BAO recognizes this growing need, which connects to key elements of our mission to support the development of a strong and diverse sector while responding to changing needs.

We are working with representatives from the sector to address educational and other factors that will improve the situation for funeral homes and directors.

We will also investigate other pathways to a licence as well as options to alleviate an FD's workload, including:

- Graduated licensing
- Apprenticeships
- Utilizing unlicensed staff to conduct ceremonies and rites
- Reviewing our reinstatement policy for people wanting to return to the sector after having allowed their BAO licences to lapse

ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF CURRENT FDS

Obviously, no single action will resolve this challenge. Rather, an array of solutions is required.

As Mr. Miller has pointed out, the needs of current working FDs must be considered to fully address the staffing issue, and work-life balance and salaries must be addressed by businesses in the sector.

Education solutions, such as much more online learning, are equally essential, as Mr. Gardiner has said.

Together, we will address how to increase the number of licensees needed across the province and in northern Ontario

especially. This issue requires a thoughtful and strategic approach on education and on the working lives of those currently in the profession.

We, as the regulator, will not be able to solve the matter ourselves, of course. But the BAO will join all other stakeholders in addressing the issue.

A multi-pronged collaborative approach is needed to develop a proactive process in keeping current funeral directors in the profession, while attracting and educating new generations.

CONSUMER PROTECTION

The May column by *Canadian Funeral News* (CFN) publisher Patrick Ottmann mentions that the term consumer protection "has always been offensive to the profession." I have now heard or read this a few times since I assumed the interim CEO/registrar role.


But it is the primary reason regulatory authorities exist under the Safety and Consumer Statutes Administration Act in Ontario.

At the BAO we self-describe our purpose as: "Responsible for protection of the public interest, the BAO regulates and supports licensed professionals and businesses in Ontario's death-care sector."

And we walk our talk.

We certainly do inspect death-care businesses and suspend and even revoke the licences of the worst offenders of the law. However, we also thank and celebrate many of our business and personal licensees in our two publications *LifeLine* for licensees and *Beyond* for the public.

I find it ironic that some licensees, and the publisher, are offended by our consumer protection language. In our complaints resolution processes, the BAO reviews public complaints made against licensees. The vast majority of the time, the BAO decides in favour of the licensee. We don't do that out of any bias. We do that because almost all of the time licensees are complying with the law and providing professional services to families. The irony is that some members of the public feel we favour and protect the profession over the public's interest.

As a result, any concern about our use of consumer protection language should be more than offset by the reality of our actions. 



IN MEMORIAM

ROBERT E. MACKINNON

“Step into the water, wade out a bit deeper, wet your feet in the water of His love.”

Bob MacKinnon crossed over in the early hours of Saturday, May 6. A licensed funeral director since August 17, 1963, he proudly called himself an undertaker. As a founder of MacKinnon & Bowes, his mentorship was passed on to the countless apprentices and staff members who came through those doors and went on to become the future faces of the funeral profession. He continued to share his knowledge and experience, whether asked for or not, during his time at Humphrey Funeral Home, Toronto Trust Cemeteries (now Mount Pleasant Group), The Simple Alternative, and Basic Alternative. He fittingly and deservedly ended his career as a traditional undertaker at his own funeral home, MacKinnon Family Funeral Home, in Acton, Ontario. He was immensely proud to be a member of this, his chosen profession, community and extended family.

Bob will be sadly missed by his wife Margaret; her children Colleen, Jeff (Jessica) and Chris; his sons Duncan (Kathleen) and David; his grandchildren Grace, Elias and Max; and his brother Allan. He is predeceased by his brother John and his daughter-in-law Pamela. He also leaves behind a loving community of friends and countless people whose lives he touched both personally and professionally.

He wished to thank, and his family would like to express gratitude to, the PSWs who cared for him at home and the many staff members at Toronto Western Hospital who made his journey a little easier.

Because he hated the cold, a memorial service will be held on Saturday, July 15 from 2-4 p.m. at the Royal Canadian Legion, 15 Wright Ave., Acton. All are welcome. 🇨🇦

“From the rocking of the cradle, to the rolling of the hearse, the going up was worth the coming down.”

UPCOMING EVENTS | 2023

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UPCOMING EVENTS 2023

ATLANTIC CONVENTION

September 14-17, 2023
Delta Fredericton
Fredericton, NB

COLLÈGE BORÉAL Post-Grad Conference

June 5 & 6, 2023
Collège Boréal
Sudbury, ON & Virtual

Recognition & Awards Banquet

June 5, 2023
Collège Boréal
Sudbury, ON

Sixth Annual Golf Tournament

June 8, 2023
Timberwolf Golf Club
Sudbury, ON

CREMATION ASSOCIATION OF NORTH AMERICA (CANA)

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

FUNERAL SERVICE ASSOCIATION OF CANADA (FSAC)

Annual Conference
June 7-9, 2023
Westin Harbour Castle Hotel &
Conference Centre
Toronto, ON

INTERNATIONAL CEMETERY, CREMATION & FUNERAL ASSOCIATION (ICCFA)

ICCFAU
July 21-26, 2023
Emory University
Atlanta, GA

Leadership Summit

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

NATIONAL FUNERAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION (NFDA)

Leadership Conference
June 25-28, 2023
The Arizona Biltmore
Scottsdale, AZ

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

ONTARIO ASSOCIATION OF CEMETERY AND FUNERAL PROFESSIONALS (OACFP)

Charity Golf Day
June 19, 2023
Richmond Hill Golf Club
Richmond Hill, ON

Front-Line Funeral and Cemetery Training

July 20, 2023
Mount Pleasant Cemetery
Toronto, ON

Educational Conference & Trade Show

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

ONTARIO FUNERAL SERVICE ASSOCIATION (OFSA)

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

SELECTED INDEPENDENT FUNERAL HOMES

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

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