



THE KEY TO Continuity

Not only does mentorship matter, it is essential to the future of the profession.

BY ALLYSE R. WORLAND



**Allyse R.
Worland**

As it was accurately described during his funeral, my mentor's death struck me like a "bolt of lightning on a clear day." To each of us who were once his students in some way or another, we were left grief-stricken and speechless, as if we were now orphans. This was the impact of the life of Todd Van Beck, who died a legend of our "beloved profession." His loss marked a great sadness throughout funeral service, but it also posed the question: What made this man so great?

There is no single answer that could satisfy such an inquiry. Van Beck was an advocate of our profession and believed in its noble cause. But what I believe to be his greatest asset was the gift he gave of great mentorship. He believed in us during the times when we didn't believe in ourselves and was dedicated to helping all "baby undertakers" to crawl, walk, run and then fly with him.

Great mentorship is key to the continuity of our profession – treating every "student" as if they are our own and preparing them for the world. Over the years, I have had several wonderful guides to help me navigate my journey. It must be distinctly understood that mentors are not just for those starting out on their journey but rather for all of us at every stage of our career.

My very first mentor was a female funeral director in my hometown in rural Indiana. After having several other funeral homes slam the door in my face when I came knocking at 15 years old, she welcomed

me in and instantly took me under her wing. She taught me about the importance of taking your time with each loved one, how to think of each service as the most important day of someone's life and how to dress professionally, which I would further appreciate during mortuary school and beyond.

Another vital challenge she shared with me was the struggles of being a first-generation female funeral director. I saw how she was held to a different standard since the owner had been hesitant to even hire a woman. I also saw how difficult it was to juggle being a parent and a professional. But she did it with an effortless grace that I still admire today. I worked for her throughout high school and she taught this baby undertaker how to crawl. It was at that point she let me crawl right into mortuary school and toward my next mentors.

My time in mortuary school was stressful. Back then, we went to class, sat at desks and didn't have laptops or recordings during lectures. We took actual notes with paper and pencil. There were many different personalities, which created both comradery and competition.

I was fortunate to find a position at a local funeral home near school, across the river in Louisville. The staff at the funeral home was very helpful and so were the owners in teaching me how to stand up on my own, learn to walk and eventually run as a full-fledged funeral director. I would not have been able to do this without the help of those willing to share their knowledge with me. I became well rounded in the "six arms" of funeral service: arrangements, ser-

vices, preneed, removals, embalming and restorative art. I say “arms” because I imagine myself juggling all these things and having the knowledge to do so with grace.

After being able to run even faster with my mentors’ help, I was ready to fly. My feet were slowly leaving the ground, and after several years, with much sadness, I had to leave to my mentor. I returned home to Indiana to a warm welcome.

I was still gaining momentum as I flew, and I flew right to my next mentor, who was not only my mentor but my business partner and dearest friend. He believed in me in a way I had never experienced. He bet on me – a young, ambitious funeral director he met at a seminar in 2019. He could have chosen anyone else to help run his continuing education business, but he chose me. Following his death in 2021, I went into the grieving process unlike anything I had ever known. His final gift to me was to fully understand what it was like to be on the other side of the arrangements table.

After not having a mentor for a few years, my wings brought me to my next mentor, Brian Vaughan. The greatest gift he has given me so far is teaching me patience, which I never imagined I could learn, and that everything will fall into place in due time. His knowledge and sense of steadiness has been an invaluable gift not only to my career but to my life in general. Brian also taught me not to be so critical of myself when things go wrong, and his “It’s okay!” response to mishaps echoes in my head when there are the inevitable stumbling blocks.

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I am now in my current role as vice president of a family-owned firm, gaining knowledge from the owner, who has also been a mentor to me. I serve on several boards within the profession and am a presenter of continuing education, none of which would be possible without having been lifted up by my mentors over the past 16 years. I am still learning the tools I need to step into the next stage in my career, which will be funeral home owner.

And my story does not end there. Some seem to believe that mentorship is only necessary at the beginning of one’s career. That is simply false. Mentorship is a necessity through all stages – even at its height.



The most surprising thing I discovered through having mentors was becoming one myself. Though I still receive guidance and I am still on my own professional journey, within the last few years, I have been able to help others on theirs. My mentors instilled in me the passion to give and to open the gates of knowledge just as they did for me.

Although I never saw myself as the best example due to my rebellious nature, I slowly learned that so many were without guidance and set out to become what I needed most during my formative years in funeral service. One of the most recent opportunities to become a mentor was through Continuing Vision’s mentorship program, Continuing the Vision. This program has been put together with the mission of providing guidance to those without a guide on their funeral service journey.

Over the years, there have been numerous conversations surrounding the retention rate of our profession. The average burnout time for a funeral director is now five years, which is extremely concerning. What is the answer to this? Some have pondered that it is offering more benefits, more compensation. But the answer is right in front of us – great mentorship.

We must strive to create a true, unconditional love for funeral service in all the “baby undertakers” we come into contact with. Simply brushing them off and making them feel unwelcome is not going to serve us in the long run. Having a deep love and understanding of what it truly means to be a funeral director is what will sustain us for the future. It is up to us to foster lifelong dedication – at all stages of our careers in this, our beloved profession. ☰

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Making Connections

BY ALLISON VOORHESS



Allison Voorhess

When making funeral arrangements with a family, there is often a moment – usually in the middle or toward the end of the conference – when a family member feels comfortable enough to ask me, “How did you get into this?” I’m sure that when they walked into the funeral home’s lobby, they weren’t expecting a woman in her 20s to be responsible for their loved one’s services.

I never feel bothered by the question or tire of answering it because I see it as an opportunity to show families that funeral directors come from a variety of backgrounds and choose – and continue to choose – this profession because of our passion for it.

After the conference, the funeral and the final disposition, I hope the families I’ve served leave with a better impression of funeral directors than when they first arrived – not just because of our origin stories but because of how we, as funeral directors, made them feel while supporting them in their grief and caring for their loved one.

As I share my story, I encourage mortuary science students to consider how you will soon share your own stories with families – many times over – and how you can convey the passion that led you to this profession.

It feels a little odd to admit, but I have no defining memory of when I first chose funeral service for myself. It is a

profession I grew up alongside and have always felt connected to. My introduction to funeral service can be attributed to my family, specifically my father, Glenn, and his brother, John.

Uncle John entered funeral service in 1970 as a graduate of Wayne State University. His career included employment with several funeral homes in the metro Detroit area and ultimately achieving a partnership in a funeral home and doing trade embalming for other firms in the area (including the one I am now employed by, several decades later).

I tailored my bachelor’s degree to subjects I thought would be beneficial, majoring in economics and management, and minoring in cell and molecular biology.

Despite having his own career in the banking industry, my father enjoyed assisting his brother with transfers and services and, to my benefit, remained involved with funeral service throughout his working years. Unfortunately, Uncle John’s career was cut short when he passed away in 1983 at just 39 years old due to health complications. Although I never met my uncle, he was my father’s introduction to funeral service and, indirectly, mine.

During my childhood, my father spent his “semi-retirement” as a funeral assistant for Hauss Funeral Home in Macomb and Armada, Michigan. He co-owned a 2005 S&S Lincoln hearse with the funeral home’s owner, Thomas Hauss, and he had no qualms about making it a “family business venture.”



Having **work experience before or even during** mortuary school is an advantage I would recommend to anyone considering funeral service.

One of my earliest funeral service memories is of my father bringing the hearse home in the summer and parking it in our driveway. I would wash and wax it until it shone, earning a little cash to spend at the mall. The neighbors called the first time Dad brought the hearse home to make sure everyone was okay, but they soon learned to turn a blind eye. On days when I was home from grade school, my father sometimes brought me along to the city clerk's office to file death certificates. He would take me to the funeral home first to pick up the certificates and, on the drive, I remember poring over the various occupations and ancestries listed on those documents. Little did I know I would be collecting the same information someday.

When I graduated from high school, I felt ready to experience funeral service as an assistant myself. During this time, I shadowed funeral directors and became more familiar with our profession from the "front" and "back of the house." I watched and assisted as those directors cared for decedents while also supporting the family and friends they'd left behind.

I continued working as an assistant while home on winter and summer breaks from Albion College, a private liberal arts school in Albion, Michigan. Early on at Albion, I felt confident that I would become a funeral director, although I recall withholding that sentiment during the many icebreaker sessions at the start of my classes (I was less confident about how my peers would react to my career choice).

I tailored my bachelor's degree to subjects I thought would be beneficial in funeral service, majoring in economics and management, and minoring in cell and molecular biology. One advantage of attending a small college was the flexibility in programming, which I certainly tested. Among a group of premed and pre-vet students, I was the sole pre-mortuary science student enrolled in Albion's Institute for Healthcare Professions.

But as fate (or perhaps divine intervention from Uncle John) would have it, the daughter of my healthcare institute advisor had recently graduated from Worsham College of Mortuary Science. With my Albion advisor's understanding and guidance, I joined Worsham's graduating class of September 2018.

As a mortuary school student, I was pleased to discover how interconnected and beneficial my work

experience was to my education. The summer before attending Worsham, I completed four months of an apprenticeship in Michigan. During that time, I gained confidence in all aspects of funeral directing, especially in restorative art.

When classes began at Worsham, I recall a "full circle" moment when the professor highlighted various embalming room instruments, including a restorative instrument for swollen tissues. I recognized it immediately – it was an electric spatula, an admittedly intimidating instrument that my preceptor had taught me to use. Moments like this occurred throughout my education, reinforcing my Michigan experiences with the curriculum I was learning in Illinois. Having work experience before or even during mortuary school is an advantage I would recommend to anyone considering funeral service.

I am grateful to have worked alongside funeral directors and support staff at multiple firms. I began my career as an assistant at Hauss Funeral Home in Macomb and Armada, Michigan, and at A.H. Peters Funeral Home in Warren and Grosse Pointe Woods, Michigan. While attending Worsham, I enjoyed working as an assistant at Donnellan Family Funeral Services in Skokie, Illinois. After returning to Michigan, I completed my apprenticeship and worked as a licensed director with A.H. Peters before joining a dedicated team at Wm. Sullivan & Son Funeral Directors in Utica and Royal Oak, Michigan. My passion for funeral service has been nurtured by the directors and staff with whom I have worked, the educators who guided me and, of course, my family.

Although I have short- and long-term career plans, I have learned to leave room for unexpected opportunities for growth. Some of those opportunities came when I felt "too new" or "too young," but I am thankful that I said yes and trusted the colleagues, educators and friends I have made in this profession.

I didn't think I was capable of leading, but I served as a district president of the Michigan Funeral Directors Association. I didn't think I had enough career experience, but I now serve on the advisory board of Worsham College. Each opportunity has led to another, and with this writing opportunity, I feel a strong desire to pay it forward to others entering the profession. I am deeply appreciative of the people in funeral service who believed in me, and it is my sincere hope that you, as mortuary students, find those who support your passion as trustworthy mentors. ☸

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Transcending Limits

BY CALVIN M. AMATO



**Calvin M.
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Fire, that fickle and relentless force of nature, holds within it the secret of rebirth. For even when the flames appear to have been extinguished, a single ember can lie dormant, biding its time, waiting for the slightest whisper of air to rekindle its blazing potential and reignite the world around it. In moments when our own hopes seem extinguished by life's persistent challenges, we can find ourselves desperately searching for that spark – anything to rekindle the fire within us.

For me, these moments of internal turmoil were relentless, each one a trial that tested my resolve and forced me to confront the darkest aspects of myself. Throughout my life, I've faced an uphill battle, one often exacerbated by the constant barrage of negativity and doubt from those around me. From an early age, teachers and peers alike would echo the same sentiment: "This kid will never make it anywhere." Their words hung heavy in the air, each a damning indictment of my potential.

When the time came for me to contemplate a future after high school, I found myself adrift in a sea of uncertainty. The voices of doubt that had plagued me throughout my life still lingered. Aside from family, I was left without many resources or much support to help me find my way.

As I began my college journey in 2015, I cast about for a sense of purpose. Initially, my gaze fell on the legal profession. Seduced by the allure of law, I envisioned myself as a powerful advocate for justice. I was drawn to using my voice to champion the causes of those in need. The power and prestige associated with the profession were not lost on me either, as I longed to prove myself worthy to those who had doubted me.

As I delved deeper into that world, however, the reality failed to live up to my expectations. The day-

to-day work seemed dry and tedious. I would also find myself surrounded by individuals whose values and motivations did not align with my own.

Searching for an alternative that would resonate deeply with my values and interests, I found myself drawn to education. As I excitedly shared my newfound passion for teaching with my family, they were supportive. I felt validated in my decision, confident that I had finally found a career path that aligned with my values. Unfortunately, my confidence would again be tested during an unexpected encounter.

During a trip to Madison, Ohio, with my fraternity brothers, we ventured out one evening to a restaurant for dinner. The atmosphere was lively and we decided to order drinks, engaging in friendly conversation with our waitress. When the discussion turned to our college majors, we eagerly took turns sharing our academic pursuits.

When it was my turn, I proudly declared, "I'm studying education."

Her response was far from what I anticipated. She stared blankly at me for a moment before bursting into laughter. "No, seriously," she said, still chuckling, "what are you really studying?"

Confused, I reiterated, "Education."

Her laughter intensified as she exclaimed, "That's really funny! Maybe you should think of another career."

Her words stung and a sense of dejection washed over me. In that moment, the supportive reaction of



my family seemed a distant memory, overshadowed by the derision of a complete stranger.

As time passed, the harsh words of the waitress and my peers from years before still echoed. My enthusiasm for teaching began to wane and I found myself struggling to stay afloat in my studies.

I knew life would always present obstacles and doubters, but this time felt different. The doubt wasn't just coming from others anymore; it had seeped into my own thoughts, whispering that this wasn't the right path for me either.

As if sensing my growing uncertainty, life saw fit to throw me yet another curveball. I returned home one day to find a letter waiting for me – an eviction notice. Balancing the costs of college and rent had always been a tightrope act for me, one that depended largely on the support of my student loans and work. Unfortunately, despite my careful planning, the funds I received fell short of what I needed.

Come December, I found myself in a room with my landlord and her lawyer, who assured me they had my best interests at heart. We discussed our options and it seemed we'd reached an agreement: I'd have 60 days to reapply for financial aid and provide the necessary payment. Relieved and hopeful, I looked forward to presenting our solution to the judge.

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When we appeared before the judge, however, I was reminded of why I had decided against pursuing a legal career. The attorney, whose values and motivations clearly did not align with my own, suddenly changed the narrative. He stated that, contrary to our previous agreement, I had agreed to move out within a week and pay back every cent I owed. Betrayed and blindsided, I once again felt the weight of my world crashing down around me.

In the wake of the devastating court decision, I made the difficult choice to venture into the unknown, determined not to return home. This decision was swiftly tested by a cascade of new challenges. Debt from my schooling and previous apartment began to mount while the eviction made securing a new place to live an insurmountable hurdle. Forced to further pause my education as I struggled to get by, I felt the familiar grip of despair take hold.

Fortunately, a spark of hope came from the most

unlikely of sources. Into my hands fell the phone number of a man who might be able to provide me with housing. Bracing myself for whatever might come, I dialed the number.

His voice was surprisingly welcoming and his willingness to help me palpable. His offer included a peculiar condition, however. The apartment was attached to a small funeral home he had recently acquired, with plans to eventually open it as a secondary location. At the time, the situation seemed far from ordinary, but I couldn't afford to be picky. Little did I know that this small act of generosity would prove a turning point, shaping my life in ways I couldn't have imagined.

As I settled into my new living situation, I found myself drawn to the atmosphere of the funeral home. During the day, my thoughts centered on the necessary tasks at hand, but as night fell, a different kind of contemplation took hold, allowing memories from my past to surface. This included thinking about the numerous funerals I had attended with my dad as a child – some for loved ones, others for complete strangers. My mind also drifted back to junior high, where I had learned about the ancient Egyptians and their fascinating practices surrounding death and the afterlife.

My grandfather's final days in the ICU also played out vividly in my memory, particularly his unwavering spirit as he mustered the strength to open his blue eyes one last time at my grandmother's heartfelt request. I pictured the funeral home staff's efforts to prepare him for his final viewing, their delicate touches ensuring that his final appearance reflected the dignity and strength he held in life.

My grandmother's death came a few years later. In her final hours, she, too, seemed to transcend her weakened state. Despite being unconscious for days, she awoke to our arrival so she could share a moment with us. Through sheer force of will, she found the strength to tell me how proud she was of me. After we left that night, she would again slip into unconsciousness but this time would not wake up again.

As these powerful memories echoed, the weight of my debts persisted, stalling my education and driving me to explore new professional avenues. I offered my expertise in food safety consulting, assumed multiple management positions in the hospitality industry and contributed to certifying products and establishments as allergen-free and gluten-free.

Just as I was finally beginning to find my footing, COVID-19 swept the globe, bringing with it a new perspective on life. The world seemed to grind to a halt, and the timing was oddly coincidental – I had just paid off my remaining debt and purchased my first home a mere two days before the shutdown.

Attempting to adapt, I offered virtual consultations, but my heart wasn't invested in this new way of working. Instead, I found myself drawn to a deep-seated desire to help, teach and guide others through their most challenging moments. Determined to follow this newfound passion, I chose to pursue an unconventional path by studying neuroscience, hoping to uncover the secrets of the human mind and equip myself with the knowledge and tools to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others.

As the pandemic waned, the mounting death toll forced me to further question my life direction. Fortunately, in a moment of serendipity, I enrolled in a class on death and dying, which served as a reminder of the kindness extended to me years ago when the rest of the world doubted my potential. It further opened my eyes to the profound impact funeral professionals can have on both the living and the dead.

At that moment, I realized that by pursuing a career in mortuary science, I could not only help others navigate their grief but also begin to heal my own. I began to research mortuary science programs and reached out to several funeral homes in early 2023, eager to begin this transformative journey.

I continued to broaden my knowledge by completing the NFDA crematory operator course and obtained my death doula certification at the International Association of Professionals Career College.

Finally, my perseverance paid off when three funeral homes expressed interest in me. I soon began to conduct my research, seeking the best fit among those funeral homes. Ultimately, I chose one located just 30 minutes from my home [Koch Funeral Home in State College] and offered my support to another conveniently situated down the road [Derman Funeral Home in Tyrone], both in Pennsylvania.

In the year that followed, I dedicated myself wholeheartedly to the funeral profession, serving as a funeral assistant. From assisting with service details to bringing decedents into our care with the utmost respect, I began to discover the profound impact of empathy and attention to detail in this line of work.

Simultaneously, my sights were set on securing a formal education in mortuary science, with Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science (PIMS) as my top choice. As I eagerly awaited acceptance into its program, I continued to hone my skills, determined to make an impact on the lives of those we served.

December 2023 marked a significant turning point in my journey when I was officially accepted into PIMS beginning in January 2024. I swiftly acquired my trainee license, propelling me into full-time work as funeral director in training at Koch's by February.

Embracing Mark Twain's sentiment, I refused to let my schooling limit my education and sought addi-

tional certifications to expand my expertise. By June, I was a certified funeral celebrant through InSight Institute and a Certified Preplanning Consultant through NFDA. Seeking even more opportunities for personal and professional growth, I became a mentee in the inaugural Continuing Vision mentorship program and was honored to join the Independent Advisory Committee at PIMS, collaborating with diverse experts across the industry to exchange ideas.

From assisting with services to bringing decedents into our care, I discovered **the profound impact of empathy** and attention to detail in this line of work.

I also joined a local hospital to assist with autopsies. An unexpected golden opportunity arose soon after when I was invited to partner with Boston University CTE Center and UNITE Brain Bank as a brain recovery specialist. This role has afforded me the chance to contribute to vital research while supporting families grappling with the effects of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE).

Looking back on this whirlwind of experiences, I can't help but feel humbled and profoundly grateful for the journey that brought me here. Each milestone, each moment of growth – even the setbacks – helped shape me into the professional I now aspire to be. The sheer joy I felt the first time a grieving family thanked me for restoring their loved one's appearance is indescribable. After successfully extracting a brain, cradling within my hands the very essence of humanity for the first time, I was overwhelmed by the weight of emotion and memory it once held.

Now, as I suit up for work each day, I'm struck by how far I've come in such a short time. Despite the setbacks and wrong turns, I followed a path to where I now have the privilege of guiding others through their most vulnerable moments in life and in death.

Just as a single ember has the power to reignite a once extinguished flame, refusing to succumb to the darkness, my inner fire has endured. Similarly, the phoenix, with its wisdom and resilience, does not fear the flames, for it understands that the power of rebirth lies within them. Often in our darkest moments, we, too, can find the strength to rise anew. ☸

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