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**ICCFA Magazine
subject spotlight**

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► She is a licensed funeral director and embalmer and trains funeral directors, cemeterians and others as Certified Celebrants who meet with families to talk about their loved ones and plan personalized funeral services.

► She and her father, Doug Manning, conduct celebrant training as professors in the College of 21st Century Services at ICCFA University and at other locations across the country through the Insight Institute.

- **ICCFAU 2013 will be July 19-24** at the Fogelman Conference Center, Memphis, Tennessee. Call 1.800.645.7700 or go to www.iccfa.com for more information.

- Contact Stansbury or go to the In-Sight Books website for information about celebrant training sessions scheduled around the country.

► Stansbury is adjunct faculty with the funeral service department at the University of Central Oklahoma, where she teaches courses in funeral service communication and the psychology of grief and oversees practicum students.

Editor's note

The ICCFA believes in celebrant training for funeral directors and cemeterians who wish to better help families and to be successful in the 21st century. In addition to articles by celebrant trainer Glenda Stansbury, ICCFA Magazine will be running, as a regular feature, stories by celebrants about specific services they put together for families.

Contact ICCFA Magazine Managing Editor Susan Loving, sloving@iccfa.com:

- if you are a celebrant with **a story about a service** that the family involved is willing to let you share in order to inspire others or
- if you have any **tips for celebrant services** such as the ones from Tanya Scotece on page ??.

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Do you believe in the value of what you offer families? Then why are so many of your families choosing 'cremation, no services'? Maybe it's because you're waiting until the arrangement conference to make your case, and by then it's probably too late.

The articulation factor: What we must learn to say to families

My favorite show on television for the past three years has been "The Big Bang Theory." The writing is wickedly funny and there is something endearing about incredibly intelligent scientists who understand and revel in concepts, equations and theories that we mortals have no chance of grasping trying to find love and acceptance in a world that doesn't embrace them and relegates them to nerd status.

One of the best parts of the show is the title. Each week the episode is titled in very scientific geek-speak to describe a mundane everyday experience. Some recent ones: "The Speckerman Recurrence" was about one of the characters dealing with a bully from his high school days; "The Good Guy Fluctuation" dealt with a cheating boyfriend; "The Isolation Permutation" showed one of the female leads becoming jealous because the two other girls went wedding shopping without her. It just makes you feel smarter to read the titles, even if the script is basic situation comedy fare with a physicist twist.

And so, in thinking about the topic I'm addressing in this article, I decided to title it, a la Big Bang, "The Articulation Factor."

I hope we can discuss an issue that presents possibly the biggest dilemma and source of frustration for funeral homes and cemeteries across the country and feel like extremely smart people while doing so.

We hear it constantly. How do we convince people who have decided to have an immediate cremation with no viewing, no service, no burial—nothing—to consider the alternative? Why do people not want what we have to offer? Why are

so many of our customers walking out the door with an alternative container in their hands, never to be seen again?

At conferences, conventions, meetings or wherever two or more funeral directors are gathered together, the conversation inevitably turns to this conundrum. The call load for cremation may be increasing, but the revenue and income per service is decreasing.

Families are convinced that cheaper and quicker is better, and we are left nodding our heads while they walk out saying to themselves, "I showed them. I didn't let them talk me into anything!" How do we combat that? Should we combat it? What will the future hold if we do not combat it?

Funeral directors have three very powerful tools: ears, knowledge and a voice. We sometime forget that we are the paid professionals the family has chosen to help them through this life experience and that we truly are the smartest people in the room when it comes to all aspects of the funeral process. We need to learn how to embrace that confidence, that passion and that belief.

First we need to learn how to listen, to hear the stories of the family, to hear the importance of a life lived and how the family would like to honor that life. And then we need to learn how to open our mouths and express it to the very people who need to hear it. We need to articulate the value of the funeral and how each element of a funeral can assist the family in their grief journey.

I'm going to make some suggestions in a chronological and experiential way to show you the opportunities we have for "the articulation factor."

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Even if you use a call service for removal, the funeral director needs to be there.

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The first call

We could write an entire article on first calls, about the importance and power of being there at that very first step in the journey. For the purposes of this article, there is only one thing to say about first call: Go! Do not send your apprentice, your part-timer or your driver.

Even if you use a call service for removal, the funeral director needs to be there. If our profession can't figure that out, all the rest of these thoughts will ultimately be moot.

Before the arrangement

You may have read this before, but it bears repeating. We are firm advocates of touching base with the family during the "gap" between removal and arrangement. It is when the family is left alone with their questions, concerns and fears that they make decisions with little information or surf the Web to find out what their options are.

Therefore, it greatly benefits the family as well as your company when the funeral director takes the time to answer many of the inevitable questions before the family even gets to the arrangement room. This is especially imperative if the funeral director is not present at first call (see first call discussion above).

A visit to the home or, at the minimum, a phone call to let the family know that the director is available for whatever they may need, is vital and a valuable use of time and staff. Those hours between when the removal car drives away and the family sits down in the arrangement room can either be the time when the family decides, on its own and to its own detriment, to forgo services, or when the family learns, thanks to an informed and caring funeral professional, about the many options available for honoring their loved one.

During "the gap," the funeral director has an opportunity to widen the family's thinking about options. The alternative is to leave the family to their own devices. That's when the computer comes on, Google appears and off the family goes on a search for information, pricing and alternatives to choices they do not want to

have to make in the first place.

Without some guidance, the family will come into the arrangement conference with decisions set in concrete based upon no information, horror stories from the Internet or reactions to bad funerals previously experienced, and the funeral director can do little to sway their thinking or offer alternatives.

The funeral director could stop by the home with some coffee and donuts, a few sub sandwiches or some paper goods, along with a funeral planner or packet of information. This tells the family that you are there to meet their needs, whatever they might be. What do you say when making this "gap" visit? You can start out with something like this:

"I just wanted to stop by to check in on you, see how you are doing and see if there is anything you need or any questions I could answer before we get together later today (or whenever the arrangement conference is scheduled).

"I'm sure you have a hundred thoughts flying around and it is difficult to concentrate on any of them. I want to assure you that we will work together to take care of all of those important decisions, details and arrangements and I'm more than happy to clear up any concerns you may have right now."

The discussion then might include, but does not need to be limited to, the value of having a viewing before cremation, a celebrant service or personalized tribute that fits their loved one and family, the importance of a funeral experience for family and friends, etc. The information you drop off certainly should let them know about their options.

Even if they look at you standing at their front door and say they have nothing to ask right now, never underestimate the power of just making that effort, the long-lasting effect of articulating your care and your expertise.

Please notice that I clearly said "the funeral director" should do this. This is not the place for a concierge or an apprentice or a part-timer who is sent on an errand to deliver coffee and cookies.

The first call and the "gap" meeting are the most important times you can spend

with the family. I cannot say this enough times or in enough different ways. Unless we touch the family from the beginning, we are playing catch up, and we never get a second chance to make that first impression.

After a recent shoulder surgery, I was lying on the couch trying to overcome the effects of the meds and the pain of the incision and wondering why I thought this was such a good idea.

The phone rang; it was my surgeon. It was not the nurse or the physician's assistant or the secretary. It was the professional I had chosen calling to see how I was, whether I had any questions or if I needed anything.

I was overwhelmed and thankful. I didn't have any questions, but I felt better that he had made the effort to touch base with me. A few weeks ago, a friend of mine asked me to recommend a surgeon. Who do you think I told her was the very best doctor in the city?

Do you see the connection?

The arrangement room

In a perfect world, funeral directors would return to the days of making arrangements in the home. People were comfortable in their own setting and it seemed less like a business arrangement and more like a meeting with an honored friend invited to help the family in a time of need.

I realize this probably is not going to happen anytime in the near future. Therefore, we need to give a great deal of thought to the location and setting of our arrangement rooms.

Ask yourself: Are you more comfortable sitting at a long wooden conference table or on an overstuffed couch with a coffee table you can put your feet on? The answer should be obvious.

It's time to make the arrangement room look more like a living room and less like an attorney's office or a furniture store. Most arrangement rooms today have way too much "stuff" lying around and are intimidating to people who are already overwhelmed by grief and probably operating with little sleep or food.

Every piece of furniture, brochure, book or sample in an arrangement room should

I am also a firm advocate of creating an atmosphere of “ceremony” every time you interact with the family, including the arrangement experience.

be reexamined, not from the standpoint of “Does this help us sell something?” but rather from the standpoint of “How does someone who has been up all night after losing a husband of 52 years feel when sitting here?”

The principles of simplicity, comfort and a welcoming atmosphere should guide you as you set up an arrangement room. The location of the coffee pot and the bottled water with the funeral home logo on it is of much less importance than the ability of the funeral director to sit next to the grieving widow and pat her hand if needed.

The “stuff” will get sold only after we have heard their hearts.

The arrangement ceremony

I am also a firm advocate of creating an atmosphere of “ceremony” every time you interact with the family, including the arrangement experience.

This could mean asking the family to bring some special items or pictures of the loved one and placing them on the table, lighting a candle and beginning by saying something like this:

“We are here to honor _____, and want to take a moment to acknowledge the importance of a life lived as we come together to plan a fitting tribute to honor _____’s life among you.”

That can go miles toward calming upset and angry minds and helping the family focus. It also says to the family that the funeral director is not just there to take their money but is very much attuned to the occasion and the loss and will be a guide for them.

Even if the family does not bring anything with them, the pausing, the acknowledging—the ceremony—is vital in setting a tone of remembrance for the family.

The arrangement bucket

For several years, Doug Manning and I have used the concept of buckets when talking to funeral directors in training settings. We try to help funeral directors visualize the family sitting in front of them as having walked in with a bucket full of feelings, fears, hurts and uncertainties.

Nothing that is said to that family will make a difference until they feel someone has heard what is in their bucket.

This is where funeral directors have failed miserably for years. The arranger is so intent on getting down to business and getting the GPL on the table that feelings and needs are ignored and families walk out of the arrangement room feeling they have been taken for an expensive ride and no one cared how they felt, what they needed to say or who their loved one was.

It is imperative that the first thing you do with every family is acknowledge their loss and let them talk about their loved one. It might be saying something as simple as:

“This must have been such a shock for you,” or

“What a long journey this has been for your family,” or

“I can’t imagine what it feels like to lose a young child,” or

“What a great long life your mother lived. I’ll bet you have some wonderful stories and memories of her,” or

“This must really hurt.”

The words are not the magic. The act of stopping to acknowledge their feelings and opening the door to hear their story is powerful and life changing. Almost everyone will have a “death story” about where they were when the death occurred: “She waited until I could get there”; “He waited until we all left the room”; “I whispered that it was OK for him to let go, and he died.”

Almost everyone wants to share their death story and, in our opinion, the first person who listens to that story is a hero in the family’s eyes.

You will encounter some families who don’t want to talk much or to share, but the majority will be extremely grateful that the professional they chose to accompany them on this unfamiliar journey is interested and compassionate and willing to be lend an ear, or a shoulder to cry on.

The arrangement consultant

For several years there has been much discussion about changing the “order taker” mentality, but not a lot has been done to encourage or provide training

in effective new behavior. The usual approach funeral directors take is to mildly offer options, then sit back and hope the family didn’t think they were too pushy or trying to up-sell. This has resulted in some pretty awful funerals, as well as loss of revenue for the funeral homes.

The family hires the funeral director to be their expert, to be the professional. A person who walks into the office of a neurosurgeon, an attorney or a wedding planner expects to be dealing with a confident professional who knows what he/she is doing, not one who apologizes for the cost or the procedures involved.

It is way past time for the funeral profession to truly believe in the value of what they have to offer, to explain with pride and conviction that the experience of a funeral is an important first step for families in grief. That means taking ownership in articulating:

- The value of viewing, regardless of the means of disposition
- The value of ceremony and gathering for some type of service
- The value of accepting expressions of sympathy and honor from friends and family
- The value of a well-planned and well-executed funeral service containing elements that make sense and are a meaningful part of the whole service.
- The value of having a final resting place as an important part of the grief experience.

If you as a professional cannot clearly define and verbalize to someone else why each of these elements is important—dare I say vital—for a healthy funeral and grieving experience, I suggest you stop reading this article right now and go spend some time working that out for yourself. Don’t worry, the article will be here when you get back.

All of these points should be made with each family to be sure that they have fully explored all the options as presented by their professional. Too often the family says “cremation” or “no service,” and the pen goes down and the folder closes.

Even if the family decides not to take advantage of any of the wide array of options presented, the funeral director will

Tips for celebrants and celebrant services

Using music

I have found that my celebrant services flow better when I select three pieces of music to use in a specific way. When I am talking (and listening) to the family, I find out what type of music the deceased liked—specific individuals or groups, eras or genres, specific songs.

I narrow down the possibilities to three that I incorporate into the service:

- I begin the service by playing one prelude song (fairly loud) right before I go up to the podium.
- The second song is played during the candle-lighting ceremony (from the In-Sight Institute) about half-way through the service.



by **Tanya Scotece, CFSP**
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• I close with the third song as people come up to pay their final respects (at the casket or urn) and during the rose petal ceremony.

You always have the option to incorporate more music or clips of music. I served one family for whom I did a Jeopardy theme, and we incorporated the quiz show's distinctive music while I was talking about the deceased's love for the show.

The members of one family I worked with were all musicians and the wife wanted seven songs played, from beginning to end. I gave her my opinion and her response was, "If people are coming to pay respects to my husband,

then they can sit and listen to all seven songs. They were all classical musicians, too!" We played all seven songs, from beginning to end.

To begin with

The first tip below for starting services is applicable to all, while the second is for services for veterans:

• I have started asking everyone to "please **silence your cell phones** as we bid our final farewell to (name of decedent)." This really does seem to be necessary these days, whether you're in church, in a movie theater or even at a funeral!

• For celebrant **services for veterans**, I now am beginning by having everyone rise and recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. I have had very favorable comments from families about doing this.

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have done his/her job as a professional, ensuring the family is making informed decisions rather than knee-jerk or avoidance decisions.

The funeral director must assume the role of an experienced guide with a strong conviction that these are important decisions to be made. A few examples:

The family says "no viewing":

"It is my responsibility as a funeral professional to not only be trained to care for the dead, but also to be a guardian of the living. Studies and writings by experts in the field of grief recovery tell us that having an opportunity for a final viewing is extremely important for a healthy grief journey, even if it is a private family gathering time.

"It will give each family member a chance to face their new reality while sharing the comfort that comes from being among others also searching for ways to cope with the loss. We would strongly encourage you to consider giving the gift of goodbye to your family and your loved one."

Or:

"While the law requires that we have at least one family view the body for identification, we believe this is an important, sacred moment of goodbye. We will have your loved one on our

beautiful reposing bed and give your family members a chance to say their final goodbyes. What time tomorrow would be good for your family?"

The family chooses to scatter:

"There are many wonderful ways to honor the life of your loved one and to carry on his memory and legacy. While there may be a very meaningful spot or location that your loved one chose for scattering, it has been our experience that at some point families need a place of remembrance.

"For some families, the ability to physically visit a grave or have a memorial marker where the urn is buried or even a tree planted in a special place can be most important in dealing with their grief.

"May I suggest that you take some time to consider all the options before you make a final decision and, if you scatter, think about saving some of the cremated remains for a memorial spot at a later time?"

And when you are ready to make those decisions, please know that we are ready and able to help you create a ceremony for that final tribute and farewell."

The family doesn't want any type of service:

"We believe that every life deserves to be honored in a wonderful and fitting way.

Our firm has trained professional life tribute specialists called celebrants who can work with you to put together a service that gives voice to your memories.

"The celebrant will take your stories and weave them into a gathering experience that will tell the story of your loved one's life and times and give each person attending special remembrances to take away with them.

"The service can be as religious or non-religious as is appropriate for you and your family and your loved one. In our experience, a well done personalized tribute that honors the life is the most important first step in the grief journey.

The family just wants family and friends to get up and speak at the service:

"In my experience, when you just open up the microphone for speakers from the floor, it can get too long and sometimes uncomfortable or even embarrassing.

"If you would like to have several family members and friends speak during the service, one of our professional celebrants or funeral directors will work with you as a master of ceremonies to help organize all the speakers, talking to each one ahead of time to make sure the stories do not overlap and to give a sense of continuity and framework to the service.

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“We want to do everything possible to ensure that every part of the funeral service is meaningful and comforting.”

The family wants to have a private ceremony away from the funeral home:

“We take our responsibility as your funeral professional very seriously and want to be available to help you with the ceremony so that you do not have to worry. This is your time to welcome the comfort and presence of your friends and family, not a time to be dealing with the details.

“We will provide one of our staff members to be present to make sure everything is set up and that everything runs smoothly. The cost will be minimal and it will take such a burden off you and the family.”

These are merely brief examples

illustrating many of the decisions made during arrangements in which a director needs to be a guiding voice, a professional who knows what grieving people need and a confident planner who knows how to help the family create the service they want.

Your goal should be to hear everyone who uses your funeral home say, “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

This approach does not come naturally or easily to many. The first step is to actually believe in the value of the funeral as outlined above. Then it requires a vision and commitment from the owner and the entire firm that no family will walk out of an arrangement room without being given options, guidance and assistance geared to help them plan a healthy and healing funeral experience.

It takes practice to get comfortable

listening, articulating and offering. It may take role-playing, videotaping or partnering with a mentor, but we all need to learn how to master the articulation factor.

We need to own the fact that we are the smartest people in the room when it comes to planning a meaningful, touching and lasting ceremony in honor of the deceased and for the family. We need to release our inner funeral geek, claim the power of knowledge and experience and be confident in how we approach each family.

Learning and putting into practice the approach is time-consuming, but it may be the only thing that will save funeral service in the coming years. People who find meaning and value in an experience will return and be willing to pay for that experience again. Just ask Disney. 