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ICCFA Magazine
author spotlight

► Stansbury is vice president of marketing for In-Sight Books, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

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

► She 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.

► She and her father, Doug Manning, a former Baptist minister who became a noted author of books about grief, developed the Certified Celebrant program and have recently added a new component, to train celebrant trainers.

Editor's note

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

Contact ICCFA Magazine Managing Editor Susan Loving, sloving@iccf.com, if you are a celebrant with a story about a service that the family involved is willing to let you share..

How to become a celebrant

Becoming a celebrant involves more than learning how to conduct a personalized funeral or memorial service. Stansbury and former minister Doug Manning of the In-Sight Institute teach celebrants how to talk and listen to grieving families and how to work with funeral directors.

• Contact Stansbury (glenda@insightbooks.com) or go to www.insightbooks.com, the In-Sight Books website, for information about celebrant training sessions scheduled around the country.

NEW

How to become a celebrant trainer

• Contact Stansbury (glenda@insightbooks.com) for information on the new training program for Certified Celebrants who would like to learn how to train new celebrants.

CELEBRANTS

Do funeral directors just need to learn how to handle cremation arrangements better, or do they need to learn how to handle *all* arrangements better?

Teach your children well

Making sure the funeral directors of tomorrow start out knowing how to handle arrangements

She was a beautiful young funeral director sitting across the table from me in the arrangement room. She fidgeted, coughed and sighed, and was clearly not comfortable.

She graduated from a well-known mortuary college, fulfilled all of her requirements, passed the National Boards and served a year as an apprentice in a large city at a very busy firm. Yet when I asked her how to begin an arrangement conference, she looked at me in open fear and said, "I have no idea. I don't even know how to introduce myself."

I swallowed hard and tried not to look completely shocked. I asked how many arrangements she had observed or participated in during her apprenticeship. "None." "None?" "None."

What did she do during her apprenticeship? Spent most of her time in the prep room or handling the minutia at the funeral home—cleaning, handing out service folders, hauling flowers, washing cars. She had never sat with a family in grief, had never watched an experienced funeral director guide a family through those difficult waters of emotion and decisions, had never spoken to a family. Never.

The firm where she currently worked had brought me in as a consultant to do a training all morning for their staff on how to improve arrangement conferences. Then they asked me to do some private coaching with this young funeral director because they wisely knew that she needed a lot of help. Starting from point zero.

What all students should learn—but aren't required to

I've had the honor of teaching in a mortuary program for seven years. My favorite class is titled Communication in Funeral Service. It has several different topics

that are supposed to be covered—theories of grief, family systems, complicated grief, arrangements and a whole host of vocabulary words that will be included on the National Board Exam.

I get these poor students for three hours every week. Pray for them. I tell them at the first class session that this will be the most important class they have. They give me that "give me a break" look as only college students can; all professors say that about their curriculum.

I tell them that we will cover all the required material they need in order to pass their boards in the first hour of each class. Then, for the remaining two hours, we are going to learn how to be good funeral directors. We are going to learn how to talk to families.

We discuss first call and how to be comfortable just sitting and listening at those most difficult and sacred moment of handing over a loved one to the professional they chose. We drill on arrangements and how to put the pencil down and be present and attentive while the family tells their story. They have to give speeches articulating the value of the funeral.

I tell them this is the most important class that they will have because if we don't respond to families at arrangement, we have lost them, and no amount of excellent body preparation or creative video tributes or immaculate cars will win them back.

The American Board of Funeral Service Education, the governing and licensing board of mortuary programs, requires each student to go through a practicum experience where her or she serves in a funeral home under the supervision of a preceptor. Sort of like "student teaching," if you will.

Our program at the University of Central Oklahoma requires that the students

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complete 10 embalming cases, five arrangements and five funeral services and write case reports on their experiences. As practicum supervisor, I get to visit with the preceptors and encourage them to involve these students in every facet of funeral service so they will graduate with a more complete knowledge of being a funeral professional.

I assumed that every program had the same requirements. Imagine my surprise when I found out that the ABFSE only requires that the practicum include 10 embalmings. There is no requirement for practicum to include arrangements. Let me say that again: There is no requirement for practicum to include arrangements.

As my dear friend Stephanie Kann, president of Worsham College, observed, "In this day and time, we may get to embalm 50 percent of the bodies. But we will do arrangements with 100 percent of the families." And yet there is no mandate or emphasis put on the one area so vital to creating a trusting and healing relationship. We just send newly licensed funeral directors out into the world and hope they pick it up. Some will be starting from point zero.

Are cremation arrangements different?

I've been privileged to be a part of the ICCFA Cremation Arranger Training this year. This is a great one-day training designed by Poul Lemasters to provide a different conversation about how we handle the growing number of cremation families.

Everyone agrees that the funeral profession reacted badly when cremation first walked into our doors and we've been playing catch-up ever since. Cremation arranger trainings have been proliferating for the past decade as more and more funeral directors realize that the horse is out of the barn; we are desperately trying to bring those immediate cremation families back to us.



Doug Manning, Teresa Dutko, Wanda Mullins Lee, Glenda Stansbury and Kathy Burns at the first training of Certified Celebrant trainers, held in Cincinnati. Manning, a former Baptist minister, and Stansbury developed the training, done through the In-Sight Institute. Dutko and Lee are on the faculty of the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science. Burns is the In-Sight Institute's mortuary college celebrant program coordinator.

But, as anyone who has read any of my past musings can attest, I'm always asking "why?" Never quite content with accepting the current situation, I want to peek behind the curtain and get to the root of why we do what we do.

In this case, it occurs to me that what we are presenting in Cremation Arranger Training is nothing more than Arranger Training 101. How to talk to families. How to engage the stories. How to be a present professional as they decide how to honor their loved one in a healing and healthy way.

We throw the word "cremation" in every once in a while, but all I'm presenting in my little segment of the training is simply: This is how to do a funeral arrangement.

I've gotten good feedback from each of the ones I've been a part of. Why? (There's that word again!) Simply because I'm touching a place of need for almost every funeral professional.

We are not comfortable in the arrangement room. We were not taught how to engage and relate to grieving people. We were given no models or guidance in all of our training to become a funeral professional. We learned from that guy who would brag that he could do arrangements in 15 minutes. We are all starting from point zero.

Part of my time these past couple of

years has been spent as a private consultant for firms providing training for staff. Some want me to talk about Certified Celebrants. Some want me to talk about ceremony. Almost all of them want me to talk about arrangements. Why? Because as one owner put it when inviting me to come train his staff, "We suck at it."

So, is this an article about arrangements? No, not really. It's an observation that we can no longer leave these vital pieces of learning to chance. We must

take an active part in whatever mortuary program is part of our area and be involved in training new licensees.

Even if the ABFSE doesn't require it, we should be ensuring that every student in every program has plenty of experience with arrangements, in dealing with grieving families, in being comfortable introducing himself or herself and starting the conversation.

Whether they are practicum students or apprentices, we are doing our profession no good if we are relegating these new members to vacuuming, mowing and washing cars.

This is a plea to any person who serves on a mortuary board or as a preceptor to start asking questions about your program. How are we equipping our future? How are we preparing the next generation to adapt and acquire the necessary skills to be effective? How can we leave a legacy of service that can be picked up by the ones who will follow us?

Training celebrant trainers

As part of that collective effort to provide a more complete preparatory program for new directors, we do have some exciting news. The InSight Institute has trained its first mortuary program Certified Celebrant

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trainers. This is a big deal.

For 15 years, as long as my father Doug Manning and I have been doing celebrant training, after every training session someone would come up and say, "I'd like to be a trainer." We'd pat them on the back, tell them to go get some experience and then, "We'll see." Every year some people would ask, "When are you going to train trainers?" We'd smile and say "We'll see."

As my father has gotten on up there in years (don't tell him I said that, please!), every year he says to me, "What are you going to do when I can't do this anymore?" I'd smile and say, "I'll think about that tomorrow, Scarlet."

We created this baby we call Certified Celebrants. We took an idea and combined training, resources, processes, code of practice and years of experience into a pretty comprehensive training.

People think we can't train someone to conduct funeral services in just three days. But you ask our trained celebrants, and most of them will say that they left our training feeling prepared to take on this unique, special and important job.

We've been very protective of the training. We established it on the basis that funerals are important to the grieving experience, and we have grounded everything we do on that foundation. Each element in a celebrant service is focused on being the voice for families and giving them a healthy start on their grieving path.

The pretty words and inventive take-aways are nice, but what's really important is whether you have touched that family and honored their loved one's life. That's the proving ground. And 2,400 Certified Celebrants have left our training room understanding that this was their calling and their mission. We didn't know if anyone else could convey that deeply important message.

But we understand that in order for Certified Celebrants to grow and to become part of the normal fabric of funeral service, we are going to need to invite some other trainers to join us. This has, quite honestly, been a difficult and agonizing process.

Here's the big secret: I'm kind of a control freak and I want this training to be

presented in a certain way. I'm working through my anxieties and have reached a place where I accept that there are many people out there who have the same passion, the same vision and the same capabilities for training. Sigh.

Our first step was to develop a training and franchise license that can be incorporated into the mortuary programs as part of the curriculum. We invited schools that already had instructors who had undergone our celebrant training to participate in a "training of trainers" experience. People from several mortuary programs have indicated their interest and hope to join us soon.

Wanda Mullins and Teresa Dutko from Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science were the first ones to say "yes." We were scheduled to have one of our Certified Celebrant trainings in Cincinnati, sponsored by the Ohio Cemetery Association in August of this year, so we invited them to be a part of the training and to have coaching sessions with Kathy Burns, the mortuary college celebrant program coordinator.

Both both attended celebrant training several years ago and have some experience in providing services for families. They also have used some of the concepts in their curriculum through the years. Now they will be able to present the complete training to their students, to "graduate" each of them with a Certified Celebrant certificate and pin and to have an entire graduating class going out into the workforce with this skill under their belts.

As anyone who has been through our celebrant training can tell you, not only do you learn how to provide services, our training makes you a better arranger, a better listener and a better professional.

I hope that as this grows among the programs, we'll eventually have a generation of funeral practitioners who understand how to use celebrants, how to embrace the concepts of ceremony, how to articulate the value of service to those cremation or non-traditional families, and who are prepared to face the challenges that the next decade will bring. They won't be starting from point zero. That's kind of exciting. □