

OKLAHOMA DIRECTOR

August 2022 • Issue 8

***IT STARTS IN
THE BEGINNING!***
The Basics of Body Preparation

**Sometimes You
Have to Use the F-Word
(No, Not That One!)**

BARBIE: Funeral Edition
Michigan Director Starts
Petition for Representation



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Change Doesn't Have to Be Bad

Phillip Hart
OKFDA President

Well, your board has travelled a few miles in the past month and I would love to tell all. We had a successful summer workshop in Medicine Park, Okla., at the end of June. This is where our OKFDA chairs, governors, executive board and executive director came together to strategize for the coming year. A couple of hot topics included membership dues structure, as well as member benefits and services. Things are in the works!

The second week of July rolled around and

the executive board, along with a few spouses and children, hopped a plane to Orlando, Florida. There, we participated in the NFDA Leadership Conference.

Through the years, our board has built bridges and fostered ties with associations throughout the country, faithfully networking with other directors and NFDA board members and administration to help grow and enhance what OKFDA can offer you, "OUR MEMBERS."

In Orlando, we participated in great discussions and heard some great speakers. We were reminded of the diverseness of funeral services in America, but that we aren't alone when it comes to the issues and problems we face. Things like the pass/fail rate of the National Board Exam and the overall lack of available licensees throughout the states.

One thing is for sure, there is a new generation coming into funeral service whose job expectations are unlike anything we've seen. This doesn't have to be a bad thing. Change is good sometimes. It keeps you on your toes. If you have an employee you can't live without, treat them that way and let them know it. With new hires, maybe it's time to get creative with job descriptions and hours.

I challenged our executive board members attending the conference to take notes during the sessions and be prepared to share three to five points that stood out to them and could be useful for our state membership. I hope to share those results in a future issue of *Oklahoma Director*. Until next time, keep honoring lives and serving families.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Dates & Locations for our Fall District Meetings have been decided.

We have combined Districts III & IV and Districts V & VI. You do not have to attend the meeting specified for your district. There will be 1 hour of CE at each meeting. The cost for members is \$30 for the meal. Non-members will pay \$50 for the CE & \$30 for the meal.

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Districts III & IV -September 27th White Dog Hill
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Small Changes Add Up to Huge Results

Dustin Pierce
OKFDA Executive Director

My hope for you is that you have had a wonderful and fun-filled summer with your families. Unfortunately, summer is coming to an end and our kids are headed back to school. All good things must come to an end, they say.

Our executive board and a few others recently travelled to Orlando, Florida, for the NFDA Leadership Conference. The conference always provides insights into the lives of our colleagues who are working in the trenches day after day, just like you are. It is easy to feel that we live our lives in a vacuum, but every funeral home is facing similar challenges.

This year the conference focused on workplace development and retention of employees. The truth is that all industries are facing employee shortages; we are not alone in this battle. Employee's mindsets are rapidly changing, and we CAN change with them if we are willing to make small changes to help them find more meaningful lives within the workplace. In years past, most of us were okay with working 60 to 70+ hours a week and didn't think about work/life balance. We found meaningful work; we took the good with the bad and marched on. The employee of today is no longer willing to just march on. The employee of today is looking for a flexible schedule, time away, benefits, and most importantly a workplace that is supportive to the needs of their life. Please hear me out. There are ways we can create a workplace that is responsive to the needs of our employees.

One way of growing your employee base is to mentor them. We have a responsibility to teach the next generation of funeral directors. What kind of funeral director/embalmer would you be without the mentorship of the previous generation? Another expectation of your employees is communication. People communicate more than they ever have, even though it isn't always face-to-face. Employees are looking for great communication. They want to know what is expected of them. What their schedule will be. When they will be paid. How they can earn extra money, or bonuses. One way to allow them to communicate with you is to let them "own" a meeting with you once or twice a year. This will allow them the ability to be honest with you and provide feed-

back regarding their happiness.

Employees also expect to be provided the tools and resources to do their job. If you are working with outdated computers, upgrade them. If you are working with instruments in the prep room that do not serve the employee well, upgrade them. There is nothing more frustrating than working with tools or resources that are outdated and do not allow you to perform your very best.

Employees are also expecting flexibility in their schedules. Are there three or four people sitting visitation in the evening? Why? Set a schedule to allow everyone a night to sit visitation. This allows your employees time to be with their families and friends in the evenings. I realize that we are not working in an 8-to-5 industry, but we can be creative in our scheduling to allow our employees the time they

need outside of work to enjoy their lives. Remember, employees are not leaving our funeral homes for other funeral homes, they are leaving the industry all together. We must be willing to face this issue head-on and be creative in hiring and retaining key employees.

Remember to use the Journey to Serve toolkit. All items can be branded to your funeral home. If we do not promote ourselves, we will certainly die on the vine. I leave you with this quote: "Small changes eventually add up to huge results." Start making small changes now and before you know it, they will add up and you will be surprised!

As always, if I can help you in any way, please let me know by calling, emailing or texting.

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Oklahoma Directors Take in Leadership Conference

Oklahoma funeral professionals joined directors and vendors from around the country in mid-July for the annual NFDA Leadership Conference. Hosted in the Orlando area at Disney's Yacht & Beach Club Resorts, the conference provided an opportunity to hear from experts, discuss the future of funeral service, participate in breakout sessions, and sharpen their leadership skills.

Now that the world is learning how to carry on in the wake of the pandemic, these conventions and gatherings are a great way to connect and revitalize your career.

If you are looking to connect and learn from the experts, there are several events to consider.

On the national/international stage is the NFDA International Convention & Expo in Baltimore from October 9-12, and its pre-convention from October 7-9 that will feature Certified Celebrant Training. Go to nfda.org for more information.

On the home front, make sure to hold the date for the Oklahoma Funeral Directors Association's 120th Annual Convention and Expo on April 23-25, 2023. It will be held at the Embassy Suites Hotel & Conference Cen-

ter in Norman. Details on that will be distributed later in the year.

**OKFDA 120th Annual
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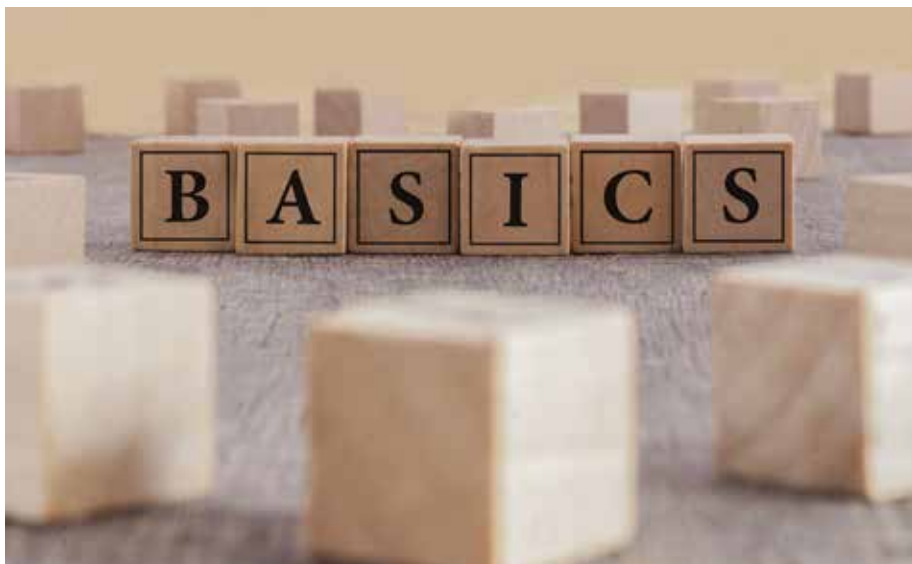
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It Starts in the Beginning!

By Wally Hooker



Most professionals who know me or of me, understand my passion for top-notch embalming, quality body presentation and going the extra mile as we prepare the dead for open casket services. Further, they know my disdain for poor quality embalming and body prep. It is that type of embalmer/practitioner who is making us all look bad. I refer to them as “knuckleheads”. I staunchly believe this is a very integral ingredient in the consumer shying away from “body present services”.

I have great regard for passionate embalmers/funeral directors and talented trade embalmers. I am in a unique position...I own a funeral home that my wife and I established and built. I spend a great deal of my time in the embalming room (I also do trade embalming at my place). I work the door during visita-

tions and funerals and I listen to people who want to talk...what I hear is not a glowing commentary of funeral service today.

Often, family members and friends travel to our funeral home for services and many times, the visitors will compliment us on how their loved one or friend appeared in the casket. How natural they looked or how “at peace” they looked! (I am not boasting, just illustrating the conversation). Then they begin to share horror stories from their communities or other funeral homes they have been in, on how dreadful bodies look! Invariably, the comments come... “they aren’t going to do that to me! I don’t want my family to see me looking like that! I’m going to be cremated!” So where have we gone astray? The dead human body is the cornerstone of funeral

service, but somewhere along the way, we’ve gotten off track. Perhaps we need “Embalming 101” more than we need instructions on “growing your pre-need”, or “make more money with cremation”, or “let’s not use the word embalming, dead or hearse”...and the list of topics go on.

Since this is my first article with you, I think it’s appropriate to start at the beginning and review the basics of body preparation. It begins with the initial case analysis. Observe the body and let it “tell you its story” before you plan your embalming approach. The time of death, the cause/manner of death, the physical extenuating circumstances should all be considered as you put together your plan of attack. Secondary to the pre-case analysis in achieving successful results is a thorough understanding of the chemicals on hand. Study them, understand their uses, what they are to be used for and what the intended results should be. Today’s chemicals are formulated for the specific challenges we face daily. Hopefully none of us are still using the same solution for every embalming, or cutting corners of how much you use!

Start with the all-important bathing and initial disinfection of the body. Successful and quality embalming begin with placing the body in a natural and comfortable appearing position. Make sure the shoulders aren’t shrugged or drooping, bring elbows close to the abdomen, and place the hands in a natural position for your particular region. Wrap Webril cotton or smooth paper toweling around fingers to hold them together and in place during the embalming. Ensure the head is not tilted too far back or too far forward and tilted slightly to the right, also use cotton behind the earlobes to reposition them.

The most important step, prior to the arterial embalming, is the proper positioning of the facial features. I have often spent more time on positioning the facial features on challenging bodies than the actual arterial injection! This is what can make or break great looking bodies. We must go back to our mortuary college days and remember the cannon of beauty: a mathematical, harmonious and proportional relationship that should be pleasing to the eye. The “rule of thirds” (radius of chin to bottom of nose, bottom of nose to center of eyebrows,

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center of eyebrows to front hairline) should be followed with very few exceptions. This is appropriate for the normal case, as well as a guide for reconstructive efforts. The same would apply for the "rule of fives" as the face is five eye widths wide. These dimensions will never fail you if you observe them and follow them. Eye closure is all important! The lower lid should cover only the lower third of the eyeball, while the upper lid should cover the upper two-thirds of the eyeball. Pay close attention to the inner canthus and make sure you take proper steps to close it. Whether you use eye caps or cotton with humectant to secure them prior to embalming, give attention to keep the eyelashes in position, not matted to the skin and not unaligned. Gently brush them clean and straighten the eyelashes prior to injection. The position the eyelashes are in during embalming is the position they will remain! It's the little details that make all the difference!

Whatever method you prefer to close the mouth, pay close attention to the lips and have a natural appearing closure, not too tight as to create a pucker or too loose that steps must be taken post embalming to bring the lips together.

I suggest not using any kind of adhesives on un-embalmed tissue to set the features. Too many problems can occur during an embalming that could require post embalming attention to overcome. Super glue type adhesives on un-embalmed tissue can tear tissue if it pulls away much easier than embalmed tissue will. If I have a slight gap of the lips following embalming, I suggest the use of a diabetic syringe/needle to plump the lips with a humectant, rather than using adhesives. Plumping the lips leaves a more natural appearance and does not leave unsightly white residue from the adhesive to overcome. Remember, it's the "little things" that add up to "big things".

Next month we will discuss the actual embalming: injection sites, pressure, rate of flow and drainage issues.

Wallace P. (Wally) Hooker, CFSP, MBIE, is the owner, funeral director and embalmer of Family and Friends Funeral Home of Wingate, Indiana. He and his wife, Janet, designed, established and built their funeral home in 2004. Wally is a graduate of Worsham College of Mortuary Science, where he

serves on the Advisory Board. He is past president of the Indiana Funeral Directors Association and board member of North American Division of the British Institute of Embalmers. In addition, he has served as the chief deputy coroner/investigator of Fountain County, Indiana, for 24 years.

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In Funeral Service, Sometimes You Have to Use the F-Word

Cody L. Lopasky, MA, CFSP
President, Commonwealth Institute of Funeral Service



While the title may suggest a more adult-themed article, or at least one not suitable for children, I am referring to an age-appropriate but very vital lesson that we all must learn. As a provisional and then green funeral director and embalmer, I had the privilege of training under an amazing licensee: William “Buddy” Mullens. He taught me invaluable skills; both tangible and intangible. Buddy passed away unexpectedly a couple of years ago, but his lessons have stuck with me throughout my career – as a funeral director and through my transition to Commonwealth Institute as a funeral service educator.

Buddy had a keen sense of humor and a dry wit that would often take you by surprise. He was not overtly conversational and could say more with one raised eyebrow than words could ever get across. But when he did speak, it was typically with a purpose. One of his favorite mottos would come forth when an error occurred during a service. When this happened, he relished taking the pastor or officiant aside and telling them, “In funeral service, sometimes you have to use the F-word... flexible.” This conversation was made even funnier when said officiant was particularly devout. The punchline word of “flexible” would invariably elicit a hearty laugh and a sigh of relief.

Although I still laugh every time I use this phrase with my students, the underlying message is arguably very important. Being flexible is a character trait for which every good funeral service professional must strive.

How many of us have worked a service, met with a family, etc. and something went awry?

In most instances, you can simply keep going and no one will know the difference; except for other funeral directors perhaps. Generally, the public does not even notice a faux pas like bringing the casket in the wrong direction or folding the pall incorrectly. We notice, and we cringe for the remainder of the service about that mistake you or a coworker has made. If done with a straight, solemn face though, those in attendance will have no clue – they assume it was meant to happen as it did.

Sometimes, things are simply out of our control though. You deal with it and move on with conducting the service. In other words – you remain flexible. You cannot blow a gasket when the local priest (with whom you have worked innumerable funeral masses) decides to bless the casket inside the church versus the narthex and changes the order of procession into the church as you walk in and the music starts. Procedural mistakes and last-minute changes by clergy are one thing, but other er-

rors may seem harder to recover from. The key is to think quickly on your feet and adjust. During the pandemic, and in the literature of its aftermath, we have often heard the word “pivot.” Due to its gross overuse in pandemic talking points and as an homage to Buddy, I prefer to use “flexibility.”

Being flexible in funeral service borrows from the concept of “Locus of Control” in the psychology world. The term Locus of Control refers to how much control a person feels that they have in events, their circumstances, and their behavior. It is measurable on a scale with the two ends being internal and external.

A person with an internal locus of control will attribute successes like passing an exam to their superb study habits and excellent notes – they would likewise perceive a failed exam as a personal indictment of their academic ability and/or reflection of their (perceived) ineptitude. They feel as if they hold all of the power and control their own destiny; for better or worse.

With the opposite, a person with an external locus of control believes that much of life is out of their hands. When passing an exam, they feel as if they got lucky that day. When they fail an exam, it was simply too tough, or there were other factors that caused them to fail – something else on their mind, an illness, etc. They feel as if life is out of their personal control, and whatever happens will happen.

There are pros and cons to both internal and external loci of control. Those on the internal end are inclined to be focused, self-motivated, and make great leaders. Conversely, they can also be arrogant, take too many risks, and become overly stressed or depressed when things do not go their way. Those with an external locus of control may stress out less about daily life and not sweat the small stuff. However, they can give up easily and may struggle with decision making and problem-solving.

To truly be flexible as a funeral service practitioner, we must use the best of both worlds and blend the two loci of control. One the one hand, we must be able to move past mistakes and errors. They may or may not be our fault,

but wallowing in self-destructive pity will not keep the service running smoothly. We also must be able to make decisions and take decisive action to correct the error or adjust our plan. In other words, we cannot get bogged down in the personal weight of a mistake but instead must overcome it and focus.

When you open the box of boutonnieres at the church to pin the pallbearers, you see that you only have 6 – for 8 pallbearers. Sure, you could start to cuss yourself for not checking the box when delivered yesterday or questioning your math skills if you miss-counted. Instead – be flexible. If time is on your side and the florist is local, then call them to bring up a couple more. No harm, no foul. If that is not an option, then find matching flowers (as close as possible) in the funeral arrangements that are present. Trim them to size and pin them on. I think many of us have been in this situation or one like it. The solution to the problem is to be flexible.

Some errors, like the one above, go unnoticed if corrected. Other times, there is no escaping the fact that those in attendance noticed that something was up. When this happens, be flexible and fix the mistake as best you can – a dose of humor can help too sometimes.

This can be illustrated by an experience of mine from several years ago [Names have been omitted]. Our funeral home had hired a new funeral director, and they were conducting a service at my church. It was all simple enough, mass at the church and a procession to the local cemetery for the graveside service. By now, this new funeral director had worked masses at this church and taken several graveside services out to this cemetery; which was about 8-10 blocks away from that church. Being friends with the priest, I rode in the backseat of the lead car during the procession to help introduce our new director. We had a lively conversation going, and the priest was relating stories of his time in the seminary. He was describing a group of classmates and where they sat in the classroom. In doing so, he emphatically said something to the effect of “to the left.” About this same time, we came up to an intersection where we should have turned right. Engrossed in the priest’s story, our new funeral director turned left; away from the cemetery. Even our police escort who had blocked the intersection stared us down in disbelief as our car swung around him. Luckily, our coach driver knew the cemetery’s location well and continued on the “right” path with the rest of the procession following his lead. Our new

funeral director was mortified and began blaming themselves. The priest was a pro (and would have made a great funeral director), and he explained that we could just bring up the rear. At the cemetery, there were a lot of odd expressions and murmuring. Once the casket was in place, though, the priest opened with “well, the lord said he who is first shall be last.” This broke the tension and everyone enjoyed a hearty laugh – including the deceased’s family and the embarrassed funeral director.

In general, we must all keep in mind that we are human and mistakes will happen. Funeral directors are known to be meticulous creatures who live in the details. All of that can be for naught if those around you make a mistake

or the clergy, family, gravediggers, etc. throw you a curve ball. When they do, stay calm and be flexible. If needed, then share the F-word mantra with a clergy member. Buddy would be proud.

It should be noted that this article is not addressing the most grievous of funeral service errors as something that can be solved with flexibility.

Cremating the wrong body, lying to a family, or burying a wedding ring that was supposed to be removed are issues for another article – one dealing with ethics and lack of/lapses in funeral home protocol. Flexibility will not save you if breaking the law or violating ethical standards within our profession.

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Barbie: Funeral Edition

Michigan Director Starts Petition for Representation

By Alice Adams



The Barbie doll, the main character in millions of make-believe worlds, was born on March 9, 1959, when she was officially launched at the American International Toy Fair. The purpose of this uniquely tall, slender plastic doll, according to Ruth Handler, her creator, was to show little girls that they could be anything they wanted to be, that “a woman has choices.”

For her introduction, Barbie – named after the Handler’s daughter Barbara – was referred to as “a teenage fashion model,” dressed in a sophisticated black-and-white striped swimsuit. The barefoot doll came in blonde and brunette, her high ponytail a harbinger of the upcoming “swinging sixties.”

Just by a lucky coincidence, Ruth Handler’s husband, Elliott, had formed a toy manufacturing company – Mattel Toys – not 10 years before, and Barbie was a huge success from the

very beginning, quickly becoming a global icon.

While she may not have visibly aged over the last five decades, Barbie has constantly reinvented herself in response to wider social and cultural change.

Today, Barbie is no longer just for girls. She is more diverse, and so is Ken, who was introduced in 1962. The dolls now come in a variety of body shapes, skin tones, and hairstyles, representing more diversity and inclusion and better mirroring the realities of the present.

She has become an astronaut, a flight attendant, a first responder, a teacher, a swimsuit model, a fashion model, a nurse, a physician, and many more professions, in an attempt to keep up with modern society.

If you’ve been reading closely, you may have noticed Barbie’s many iterations have not al-

lowed us to see Barbie participating in one of every society’s inevitable rituals – and Sarah Brown-Derbah, a Southfield, Michigan funeral director, is working to help Mattel Toy Corporation correct this oversight.

“They have Barbie in so many career fields now,” she explained, “so why not a funeral director Barbie?”

Sarah, the general manager of Haley Funeral Home, isn’t a doll collector herself, and is much younger than the still-curveaceous 63-year-old doll. She does, however, admit to receiving graduation Barbies from her mom when she earned her bachelor’s degree in biology and secondary education from Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee, and when she completed the mortuary science program at Wayne State University in 2007.

A member of the historically black Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Sarah said much excitement surrounded the group’s 100th anniversary celebration when an AKA Centennial Barbie was created by Mattel. And yes, she is a proud owner of this doll, too.

So, if she’s not an avid Barbie doll fan/collector, why is Brown-Derbah collecting signatures to petition Mattel to design Funeral Director Barbie?

“It’s a good way to inspire kids, first to think about a career in funeral service,” she explained, “and secondly, a Funeral Director Barbie may promote conversations about what services funeral directors provide, why funeral directors are needed, the history of funeral service, beginning with the undertakers, and what directors contribute to the community.”

“Finally, the Funeral Director Barbie would make a good gift for today’s directors, as well as a good way to pay tribute to those determined women who entered the male inner sanctum of funeral service in the early 20th century and didn’t mind being advertised as ‘lady attendant on duty’ to attract business from those families preferring a woman to care for their mothers,



wives, sisters, aunts or grandmothers,” Brown-Derbah said.

Historically, funeral service has been dominated by male directors. According to statistics provided by the National Funeral Directors Association, 81 percent of this nation’s funeral directors are male. However, as the profession has evolved, in 2019, NFDA reported women made up 71.9 percent of American mortuary school enrollees. Brown-Derbah said when she attended mortuary school at Wayne State University, there were only seven male students in her class.

“Women have been part of caring for families and preparing the decedent for burial long before there were undertakers – and there were many female undertakers before the turn of the 20th century,” the director pointed out. “With a Funeral Director Barbie and a little education about women in funeral service,



when families see a woman in the funeral home, they won’t automatically think of her as administrative staff rather than a funeral service professional.”

The only daughter of two school teachers, Brown-Derbah knew from an early age she would enroll in college after high school. She also pictured herself, perhaps, teaching in a Michigan high school.

However, this picture of her future was soon blurred by a funeral she attended where the visitation was held in a room where multiple decedents could be seen in their caskets.

“I had never been in a funeral home – funerals I had attended in the past were always held in churches, usually in the suburbs where I lived,” she remembered. “When we arrived there, the receptionist asked us, ‘Who are you here to see?’ That’s a question I might expect at a hair salon or a doctor’s office, certainly not in



a funeral home.”

“As I said, all of the caskets were in the same room for visitation, and I saw a baby in one of the caskets, and it looked terrible,” she continued. “When I saw it, I remember thinking, ‘If I knew what to do, I’m sure I could do a better job.’”

After graduating with her bachelor’s degree, Brown-Derbah’s mother asked what her plans were.

“I told her I felt I was being called to service

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FEATURE

in the funeral profession,” Brown-Derbah said. “Mom thought it would be a good idea for me to speak with a veteran funeral director, and I enjoyed hearing his stories and his guidance for mortuary school.”

Brown-Derbah graduated from the Wayne State Mortuary Program in 2007, but wasn’t licensed until 2011, with her mettle tested to its fullest extent. “I needed an apprenticeship, but even after writing what seemed like hundreds of funeral homes asking for an apprenticeship, I was turned down everywhere. One director I interviewed with asked me if I

wouldn’t rather be a nurse, while another one said, ‘You have too much education to be a funeral director.’”

When another interviewer told her most female directors were from funeral home families, Brown-Derbah refused to give up, and eventually found out that one of her instructors had just purchased a funeral home and was hiring.

“I called, interviewed and – as an apprentice – became the new funeral home’s first employee,” Brown-Derbah said, relieved that since the mortuary science program required its grads

to secure their own apprenticeships, she was moving closer to licensure.

It took this unstoppable young woman one year to complete the requirements of her apprenticeship and after that, two more years to find a job, even though she was one of only a few African-Americans in her class to pass the National Board Exam.

A friend recommended her to a funeral director who owned a firm in the city center where she successfully worked for two years, and when a colleague heard about an opportunity at Haley Funeral Directors in Southfield, Brown-Derbah was hired immediately.

That was five years ago.

Today Sarah Brown-Derbah is general manager of this well-respected firm. “As with all new funeral directors, my greatest challenge was earning the trust of the community, so I went on death calls and walked with families through the entire journey,” she explained.

Like Brown-Derbah, Barbie has come a long way. “I have been visiting toy aisles the last 10 years, and when I realized Barbie was getting into careers, I really expected – after COVID – that Mattel would get into front line responders, including funeral directors.”

“Several months ago, I saw Medical Assistant Barbie, so I began collecting signatures on my petitions.”

“People may not realize it, but we are the last professionals to dress professionally, so I think Barbie should dress like me,” she laughed, adding her closet consisted of 10 black suits and 20 black dresses. “I dress in black stockings and shoes, wear black gloves and wear a black hat. For larger services, I wear a black hat with a veil. I think Funeral Director Barbie could be sold with the same wardrobe and, as an accessory, she could have a comfort dog, a floral arrangement, a winter coat and a single flower.”

“As the director – and before I close the casket for a final time, I place a flower in the hands of the decedent, and on graveside services, I place a flower on the casket,” she said.

To sign Brown-Derbah’s petition so Mattel will consider a Funeral Director Barbie, go to www.change.org/p/mattel-tell-mattel-to-create-a-funeral-director-barbie.

A reporter from *The Detroit Free Press* contacted Mattel, who said they would be open to the idea [of a Funeral Director Barbie]. Brown-Derbah’s Facebook Group is also supporting the idea.

Just imagine: one doll could change an entire society’s attitude toward death and dying. All it would take is a little Mattel magic!

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