

Women Who Care for Life After Death

By Elizabeth Fournier
Photos by Joni Schrantz



I often hear that I don't look like a funeral director, but historically in the United States, women were the first caretakers of the dead. They were called "layers out of the dead." Helping families in time of need and caring for others was consistent with women's roles as midwives and nurses. It was only when mortuary education became formalized that caring for those who had passed on was deemed inappropriate for women.

It was women who washed, shaved and dressed corpses for quick burial services – a necessity before refrigeration or modern embalming techniques took hold. But after the Civil War, the familial chore of making a loved one presentable after death turned into a profession. Instead of women, licensed men, educated at a growing number of mortuary science schools, prepared the dead for burial using modern techniques that preserve bodies much longer.

Women bring a necessary element to the role as caretaker of a family's deceased loved one; we inherently listen for a story, rather than just picking out the facts. It's true to our nature to achieve a personal connection. Women have a nurturing instinct that comes naturally. Plus, women have a knack for details. We are more apt to provide a variety of choices to fulfill personal wishes because we know that death ends a life, not a relationship.

Realizing that each individual is a gift, possessing a unique personality and character, women are quite committed to making each service truly reflective of the life that has been lived while acknowledging the loss that has occurred.

I began working in the funeral industry 19 years ago, back when it was truly an anomaly to walk into a funeral home and be greeted by a woman. Working hard to prove myself came naturally to me and I am comfortable in a helping industry. I love the reverence and extreme level of caring.

When a loved one passes away, numerous responsibilities require immediate attention. My first priority, naturally, is to comfort those who are most affected. Then I focus on arrangements, taking care of required forms and notifications.

I am in a rare situation in my industry: I'm a small-town mortician who lives on the same property as the funeral home, so I can be available at all hours of the day and evening. I am the person who answers the phone, arrives at the place of death and handles everything for the family so they can mourn and take care of each other.

I take great pride in knowing that my community has entrusted my funeral home with providing unparalleled service and attention at such a time of need. It is my goal to support families through every step of their arrangements and to pay tribute to the special memory of their loved ones.

Being a woman allows me the luxury of adding feminine touches to my work. The calming aromas of freshly-baked cookies and breads waft through my parlor. If a family is from the South, they'll find biscuits filled with Virginia ham, since that is a staple of Southern funeral buffets. For East Coasters, I typically present large platters of delicious Austrian and German cold cuts and cured meats, cheeses, pickled herring, pickles or deviled eggs. (Deviled eggs are an extremely popular funeral food!) Chocolate is a wonderful mood elevator; you can't go wrong with chocolate. Or a fresh fruit basket.

Years ago, women prepared funeral feasts that made the day – great amounts of soup-laden casseroles, aspics, pound cakes – all named for the originator of the recipe or for the woman in whose kitchen she worked for 12 hours a day before she went home to feed her own family.



wanted to ask about my life at the parlor. She was a career-changer, looking for a more meaningful line of work. She had been intrigued by the business for years and was thrilled to finally have the opportunity to meet with a woman who could honestly answer her questions.

The bottom line for many women in the field is a deep desire to help people during an emotionally difficult time. Lately, I've been seeing more women in the funeral profession and slowly the numbers of women are rising at annual conventions. This pleases me greatly. The show of interest and desire to provide family support reinforces my belief about women's roles in assisting others at the time of a death. We're there to offer compassion for those who hold meaning in a person's life.

Elizabeth Fournier is the mortician and owner of Cornerstone Funeral Services in Boring, Oregon.

I recently received a call from a woman who

When appropriate, I incorporate a handmade pillow for the family into my services. The fabric is coordinated with the clothing of the deceased, the casket color and the flowers. The pillow is given to the family during the hour before the services. I love it when families phone to share with me the comfort it brings to them.