

AFD PROFILE

BY KIM STACEY

women In funeral service

Women have always played a critical part in helping to birth babies, as well as in caring for the dying and the dead. While it's true that part of this can be attributed to basic biology, the simple fact is that societies around the globe have long allocated death-care activities to women.

This was true in early America, too, but a major shift in death care in the United States – from a home-based, midwifery approach to a more profit-motivated, male-dominated business model – began early in the 19th century. While this effectively excluded women from death care for many years, women are returning to funeral service in greater numbers – restoring a centuries-old tradition.

A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Let's consider the women of rural Greece. They have been completely in charge of caring for the body of the deceased, as well as the staging of related rituals – which go on (literally) for years after the death of an individual

– since time-out-of-mind. They are truly the caretakers of the dead.

This role is an ancient one, and codified in the mythology of the region. You may have heard of Libitina, the Roman goddess of death, corpses and funerals. While no images of her remain, she provides us with a foundational feminine image to reflect upon: that of the benefactor of the dead, and the keeper of ritual. However, throughout the millennia her very name – and for a time, her role – sank into such obscurity that it is seldom known by anyone outside of funeral service. Today, many young “goth” women have adopted her look. Dressed in black, they often stare into the camera with a combination of sorrow and


menace, attempting to capture how Libitina must have appeared. So Libitina lives on, if not in her original role.

This same phenomenon of sinking into obscurity and then resurrection or resurgence is true for the role of women in death care in the U.S.

From Women to Men

In “The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883,” Gary Laderman wrote, “By the end of the eighteenth and into the middle of the nineteenth century, women in the Protestant communities of the northern states indeed had the primary responsibility of getting the body ready for burial – a crucial activity performed by women in England for centuries.”

But as early as 1810, we see the rise of death care as a masculine endeavor. Laderman wrote that while “the

A close-up portrait of Char Barrett, a woman with short, styled blonde hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a vibrant magenta blazer and has her hand resting under her chin. The background is dark and out of focus.

Char Barrett

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gendered division of labor in the period suggests that responding to death, and more specifically preparing the corpse, was understood as a component of domestic life, and therefore within the purview of women's activities. Though others support the view that midwives, nurses and women in general carried out the tasks associated with laying out the dead, there is also evidence that men would perform these tasks under certain circumstances. On those occasions when the deceased was an old man or an infant, a male might engage in handling the corpse and preparing it for disposition."

While men may have participated, it was still true that care of the deceased remained in the family. "Preparing the body was a duty for the close living relations of the deceased, and they rarely hesitated to participate in these activities," Gary wrote. "The intimacy that survivors maintained with the corpse preserved it, at least until the

actual interment, as evidence of a valuable, and vital, social relation."

Midwives not only cared for women in childbirth but also tended to the sick and helped families care for their dead. In "A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785 - 1812," Laurel Thatcher Ulrich wrote, "Between August 3 and 24, 1787, (Martha) performed four deliveries, answered one obstetrical false alarm, made sixteen medical calls, prepared three bodies for burial ..." While very few notable midwifery records exist, the detailed journal of Martha Ballard chronicles a common story, in which these women were relied upon in the community.

Women have long been caring for the dead in the U.S. as midwives or simply female members of a family. But the advent of the science of embalming, the battlefield conditions of the Civil War and the continued rise of capitalism led to the displacement of women from

death-care activities. Death itself was removed from the domain of the family. Gary Laderman quoted Geoffrey Gorer, the British sociologist, who commented that "the gradual displacement of the presence of death in daily living began sometime after the Civil War." This displacement heralded the era of male-dominated death care in the U.S.

Into the 20th Century

It hasn't been an easy road for women who wish to come back to the work they traditionally performed. One of the most revealing passages in "Mortician Diaries" by June Knights Nadle documents the limited number of women in the field back in 1945, and the limited number of employment opportunities available to them: "It was a critical time in my life when I graduated from the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science in 1945 and started seeking an apprenticeship. There were few licensed women in the

business. As the only woman in my class of '45, I constituted 5% of our group (by the 1995 class, 355 of the students were young women.) After three months and seventy-nine letters to mortuaries in four western states, along with seventy-nine rejections, my oldest sister, Beth, helped me find work in a family-owned mortuary located in Hollywood, California."

Women in Funeral Service Today

In a 2006 article, "Death Becomes Her," written for the Columbia News Service, Mike Stevens wrote "Long dominated by men, the business of death is increasingly being handled by women. Last year, roughly 57 percent of new mortuary science students were women, according to the American Board of Funeral Service Education."

Women seem to be returning to funeral service in greater numbers than ever before. As executive director of the Association of Women Funeral Directors, I've been privileged to get to know some of these really fine women,

each of whom has come to funeral service with different stories but always with a heart-driven purpose. I'd like to introduce three of them to you. Each is remarkably authentic, and a true asset to the funeral service profession:

- Char Barrett, founder of A Sacred Moment, located in Seattle and Everett, Wash., offers her client families alternative services such as home funerals and natural burials. She is a licensed funeral director who learned early in her mortuary college studies that there was a deep need for families to be more engaged in the care of their loved ones.

In addition to her traditional funeral service education, Barrett trained with home funeral educator Jerrigrace Lyons of Final Passages. "It completely opened my eyes," Barrett said. "I asked myself, 'Why are we not extending the same level of care for our loved ones after they die, as we do before they die?'"

Barrett has a strong hospice background, which certainly colored her thinking. "Home funerals allow families to come to their grief in their

own terms; there's so much potential for healing," she said. She shared a number of stories with me during our conversation, and the commonality was that families who chose this home-centered approach often said that having the deceased in the living room gave them the opportunity to say the things they couldn't while their loved one was alive.

"That's where the name 'a sacred moment' came from. I personally witnessed many sacred moments: a mother braiding her daughter's hair, watching friends bathe a beloved friend, an estranged son, who was able to connect with his father on a heart level, by bathing and caring for his body after death. That's the kind of power there is in this work," Barrett said. "I now approach a family, no matter what they want, knowing that I'm not the one in control. I'm the guide; the coach behind the scenes. My goal is to empower and engage the family, to do what they need to do. I deeply listen, allow them to come to what they need and not allow myself to direct them."

She sees her role as a bridge between the conventional funeral industry and alternative forms of service. "I'm trying to straddle the fence between the two," she said. "Home funeral guides are becoming more aware that their role involves teaching and support. They create the awareness that home funerals are an option, and they can educate the family. The important element to remember is that it's the family who directs the funeral."

- Gwendelrae Hicks of Northern Star Mortuary in Kansas City, Kan., was called to funeral service at age 17. "I was sitting in a psychology class, where there was an ongoing discussion of possible careers. At that time, I was thinking of becoming an attorney, or perhaps a pediatric physician," she said. "These options weren't sitting well with me. I sat and thought of all the funerals I'd been to as a child, and how the funeral directors didn't seem to be truly present; they always had something outside the service they had to deal with. I didn't think that was right; they were supposed to be there to help us get through this difficult time. There I was, in a quandary, so, I asked

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the Lord for guidance.”

Gwen candidly said that she wasn't always comfortable with dead people, but she accepted the divine will expressed to her that she was to own her own funeral home. It took her a long time to realize her vision, with years of school and then years of preparation for funeral home ownership, interrupted by marriage and caring for her two daughters. But she traveled that long road with tenacity and commitment. “I struggled a long time to get to where I am,” she said.

Gwen was also quite candid when she shared, “I went through the battlefields with the men in the industry. I was fortunate to receive my training not just from the men but from two female embalmers and funeral directors: Ms. Bobby Pearson and Ms. LaRoyce Holmes. They helped mold me into the professional business owner I am today; but the real support came from my husband and my children.”

In 2007, she and her husband, Scott, opened the doors of Northern Star Mortuary. “The name was inspired by the stories of Harriet Tubman, and how she was guided by her determination to right a wrong; her visions, faith and strong will to lead our ancestors through the Underground Railroad,” she said. “When we were traveling from one safe haven to the next, the North Star was used as a guide to motivate the weary; for hope, courage and as a light to shine their way. I want my business to be a guiding light for the families who are grieving and looking for passion, compassion and professionalism.”

Her husband is not a licensed funeral service professional but acts as her funeral assistant during the day. Theirs is truly a shared commitment, and a shared dream. “I rejoice in my success every day. I love what I do, and I do what I love. I put all of my passion and compassion into my calling,” she said.

• Kristan McNames of Grace Funeral and Cremation Services in Rockford, Ill., is a mother of three young boys. She and her husband, Bob, also have a shared dream, and work side-by-side to make it a reality.

They opened their own funeral home in 2009 – with the hope of creating a

different image from the common conceptions of funeral home and funeral director. “I love the fact that our firm doesn't feel like a funeral home, and families often comment that ‘You don't act like a funeral director;’” McNames said.

McNames came into funeral service following in the footsteps of a funeral director she admired. “My dad died while I was in high school, and ours was a rather high-maintenance extended family. The funeral director in question, who was the manager of the firm, did a great job putting us all at ease,” she said. “My dad was only 43 when he died unexpectedly, the day after Thanksgiving. This director had known my dad from seeing him walking our dog, Moose, and he invited us to bring the dog for a private family viewing. I thought that was a remarkable act of kindness, and I've always remembered it.”

She added, “While I feel that I rather fell into the work, I really love helping families. Honestly, I judge our success

on the number of hugs that we get. And we get a lot of them!”

McNames said that she and her husband have grown quite accustomed to their respective roles. “He does most of the removals, and is very good at all which goes on in the prep room,” she said. “I do the upfront arrangements, public relations and marketing.”

McNames is also a weekly guest on a local radio show. “People can call in and ask questions about funeral service and our firm,” she said. “Lots of people listen. It's conversational and casual. Mainly it's so people can see we're normal and funny.” •

For more information:

- *Grace Funeral and Cremation Services:*
www.gracefb.com
- *A Sacred Moment:*
www.asacredmoment.com
- *Northern Star Mortuary:*
www.northernstarmortuary.com
- *Association of Women Funeral Directors:* www.wfdconnect.com

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