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Embracing Life By Confronting Death

Teamster Funeral Professionals Pride Themselves on Being There for Families

On a warm summer evening on an Illinois farm in the 1950s, a family sits at a small kitchen table chatting with their friend Tony.



Joe Fogarty and Karen Christiansen, Merrick Funeral Home, prepare a casket for a funeral.



Robert Biglands, retired 43-year funeral director Teamster and Local 727 Trustee

Over a glass of cool lemonade, Tony tells them inspiring and personal experiences he had that week as the owner of a funeral home in Chicago.

He told about how he helped families during a difficult time. He even explained the process of becoming a licensed funeral director and embalmer.

Robert Biglands, then only a teenager, was intrigued by the funeral industry stories.

“It was that moment when I thought, ‘That’s what I’m going to do someday,’” exclaimed Biglands, laughing heartily at the memory from his teenage years.

Biglands—a retired 43-year Teamster in the funeral director industry and a Local 727 Trustee—says it was Tony’s stories and relating the niceties and values of the funeral director profession that really got him thinking about it as a respectable career.

“I must have really been captivated, because I went to college and mortuary college, and then ended up embalming and funeral directing for the next four decades,” he said.

At Bigland’s career peak, he was on call 24 hours a day and embalming an average of 100 cases a month. Biglands worked as a trade embalmer for 23 different undertakers, before working for a corporation until retirement.

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The Traditional Jewish Ceremony

All funerals have different procedures depending on the deceased person's religion and desires. Each religion has its own customs. Although there are many variances of Jewish ceremonies, the most traditional service is highlighted here.

"I have seen quite a variety of Jewish ceremonies in the 15 years I have worked in this industry," said Jay Horowitz, who works as a driver and dispatcher for Piser Funeral Home, a Jewish funeral home in Chicago. "Reformed, conservative, different forms of orthodox, traditional and much more."

The Jewish belief is that each person is made up of body and soul.

"The belief is when someone dies, the two parts are separated," said Ed Boldyga, a funeral driver at Piser. "After the body is buried, the soul returns to God who gave it. The soul never dies."

Because the body is considered the home of the soul, it is treated with great respect.

"That is why a ritual called taharah, or holy washing, is done," said Horowitz. "A group of women bathe a deceased female body, and a group of men bathe a deceased male body as part of the ritual."

After the taharah, the body is dressed in a shroud of white linens.

"The idea of wearing shrouds is to make everyone equal," he said. "Everyone enters the world equally and leaves the world equally. The person isn't wearing an \$800 suit, or a T-shirt and blue jeans."

Out of respect, in Jewish ceremonies the body is neither embalmed nor cremated. The burial occurs very quickly, in as little as 24 to 48 hours of death.

"The belief on this is not to delay putting the body into the ground," said Dan Mandel, funeral director at Piser. "The body is returned to the earth where it originally came from. The body returns to the earth whence it came, and the soul returns to God who gave it."

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"I've seen it from both sides, as an employer and as an employee," he said. "Although the funeral business can be stressful and emotional when working with people who are grieving, it's a great feeling to be the one to comfort a family during a time of need."

This statement resonates with other Local 727 funeral workers.

"What we do is a very positive thing," said Deborah Bluck, a funeral director and embalmer who works at the Modell Funeral Home. "You're helping people through difficult times and calming their fears."

"It can indeed be difficult to be constantly reminded of the fragility of life," said Joe Ewald, funeral director for Oehler Funeral Home. "You get very involved."

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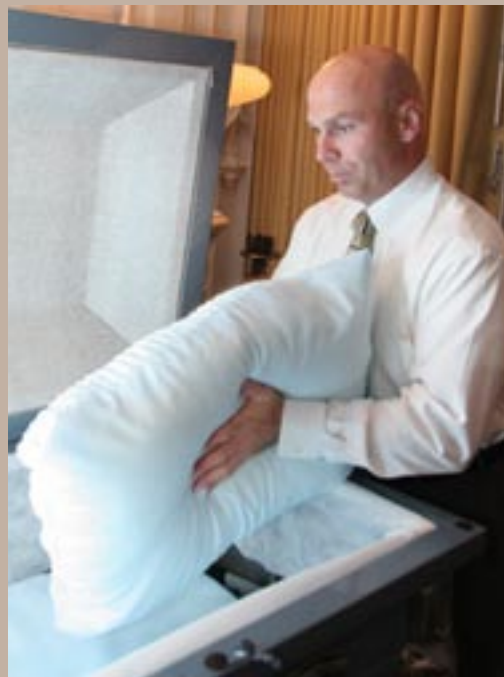
Piser Weinstein Funeral Home drivers (from left to right) Jay Horowitz, Bob Sparacio, Ed Boldyga and John Libertore.



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The Funeral Director and Embalmer Career— What It Entails:

- Arranging for transport of the remains to the funeral home
- Completing necessary paperwork, such as: a death certificate; filing with the health department, explaining benefits from Social Security, Veterans Administration (VA), public aid and the need of certified copy for insurance benefits, property and proof of death.
- Arranging the funeral service with clergy, the cemetery, the local newspaper and livery
- Embalming and preparing of human remains and, if necessary, restorative art work
- Arranging for shipment of remains in US and International; knowledge of arranging with Consulate and Embassies of every country worldwide and foreign airlines; must know customs and health laws as how they pertain to shipment
- Counseling relatives and friends about bereavement services available, such as books, videos and professional services





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The Local 727 funeral directors consider their careers as more than just a job. They consider their arranging, directing and embalming as art forms. An inexperienced onlooker might not understand—but it is about more than outward appearances.

“Viewing a loved one helps with the healing process,” said Bluck. “The family has an easier time with closure and it sinks in that they are really gone. It eases their mind.”



Joe Ewald, Teamsters Local 727 member and funeral director/embalmer

With more than 350 funeral directors and embalmers, in addition to 300 hearse and funeral limousine drivers, Local 727 has the largest group of Teamster members involved in the funeral industry.

“Unions need the support of their members the same way a family does,” said Bluck. “As a steward, I try to take a situation that might be negative and turn it into something positive. It’s the same with my work.”

The funeral profession is not for everyone. However, those who choose a career in the funeral industry may find it a very rewarding experience.

“There’s certainly no glory in this business. You have to have a helpful attitude,” said Jay Horowitz, a driver for Piser Weinstein Funeral Home. “About 90 percent of the people we deal with are really very nice, and appreciative that you helped them. It makes you feel like you are accomplishing something when you help a family.”

In addition to their daily tasks, funeral directors and embalmers are required to obtain 24 hours of continuing education every two-year period per Illinois law.

“Local 727’s continuing education program is very inspiring,” said Ewald. “We can trust the local to provide a solid, stable CE program. Not only does it help with licensure but it keeps us educated on current events, area of concerns, and gives us innovative ways to go forward in our ever changing and demanding jobs in our industry.”