

First Person

A funeral director talks with Marya Smith

'We see families at their lowest ebb'

Name: Bob Muth, 57

Occupation: Funeral director

Background: Muth's father owned a neighborhood funeral parlor on Chicago's Near West Side. Muth followed his father's career path when he graduated from Worsham College of Mortuary Science. In 1952 he became an apprentice embalmer for Blake-Lamb Funeral Homes and has worked there ever since. Although he is also a licensed embalmer and manages two branches for the firm, Muth spends most of his six-day work week performing the duties of a funeral director. Muth lives in Tinley Park with his wife, Faye. He has eight children and 14 grandchildren.

Years in present position: 36



Tribune photo by Bob Felt

Bob Muth: "Today there is a better understanding of the grief process."

Funeral directors are like policemen and firemen in the sense that we're open 365 days a year and we work holidays and Christmas if we're needed. When a person has a loss in their family, they want to talk to somebody right then and there. When they pick up the phone, someone has to be there. It's a very emotional time. We see families at their lowest ebb. We know that when we go into the business.

My job as funeral director is to coordinate all that goes into the funeral service. Every family is different. When a family first comes in, I sit down with them and find out what their wishes are. It's not how I think the funeral should be. I have to listen carefully.

The people I deal with are bereaved. I have to go very slowly to make sure they understand. I explain the whole contract. I tell them to stop me and ask questions at any point. Sometimes words mean something different to them than they do to me. Some people still call cemeteries graveyards, for instance. I was talking to one family recently about a chapel service, which to us, in Chicago, is a service in a funeral home, but to them, in the part of the country they were originally from, it meant a service in a church. It got confusing. I have to be very careful.

There are about 50 different services I can provide, from composing the newspaper notice to checking on and applying for benefits. It depends on the individual family's needs. I find out what cemetery they're going to, and if they don't have a grave, I help them purchase that. Most of the Chicago metropolitan cemeteries require a concrete outer container, or vault,

so we talk about that.

I ask if they want a two- or one-night wake or simply a visitation before the service. We talk about the timing of the arrangements; they may have relatives traveling some distance. I show them a book of memorial cards and a listing of various prayers or sayings, and I show them thank-you notes, if they want them. I can arrange the details of the memorial luncheon for the families that want one. My job is to make everything go smoothly.

I don't sell caskets. At that time, very few people want to hear chatter on how this casket is made and so on. They have a price list in hand, and they walk around the casket showroom. Most people have a figure in mind when they walk in. They already know, "I can afford this much" or "This is what Dad wanted." Very few people purchase clothing anymore. Years ago, it was always that Pa had to have a new suit. Now people use everyday clothing. It's so much more natural.

I take care of the details of the wake, the flowers for the chapel, the memorial or mass cards, coffee for the public. I'm there to greet the family for the first visitation. I normally set aside at least an hour before public visitation for the family. I feel the immediate family should have that time for themselves. Some ask for two or three hours by themselves, and that's fine.

The night before the funeral I get together with the family member in charge, and I find out the pallbearers' names, find out if there are cars they want lined up, if they want a limousine to pick them up in the morning, things of that nature. We go

over any special requests, music or whatever, for the church. My duties there depend on the type of religious service.

It's very difficult sometimes getting to the cemetery. Other motorists, not in the funeral cortege, are wrapped up in their own affairs and cut in. Law requires that the lead car of a cortege stop at a red light, but once the cortege has started through a green light, the rest of the cortege has the right-of-way through a red light. It's the same at a stop sign. Law also requires a bright orange sticker on the front windshields to call attention to the funeral procession. Of course, there are people who show disrespect deliberately. I just hope we don't have an accident.

People in the funeral party sometimes wonder why we take certain routes, but we have to think of safety and convenience of turns. The best speed for a funeral cortege is 18 to 20 miles an hour at most. The expressway is faster but not as safe. We always check with the family first, and we'll go through the city if they wish. Also, it's very important to some families that the funeral cortege pass the house on the way to the cemetery.

I personally feel that the clergy should perform the committal services at the cemetery, but I'm more than glad to do it if the family wishes. After the committal service, at the interment chapel, I thank the people on behalf of the family. Then usually the family leaves, and I go with the remains into the service area where the casket is put into the outer container and is sealed. If the family has asked me to follow it out to the grave, I do. At a

graveyard service I stay there until the vault is sealed. It's an unwritten code here. I've stood out there on many a sub-zero day, but that's my job, my duty to that family. They've put their trust in me. It's a very big concern to some people.

Sometimes people say, "I want to follow Ma all the way." When families wish to witness the sealing of the vault or the closing of the casket, they're more than welcome. It sometimes gives them satisfaction. It helps them. They might want to cover Mom with her favorite afghan. Sometimes it's too hard, and I will do it for them.

I don't embalm now, except in emergencies. For example, during a major airline disaster outside of Midway we handled quite a few of the people, and I could step in and help because I'm licensed. Not everybody wants to handle the dead. There are health reasons, too. I can remember the polio epidemic in the '50s. We used to take turns handling the victims. My own children were young and couldn't understand why I wouldn't let them come close to me when I would get home. Those were terrible summers. It's the same situation today with AIDS. As long as we know AIDS is involved, we know how to protect ourselves with the proper gear. People should not be ashamed to let us know it's an AIDS case. It's for everybody's safety.

When I was growing up, death was a subject everyone kept in the closet, but today there is a better understanding of the grief process. Overall, people are more involved in the funeral, and it does them a lot of good. People come up with the ideas and their own suggestions. They'll say, "It would be nice if each one of the children gave Grandma a rose." It's an act of love. I see more children attending funerals, and I'm all for it. People participate in the religious services. People pick out a special poem or special readings. What's happening is people are able to express their love and special feelings. It used to be Step 1, Step 2, Step 3.

I think every funeral director wants to do the best job possible. But years ago I learned a lesson. A little girl had died, and I wanted everything to be perfect, to do what I could for the family. When it came time to tie the bows in her hair, I was disappointed in myself because I felt I didn't do a very good job. Then I saw her mother come in and kneel down by her daughter. She started talking to her child, and as she talked, she retied the bows, the way only a mother could. I learned that it's important for the bereaved to have some last thing to do, especially with a child. It's important to them emotionally.

There is nothing enjoyable about death, but it is a pleasure to help people. The greatest reward you can get in this business is to feel you brought some consolation to a family. All we can do is try to ease their hurt a little—I know they have to go through the grief process themselves. ■